

## Say, “No” to a Classical Mandate:

I am troubled to learn that a draft executive order is circulating among White House staff that, if signed by you, would officially designate “classical” architecture as the preferred style of all federal courthouses, all federal public buildings in the Capital region, and all other federal public buildings whose cost exceeds \$50 million.

*American architects count among their ranks some of the most spirited, knowledgeable and creative designers in the world, and the freedom explicit in our national ethos inspires them to produce extraordinarily fine works of architecture in all typologies and uses. Why would we limit the potential of this creative force when it comes to the very buildings that represent us as a nation? Surely it’s our freedom to create new and perhaps adventurous designs, using the advanced building materials and technologies that the US has to draw upon that contributes to our nation being the envy of all others.*

*Our democracy is another of our enviable traits, but this sort of* top-down approach to the delivery of federal buildings will cut local community voices out of the design process. Classical architecture has tremendous value, but so do other architectural styles. Depending on the needs of the community—including regional preferences, topography, weather, the style of surrounding buildings, the history of the community—a different approach may be much more appropriate.

It is the solemn mission of the federal court system to serve the community it is in. That is why federal court cases are tried at home, not in Washington DC. Communities can decide for themselves what style of building best evokes the sense of respect for the law and pride that the executive order seeks to invoke. In some communities across the country, a neoclassical courthouse might be fitting, but in others, it would stick out like a sore thumb. This would make it harder for the courthouse to achieve its mission.

By restricting design decisions through this executive order, it would put Washington bureaucrats in charge of design decisions affecting communities they may never visit. We agree our federal buildings should evoke respect; but that respect comes from the power of our system of self-government. Federal buildings should incorporate local design preferences to reflect the fundamental truth that our government is not beholden to just the whims of the Capital region but is of, by, and for the people whom it serves.

I urge you to reject this draft executive order and not continue to pursue any policy change that would replace local input for Washington bureaucrats within the *design process in states and municipalities*.

*We are not Rome or Ancient Greece, but a shining city on a hill, with the most promise of any society in history, including the Classical world. Let us continue to celebrate the audacious challenge of realizing the promise of that ideal with architecture that is not a product of proscribed formula, but rather a very American synthesis of unbridled individual creativity and passionately held community values.*

Paul Adamson FAIA  
Board of Directors AIA SF