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Daniel Patrick Moynihan and his ‘Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture’ (1962)

Following Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s retirement in 2000, and subsequent death in 2003, scholars have renewed their efforts to critique his political ideas and public policy legacy. But, with the notable exception of Nathan Glazer’s *From a Cause to a Style: Modernist Architecture’s Encounter With the American City* (2007), most of these writings have focused on Moynihan’s controversial activities in welfare, poverty, crime, and family policy, to the detriment of a detailed analysis of his federal architectural policymaking efforts (Glazer 2007, 146–162; Patterson 2010; Geary 2015). This is a surprising omission, given that the design of public buildings is one of the few areas where Moynihan’s thought has had far-reaching consequences: His ‘Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture’ (a short statement that Moynihan wrote in mid 1962), today form the crux of the United States’ federal architectural policy. This article therefore offers an insight into an often-overlooked policy area by analyzing the origins, meanings, and significance of Moynihan’s ‘Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture’.

Culture First Becomes a Policy Issue in the New Frontier

The idea of a federal architectural policy never arose in the United States prior to the mid twentieth century, as Congress always felt uncomfortable about expanding the scope of the federal government to include what were considered state, local, or private matters, especially given the apparent elitism of the subject in a majoritarian political culture (Conn 2012, 140). That said, if any one style dominated federal buildings (as was particularly the case in Washington, DC), it was neoclassicism. This architectural form was inspired by the classical structures of ancient Greece and Rome, and was considered most suitable for federal buildings

because it explicitly evoked the origins of the democratic form of government that the founders of the early republic also sought to establish (Westfall 1999, 73–74). But although politicians occasionally considered the subject of federal architecture, in the main, the government preferred to concentrate on practical matters of construction, not aesthetics.

The Progressive period was not notable for heralding the beginnings of national-level discussions on federal architecture either. Congress did create a Commission of Fine Arts in 1910 to provide advice on the building of public monuments in Washington, DC, but this was a small federal bureaucracy, and its aims (and initial appropriations) were accordingly limited (Act Establishing a Commission of Fine Arts 1910, 371). Even the New Deal federal arts projects of the 1930s did not establish an ideological or a practical basis for such matters: Instead, it was President Roosevelt's intention to temporarily provide relief to American workers, including those in the cultural industries (McDonald 1969). Thus although the federal government utilized cultural workers to produce patriotic propaganda during World War II, the subject of a federal architectural policy was never raised, even though the government embarked on a massive project of building new American embassies overseas in the immediate aftermath of the war (Sparrow 2011, 169; Loeffler 1998, 37–59). Indeed, when Congress eventually established a General Services Administration (GSA) in 1949 to simplify federal property concerns, the agency's enabling act made no mention of supporting good design at all (Federal Property and Administration Services Act 1949, 379).

Matters of domestic architectural policy were therefore rarely discussed at the federal level – other than in a piecemeal fashion pertaining to individual construction projects – prior to the formulation of Moynihan's Principles. 1962 was therefore a very important year: For the first time, the government began to take, however cautiously, a small step towards raising the

standards of federal architecture across the country. That the Kennedy White House should take an interest in the subject at all was actually rather surprising, given that the President did not always provide strong leadership on significant domestic issues (Parmet 1983, 353). It was also unexpected because Kennedy's artistic instincts were not well developed. But although, as Theodore Sorenson, Kennedy's Special Counsel, later noted, the President had "no interest" in opera, "dozed off" at symphony concerts, and was "bored by ballet", Kennedy did understand that key members of his political constituency were often culturally minded, and he sought to woo them (Sorenson 1965, 378–388).

With prodding from his wife, Jackie, and his more liberal aides (most notably Press Secretary Pierre Salinger, and Special Assistant to the President Arthur Schlesinger Jr.), Kennedy gradually took action in cultural affairs. His efforts began with events of high symbolic value (such as inviting artistic folk to glittering evening soirees in the White House), and culminated with more substantive activities (notably the appointment of August Heckscher, the director of the Twentieth Century Fund, as the first White House Special Consultant on the Arts). The atmosphere in the Kennedy administration was therefore conducive to new federal cultural activities, and grew increasingly so after May 1963 when Heckscher produced a report for the President that recommended the establishment of a full-time, permanent cultural aide in the White House, an arts advisory council, and a new foundation (Wetenhall 1989, 305–307).

