

The Trump Administration's Executive Orders on Classical Architecture in their Historical and Ideological Contexts

Promotion of Classical architecture has been a recurring theme of the Donald Trump's Presidencies, beginning with an executive order in his first term that established "traditional and classical architecture" as the "preferred" architectural style for Federal buildings. President Biden rescinded this order on his first day in office, but Trump kept the issue alive, promising on the campaign trail in 2023 to "get rid of bad and ugly buildings and return to the magnificent classical style of western civilization" if elected. And in August 2025 Trump signed a modestly revised version of his original order with a title updated to reflect his political movement's catchphrase: "Making Federal Architecture Beautiful Again." For a President not known for his aesthetic taste or interest in history, the prominence of such orders in Trump's political agenda is both surprising and the primary point of contact between contemporary politics and the material that we, as members of CAMWS, study and teach.

This executive order has received extensive criticism, particularly from architectural historians, for the way it erases the diversity of architectural styles found in Classical antiquity, deprives municipalities of architecture that responds to local traditions and contexts, and troublingly echoes the preferences of notorious dictators. Such criticisms cast the executive order as, at best, a heavy-handed and historically uninformed mandate, and at worst a dog-whistle to white nationalist supporters of the President (Dozier 2020). Such criticisms are appropriate as far as they go, but, as I argue in the paper, fail to adequately address the reason such architecture appeals to authoritarian politicians and, ironically, feed the very politics they seek to resist.

Such criticism implicitly casts the symbolic meanings that President Trump's executive order attaches to Classical architecture as deviations from historical and mainstream American

understandings of the form. However, as Thill and Monteiro have argued, classical architecture has always carried imperial and authoritarian meanings, both in antiquity (Thill 2021) and throughout American history (Monteiro 2021). Building on this work, I demonstrate that the executive order's arguments in favor of Classical architecture — reference to the “founding fathers”’ admiration for it, and to classical architecture’s alleged embodiment of democratic ideals — reflect the same arguments that have, historically, been used to promote nationalistic attitudes toward this architecture by eliding the imperial and colonialist symbolism of the style. This is the case for classically informed architecture not only in the American South, which has been analyzed along these lines (e.g. Marquardt 2018, Moreno 2022), but of such architecture throughout the United States, including that of the nation’s capital city. These violent symbolic meanings were legible to African American observers of the construction of the most prominent examples of Classical architecture in Washington DC (Barnard 2018) but continue to be occluded by more idealizing narratives propagated by mainstream treatments of the style.

Interpreting the executive order in light of this historical occlusion reveals it to be reflective not of the bizarre preoccupations of an extremist administration but of the alignment of many of that administration’s political priorities with core elements of the nation’s self-understanding. Besides clarifying the ideological reasons that Greco-Roman antiquity appeals to far-right movements and revealing the surprising historical acumen of their appropriation of that past, such an analysis throws into relief the urgent need for Classical scholars to subject to critical scrutiny traditional, idealizing ways of valuing Greco-Roman antiquity as a means of making the Classical past less suitable for political appropriation.

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