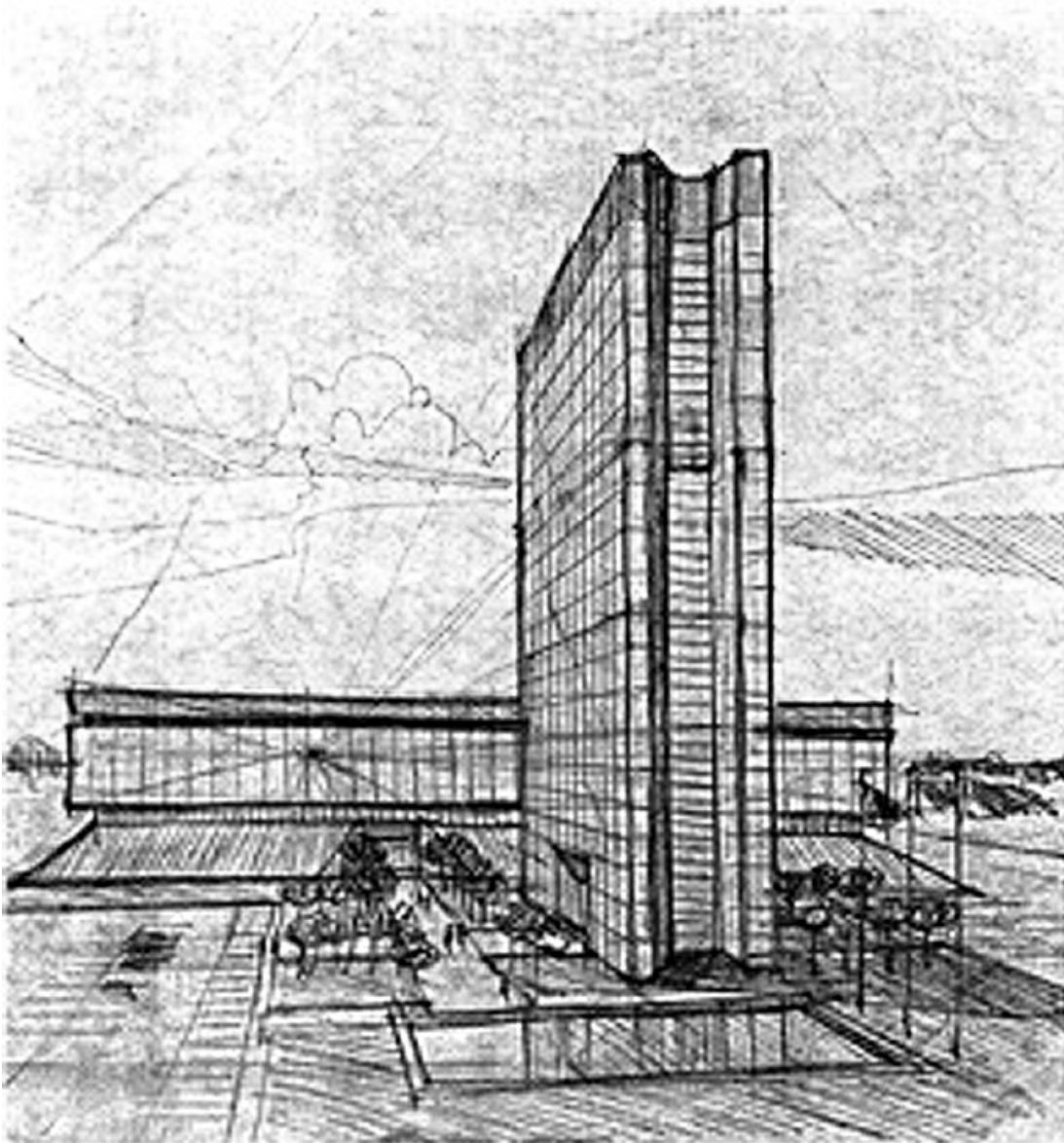


Making Architecture Great Again: Politicizing Aesthetics

by [John Henry](#) (March 2020)



From the author

It is with a large measure of ambivalence that I write this.

The reason being: I grew up in a fascinating land rich with ancient archaeological treasures, and my university training taught me to follow and love only Modernist tenets. I appreciate both sides of this polemic. I see great and poor design on both sides. But over the years I noticed an extreme bias of one side against the other and only in the past few did the other side respond with intelligence and force. This mirrors our current political stasis where one side, "tolerant", actually does not wish to hear at all from the other. The side marginalized for years and years may now even see legislation supporting their view and preference.



