

Trump's war on culture: The authoritarian logic of “Making Federal Architecture Beautiful Again”

Tim Rivers**15 September 2025**

President Donald Trump, returning to a plan he first advanced in 2020 and which was later rescinded by Joe Biden, has again taken personal control over architectural design for federal projects in Washington D.C. and throughout the country. Trump's new executive order, “Making Federal Architecture Beautiful Again” (signed August 28), imposes authoritarian aesthetics for buildings, codifies kitsch and signals a broader assault on cultural freedom.

Spuriously invoking the roles of Washington and Jefferson in designing the Capitol and White House, Trump asserts that monumental, classical forms are the only legitimate style for government buildings. “In the District of Columbia, classical architecture shall be the preferred and default architecture for Federal public buildings absent exceptional factors necessitating another kind of architecture,” the order declares.

Justin Shubow, Trump ally and head of the National Civic Art Society, helped draft the document. Standing on the National Mall, Shubow proclaimed: “This is a city inspired by Ancient Rome—meant to be a new Rome—a timeless republic that will never die.” His language echoes Hitler's dream of a Thousand-Year Reich.

The Führerprinzip—the Nazi “leader principle,” where all decisions flowed from an infallible ruler—applied not only to politics but also to culture and architecture. Trump's decree operates on the same logic: the state dictates what is beautiful, permissible and legitimate.

The precedent is unmistakable. Hitler and his chosen architect, Albert Speer, mandated monumental classicism while denouncing modernism as “degenerate.” Trump's order, dressed up as patriotism, channels the same authoritarian impulse: uniformity imposed from above, art stripped of critique, and culture reduced to propaganda.

In any case, Trump's order has nothing to do with genuine “classicism,” or a reversion to the Georgian and Federal architecture of the 18th and early 19th centuries. Those styles were distinguished by simplicity and balanced proportion and deliberately based themselves on the Enlightenment principles of reason, clarity and order, as well as ideals derived from ancient Greece and Rome.

The Trump version has as much in common with the beauty and elegance of classical architecture as has the Venetian Las Vegas, with its absurd reproductions of the Rialto Bridge, the Doge's Palace and the Grand Canal, with the actual “City of Canals.” The Trump administration, complete with anti-science fanatics and Christian-nationalist Nazis, is incapable of organizing anything in the field of architecture but pastiche, unintentional parody and “mega-galactic kitsch” (the phrase used for the Las Vegas version of Venice by a

former mayor of the Italian city).

II. Trump's cultural offensive

The executive order must be placed within Trump's broader cultural offensive. His hostility to the arts and honest artists has been consistent and deliberate.

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington became an early target. When Congress allocated emergency funding during the pandemic, Trump denounced the money as wasteful. The sums were trivial compared to corporate bailouts, but the message was clear: culture is an enemy, a parasite, undeserving of public support.

The Smithsonian Institution likewise drew Trump's ire. He attacked exhibitions addressing racism and inequality, denouncing them as “toxic propaganda.” He opposed efforts to tell America's history from the standpoint of the oppressed, insisting instead on a sanitized, “patriotic” nationalism.

Every Trump budget proposal included the elimination of the National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities, agencies whose combined budgets are less than the cost of a single fighter jet. Public broadcasting, from NPR to PBS, has been defunded. Institutions that bring culture and education to millions have been treated as subversive.

By contrast, Trump poured energy into projects of nationalist spectacle. He has called for the building of a “National Garden of American Heroes,” part of his preparations for the 250th anniversary of US independence in 2026. Statues of generals and businessmen and right-wing economists, not independent art, are to embody the national spirit.

The pattern is unmistakable: starve culture, suppress critique and redirect funds to propaganda. Trump wants art that is patriotic, toothless, and banal—“beautiful” in the sense that it flatters the state and comforts the billionaire at the gala.

III. Lessons of the Nazi experience

The comparison with Nazi Germany is not rhetorical excess. It is a

historical warning.

From 1933 onward, Hitler's regime sought total control of culture. The Reich Chamber of Culture dictated who could work. Modernist art was ridiculed in the 1937 "Degenerate Art" exhibition before facing destruction. Meanwhile, heroic paintings of farmers and soldiers were mass-produced to glorify the state.

