

# THE AESTHETIC OF RIGHT HOW HISTORICAL FAKE FEEDS POPULIST AGENDAS

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## ESSAY 81/04

POST-TRUTH

IDEOLOGY

REVISIONISM

REVIVALISM

SPACE AND POWER.

Fake News as propaganda is not a novel creation by the former President of the United States (POTUS) and the use of architecture as propaganda to propel populist agendas is no different. This article will observe two case studies, *Skopje 2014* implemented by the nationalist conservative party VMRO-DPMNE of Macedonia and the *Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture* Executive Order no. 13967 by Donald Trump, former POTUS. These Two case

studies will be discussed in how architecture feeds the populist agendas through two different types of political administration. The term fake will be associated with misinformation, mistruth and through a historical sweep and comparisons. This article argues how the use of neoclassicism as an architectural style outside of its historical context coupled with the political agendas would be considered propaganda and in turn fake.

## INTRODUCTION

In an era where people can choose to falsify and question factual truth, tendentious fakes present a dangerous future for humanity. The rise of alternative news sources and the resurgent ideology of 'fake news' enables certain political movements to construe truth in many forms. Truth is no longer defined as singular but relatively plural and open for interpretation. Like any form of communication, architecture has always been one of the main platforms for political movements to assert their agendas. Architectural styles, aesthetics and forms take on different meanings and symbolism throughout history. In the West, the architecture of power is especially characterized by the use of features from the Greco-Roman period (Therborn, 2017). Architecture and the act of building can be observed as an exercise of power and forming an identity for a city or nation. When the former US president Donald Trump released the order of any federal building to be built and designed within the neoclassical style, known as the *Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture* order (President of the United States of America, 2020), it prompted alarming connotations of similar approach to propaganda by past populist leaders. The *Skopje 2014* initiative by the VMRO-DPMNE in Macedonia was used to 'beautify' the existing built environment that consists of buildings from the socialist era and the Ottoman era. Thus, rewriting its social and political history in an attempt to re-assert a euro-centric identity that links back to Alexander the Great (Vangeli, 2011). The narrative of reshaping and covering an existing building is a communication of power from sovereign leaders towards their national subjects. The approach of the Trump Administration and the Macedonian Government in their identity making efforts through the use of neo-classical and baroque architecture can be examined as false representation of their respective societies. Representation and meaning that a building can convey is important as it shapes the narrative of its context. This paper explores

how architecture is used as a form of propaganda through the two case studies of the *Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture* and *Skopje 2014* (Figure 1).



**Figure 1** Giuseppe Resta, *Skopje 2014 project – the centre*, 2017, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia.

## METHODOLOGY

The choice of revivalism in architecture bears a wide range of reasons, which vary across different cultural milieus (Bann, 1984; Beiser, 2011). Athena Leoussi (1998) explains that classical revival has been a common reference point for progress in western Europe from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century, but it is still an aesthetic canon today. Rediscovery of the past exposes what Rancière (2013) calls the relationship between history and historicity in his *The politics of aesthetics*. The first is the historical agent itself, the second is how history is narrated. The Romantic era,

which can be regarded as the initiator of revivalism in all arts, has separated the logic of facts from that of stories (Rancière, 2013). Through an analysis and a historical sweep of how the neoclassical style has been used in the past will reveal the politicisation of architectural aesthetic as a tool in creating alternative narratives. In other words, how politics can shape and re-shape the idea of tradition (Hobsbawm, 1992) to serve their agenda.

First, we survey the *Skopje 2014* project of antiquization in the Macedonian capital, whose main revivalist intent is based on a calculated historical inaccuracy. Then we analyse the revoked *Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture* order issued under the Trump administration as a form of propaganda aiming to impose the neoclassical style on all new federal and civic buildings. Finally, an analysis of the link between architecture and propaganda, considering the former a vector of political messages. Hence, it is included a paragraph on the reception of these decisions. It should be noted that the Republic of Macedonia and USA constitute very different contexts. The two distant cases have been selected on purpose in order to see if different nationalist governments, referring to the same represented aesthetics, resort to similar ways of manipulating the historical truth. We have limited our interest to conservative-nationalist cases, but also post-socialist democratic countries struggled with a true recognition of their past (Kopeček & Wciślik, 2015).

