

What We Learn From the Hydra

Science, like the serpent-headed monster, seems to cause more problems than it remedies.

See B6

J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM



JOHANNES SIMON/GETTY IMAGES



FILM

'Sophie Scholl: The Final Days'

This German film captures the valiant effort of one college student fighting the Nazis with truth.

See B2

ARTS & CULTURE

THE EPOCH TIMES

SONGQUAN DENG/SHUTTERSTOCK

ARCHITECTURE

Making America's Civic Architecture Great Again

An interview with National Civic Art Society President Justin Shubow

LORRAINE FERRIER

"Whenever it is proposed to prepare plans for the Capitol, I should prefer the adoption of some one of the models of antiquity which have had the approbation of thousands of years," Thomas Jefferson wrote to French engineer Pierre Charles L'Enfant on April 10, 1791.

But why did Jefferson and America's Founding Fathers admire classical architecture so much as to emulate it in federal buildings and U.S. courthouses? And why is classical and traditional architecture still relevant to Americans today?

National Civic Art Society (NCAS) President Justin Shubow helps answer these questions, and more. Shubow is also the chairman of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, an independent federal agency of seven presidential appointees who are the aesthetic guardians of Washington. Shubow's architectural critical essays have been published widely in top national publications, and he's a noted speaker at academic institutions and the U.S. State Department.

Shubow explained by phone the importance of honoring America's historic architecture, and the significance of President Trump's recently signed executive order "Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture," which the NCAS (a nonprofit organization promoting public art and architecture worthy of the American Republic) championed.

Continued on B4

America's Founding Fathers favored classical architecture for the Republic.



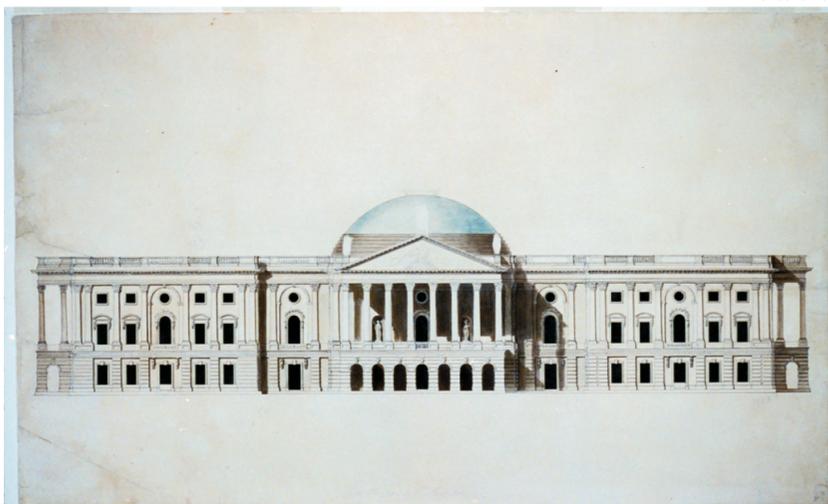
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1



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3

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

1. The National Mall, Lincoln Memorial, and Washington Monument, in Washington.

2. Aerial view from above the U.S. Capitol, looking west along the National Mall, in Washington.

3. The design for the original U.S. Capitol Building, circa, 1796, by amateur architect Dr. William Thornton.

4. Stained glass window in an alcove of the reading rooms at the Thomas Jefferson Building.



4

ARCHITECTURE

Making America's Civic Architecture Great Again



PUBLIC DOMAIN

The west façade of the Thomas Jefferson Building faces the Capitol Building.

Continued from B1

The Epoch Times: How do people recognize good architecture?

Justin Shubow: I believe there is some kind of human nature underlying our evaluation of architecture. This is one reason why there are masterpieces around the world that are universally recognized across cultures, whether it's the U.S. Capitol Building or the Taj Mahal. There is a human nature involved in our appreciation.

At the same time in the U.S., certain building types are often associated with democracy in the minds of ordinary people. You don't have to have attended architecture school to have a sense of what a courthouse looks like or what a church looks like. There are particular building forms that have come down to us from history, and it makes sense to keep building in a way that is legible to ordinary people.