I graduated with a Master in Architecture from Texas A&M in 1978. As Rush Limbaugh likes to say: our 'minds were full of mush'. Students absorb whatever their professors espouse. We went to college with hopes and dreams and expected reality to accept what we had learned and the world to hire us to

exercise our newly acquired skills and theories. This seemed to work (the modern approach) in the commercial world but not in the residential. And as clinical as my Bauhaus-inspired training seemed to be, there was never a political connection to style or design. In fact, all personal beliefs, other than design theory, was not discussed in any of my classes. As we slowly realized, in the art and architecture world of the 40s to present day especially, things were not as neutral and antiseptic as we were led to believe.

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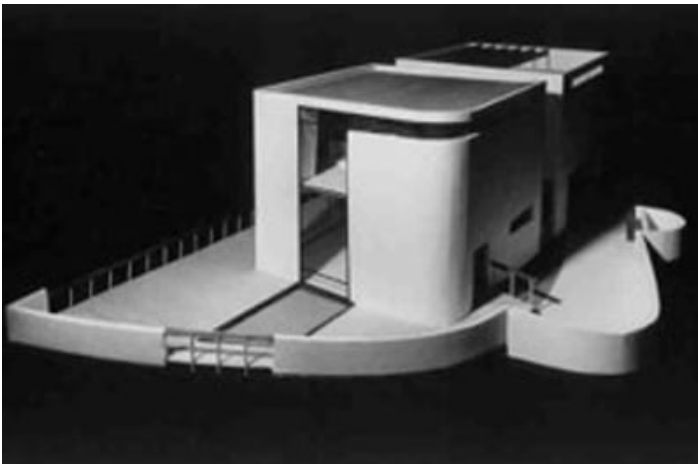
Architecture was supposed to be apolitical. It was a process, explained by our Gropius-educated Dean, that was a culmination of analysis and problem solving. We never heard it connected with any particular dogma other than purely an academic

development based on technology.

The history of architecture before the advent of Modernism and the International Style was treated as a series of notable construction adventures by primitives to fantastical expressions and devotions to Greek and Roman gods and Caesars, to 17th- and 18th-century monarchs, despots, to Fascists, mixed in with a mish-mash of experimental classical revival

styles, mostly based on the Western Tradition—but finally abrogated—that culminated in the most acceptable manner of building from the 1940s to the present day—namely, Modernism.

It wasn't clearly explained why this break occurred, or why the previous 2,500-year culmination of creative enterprise was abandoned completely except that economics and expediency were the main culprits. And there was absolutely no return. We never asked why. The previous two and a half millennia were reduced to museum curiosities, never to be repeated. Or else.



One did not design any building with classicizing features in the Universities after the theories of a group of European architects made their way through academia (and were supported by big pocketed investors/developers). To go classical/traditional was

out of style, backward thinking, against the best theories of architecture; it was verboten. In fact, only Notre Dame finally turned to a full curriculum with an emphasis on classical architecture. The frou-frou of traditional architecture was replaced by a machine ethic expressed in glass, steel and concrete. It was 'honest'.

Let's fast forward to the recent news that the Trump Administration is looking to put in place an emphasis, and legislative guidelines, favoring traditional architecture for new government buildings. While architects in general may find this a seriously rude signal that would stifle creativity,

architects of strong 'progressive' minds are calling this a crusade against the free expression they have enjoyed for so many years but especially an affront to their beloved Modernist beliefs and self-declared unassailable conventions.



We have finally confirmation, evident from several recent aesthetic critiques, that Modernism—and its progressive offshoots—is indeed an architecture of the left. Like the left-leaning media on which we have accepted as the norm, Modernism and its genetic progeny have pervaded our environment for 80 years or more, has infected nations worldwide with its seemingly inert tenets, and is rarely challenged. Supported by academia and the leftist art world and glossies, it has been the de facto norm. The inescapable conclusion is

that artistic expression, like political thought, has been governed by the left for decades now.

In a recent U.K. based opinion [piece](#) seen on [failedarchitecture.com](#), the writers claim that traditional architecture is favored by the 'European Right.' It follows that the left prefers Modernism, no? The article goes on to say that "There is clearly a reaction taking place against

modern architecture, led by conservative voices and members of the New Right" (underline is in the article). The authors then label right-wing architecture critics as a 'motley crew,' and consequently that proponents of classicism are white supremacists. They contrast traditional architectural expression against modernism, warning that the latter ". . . faithfully mirrors the ambiguities, complexities, and struggles of the contemporary urban experience, to be replaced with a singularly white, European image of human progress."