The Nation Gets Flexible Aesthetic Guiding Principles

Moynihan was too junior to be part of the intimate clique of senior New Frontiersmen that surrounded the President, but his immediate superior, Secretary of Labor Arthur Goldberg, was highly respected within the administration, personally loyal to Kennedy, and had his ear (Giglio

1991, 21, 42, 55–56, 287). When Kennedy asked Goldberg to co-chair a committee on the subject of the pressing need for federal office space, Moynihan was tasked to provide administrative support. Although Moynihan was decidedly not given a mandate to write any such thing as a federal architectural policy, he was an astute political operator, and he possessed an expansive understanding of his own position and abilities (Hess 1997, 53). Moynihan tacked his ‘Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture’ on to the final May 1961 ‘Report to the President by the Ad Hoc Committee on Federal Office Space’, and in so doing, wrote a memorandum that today, forms the basis for the government’s policy on the architecture of federal buildings.

Moynihan began his Principles with a preamble that emphasized the state’s need to embrace “good design” in order to make “efficient use of public money” – a suggestion that was sure to win support from every hardened political hack, bureaucrat, and American taxpayer. No additional monies would be necessary for the implementation of his ideas, Moynihan promised: Indeed, he implicitly suggested that making quality architecture available to the American people might actually save money, for the guidelines made mention of “efficient” and “economical” government facilities. Next, Moynihan moved on to what might be termed the loftier aspirations of federal architectural design: Construction that would “provide visual testimony to the dignity, enterprise, vigor and stability of the American Government” (Moynihan 1962). At the most fundamental level, Moynihan was arguing for an awe-inspiring federal architecture that would stand testament to the central tenets of American democracy.

Exactly what this would look like in terms of an architectural form was not entirely clear though. To a certain extent, Moynihan seemed to favor the neoclassical vision, one that was in keeping with the existing federal landscape of Washington, DC. This interpretation is bolstered

by Moynihan's admonition that federal architectural design ought to "meet the test of Pericles' invocation to the Athenians ... "We do not imitate – for we are a model to others"" (Moynihan 1962). Classicism was, however, an American imitation of a European tradition imported to America from that symbolic pillar of democracy, ancient Greece, and yet neoclassical buildings had, by this point, come to model American democracy. On the one hand then, the meaning of this quotation was – perhaps deliberately – rather obtuse. But on the other hand, its meaning was quite clear. Moynihan had astutely chosen a quotation that Kennedy himself had previously utilized in his January 9, 1961 'City Upon a Hill' speech (Kennedy 1961). By quoting Kennedy, Moynihan made it appear as though the President was calling for what he, Moynihan, actually wanted – a new policy on federal architecture.

Next, Moynihan offered three further rules for quality in federal design. Firstly, the government ought to choose plans that "embody the finest contemporary architectural thought", whilst also paying attention to "regional architectural traditions", and patronizing the fine arts by placing an emphasis on "the work of living American artists" (Moynihan 1962). Here, Moynihan adroitly provided space for a wide range of architectural visions; for the propagation and support of Modernism, or any other home-grown, historical American style, either then, or in the future. This was a perfect example of Moynihan's ability to "create virtually contradictory impressions", as Peter Steinfels has put it (Steinfels 2013, 121). Moynihan's Principles were flexible enough for bureaucrats, politicians, and architectural experts alike to find within his statement support for their own aesthetic positions.

Moynihan's second point was that an "official style" should be avoided, and that federal designs ought to be selected through competitions judged by architectural experts (Moynihan 1962). This rule was no doubt meant to ensure that the state did not get into the business of

dictating what architects and artists should or should not be doing. For whilst Moynihan made no explicit mention of America's need to wage and win the Cold War, the federal government's ability to accept and promote aesthetic diversity through the Principles symbolically demonstrated the American belief in freedom and democracy, in stark contrast to the dictatorial line taken on official architectural styles by the leaders of the Soviet Union (although not necessarily by all Russians) (Barnhisel 2015). This was a difficult argument for Moynihan to press though, because the United States already embraced two different federal architectural forms: Historically, neoclassicism for federal buildings at home, and since the mid to late 1940s, Modernism abroad. Matters were further complicated by the fact that the Soviet state had originally embraced a Modernist architectural aesthetic until Stalinist forces within the architectural community destroyed the movement in favour of a traditional, classical vision (Hudson 1994).

