

# THE VALENCIES OF NEO-CLASSICAL



I have been avoiding giving any attention to the last days of Trump. Jody Maxmin, however, directed me to an executive order this last weekend concerning classical architecture.

Here's the report in the New York Times:

## Trump Makes Classical Style the Default for Federal Buildings

An executive order stopped short of banning modernist architecture, but states that “the preferred architecture” style for new buildings should be classical.

“Though we are appalled with the administration’s decision to move forward with the design mandate, we are happy the order isn’t as far-reaching as previously thought,” Robert Ivy, chief executive of the American Institute of Architects, said in a statement promising that his organization would never prioritize any one type of architectural design over another. The group said it would ask the incoming Biden administration to reverse the order.

Michael Kimmelman, the architecture critic for The New York Times, condemned the measure last February. “Just to have this argument feels demeaning,” he wrote.

“The executive order is meaningless,” said Reinhold Martin, an architecture professor at Columbia University.

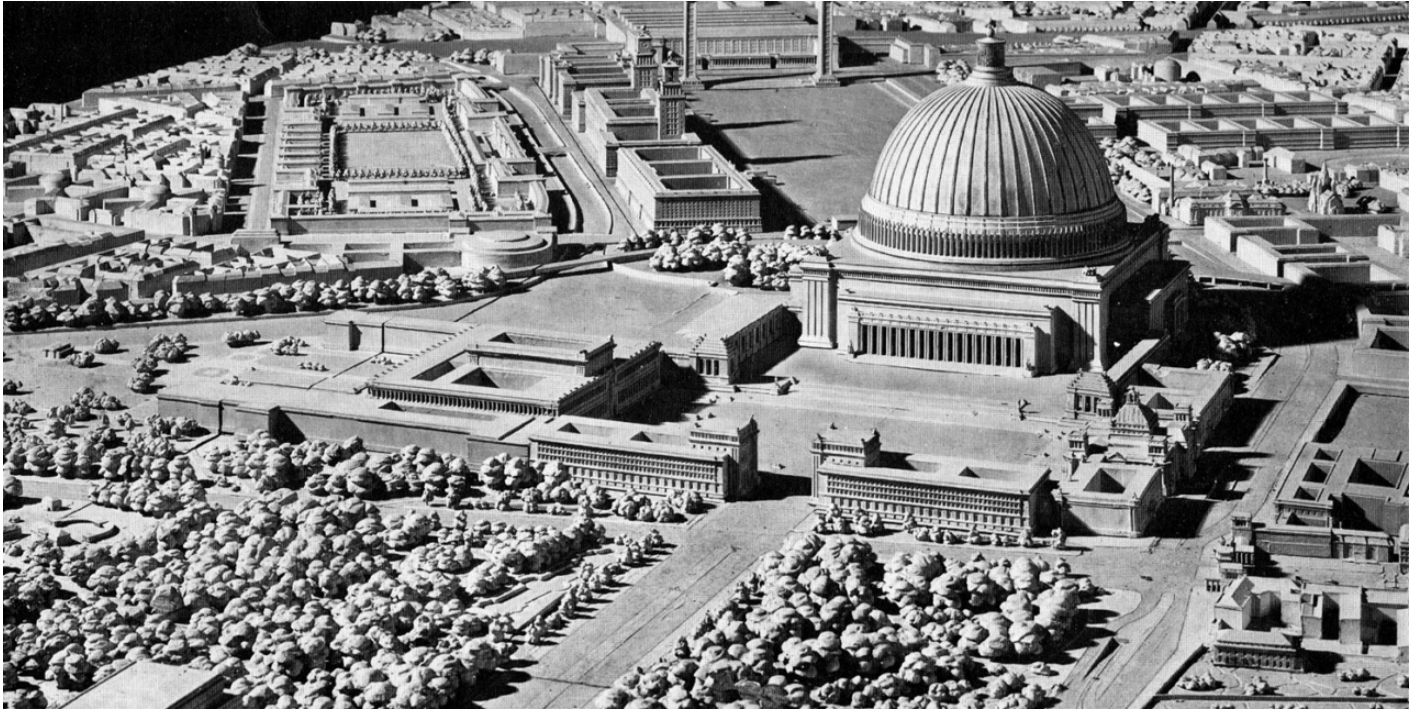
“This is an effort to use culture to send coded messages about white supremacy and political hegemony.”