Recently, the National Civic Art Society hired The Harris Poll to conduct a survey of Americans' preferences in federal architecture, and the survey found that 72 percent of Americans favored traditional architecture for federal office buildings and U.S. courthouses. These were wide majorities over all demographic groups, including socio-economic status, political party, race, and ethnicity. This is not a partisan issue. It's clear what the American people want, and that's also why the executive order is so important:

It's fundamentally democratic by giving Americans the sorts of federal buildings that they want.

The Epoch Times: Why did America's forefathers favor classical designs?

Mr. Shubow: Thomas Jefferson and George Washington consciously chose the classical style of the core buildings for the American government and the design of Washington, D.C. They wished to harken back to republican Rome and democratic Greece, those great political traditions. They, particularly Jefferson, also saw the classical tradition as being time-honored and timeless.

Jefferson sought classic architecture to improve the respect for America around the world. And the classical tradition largely set the pattern for American federal architecture up until World War II.

The Epoch Times: How did American architecture move away from the forefather's ideals?

Mr. Shubow: In 1949, a new federal agency called the General Services Administration (GSA) was created to oversee all federal buildings. Although there had been official classicism for federal architecture, the GSA started to build in a modernist style, in a style imported from Europe, based on ideas of functionalism, the metaphor of the machine, and a stripped-down aesthetic.

And in 1962, there was a report on federal office space, and in that report there



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5

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6

PUBLIC DOMAIN



was a single page called the “Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture.” And those principles rejected official classicism and implicitly favored modernism in federal design. At the same time, those principles said that architectural “design must flow from the architectural profession to the Government and not vice versa.” And who did this abdicate control to? The modernists who had come to dominate architecture. And from that time on, federal architecture has almost entirely been modernist and post-modernist.

Empirical academic studies have repeatedly found that architects’ evaluation of buildings diverges greatly from that of ordinary people. I would say that there’s something about architectural education that corrupts or deforms architecture preferences away from human nature towards some kind of artificial good that only the indoctrinated can support. Not only are there differences in aesthetic interpretation, you will even find some architects saying you should admire certain buildings because they are ugly. They’re not even denying that such buildings are ugly. They have a different value system.

The Epoch Times: Is modernism the same for architecture as it is for modern art?

Mr. Shubow: Modernism means different things in art and architecture. But very much in architecture, modernism completely rejected the prior tradition of

architecture. Modernists wanted to start anew, and in its early phases, modernism had this utopian ethos seeking to build a new man in a new era, in a technologically and economically charged society.

I would note there is one key difference between modern art and architecture in that architecture is public. It’s forced on us in a way that art is not. If you don’t like a painting, you don’t have to go to a museum. If you don’t like a novel, you don’t have to read it. But architecture builds the world in which we live, and so it necessarily has a small political component.

The Epoch Times: In December 2020, President Trump signed an executive order “Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture” that favors classical and traditional design for federal buildings. What does this actually mean for civic architecture?

Mr. Shubow: The executive order reorients federal architecture in a classical and traditional direction. It requires that new federal buildings and U.S. courthouses be beautiful and command the admiration of the general public. The order states that the general public’s preferences should matter most—not those of the architectural establishment—because what ordinary people want diverges greatly from what architectural elites want. I say architectural elites because we’re talking about some of the largest and most powerful architecture firms in the country, which are largely modernist in orientation.

At the same time, the order, although not mandating classical or traditional architecture for the country, does state that there should be a particular regard for classical or traditional architecture. It defines traditional architecture to include various styles that are not classical, such as Gothic, Romanesque, and Pueblo Revival, and shows that there are regional styles in America that are appropriate for federal buildings that are not strictly speaking classical.

However, for new federal buildings in Washington, D.C., the executive order does require that those buildings be classical in part because Washington, D.C., was intended to be a stately classical city by the Founding Fathers. That tradition, and its iconic symbolism, was continued through the 1901–1902 Senate Park Commission Plan, commonly known as the McMillan Plan, which created the National Mall and monumental core as we know them. And classical architecture is what Americans think of when they think of our government at its best. They don’t think of Washington as being a Brutalist or modernist city. It’s the classical architecture that gives it its particular beloved character.