Where have we heard this malarkey before? Why in our recent Democrat vs. Republican dialogues. The right is racist, the left inclusive, etc. What we have experienced since the 40s has been an intolerance of Modernists to accept any

argument favoring Traditional architecture. This is no doubt a parallel of the current political malaise.

The article above is just one of many recent clearly voiced associations of Modern art and architecture associated with the left and Traditional with the right. The left has disguised its agenda for over half a century in our American politics and public realm, employing aesthetics and media/education to gently but forcefully assert their nascent and overt programs which are actually politically charged with clear objectives.



This connection occurred to me several years ago because the arts intelligentsia, headed by the left through any logical accounting, has marginalized traditional fine arts for years—sculpture, painting, architecture—in favor of a free form aesthetic that eschews ambiguity, impressive self-referential theoretics, to nihilism.

The more recent 'progressive' Modern architecture, since its inception, has made a point to stray as far away from any notion of classicism or cultural heritage or even common conception of 'building.' From amoebas on stilts to crumpled cans and wavy disconnected metallic surfaces, with jarring incoherent interiors that appear to be inspired by '20s German film sets (as in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* which was said to 'explore the twisted realm of repressed desires, unconscious fears, and deranged fixations' –Anton Kaes), the imagery is an anti-architecture in the traditional sense, evidently against the 2,500-year tradition inherited from Athens and Rome and then taken up by French and other European royalty and nobility.



The left has co-opted the arts, news, and media in order to overwhelm the sensibilities of our citizenry, educate our children in the most liberal mores, but especially to crush the right's core beliefs. The left's views on family values, reproduction and sexual mores, immigration, policing, governance, and politics in general is reflected in the often-dystopian and bizarre images of architecture for private and public commercial buildings that have been erected in the last 80 years.



The funny thing is, after graduating and starting my practice, I noticed how rare modern design was represented in private housing. I was subconsciously disappointed on one hand, yet on the other, happy to design traditional houses! (I had to take on an ongoing research project into the great 'Western Tradition' –Classicism, purchasing hundreds of texts and visiting/experiencing/documenting countless landmark buildings in Europe and in the United States, as the underlying theory and proper execution was not sufficiently explained to me and millions of other architects matriculating under Bauhaus 'Start From Zero' design principles.) In fact, apart from Modern revivals every few years, the preponderance of private housing—large and small—has been in traditional and regional styles. Four walls and a pitched roof seemed to be sufficient, from small Medieval dwelling to early Renaissance palaces. The left absolutely abhors a traditional pitched roof. It really is comical to what lengths they will go to avoid it.



Like Trump's large middle-class following and appeal, the humble traditional-looking house with its recognizable (and endearing) details and proportions is preferred to anything that resembles a spaceship. The disconnect with Modern public and commercial architecture in the late 60s was finally answered by the profession's academic's cartoon-like Post-Modern designs. These also failed to hit the mark for a true Traditional architecture but

they could not go back to the origins and replicate the exact proportion, details, etc. due to an expected leftist ruling critical media backlash. Beauty and proportion were not in the Modernist vocabulary. The idea was that anyone could train their 'eye-mind-hand' and create suitable buildings and become architects. The notion of talent was not discussed. Solve the 'problem' and the result will have an innate 'correct' or acceptable form.



Houses with pitched roofs rarely have the problems of modern houses with typically flat roofs. Traditional houses have less window and more wall and thus are more energy efficient. They have fewer wild intersecting planes and dissimilar structural elements and thus less prone to long term upkeep and repair; they are easier and more economical to build. The same advantages are documented in traditional commercial and public buildings. The costs to build the crazy distorted music venues, museums, and other privately funded projects is 2 to 5 times that of a Euclidean design and create a host of problems not found in traditional architecture including how to build, where to start even, how to seal against the weather, how to make accessible for long term maintenance, etc.



My idol in school was Frank Lloyd Wright, a fierce individualist and the model of Ayn Rand's hero in *The Fountainhead*. Wright was also an avowed socialist. He eventually abandoned his Usonian houses to beat the Modernists at their own game. He capitulated to the

left. Philip Johnson reintroduced an all-glass house, based on Mies's model, and influenced a generation of architects. He then dallied in Post Modern design, working-in traditional elements to his large projects later in his career. In the mid-40s however, Johnson was invited by the Nazis to Warsaw and joined the high brass to watch the city get bombarded and burn to the ground. Others, like Corbusier were fascist thinking.