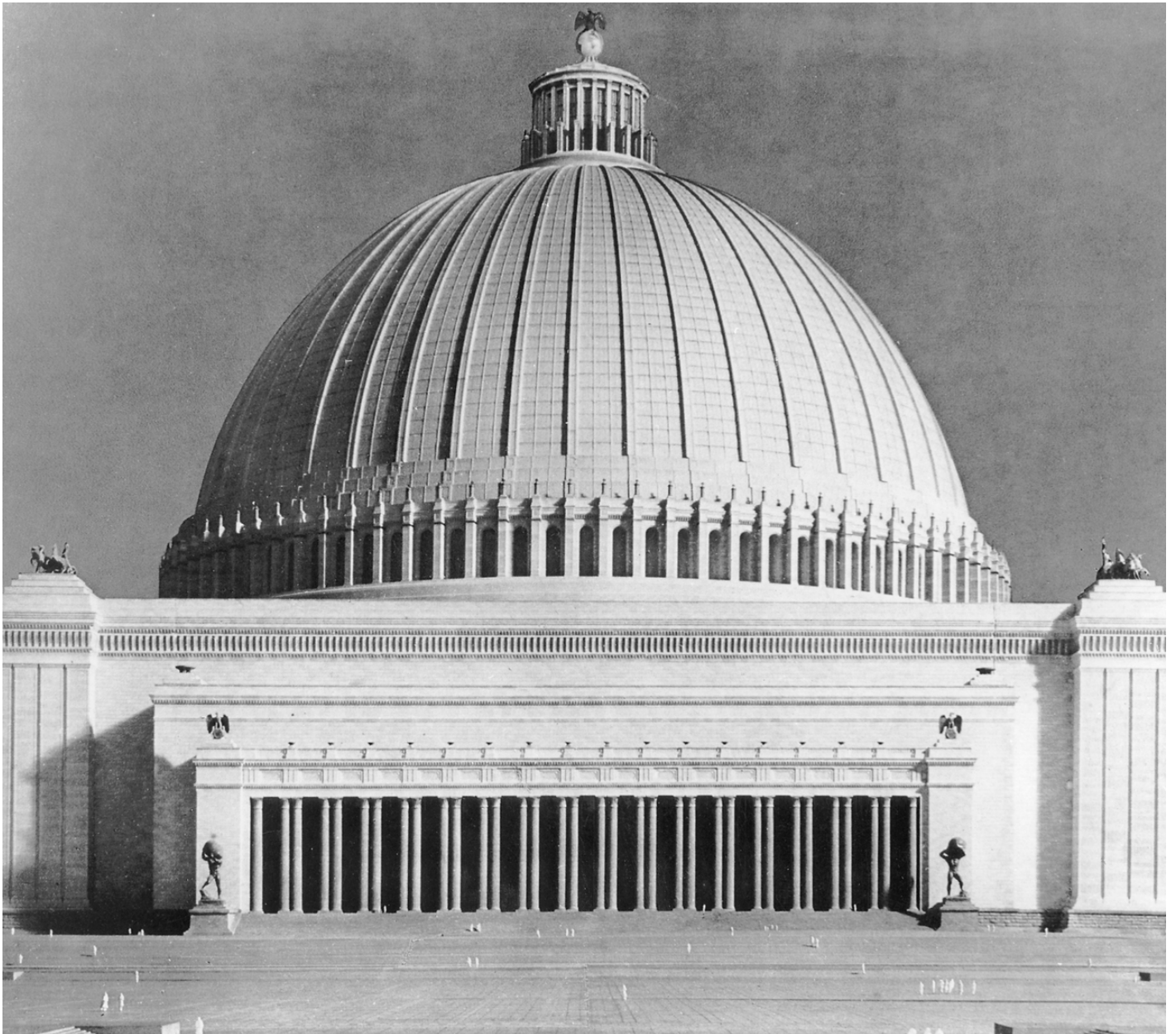
Of course the Classical has always been the go-to style for the architectures of European states that wish to trace their origins to Rome and Greece.

