MICHAEL W. MEHAFFY, PH.D.
SENIOR RESEARCHER, KTH ROYAL INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
FACULTY ASSOCIATE, ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY
216B NE SNOHOMISH AVENUE
MAILING ADDRESS: P.O. BOX 2579
WHITE SALMON, WA 98672

August 2, 2020

Representative Dina Titus
2464 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Titus,

RE: Comments on HR 7604, "Democracy in Design Act"

I write as a researcher and educator in architecture and urban planning, currently with appointments at Arizona State University (urban planning) and KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm (architecture). I am also a practitioner in planning and design, with a Ph.D. in architecture from Delft University of Technology. My areas of specialty include public involvement in planning and design, architectural design theory, evidence-based design, scenario-based planning, and urban and architectural form and its impacts.

I want to endorse the sentiment expressed by Jane Frederick, AIA 2020 President, who stated recently, "Buildings—both functionally and aesthetically—must be designed to serve their populations. It's critical that communities have the ability to decide for themselves what architectural design best fits their needs."

Unfortunately, the evidence shows clearly that in recent decades, our planning and design professions have too often failed in this responsibility. Like any profession, architecture and planning are subject to well-documented biases, against which we must compensate. One of these is a well-documented cognitive bias concerning the qualities of architectural design believed most important by professionals, which too often turn out to be at odds with what users actually need and want.

(Technically, this bias is described in social psychology as "construal level theory," wherein a professional who is psychologically distant from the actual daily experiences of users must make "construals" of what they believe are the important qualities of a design; in practice, these can be abstract artistic characteristics that are of little value for the daily experiences and needs of users.[i]).

The literature documents this failure extremely well, for example:

> "Evidence reveals that architects' aesthetic evaluations of buildings differ from those of laypersons. If architects are to create buildings that are pleasurable in the eyes of others, they must know how laypersons recognize and evaluate buildings..."[ii]

> "Previous research has revealed important differences in architectural evaluation between design professionals and the lay public… the findings of a study … specifically focusing on differences in architectural interpretation between the lay public, planning students, and practicing planning professionals…"[iii]

> "There is abundant evidence that architects' aesthetic evaluations of buildings differ from those of laypersons… Nasar (1988) found that architects did not merely disagree with laypersons about the aesthetic qualities of buildings, **they were unable to predict how laypersons would assess buildings, even when they were explicitly asked to do so**. It would seem that many architects do not know, from a lay viewpoint, what a delightful building looks like. If we are ever to have more delightful buildings in the eyes of the vast majority of the population who are not architects, this conundrum needs study and solutions.".[iv]
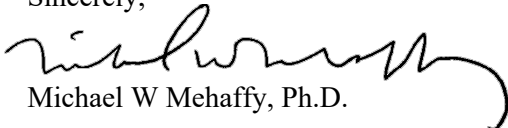
In light of this and related research, better methods are clearly needed to assess citizens' actual preferences over time in evaluating architectural designs. The imposed values (or "construals") of professionals, artists or government panelists are clearly inadequate, and moreover, may run contrary to the professional responsibility to serve public needs and interests. Instead, better tools are needed to involve the public in more meaningful ways, with better outcomes over time. (There are many such tools, including visual preference surveys, stakeholder workshops, eye-tracking software, and other measurement methods.)

Another approach is simply to use the evidence of history about designs that are most likely to be satisfactory in the eyes of the general public. The evidence clearly shows that some building types and characteristics are preferred and even beloved by most people in many different contexts, and we later come to call these "Classical" or "traditional". Often the most desirable designs are those that have been identified and refined through a kind of evolutionary process, not unlike the processes that generate the most beautiful forms of biology. This is a different way of looking at Classical and traditional architecture as a kind of "evolutionary repository," but it enjoys a growing (and fascinating) scientific evidence base.[v]

By contrast, the award-winning avant-garde buildings by contemporary architects, however much merit they may have as daring and original artistic works, typically carry no such evidence base of public preference or benefit. Indeed, as some critics point out, they may amount to unethical professional experiments carried out upon an unconsenting public. In controlled private settings, such sculptural expressions may be perfectly appropriate, but as key elements shaping the public realm and the daily experiences of all users, they simply violate our professional duty to serve. Judging from the painful history of the last half-century, we are experiencing an unconscionable form of professional malpractice.

Therefore, when it comes to HR 7604, the "Democracy in Design Act," I hope you will bear these observations and findings in mind. While we can and should debate the merits of any executive order mandating a style, it may be no less appropriate than legislation that would indirectly enforce another, equally arrogant kind of mandate. We need a better, more thoughtful, evidence-based path forward to best serve the interests of all citizens.

Sincerely,

Michael W Mehaffy, Ph.D.

[i] Trope, Y., Liberman, N. & Wakslak, C. (2007). "Construal levels and psychological distance: Effects on representation, prediction, evaluation, and behavior." *Journal of Consumer Psychology: 17*(2), 83.

[ii] Ghomeshi, M., Nikpour, M. & Jusan, M. M. (2012). "Evaluation of Conceptual Properties by Layperson in Residential Façade Designs". *Arts and Design Studies, 3*, 13-17. See also

[iii] Hubbard, P. (1997). "Diverging attitudes of planners and the public: an examination of architectural interpretation". *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research,* Vol. 14, No. 4, pp.317-328.

[iv] Gifford, R., Hine, D. W., Muller-Clemm, W. & Shaw, K. T. (2002) "Why architects and laypersons judge buildings differently: Cognitive properties and physical bases", *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 131-148.

[v] Mehaffy, Michael & Salingaros, Nikos (2020) "Building Tomorrow's Heritage. IV. Making Places For All, By All", *Preservation Leadership Forum, National Trust for Historic Preservation*, 20 May, https://forum.savingplaces.org/blogs/special-contributor/2020/05/20/building-tomorrows-heritage-making-places-for-all