#### SKOPJE 2014, A NEW UNIFYING AESTHETICAL CODE

The recent *Skopje 2014* project has been addressed as the product of a 'nationalist planning doctrine' (Grcheva, 2019). In the 2010s, after only two decades from the proclamation of independence of the Republic of Macedonia, the nationalist conservative party VMRO-DPMNE promoted

identitarian policies based on the assumption that there is a direct link between today's ethnic Macedonians and An-

**Figure 2** Giuseppe Resta, *Skopje 2014 project - detail*, 2017, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia.



cient Macedonians. Government officially commenced the antiquization by renaming the Skopje Airport ‘Alexander the Great’ and later took other institutional measures in the same direction. Additionally, civil society impulses have complemented governmental efforts. (Vangeli, 2011, p. 13)

In this process of creating an ancient image in Skopje, buildings had been wrapped with plasterboard columns and cornices in an attempt to reclaim a proud sense of patriotism (Figure 2). The foundation of this alternative narration, which contested the long established utilization of the myth of Alexander to inject Macedonians under Greek origins, could be integrated to the invention of a tradition (Hobsbawm, 1992). Therefore, Similarities can be easily drawn with nationalist regimes of the 20th century (Sudjic, 2005; Therborn, 2017).

The project *Skopje 2014* resulted in a ridiculous pantheon of supposedly identity-making landmarks, but it was founded on a very serious political scheme to differentiate Macedonia from Greece with the re-appropriation of historical symbols and style. Some commentators addressed Skopje as Europe’s new capital of kitsch (Gillet, 2015). This act of covering, in a way, rewrites the narrative of the urban fabric. The use of neoclassical architectural elements in contemporary era assimilates the ideology of its historical preconception



**Figure 3** Giuseppe Resta, *Skopje 2014 project*, 2017, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia.

of an idealized time. The construction of these façades also plays an important role in the false narrative. The use of polystyrene moulding with cement render is a fake representation of masonry type construction (Figure 3). A capital that is fragmented by nature is being treated with a unifying aesthetical code. For instance, the building of Electric Power Company of Macedonia (ESM), built in 1962 and designed by Branko Petričić who was trained in the office of Le Corbusier, was an example of the International Style and featured the first curtain wall in Macedonia (Shulevska, 2015, pp. 36-43). In 2015, it has been wrapped with a skin made of cornices, capitals, and columns. Another landmark case is the transformation of the central Republic Dispatch TC Center, built in 1989 by architect Zoran Shtaklev. The building was part of the post-earthquake reconstruction plan of the city centre by Kenzō Tange (Shulevska, 2015, pp. 54-59). Disguised as the

others as maintenance works, *Skopje 2014* actually re-shaped the exteriors keeping the interior as they were. What mattered was the urban scene. This renewal project implied the creation of a rulebook, new principles on city planning, architecture, and the design, created by the ruling political party leaders (Grcheva, 2019). While initially the stylistic direction of *Skopje 2014* was only suggested, it gradually became a legal requirement. Thus it imposed an architectural style to architects which then influenced non-government buildings through an incentivised conditional tax cuts (Grcheva, 2019, p. 142). Façadism has been used as a subtle device not only to compete with the post-socialist heritage, but also to overwrite what has been built before. The government covered the past, literally, with a new layer (Figure 4).

**Figure 4** Giuseppe Resta, *Skopje 2014 project – the centre*, 2017, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia.



## PROMOTING BEAUTIFUL FEDERAL CIVIC ARCHITECTURE

Revival as a methodology of invention of the past is not a peculiarity of recently formed European republics of the East. Proof is what happened under the Trump administration. The former President of the United States released the order of any federal building to be built and designed within the neoclassical style, known as the *Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture* order (President of the United States of America, 2020). In Section one of the executive order, it referred to the notable founding fathers placing importance on the civic and federal buildings: “They wanted America’s public buildings to inspire the American people and encourage civic virtue” (Exec. Order no. 13967, 2020).

This reference was to bring justification in modelling future Federal and Civic buildings to be like those built around the founding of the United States of America. An example of a building that was built during the Trump Administration was the White House Tennis Pavilion which the former First Lady Melania Trump co-designed in a neo-classical style (Figure 5).

**Figure 5** White House, *White House Tennis Pavilion*, 2019, Washington DC, United States of America. Retrieved April 30, 2021 from <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:White\\_House\\_tennis\\_pavilion.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:White_House_tennis_pavilion.jpg)>.



This would be a precursor in promoting this style for Federal and Civic buildings. Around at the same time, the White House gardens were renovated and changed which sparked controversy to the removal of historical importance of the gardens such as the rose garden that was planted during the Kennedy Administration. The idea of creating a new image is a form of political propaganda and in a way creating a new form of reality by removing the past and instilling the present.

During the 1950's onward in the USA, the use of neoclassical style was replaced to favour modern and contemporary designs. During the 50's, 60's and the 70's, there was a large number of new federal buildings that were built and designed by renowned architects of the modernist era (Robinson & Foell, 2003). These become reflections of the stylistic ideals of that time but it also reflects the context of a changing socio-cultural and economic environment post World War II. The 1959 Public Building Act, reviewed by the Kennedy administration, aimed for efficient and economical builds that favoured creative design and the implementation of art (Robinson & Foell, 2003, pp. 43, 44). The act also sought to seek the direction of the architectural profession with current trends rather than the government. Buildings

**Figure 6** Photographs in the Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, *Robert C. Weaver Federal Building*, Washington, DC. Retrieved April 30, 2021 from <<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2011633627/>>.





