

MEMORANDUM

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Classical, Traditional, Postmodern & Federal Architecture and Its Place in Today's Society

Aleksandr Sheykheth's Thoughts on Virtus and Pitfalls of Historicity in Design

I. CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND

1. HISTORY IS A BOX OF CHOCOLATS FOR A DESIGNER

Architecture was my love and solstice from the childhood. Kyiv, my Ukrainian hometown, is over 1,500 years old. Its historic center is a conglomeration of magnificent edifices woven into quilted urban fabric. The city is shaped by a great river and complex topography. Most architectural styles that flourished in Europe over the past millennia are represented. Kyiv is a nurturing and inclusive open-air urban laboratory for a study of architectural styles co-existence. Many neighborhoods synthesize gracefully richness of Secession style with austerity of Soviet construction studded with Neo-Byzantine ecclesiastic style or similarly disjointed potpourri. Diversity begets richness when filtered through layer of talented participants.

I love beauty, harmony, mathematical precision of classical architecture. It has its indispensable place in urban fabric. This essay is a somewhat random collection of thoughts and reactions toward neoclassical architecture, its place in the city, and government role in stylistic debate.

2. GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR FEDERAL ARCHITECTURE

In 1962 Daniel Patrick Moynihan penned what has become known as the Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture, a forward-thinking pronouncement on how the government should further the interests and aspirations of the American people in its public buildings.

The design of Federal office buildings must provide efficient and economical facilities and visual testimony to the dignity, enterprise, vigor, and stability of the American Government. It should be our object to meet the test of Pericles' evocation to the Athenians: "We do not imitate-for we are a model to others." The choice of designs shall embody the finest contemporary American architectural thought. Specific attention should be paid to the possibilities of incorporating into such designs qualities which reflect the regional architectural traditions of that part of the Nation in which buildings are located. Where appropriate, fine art should be incorporated in the designs, with emphasis on the work of living American artists. The development of an official style must be avoided. Design must flow from the architectural profession to the Government and not vice versa.

3. POLITICAL NEUTRALITY OF NEOCLASSISM

"One may not admire classicism, but it really has nothing to do with politics; it was used by the Borgias, Renaissance popes, German Lutherans, British Protestants, and the American Founding Fathers," [writes](#) architecture critic Witold Rybczynski.

4. PUBLIC OPINION MATTERS

In a 2020 public opinion poll, traditional buildings soundly defeated their modern counterparts. Survey conducted mixed the population of diverse age, geography or political preference.

The survey, conducted by The Harris Poll, asked more than 2,000 Americans to consider seven pairs of images, most of them side-by-side photographs of various federal buildings — one classical in design, the other more modern.

“Which of these two buildings would you prefer for a U.S. courthouse or federal office building?” asked the survey, which was organized by the National Civic Art Society, a nonprofit that promotes classical approaches to architecture and urbanism.



Choose your fighter! The classical headquarters for the Environmental Protection Agency (1935) versus the modernist headquarters for the Department of Housing and Urban Development (1968). Carol M. Highsmith Archive/Library of Congress



The Hubert M. Humphrey Building, on the left, doesn't measure up to the National Archives, according to American poll respondents. Carol M. Highsmith Archive/Library of Congress; Alexandre Fagundes de Fagundes



The Hammond Federal Courthouse (designed by Pei Cobb Freed & Partners) alongside the Gene Snyder U.S. Courthouse and Custom House (James A. Wetmore)

The responses did not vary by demographic group: when asked to choose from the two images, Americans of every age, sex, race and class category elected traditional designs by overwhelming margin. Overall, classical won out over modern by 72% to 28%.

The survey found that 73% of self-identified Republicans, 70% of Democrats and 73% of independents support classical designs over their modernist counterparts.

“This is very strong reason for thinking that a bipartisan majority of Americans would support a reorientation of federal architecture in a classical and traditional direction,” says Justin Shubow, president for the National Civic Art Society. “The results are so strong that it’s hard not to conclude that Americans wouldn’t be happier with more traditional buildings.”

5. CURRENT AFFAIRS: 2020

Late in 2020 the President of the USA issued an executive order: “Classical architectural style shall be the preferred and default style absent special extenuating factors necessitating another style.” Thus codifying classical architecture as the house style for the federal government. What “beautiful” means in practice, you may ask. Translation: the architects must submit traditional designs only.

II. CHAPTER TWO: IMPACT

- "Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture" limits design options for both the architects and local communities where federal projects are constructed.
- This executive order shifts some level of design discretion to the US capital and
- “Neoclassicism is not broadly taught in schools of architecture in the U.S., although handsome buildings can still be made using neoclassical design principles,” Robert Ivy, CEO of AIA
- Policy limits participation in the design of federal buildings to the firms capable of demonstrating cohesive neoclassical portfolio

III. CHAPTER THREE: ACTION

As an artistically-inclined non-signature design firm, OS believes the following.

Carefully considered proportions, appropriate material selection, color sensitivity, general good taste, inspired design, site-specificity, and direct response to the building locale transcend stylistic boundaries. In other words, there are no ‘right and wrong’ styles. There certainly are beautiful and ugly buildings. Our portfolio is quite synthetic in terms of stylistic output. We think it shows sensitivity, humility, and good taste. There are modern, contemporary, parametric structures we are proud of. We have also completed a body of traditional architecture. We strive to expand both faucets of our output. Our work in the civic sphere will continue to respond to not only regulations, but site conditions and local preferences.

IV. CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

Pluralism is a guiding principle of democratic society. Governments that enforce official architectural style tend to control their citizenry beyond the realm of aesthetics. Many monarchies, German Nazis, Soviet Communists all adhered to a detailed doctrine of an official architectural style.

We, as society, shall not only tolerate, but encourage public discourse in urban pluralism. And yes, one could make federal buildings beautiful again without banning Brutalism, Deconstructivism or any other aesthetic concept that the current designer-in-chief does not personally approve of.

END OF MEMORANDUM

Here is a shortlist of the neoclassic projects my office has worked on:

- 1. Ghirardelli Chocolate Factory Hospitality Retrofit, San Francisco, CA, USA**
- 2. Kensington Palace Restoration, LONDON, UK**
3. Statter Hotel-Bank of Denver, CO, USA
 - great reveal of the hidden classical street façade behind 1960-th skin
 - street integrity preservation
- 4. Interstate National Bank Virginia Street and Second Avenue Executive Center, Reno (return to the original Greek Revival glory), NV, USA**
5. Al Zabbi Villa
- 6. Shriner's Free Masons Event Center, CO, USA**
- 7. D&F Tower Addition**
8. Manezh Arcade and Stables Restoration-Moscow, Russia
9. Red Brick House-Kyiv, Ukraine
10. Pushkin's Atrium-Kyiv, Ukraine
 - Collage architecture of stitching together beautiful historical mid-rise office with proposed Highrise
11. Art Deco Rental Apartments, Moscow, RF
- 12. Imperial War Museum, London, UK**