

Rejecting precedent and Trump, Biden ousts members of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts

By [Peggy McGlone](#)

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Having ousted four Trump-appointed members of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, President Biden announced Tuesday that he will replace them with four people who bring “a diversity of background and experience, as well as a range of aesthetic viewpoints.”

Architect Peter Cook, Howard University professor of architecture Hazel Ruth Edwards, Andrew Mellon Foundation program officer Justin Garrett Moore and architect Billie Tsien will join the seven-member commission, an independent agency responsible for guiding the design of the capital city, including renovations of historic homes and the look and scale of government buildings, museums and memorials.

“President Biden is proud to nominate this extremely qualified and well-respected group of professionals to the Commission on Fine Arts,” said an emailed statement from the White House on Tuesday. The appointments do not require Senate confirmation.

On Monday, the Biden administration sent letters to architect Steven Spandle, landscape architect Perry Guillot, sculptor Chas Fagan and commission chairman Justin Shubow asking that they resign by 6 p.m. that day or face termination. Fagan is the only one who resigned, according to Shubow.

Spandle, Guillot and Fagan were appointed in January to four-year terms by President Donald Trump and made the CFA all White and all male. Shubow, who is president of the National Civic Art Society, was appointed to the board in October 2018. He was elected chairman in January. The commission’s new chairman will be voted on by its seven members; the next meeting is June 17.

Shubow called the move unprecedented in the commission’s 110-year history and said the commissioners were targeted for their views on classical architecture.

“Given that all of the threatened commissioners support classical architecture, the White House’s action clearly represents an attack on that type of design, even though it is approved by most Americans,” Shubow said.

Guillot said he was disappointed that his term ended after five months.

“I found it an incredible honor to be a part of the office, working with the commission and Secretary Thomas Luebke and his staff,” Guillot said by phone Tuesday. “It was tremendously rewarding. I regret not staying on.”

Guillot said he does not think the terminations were about classical ideals. The three remaining members are more rooted in classic ideals than he is, he said. But four new members will be a majority and will select the chairman,

shifting the balance of the panel.

“I got lumped into that group and those are the breaks,” he said.

Spandle and Fagan did not immediately return messages seeking comment.

Asked about the change, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said a number of the ousted members were last-minute appointments by Trump. “Certainly any president coming in has the right to nominate their own people to serve on a commission or serve in any positions in their own administration,” she said Tuesday.

Washington Deputy Mayor John Falcicchio sent a letter to Biden’s personnel director in February asking for a review of Trump’s last-minute appointments to the National Capital Planning Commission and the CFA. Falcicchio wrote that because the boards approve development in the city, the new members could impede Washington’s progress toward racial and economic equity, climate change and affordable housing.

“For the sake of Washington, D.C.’s residents and visitors, the NCPC and CFA need members committed to meeting the myriad challenges and opportunities of today,” Falcicchio wrote. “The buildings and landscapes of Washington, D.C. must address the urgent needs for sustainability, resilience, and housing. They must also embrace our diversity and advance equity as a remedy to the legacy of discrimination that shapes our surroundings to this day.”

Biden removed two members of the NCPC and the chair of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation in early February.

The administration’s request to the CFA members was first reported by [the Federalist](#). The commission’s remaining members are Vice Chairman Rodney Mims Cook Jr., appointed by Trump in January, architect Duncan G. Stroik and James C. McCrery, assistant professor at the Catholic University of America’s School of Architecture and Planning, both appointed in 2019.

Guillot recently [led the redesign of the White House Rose Garden](#), and Spandle designed the new White House tennis pavilion. Fagan made the sculpture of President Ronald Reagan in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol.

Trump signed an executive order in December calling for classical design to be favored for government buildings. Biden revoked that order in February.

Shubow noted that three of the late-term Trump appointments replaced members appointed by President Barack Obama as he was about to leave office. He also said previous commissioners worked on White House projects.

In his response, Shubow said the administration’s move to dismiss the members sets a terrible precedent.

“I respectfully decline your request to resign,” he wrote. “I request an explanation of the legal basis and grounds of your extraordinary request and accompanying threat of termination.”

On Tuesday, Shubow said: “It’s been a great honor to serve on a commission that is meant to be the aesthetic guardian of Washington, D.C. The CFA was created to steward the McMillan plan that is responsible for so much of the classical design and architecture of Washington, D.C.”


Cook is a principal at HGA Architects who has worked on major projects such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Embassy of South Africa and the St. Elizabeths East Gateway Pavilion. Edwards is

the first woman to chair the Howard University Department of Architecture, which she has led since 2016.

Moore is a designer and urbanist who previously led the City of New York Public Design Commission. Tsien, with her husband, Tod, is a partner at Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects, a company that specializes in museums, schools and other nonprofit organizations. Their firm designed the Obama Presidential Center planned in Chicago.

Correction: *A previous version of this article incorrectly identified Tsien's husband, Tod, as Todd and repeated the misspelling in the name of the company Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects. The article has been corrected.*

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