**Figure 7** Frank Schulenburg, *Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture*, 2020, Washington DC, United States of America. Retrieved April 30, 2021 from <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:National\\_Museum\\_of\\_African\\_American\\_History\\_and\\_Culture\\_in\\_February\\_2020.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:National_Museum_of_African_American_History_and_Culture_in_February_2020.jpg)>.

such as the Mies Van Der Rohe's Kluczynski Federal Building (Chicago, IL), the Marcel Breuer's Robert C. Weaver Federal Building (Washington, DC) and the Walter Gropius' John F. Kennedy Federal Building (Boston, MA), built at the time were examples of design that were current representation of the discourse (Figure 6). The positive impact of not prescribing a style can still be observed in the contemporary era, most notably with the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (Figure 7). This building built under the Obama administration with the design led by David Adjaye are a reflection of the changing socio-cultural vanguard around African-American history and culture. This is vastly different to what the Executive Order given by the Trump administration where it sought to undo these architectural freedoms. The 1959 Public Building Act gave agency for the architectural profession to use their creative expertise to reflect onto the building of their context by incorporating

art and design thought that they see fit. The Executive order 13967 sought to remove this power and impose a singular style that limited the representation of the broader United States, thus becomes authoritative and misrepresents the current architectural profession.

#### ANALYSIS: ARCHITECTURE THROUGH POWER AND PROPAGANDA

In year 2020, the surge of the pandemic provided a fertile environment for politicising the global situation. The formula 'Fake News' was disseminated in 2016 by Donald Trump who was at the time a candidate running for the presidency. As Trump rose to power, the terminology of 'fake news' also became a powerful weapon. The following year in 2017, in response to the growing weaponization of the term 'fake news' by some world leaders, a joint declaration by the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the OSCE's Representative on Freedom of the Media, the Organization of American States' Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, and the African Commission on Human and People's Rights Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information to express their concern on the impact towards the integrity of journalism (Kaye, 2017). Around the same time, UNESCO produced a handbook outlining to journalists, students of journalism and journalist educators/trainers on how to navigate the surge of 'fake news' (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). The idea of fake news is not novel. It is simply another form of disinformation, misinformation and propaganda. The first recorded smear campaign was at the time of Mark Antony and Cleopatra in 44 BC. Kaminska (2017) colourfully wrote that Octavian produced 'tweet' like propaganda in the form of small coins. The goal was to brand Mark Antony as Cleopatra's puppet, a drunkard, philanderer and not fit to lead the Roman Empire. Octavian was successful in his propaganda and spread of misinformation despite the lack of evidence against Mark Antony (Sifuentes, 2019). Therefore, the



**Figure 8** Darmon Richter, *Construction of Skopje 2014*, Skopje Administrative Court, Republic of Macedonia. Retrieved April 30, 2021 from <<https://www.exutopia.com/skopjes-colourful-revolution-fighting-tyranny-with-street-art/>>.

ability to acknowledge real information from fake information gets blurred through propaganda. In the case of the *Skopje 2014*, the buildings were wrapped with lightweight structures and plaster to mask the existing concrete structures, as seen in Figures 8-10 of the Administrative Court. The act of masking with an architectural skin coupled with agendas of the VMRO-DPMNE made it propagandist. Whilst, the *Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture* limits new building to be within the appointed style through authoritative requirements. Therefore, the built environment and its architecture can be used as a form of media for political propaganda.

The historical context of Neoclassicism and the revival of the ancient world has been twisted to serve certain ideals that have evolved over time. The interest towards the past was re-ignited after the discovery of the ancient ruins in Herculaneum (1738) and Pompeii (1748). This unveiled an unprecedented source of aesthetical, and eventually, philo-



**Figure 9** Darmon Richter, *Construction of Skopje 2014*, Skopje Administrative Court, Republic of Macedonia. Retrieved April 30, 2021 from <<https://www.exutopia.com/skopjes-colourful-revolution-fighting-tyranny-with-street-art/>>.

sophical references of the classical revival movement during the 18th century as they idealised and romanticised the past as the perfected society (Irwin, 1997; Leoussi, 1998). The classicism set forth by Winckelmann and the Grand Tour exemplify how historical revisionism can create a snowball effect on the contemporary society just discovering and sharing image-based ideals. In other cases, revivalism can be an ad-hoc strategy to support the ideology of national identity, with a top-down direction. It is especially the problem of the definition of an identity that creates a connection between political propaganda and architecture (Leoussi, 1998; Pandya, 2020). The propaganda of fascist/populist political movements created a new context for this architectural style.

