Politics, Ethics,
& Running a Design Firm

Design Advocacy
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The Making of
a Design Movement

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Politics in
the Design

By Cara Gibbs

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"Politics is impossible to separate from architecture," states Peter Coffman, architectural historian and associate professor at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario. It's perhaps not the most obvious of proclamations, but when examining the delicate relationship between design, in all its forms, and political persuasions, the interconnectedness between the two is ripely undisputable. A mere look through centuries of rising empires and falling dynasties offers all the proof one might need—one superpower takes the leadership reigns only to be usurped by a successor—of the fleeting convictions of power. But what's most often left unexplored and vastly overlooked is the lasting impact of well-executed design and architecture on its behalf.

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**Experts discuss the deep
histories and ever-evolving
landscapes of politically-
charged design regimes**

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Philosophy of Design

Persevering long after the forces that aided in their establishment, design and architecture often serve as barometers for the current and incumbent political climates. South Florida designer Laetitia Laurent, principal and lead designer at Laure Nell Interiors, waxed philosophical on the matter. "Aristotle was the first philosopher to introduce the idea that cities were to be shaped with the political regime of the time in mind," she notes. "Paris, where I grew up, reflects this concept like no other city in the world. A straight line connects the Place de la Concorde and its 3,000-year-old Egyptian obelisk to the Arc de Triomphe, which stands to commemorate those who died for France during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, to the city's major business district, La Défense."

Coffman echoes the famed Greek philosopher's stance, musing, "What we build always reflects the ideas, aspirations, means, technology, and values of those with the power and capacity to build. That doesn't change; what does shift to some degree is who has that power and capacity." In the Middle Ages, it was the church and the aristocracy. In the 19th century the British Empire adopted Gothic as its signature style and used it to imprint an image of Englishness across the empire. Mussolini used a stripped-down, harsh version of classical architecture to frame his fascist regime as the 20th-century heir to the Roman Empire. "Particularly in imperial contexts, architecture has always been a powerful tool of mass communication," says Coffman.

1. Among Paris' iconic structural landmarks is its 3,000-year-old Egyptian obelisk.
(Image: Vitor Pinto/Unsplash)

2. The ornate San Carlo Quattro Fontane in Rome exemplifies the Catholic Baroque style.
(Image: courtesy of Peter Coffman)

3. The English Whig take on Neoclassicism is evident in the design of Chiswick House in London.
(Image: courtesy of Peter Coffman)

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—PETER COFFMAN, CARLETON UNIVERSITY

3.

Powerful Expressions

In the spirit of open dialogue from one politically driven style to another, the transition from Baroque to Rococo must be mentioned. It began as an era shrouded in deep, dark woods; heavy finishes; and imposing materials. It was ecclesiastical and, above all else, dictated by the king. The highly ornate Baroque influence thrived rampantly under the reign of Louis XIV at the Palace of Versailles, where court life was designed to reflect the king's every whim and began and ended inside the palace.

"In the 16th and 17th centuries, Baroque arose partly to re-inject spiritual vitality into Catholicism in the wake of the Reformation, and partly to assert the glory of absolute monarchies," expounds Coffman. "Eighteenth-century Neoclassicism in England was very much the architecture of the Whigs, whereas Baroque was seen as the architecture of the Tories," the country's two political parties at the time. When political sensibilities shifted and Rococo flourished into existence, there was no shortage of theatrical cues and ornamental whimsy left by way of a distinctly Baroque aesthetic, but what abounded was an unprecedented freedom through design and architecture. Through lighter materials and softer tones met with sweeping romantic gestures, an element of personal preference came to light. Suddenly individualism had a voice, a perspective, a position that begged to be expressed.

In search of carving out space both on a political forum and on a smaller, homebound scale, more and more pivotal design-driven movements began to take shape and ultimately form popular thought of the day. For instance, the Arts and Crafts movement grew out of a dissatisfaction with industrial production and a firm belief that an object's value resided, in large part, in the human labor, time, and ingenuity that went into it. Thus, a perfect, mass-produced ornament is inferior to an imperfect, handmade one.

"It's a noble idea," Coffman states, "but the world voted with its wallet. The Bauhaus shared the Arts and Crafts' conviction that everyday life should be beautiful but, unlike William Morris and his colleagues, embraced the machine and mass production. The tradeoff sacrificed the veneration of the individual craftsperson for the benefit of making beautifully designed objects cheaper, and thus available to far more people."

Laurent points out that after Germany's defeat in World War I, those in society sought to radically express themselves, as they had previously been suppressed by the old regime. A rise in modernism, simplified forms, and an absence of ornamentation followed, and the Bauhaus school flourished until the Nazis shut it down in 1933. "With the school closed," Laurent notes, "the professors began emigrating and disseminating Bauhaus modernist principles where they next called home." Before we knew it, for example, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe set up shop in Chicago.
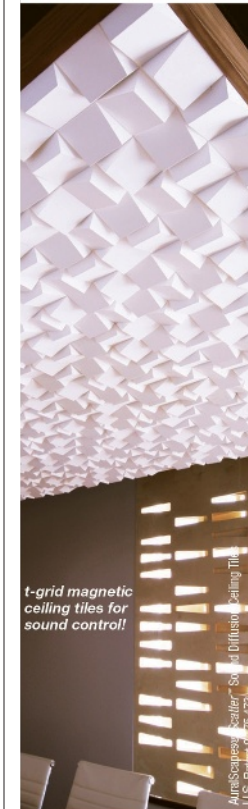

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Modern Ideas

But perhaps one of the most influential movements of the 20th century might just be Cubism. Laurent ruminates on the thought-provoking period that represented a perpetual look toward the future: "The movement focused on depicting a world that had been changed and was largely expressed by aggregating geometric shapes and constructing an object through several varying viewpoints," she says.

It began first with art—think Picasso's disparate figures and Paul Cézanne's three-dimensional paintings—and it was Le Corbusier who turned Cubism on its head with the birth of the more minimalist-minded Purism era along with Amédée Ozenfant. When Le Corbusier opened an architecture studio in Paris with his cousin Pierre Jeanneret, the two translated this minimalist approach to architecture. "After the war, Jeanneret started experimenting with minimalist design, which led to his iconic chair, foregoing fasteners," Laurent says. "In later years, he collaborated with Jean Prouvé, known for his mastery of industrial metals and their use in furniture design. The style is set apart from the Bauhaus steel furniture of the time, more rigid in form."

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> **—LAETITIA LAURENT,** LAURE NELL INTERIORS

A present-day example of Cubist design in a Florida home designed by Laetitia Laurent.
(Image: Anthony J. Rayburn)

Coffman illuminates the arousal of Modernism, explaining its connection to democracy. "Louis Sullivan—one of the seminal Modernist thinkers, writers, and architects—saw Modernism as an emancipation from servility and an expression of democracy," Coffman states. "Sullivan believed that fulfilment and expression of function was what architecture was about, and that the function latent in American architecture was democracy. So, Sullivan, like many architectural thinkers before him, attached a very specific and urgent political meaning to the style of architecture that he used. Such claims make for pretty grand reading, but they don't always stand the test of time—to this day, there's no real consensus on what a 'democratic' building should look like."

There's certainly no deficit of powerplays from one design movement to the next, but perhaps the lasting imprint has trickled into our most personal of realms. Perhaps *home* is the most impactful ground for a strong political statement—the structures we dwell in and the interiors that support them. Coffman put it simply and concisely: "Every species has its way of marking territory," he says, "and humans tend to do it with design." ●

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