Here we have an example of the orientation upon a desired future, a utopia, that can be associated with this celebration of Classical style. Style, material, and values are here connected with a particular urban staging, setting for certain experiences, a particular ambient rhetoric.

Architecture is never simply form given to space.

In this orientation on the future one is reminded of Albert Speer’s infamous Neo-Classical plans for remodeling Berlin in the Third Reich, plans so beloved of Hitler. Here is a model of the People’s Hall. (There was a great article in the Guardian back in 2016 on this project in urban planning – [\[Link\]](#))





Here's another post about Speer, spectacle and architectural spaces – [\[Link\]](#)

In my book on the archaeological imagination [\[Link\]](#) I was concerned to trace the processes that work through relationships between past and present in establishing what we can call ideological fields of meaning and significance, materialized in building. A fascinating case is that of Belsay Hall (1810-1817) in the north of England. Charles Monck, wealthy estate owner and amateur Classicist, designed and had built an extraordinarily purified and rationalized translation of Classical architectural ideals. It is said that he had to have masons retrained to be able to cope with his architectural plans that were drawn to an accuracy of a hundredth of an inch – in order that the building would faithfully respect the mathematical ratios of Classical harmony..

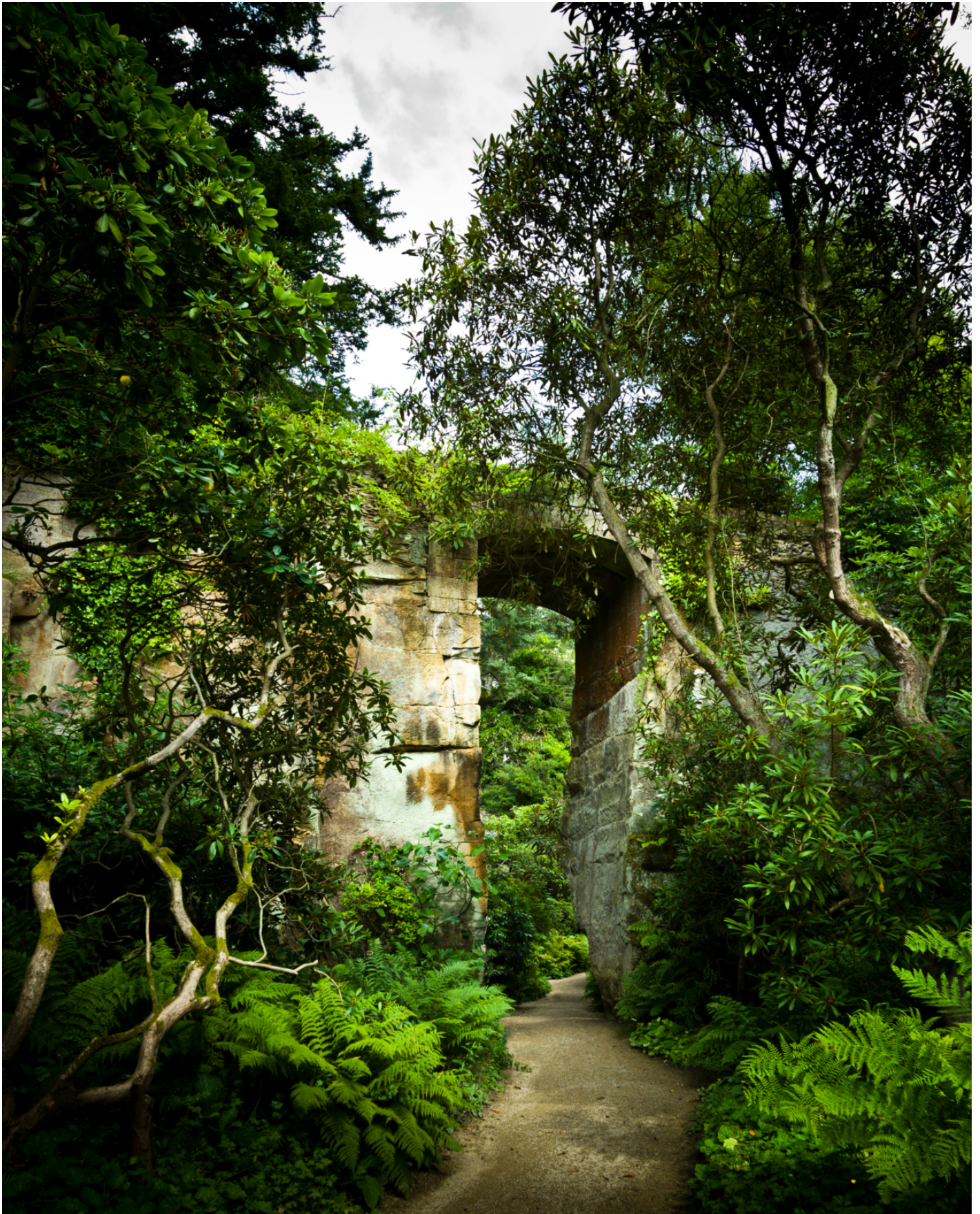




In contrast to the austerity of the house is the lush romantic garden created in the stone quarry that leads to the old (Gothic) castle with its Jacobean extension.

Perambulation connects grand historical dispositions with the genealogy of his great family (the Middletons).

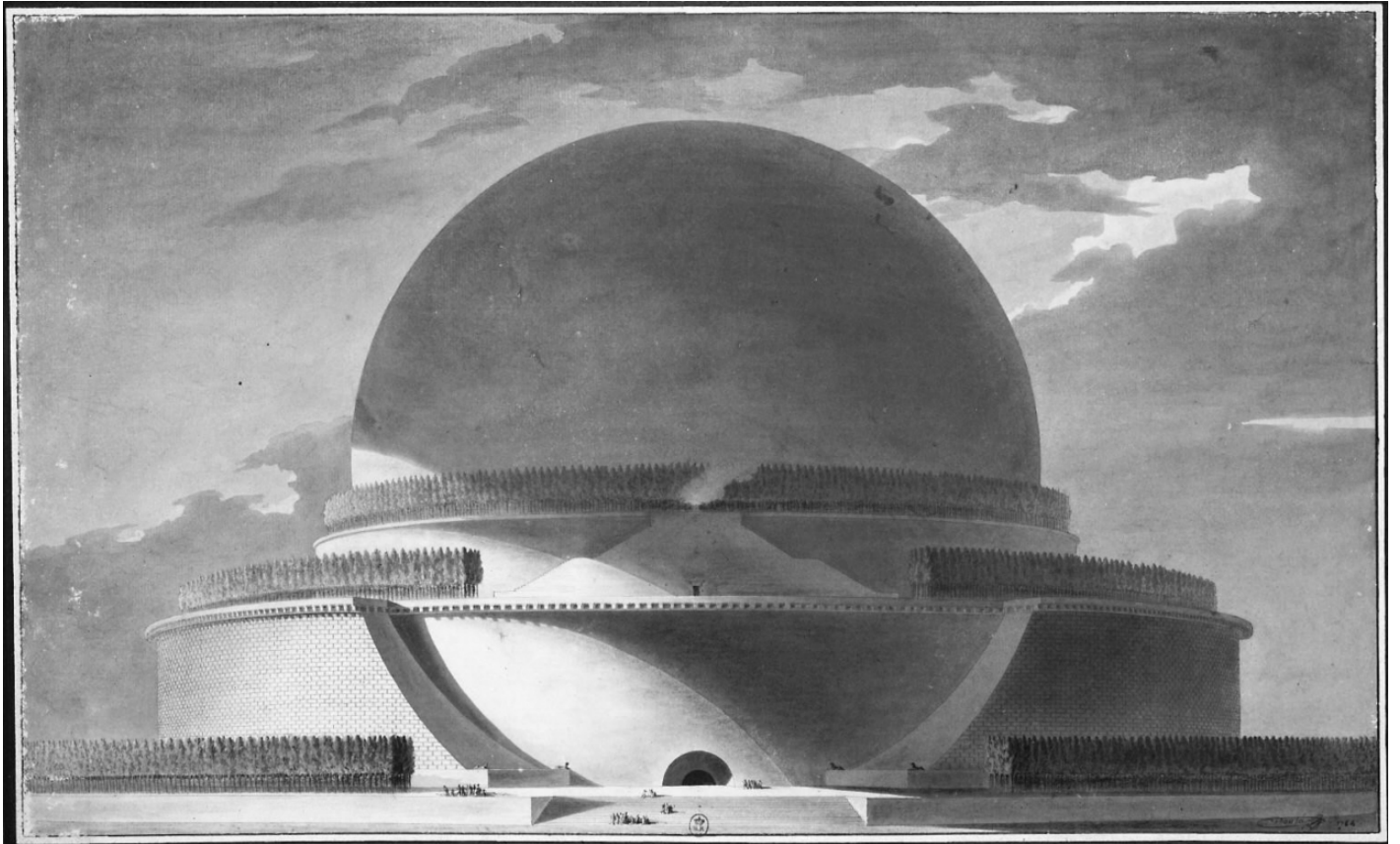
Another post on Belsay – [\[Link\]](#)