The drive to associate government building within the style of Neoclassicism has changed overtime through political agendas that used the architectural style as an imposition of power and the association of an idealised society.

**Figure 10** Darmon Richter, *Construction of Skopje 2014*, Skopje Administrative Court, Republic of Macedonia. Retrieved April 30, 2021 from <<https://www.exutopia.com/skopjes-colourful-revolution-fighting-tyranny-with-street-art/>>.



The assertion of a nationalist identity with architecture can be seen through the patronage of Adolf Hitler to Albert Speer in the conceptualisation and design of New Germania (Therborn, 2017). It was clear that there was an intent to impose a global dominance through designs that would reference and rival in scale and grandeur the Roman Pantheon and St Peter's Basilica (Vale, 2014). Power plays an important role in architecture and in turn architecture plays an important role in asserting and establishing a powerful national identity. In the same period, the Italian fascist regime was concerned with the re-elaboration of the Roman tradition as Piacentini (1933) looked for *italianissimi* and *romanissimi* building designs. Moreover, authoritarian regimes employed neoclassical tropes to westernise colonies (Deane et al., 2012) as it accompanied the acquisition of distant lands (Pieris, 2012). Thus, the architecture created became cultural landmarks through the formation of a new nation-state (Calace et al., 2017; Pantelić, 1997). Narrative within a built environment is power at its best. Therefore, contemporary neoclassical façades can be viewed with Western nationalism in the act of imposing their agendas with a connotation of power and dominance. The connotation of the neoclassical style has evolved from romanticising the ancient world into weaponizing the style.

As a reaction, protests and demonstrations opposed both policies. In Skopje, the realization was so fast that the local community was left unprepared in front of the renewal project. Among these protests, the 2016 *Colourful Revolution* involved citizens, art experts, architects, writers, sculptors, university professors, politicians, in colouring plaster skins with paint and coloured balloons (Buleski, 2017). Social mobilization weakened the image of the ruling party, leading eventually to an election loss, but the consensus of the population on *Skopje 2014* was nonetheless consistent and today the capital still faces the aftermath of that project (Grcheva, 2019). In USA, president Joe Biden has revoked Trumps executive order four days after he sworn as the 46th president of the United States. When it was announced and during its 69-day of activity, the order provoked many opposing voices from professional organizations and media (McGuigan, 2020). The American Institute of Architects (AIA) president Peter Exley commended Biden's overturning of the policy saying that he "has restored communities with the freedom of design choice that is essential to designing federal buildings that best serve the public" (Dafoe, 2021).

It can be said that, in both cases, public mobilization has effectively opposed aesthetic revivals, extending the stylistic problem to the political domain. In Macedonia, the protest has been taken to the street, while the USA act has been hindered at an institutional level.

## CONCLUSION

Extravagance and ornamentation, under the reassuring guise of a widely accepted aesthetic, are believed to be universally applicable, beyond the boundaries of place and time. Nevertheless, when revival is associated with the search for identity, then looking for a congruent unity between politics, the nation, and a style, historical fakes can feed nationalistic propaganda. Buildings being a representation of the nation

and of the people that use them needs to consider the image and the historical implications when appropriating a certain style. It is clear that when the Macedonian Capital Skopje began masking the existing modernist government building with classical features it signalled an attempt to rewrite history. Buildings as seen as both a visual representation as well as a vessel of socio-cultural meaning and symbols need to be placed with importance. The aesthetical and stylistic image will have a direct narrative in how they will be perceived. Thus, a building that has been plastered over to hide another building beneath its thin polystyrene skin tells a story of an attempt to deceive the viewer. This is the fakery and the fallacy demonstrated in Skopje is a deception of a narrative that tries to re-invent an image of a nation. Furthermore, federal and government buildings hold power in the identity of a nation and when the Executive Order 13967 it was not an attempt to reflect the ideals of the citizens as it imposed a singular aesthetic that rendered the role of the architectural profession to a subsidiary level compared to the 1959 Public Building Act that sought to foster creativity and agency outside Government control. Therefore, a misrepresentation of the discourse.

This article is no means to demonise the neoclassical movement as it is a representation of the 18th and 19th century Western European ideals of art, architecture and philosophy. However, it must be questioned whether this aesthetic is a relevant style for the 21st century where the socio-cultural ideals are vastly different and whether its association with populist agenda is appropriate. Although trends and style change through architectural history, their meaning and representation remain a marker in time of their context. Buildings are vessels of information and like many forms of information it can be construed and misrepresented. Thus, architecture as a tool for communication is susceptible to the spread of misinformation and propaganda. In brief, we argue that fake classicism, like employment of fake news, is propagandist that is used as a tool to change the shape of a community. Thus, shifting and altering the narrative of a city.

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