The Epoch Times: Why is this executive order so important?

Mr. Shubow: As Thomas Jefferson said, public architecture cannot be separated from political activity. These federal buildings speak to who we are as Americans. They should have legible symbols; they should inspire civic virtue. They should not demoralize. They should beautify and uplift our world, and should

5. The Capitol Building of Washington, around 1800, which housed the U.S. Senate.

6. The original columns that supported the old East Portico of the U.S. Capitol are now at the National Arboretum.



SAMIRA BOUKOU/THE EPOCH TIMES

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A survey found that 72 percent of Americans favored traditional architecture for federal office buildings and U.S. courthouses.

Justin Shubow,
president, National Civic
Art Society

To find out more about the National Civic Art Society, visit CivicArt.org

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

remind us of the ideals of our democracy.

The Epoch Times: Please give an example of a federal building that aspires to the virtuous characteristics that you just mentioned, and another that doesn’t.

Mr. Shubow: The most famous case is that of the U.S. Capitol, which is built in a design inspired by a Roman temple. And as a result, it has a sense of sacredness, which can be seen from the fact that after the recent attacks on the Capitol, numerous legislators—both Republicans and Democrats—talked about the desecration of the temple to democracy. And I think that language is telling. If the U.S. Capitol had been a Brutalist building or a steel and glass box, no one would describe it as a temple, and no one would’ve said it was desecrated because there is nothing sacred about that kind of modernist design.

The Capitol building became the model for many state capitol buildings across the country. It created a recognizable building type in the United States.

Now, as for a building that totally fails, there is the San Francisco federal building that looks like an alien spacecraft, which is about to kill you with laser beams. It’s deconstructivist. It’s ugly. It’s widely hated by people in San Francisco, and it’s unrecognizable as a civic building. It’s not identifiably American, or regional in any way.

The Epoch Times: How do these contrasting architectural designs affect us?

Mr. Shubow: I know that one federal judge, the late Jeffrey Gallet, wrote an essay in which he claimed that he has overseen trials in both a modernist courthouse and a classical courthouse and that the people in the courtroom were better behaved in the classical building.

The Epoch Times: There have been some comments from architects and architectural bodies that say the executive order goes too far and stifles creativity. What is your response to that?

Mr. Shubow: First, I would note that many of the criticisms were from the leaked draft of the executive order as opposed to the final version. The version that was signed by President Trump does not mandate classical architecture for federal buildings across the country. Modernist buildings are completely allowed so long as they are beautiful and command the respect of the general public. So there is room for creativity and innovation. And of course there is room for creativity and innovation within the classical tradition itself. The executive order defines classical architecture quite broadly to include everything from neoclassical designs to Beaux Arts to Art Deco.

The Epoch Times: What would you say to people who would love to see more classical and traditional federal buildings built in America? What can they do?

Mr. Shubow: They can reach out to their political leaders and tell their preferences as to what they would like to see. Ultimately, the client for federal buildings is the American people, and their tax dollars have been used in the billions to construct these buildings. And yet for too long, architects have been forcing their preferences on the people, when it should be the people’s preferences that matter most.

I want to make clear that throughout American history, people of all political orientations have seen the greatness of the classical tradition. That includes Franklin Delano Roosevelt who, as president, promoted classical architecture for Washington, D.C., and fought the modernists who sought to build in a different style. It was F.D.R. who fought for the building of the Jefferson Memorial, which is in the form of the Roman temple, even though the entire modernist architectural establishment opposed it for supposedly being out-of-date.

Likewise, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer has talked about how classical forms help convey a sense of fairness and dignity.

What he had in mind is the association Americans have, that certain building types are associated with democracy. Now, there is a sense, maybe you might say an inherent sense, of harmony and order and stability that comes from the architecture so that you don’t even need any association to appreciate it. It gets to our human nature, about the sorts of architecture that are universally admired. And I think when you just see well-designed classical buildings, you get a sense of eternity and of timelessness and even of the metaphysical level. You sense the existence of the good, the beautiful, and the true.