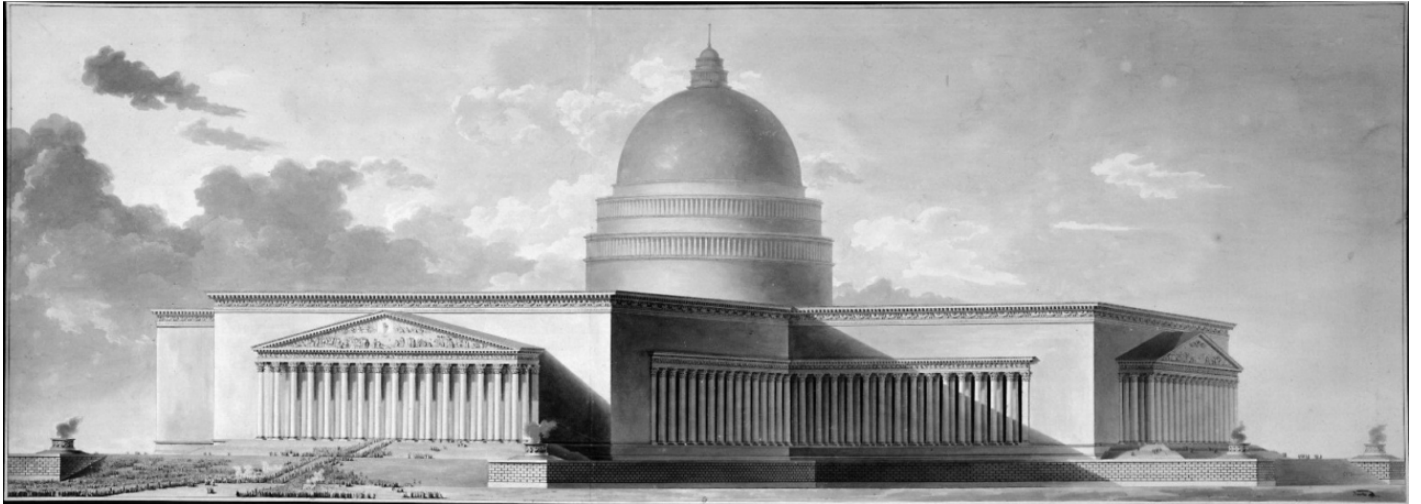


Past-present-future trajectories. Imagined, speculative futures, are always present, of course, in any architectural project. Such is part of the working of the archaeological imagination.

Etienne Louis Boullé, an older contemporary of Monck's never realized his visions of a rationalized future embedded in the reincarnation of the past:



Etienne Louis Boullée – Cenotaph for Newton



Metropolis Project.