Lastly, Moynihan's third principle stressed that government buildings should be site-specific and sensitive to the "general ensemble of streets and public places" (Moynihan 1962). Given the nature of federalism in the United States, tensions between a national ideal of an American architecture and local pride might easily have resulted in controversial debates over federal designs, and Moynihan sought to pre-empt this problem. Although he was not entirely successful in this effort – the GSA for example, came under intense fire for placing Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981) sculpture outside a federal office in New York City without consulting the occupants of the building, resulting in a law suit, and its eventual removal in 1989 – initially at least, Moynihan's Principles were met with generally positive reviews. The *New York Times* lauded his comments as a "most decisive and substantial step" that established "standards and leadership where none existed before" (*New York Times* 1962, 30). Meanwhile, *Architectural*

Forum, one of the leading magazines for the building industry, proclaimed the report “remarkable” (*Architectural Forum* 1962, 79). The federal bureaucracy was much slower off the mark however. The GSA’s annual report for 1962, for example, made only passing mention to “proposals” that included guidelines for federal architecture, and did not see fit to include Moynihan’s statement, even in an appendix (General Services Administration 1962, 3). A pattern of patronage-based federal building networks was already in existence, and it would take significantly more than a short policy document penned by a junior aide in the Department of Labor to encourage the GSA to uproot this system.

Thus upon Kennedy’s death in November 1963 the fate of Moynihan’s bold experiment was still uncertain. The President had increasingly experimented in cultural affairs because his more liberal domestic policy advisers had encouraged him to, and he came to realize that it won him good publicity, but a new policy on the design of federal buildings had never been a major priority for Kennedy, certainly not in contrast to such pressing foreign policy matters as the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Moynihan’s Principles might therefore well have been forgotten by subsequent administrations, pushed to the back of a bureaucrat’s filing cabinet, never to be seen again. It would take Moynihan’s continued efforts under the auspices of two subsequent presidents to ensure that the Principles became embedded within the architecture of government.

As Assistant Secretary of Labor in the Johnson White House (1963–1965), Moynihan was, with the assistance of Jackie Kennedy, perfectly placed to convince the new President that echoing Kennedy’s growing support for quality in federal architectural practices was a fitting tribute to the slain President (Hodgson 2000, 81). And as Counselor to the President for Urban Affairs in the Nixon administration (1969–1970), Moynihan was also, with the support of other White House domestic policy liberals such as Special Consultant to the President Leonard

Garment, very well placed to persuade the President to take active leadership in cultural affairs, including matters of architecture and design, on the assumption that such efforts would mollify Nixon's liberal critics, of which there were many (Garment 1997, 163, 167). Thus although as Senator from New York (1977–2001), Moynihan consistently lent his support to matters of historic preservation and building restoration, ultimately his policy legacy was not based on the formulation and implementation of substantive legislation: It was instead as a federal executive that Moynihan really hit his stride (Peck 1998, 68–69; Hess 1997).

A Problematic Legacy in Federal Architectural Policy

Moynihan's Principles have, as he would have wished, produced a wide variety of prominent neoclassical, Modernist, and other architecturally significant buildings in the nation's capital, and across the country. However, if federal architecture is as important as Moynihan suggests, if it should provide "visual testimony to the dignity, enterprise, vigor, and stability of the American Government", then ought not the American public to be actively engaged in public debates over its meaning (Moynihan 1962)? Moynihan's Principles stand testament to the continued impact of the kind of top-down policymaking favored by elites in the early 1960s, but if the United States is to promulgate a public architecture fit for the twenty-first century, one that symbolically demonstrates the sanctity of the American form of democratic government, it is vital that the policymaking process itself also be further democratized.

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