Architecture was central. Hitler believed monumental classical forms would project the eternity of the Reich. Albert Speer's megalomaniac designs for Berlin—colossal domes, triumphal arches—were conceived to overwhelm individuals and convey obedience.

The cultural result was banality. While the Nazis exalted their kitsch as eternal art, it is remembered today only as propaganda. The real legacy belongs to those they tried to silence: Klee, Kandinsky, Brecht, Mann—artists whose work challenged power and exposed truth.

Trump's decree echoes this history. It designates one style as legitimate and all others as suspect. It subordinates architecture to conformist bourgeois ideology. It arrives amid a crisis of capitalism, in which the ruling elite, unable to address inequality and every other burning social problem, is hurtling toward authoritarianism.

For those in power, critical art is intolerable. It inevitably raises questions about war, poverty, exploitation and the unity of workers worldwide—Rivera's industrial frescos and Picasso's Guernica, for example. Hence, in "dangerous" art, the elite sees not creativity but threat. Trump's order expresses this hostility in architectural form but reflects a broader campaign to suffocate culture.

IV. The oligarchy's Idea of "beauty"

Trump's aesthetics cannot be separated from his class position. For the oligarchy, beauty is ornamentation to proclaim and justify wealth and power: marble facades, gilded interiors, monumental statues. These are not simply matters of taste, but ideological weapons.

Critical art—whether socially conscious novels, modernist experimentation or architecture designed for human needs—challenges this order. It exposes exploitation, provokes thought and stirs resistance. That is why such art is derided as "ugly," "elitist" or "degenerate."

Trump's order is thus not a quirk of personal vanity. It is a cultural policy of the oligarchy. Just as tax cuts enrich billionaires and deregulation serves corporations, so cultural decrees seek to discipline art into propaganda for national autocracy and fascist dictatorship.

For the working class, beauty lies elsewhere: in the courage to portray the truth, in the solidarity of struggle, in the freedom to create without censorship or commodification. The two conceptions—oligarchic ornament versus human liberation—are irreconcilable.

Trump's "Making Federal Architecture Beautiful Again" order is not about aesthetics but about social exploitation and political power. It proclaims that culture is the prerogative of the state, to be dictated from above. This is dictatorship in architectural form.

Like Hitler's monuments, it emerges from weakness, not strength. The louder the proclamations of permanence, the more fragile the order they seek to defend. American capitalism is beset by inequality, militarism and crisis.

In a genuinely democratic society, decisions about architecture and

culture would emerge from broad discussion, involving artists, workers, and entire communities. In Trump's America, they are imposed by decree. The result is not beauty but banality, not freedom but obedience.

The lessons of history are clear: authoritarian regimes destroy culture. The Nazis left behind bombastic monuments and propaganda paintings; their true legacy lies in the art they tried to silence. Trump's order will be remembered the same way: as a monument to fear, erected by a ruling class in decline.

The defense of culture cannot be entrusted to liberal politicians or wealthy patrons, who have themselves presided over cultural impoverishment. It falls to the working class, whose interests lie in universal access to art, education, and enlightenment.

Workers must demand culture as a social right: free museums, theaters and libraries; public funding for the arts; democratic planning of architecture and urban space. In the struggle for socialism, culture will no longer serve profit or propaganda, but human freedom.

*There is no doubt that, in the future—and the further we go, the more true it will be—such monumental tasks as the planning of city gardens, of model houses, of railroads, and of ports, will interest vitally, not only engineering architects, participants in competitions, but the large popular masses as well. ... In this struggle, architecture will again be filled with the spirit of mass feelings and moods, only on a much higher plane, and mankind will educate itself plastically, it will become accustomed to look at the world as submissive clay for sculpting the most perfect forms of life. The wall between art and industry will come down. The great style of the future will be formative, not ornamental. (Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, 1924.)*

Trump's order is a declaration of war on art and reason. Against the marble facades of authoritarianism, workers must counterpose the living creativity of humanity. Against the kitsch of nationalism, they must assert the truth of art. Against monuments to decay, they must build a new world—based on equality, solidarity and beauty born of freedom.

Only through socialism can humanity liberate both labor and art. The fight against Trump's decree and program of cultural counter-revolution is not merely about art and architecture. It is about the future of civilization itself.



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