

Background Document

The American Institute of Architects

Democracy In Design Act

BACKGROUND

This document provides additional background information for the Democracy in Design Act. Please note that this document is for AIA member use only and is not meant to be shared with Members of Congress (MOCs) or Congressional staff.

The Democracy In Design Act is a bipartisan bill that would prevent a future federal mandate on architectural design style. The legislation:

- Codifies the U.S. General Services Administration’s (GSA) “1962 Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture,” which prohibits the federal government from mandating any national design style for federal buildings and encourages the government to avoid excessive uniformity in building design.
- Safeguards the GSA’s Design Excellence Program, which guides the GSA’s process to acquire, design, and construct public buildings.
- Requires proposed changes to the Design Excellence Program to include a public comment period, increasing transparency in the federal design process while also allowing the program to evolve.

For more information

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On December 21, 2020, an executive order (EO) titled *Executive Order on Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture* (Executive Order 13967) mandated an official governmental preference for certain architectural styles (in this case, “classical” and “traditional”) for federal courthouses and other federal buildings over \$50 million. AIA unequivocally opposed that EO and advocated for the overturn of the policy. AIA will oppose any attempt to mandate architectural design style. On February 24, 2021, President Biden revoked EO 13967, thereby repealing the mandate. However, without clear legislation to prevent it, future presidents could enact similar executive orders to suit their personal preference for architectural design style.

KEY MEMBERS OF CONGRESS:

The bill is bipartisan, cosponsored in the House of Representatives by Reps. Dina Titus (D-NV), Mike Simpson (R-ID), Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC-At-Large) and Buddy Carter (R-GA). It is cosponsored in the Senate by Senators Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) and Ben Ray Lujan (D-NM).

The key Congressional committees with jurisdiction over the Democracy in Design Act are:



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- House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee (House T&I), Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management
- Senate Environment and Public Works Committee (Senate EPW), Subcommittee on Transportation and Infrastructure

POTENTIAL QUESTIONS:

Why do we need the Democracy In Design Act?

- Officially maintaining a style-neutral position respects this country's regional differences, as various communities may have different preferences, topographies, and design traditions.
- It encourages American architectural innovation.
- It keeps the decision-making in the hands of designers and the stakeholders who will use the buildings in question, instead of centralizing those decisions in Washington, DC.

Does this bill discourage classical design?

- No, in fact, the Democracy in Design Act protects against establishing a preference for or against any particular design style.

If the Biden Administration rescinded the Executive Order, is this still necessary?

- Yes, because this bill is not about the past, it's about setting appropriate policies for the future. We want to depoliticize the topic of architectural design. This bill would prevent future administrations from inappropriately influencing the design process for federal buildings across the country.

CONCLUSION:

The main goal is to urge Members of Congress to support the Democracy In Design Act. The takeaway message:

- The federal government should not mandate architectural styles for federal buildings. Federal buildings should reflect the citizenry for which they are built. Support the Democracy In Design Act, which safeguards against future federal design mandates.
- AIA is committed to being a resource to policymakers on this legislation moving forward.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in AIA's 2023 Lobby Day! Good luck!