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My first shock that there was no neutral design world was evident in a photo published in a well circulated trade magazine of high profile modern and post-modern architects supporting gay rights in the late '70s. I couldn't rationalize this anomaly, as I had never read any architect taking such a politically charged stand, and only years later realized how prevalent leftist liberal leanings were shared by so many artistic professionals.



Classical architecture has been used by despots, namely Nazis and Italian Fascists, to impress the oppressed. Classicism though was adopted by our early founders to express the freedom of democracy reflected in our greatest and widely recognized

monuments and public/government buildings including the Jefferson Memorial, U.S. Capitol, and White House. These and other historical forms derived from ancient and European architecture were adopted and replicated/mimicked by 18th and 19th-century American architects into the fabric of our towns and cities. They are preferred by many over the completely out of scale and anti-urban, anti-human scaled Modern monstrosities.

It is time to Make Architecture Great Again. If Traditional architecture represents the Right and we have been made to suffer for so many years by the insipid and overbearing blank and scale-less buildings ascribed to Modernism and thus the Left, then the public deserves a reconnection to a historical progression of the fine arts exemplified in government buildings and other monuments, that was severed after the industrialized building systems (though well employed at the time) to quickly rebuild the catastrophes of two world wars.



Is this payback, is this retribution? Is it time to get even? Perhaps. But I would call it a long-awaited correction and a Return to Tradition to establish a more human connection between buildings and the people who must occupy and be inspired by them. We have had enough of 'Federal Modernism', deconstruction and its cousins, and are tired of having our sensibilities ordered by the left without question. A push towards an at least acceptable option of having period style historical buildings erected by our tax dollars is not out of the question.

But there should be no question at this point, that the architecture of the left is a social and political statement, namely Modernism; that like 'blue state' politics, it represents liberalism/socialism, and tends towards even communism. Traditional architecture is then deduced to be

supported by the right, or conservatives. In this country, the blasphemous arts and modern architecture are Democrat supported media platforms. Republicans, on the whole, support traditional forms of art and construction, prefer it, and should have the right to build the same for public installations. It would be nice if the Antifaleft art critics were to shut up for a protracted period and get out of the way. Executive Order is welcomed. Mr. President: like the fake news, we are tired of being served Fake Architecture for so many years. Let's achieve a more fair and balanced distribution of design theory and practice.

What would a world where beautiful buildings predominate look like? Something like this:



The painting above is by Michael Gandy, 1820. It is a landscape representing English architect John Soane's unbuilt work. Can you imagine an alternative universe built solely of Modern style buildings? I would fear it. Classicism calls for

a 'brotherhood' of architecture. Modernism is its antithesis.

The Marxist [definition](#) of propaganda is the "popularization and dissemination of political, philosophical, religious, scientific, artistic or other ideas in society through oral speech, the media, visual or other means of influencing public consciousness."

For too long the Left has been in control of the media (arts, architecture, film, television, even social media) and education. If you repeat the same lie, the masses will accept it as truth. Modern architecture, unchallenged, makes a permanent mark on the urban fabric and in the suburbs. It no doubt influences our notion of what is 'good' and 'bad' architecture. Without shouting too much, except to offend our aesthetic and normative perceptions, it makes a point a lasting statement. Repeated for 50 years, it is the accepted 'normal.'

The left is not aiming for neutrality or fairness, and like politics, it does not accept opposition. Repeating the same nihilistic aesthetic numbs people's understanding of artistic development.

The Left pushes its agenda through small and sustained efforts by breaking norms. It is time to call out the Left's biggest lie and expose it for what it is. Modern Architecture and its offshoots has pervaded our psyche. It is a leftist notion that smashes rules, tradition, and calls for a free for all. The art of the Left does not permit diversity or inclusiveness. It is time to oppose it as strongly as the Right opposes divergence of religion, social norms, and morality.

The Left has finally exposed its true colors. By standing against Trump's potential ban on Federal Modernism and bashing Traditional Architecture as a right-wing 'white man's privileged expression of supremacy,' they are clearly signaling that the architecture of liberalism and thus Democrats, Socialists, and Communists is at its roots Modernism.



The drawings and work above were all designed by hand.

Photos by Harvey Smith Photography

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