

Draft Executive Order Would Give Trump a New Target: Modern Design

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Body

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WASHINGTON — Should every new government building in the nation’s capital be created in the same style as the White House?

A draft of an executive order called “Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again” would establish a classical style, inspired by Greek and Roman architecture, as the default for federal buildings in Washington and many throughout the country, discouraging modern design.

The order, spearheaded by the National Civic Art Society, a nonprofit group that believes contemporary architecture has “created a built environment that is degraded and dehumanizing,” would rewrite the current rules that govern the design of office buildings, headquarters, and courthouses, or any federal building project contracted through the General Services Administration that costs over \$50 million.

“For too long architectural elites and bureaucrats have derided the idea of beauty, blatantly ignored public opinions on style, and have quietly spent taxpayer money constructing ugly, expensive, and inefficient buildings,” Marion Smith, the group’s chairman, wrote in a text message. “This executive order gives voice to the 99 percent — the ordinary American people who do not like what our government has been building.”

But the proposed executive order has already drawn fierce opposition from architects who say it would have a dampening effect on architectural thought and give President Trump broad power to make aesthetic appraisals, something critics say he knows nothing about.

“At the most fundamental level it’s a complete constraint on freedom of expression,” said Roger K. Lewis, an architect and a professor emeritus of architecture at the University of Maryland who has written extensively about design and planning in Washington. “This notion that the White House has expertise or knowledge or understanding of architecture and design sufficient to allow them to mandate that all federal buildings be classically styled is absurd.”

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The hope among the order's authors could be to put it in front of President Trump sometime within the next month, according to one person familiar with its development. It would explicitly discourage some modern forms of architecture — including the Brutalist-influenced Federal Bureau of Investigation headquarters on Pennsylvania Avenue whose appearance Mr. Trump has criticized — in favor of classical design.

If a style other than classical is proposed for a project, the order establishes a high bar for getting approval: it would establish a presidential “re-beautification” committee to review designs and would still give the White House final say. Benjamin Forgey, the former architecture critic for The Washington Post, called the order “profoundly mischievous,” and said it would eliminate the ability of architects to consider contemporary design and context when creating new government spaces.

He held up the National Gallery of Art as a model of the “conversation” between modernist and classic structures. The West building, designed by the architect John Russell Pope and finished in 1940, was modeled after the Roman Pantheon. The East building, designed by the Chinese-American architect I.M. Pei and completed in 1978, is a triangular design influenced by modernist thought.

Though the order would only apply design rules to federal public buildings and some memorials whose designs are developed through the General Services Administration, not Smithsonian-funded museums, Mr. Forgey described the museum as a civic and architectural medley that would be less common if the order is successful.

“It’s an example of why we need contemporary thought in architecture,” Mr. Forgey said. “It’s what makes contemplating and experiencing cities enjoyable.”

The order also accuses the G.S.A.’s Design Excellence Program, which directs the federal government’s multibillion-dollar building program, of encouraging the proliferation of modern styles, arguing that “the federal government has largely stopped building beautiful buildings the American people want to look at or work in.”

In an email, Amale Andraos, the dean of the Columbia Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, said the G.S.A. program had encouraged a proliferation of different architectural styles and ideas.

“There was a time when the United States’ leadership could be seen through the cultural sophistication of its government building programs where architecture was asked to exude power but did so often with complexity and sensitivity to the wealth that comes from diversity,” Ms. Andraos wrote. “While this tradition has been upheld through the G.S.A.’s Design Excellence program up until recently, clearly this period might be coming to an end.”

The effort to rewrite the Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture is considered among the most egregious features of the order. The principles, part of 1962 document by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the New York senator, who as a Kennedy administration official was heavily involved in design issues in the capital, have endured for over half a century, in part because they discouraged promoting an official style: “The design must flow from the architectural profession to the government. And not vice versa.”

The administration’s draft order, which was obtained by The New York Times, suggests an abrupt reversal of that ethos: “Classical and traditional architectural styles have proven their ability to inspire such respect for our system of self-government. Their use should be encouraged.”

The proposed mandate has triggered protests from architects and critics of the administration who say the president should not have the ability to issue a top-down mandate on how government buildings should look. News of the draft first appeared in the Architectural Record.

Asked about the possibility of an executive order, Judd Deere, a White House spokesman, declined to comment.

Architects have regarded Mr. Trump, a former real estate developer who keeps close watch over his family’s portfolio of luxury properties, with a certain degree of wariness since he took office. His design style at his personal properties favors gilded furniture, marble flooring, and Louis XIV-style flourishes. But two of his higher-profile

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business projects, including the Trump Towers at Columbus Circle in New York City and The Trump Tower in Chicago, were built with modernist influences.

“At one level, it’s aspirational, meant to project the wealth so many citizens can only dream of,” the author Peter York wrote in 2017 of Mr. Trump’s style. “The best aesthetic descriptor of Trump’s look, I’d argue, is dictator style.”

Shortly after Mr. Trump’s election, the American Institute of Architects pledged to work with him on proposed infrastructure projects, before abruptly withdrawing that pledge after encountering a backlash.

This week, Sarah Dodge, the group’s senior vice president of advocacy and relationships, sent a message to group members urging them to sign a petition that would discourage Mr. Trump from signing the order.

“All architectural styles have value and all communities have the right to weigh in on the government buildings meant to serve them,” she wrote. The group also issued a statement that “opposes uniform style mandates” for federal architecture.

“Architecture should be designed for the specific communities that it serves,” the statement read, “reflecting our rich nation’s diverse places, thought, culture and climates.”

But Mr. Smith, the chairman of the National Civic Art Society, believes contemporary architecture has “created a built environment that is degraded and dehumanizing.” He defended the order by saying Americans are in support of classical style, and that it wasn’t calling for a “rigid neo-Classical program.”

The group crafted the order a year ago and then spent months prodding several senior administration officials, including Joe Grogan, the White House head of the Domestic Policy Council, people involved in the planning said.

The organization is stocked with experts who believe it is their mission to restore classical design style as the default in American architecture. Justin Shubow, the group’s president, was appointed to the United States Commission of Fine Arts, which bills itself as the aesthetic guardian of Washington, D.C., in 2018.

As the order works its way closer to the president’s desk, the prevailing thought among architects is that Mr. Trump’s approval of one school of architectural thought over another would create a dangerous and even cynical precedent for architects contemplating the aesthetic future of the capitol.

“We are a society that is linked to openness of thought, to looking forward with optimism and confidence at a world that is always in the process of becoming,” Thom Mayne, a California architect and Pritzker Prize winner whose Santa Monica firm has designed a number of buildings for the G.S.A., said in an email. “Architecture’s obligation is to maintain this forward thinking stance.”

PHOTOS: Top, the classical-style White House is inspired by Greek and Roman buildings. Above, the East Wing of the National Gallery of Art by I. M. Pei in 1978 has a modernist influence. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY SAMUEL CORUM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES; J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE/ASSOCIATED PRESS) (C6)

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