

GOLD

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FAKING AUTHENTICITY WITH FOOL'S GOLD ARCHITECTURE

There are countless examples of explorers and prospectors being duped by the gleam of fool's gold, or pyrite: a mineral that has a remarkably golden sheen but on closer inspection is revealed to be something altogether different. Pyrite has its own uses and can be found in close proximity to real gold deposits, but it lacks the prestige that has long been bestowed on its metallic namesake. A similar phenomenon can be observed in urban environments, where seemingly 'normal' neoclassical terraces, castellated towers, 1950s bungalows and even strangely rigid palm-trees pepper the landscape, blending in to their surroundings through cunning acts of architectural camouflage. These carefully crafted façades can sometimes echo their surroundings so effectively that passers-by fail to notice the subtle differences that hint that these structures are not, in fact, what they seem. Appearing on the surface to be one thing whilst operating as something different, one might regard these as architectural 'fool's gold': terraces obscuring subway vents, bungalows masking electrical substations, castellated forms hiding pumping towers and telecommunications masts that take the form of palms, pine trees and church crosses. This paper uses the phenomenon of architectural camouflage, drawing on examples from North America, Europe and Australia, to challenge existing attitudes about authenticity in architectural design and heritage practice. Are these 'fake' forms essentially worthless, serving only to highlight a predominantly Western distaste for ugly infrastructure? Or are they of value for a different reason, serving as an indicator of contemporary fondness for 'hyperreality', whereby a convincing 'fake' of one form is preferable to the gritty reality of another?

Introduction: All That Glitters...

Over the past two hundred years city-dwellers have become accustomed to a certain level of infrastructure dotting the landscape. These are the physical markers of resources and technologies that make our lives more comfortable, convenient and connected: telecommunication masts, transportation tunnels and vents, electricity substations, water pumps, and even the occasional oil well. However, despite the obvious benefits these facilities give, neighbourhoods and communities (particularly in wealthier developed nations) often resist the erection of such structures in their local area, citing concerns about pollution, declining property values and potential health risks. If the location of the infrastructure within a certain radius is necessary for serving its function, then at the very least one might expect that it be obscured from view in order to keep up the appearance of a clean, prosperous and healthy neighbourhood; its effects on property values thus minimised. This expectation is further amplified in historic landscapes, where visible modern infrastructure would disrupt the 'time travel' experience that tourists seek out and upon which local businesses rely.

Such a problem is often solved by placing the infrastructure on rooftops, underground, or behind larger and more aesthetically pleasing structures; visible to those who have access to private or restricted areas, but otherwise inaccessible and invisible to the public. Another solution - and one arguably more intriguing from an architectural perspective - is to hide the infrastructure in plain sight by giving it an appearance more in keeping with its surrounds, either by mimicking the environment nearby or displaying visual cues that imply a different type of building altogether. This process of architectural camouflage produces something unusual: structures that are most valued when they are misinterpreted or unnoticed; their exteriors bearing little or no resemblance to the activity within, but rather intentionally communicating a more amenable function to the public via specific forms, materials, stylistic features and landscaping. This is architectural 'fool's gold', its appealing exterior intended to deceive the casual observer and encourage a misperception of worth. As this paper will demonstrate, however, just like pyrite (the mineral commonly mistaken for gold, but useful as a source of sulphur and sulphuric acid),¹ this intriguing coupling of architectural façade and utilitarian infrastructure has merits of its own. It discourages illegal access to sensitive or expensive equipment; it maintains historically important or aesthetically valuable streetscapes, and it helps stabilise property values that might otherwise be at risk of decline.

It is tempting to dismiss such examples of architectural camouflage as ill-advised efforts to solve frivolous design problems, and indeed some might advocate for an alternative approach that exposes and celebrates the infrastructure that facilitates modern lives. Rather than weigh-in on the age-old debate about the relationship (or lack thereof) between architectural form and function, however, it is the goal here to draw attention to an under-appreciated but growing collection of structures that are indicative of a societal preference for 'fake' aesthetics over 'ugly' reality. By thinking of this as camouflaged or 'fool's gold' architecture, and framing this as a socio-economic phenomenon, it becomes possible to consider its significance as an artefact of twentieth and twenty-first century life. What might these structures say about the increasingly blurred boundaries between authentic and inauthentic environments and experiences, and a collective willingness to suspend 'reality' in favour of 'hyperreality' (to borrow from Baudrillard and Eco)?² What meaning (if any) can be gleaned from the history and design evolution of these structural camouflages, and what might this suggest about approaches to architectural disguises of the future? How might one conserve and interpret these curiosities for future generations, if indeed it is worth conserving them at all? Such questions are posed herein not with the intention of providing definitive answers, but as a means for furthering discourse on the intermingled notions of architectural design, physical and experiential authenticity of landscapes, and the subsequent conservation of the built environment as evidence of humanity's follies and foibles.

There are a few distinctions and clarifications that should be made before venturing any further into the contentious territory of authenticity, and acknowledgement must also be given to the overlap between the phenomenon under consideration here and the wider notion of façadeism that is sometimes employed in architectural heritage conservation. The act of retaining or reconstructing heritage façades as masking devices for new builds, or as token gestures to

inner-city historic streetscapes, is an approach that has already been considered in works such as those by Richards, Lewi and Murray, and Wesener.³ While it is not necessary to rehash the nuances of this discourse here, the underlying attitudes and outcomes identified by these authors bare a number of similarities to those associated with architectural camouflage. Indeed there are examples of façadism that could also be framed as architectural 'fool's gold', such as 58 Joralemon Street in Brooklyn, New York (Fig. 1) and 23-24 Leinster Gardens in London. (Fig. 2) Both were originally constructed in the nineteenth century as terraced residences, and have since been gutted to make way for subway ventilation. In both cases a decision was made to retain the historic façade in order to convey an outwards appearance of domesticity that is congruent with the residences that surround them.⁴ That this type of camouflage occurs is important to note as part of the bigger picture being considered here, but as such cases are driven by (and reliant on) an existing historic façade they fall more clearly into the type of architectural heritage conservation processes outlined by the authors identified above. In this paper, therefore, attention is being directed more specifically at examples where the façade has been constructed simultaneously with the infrastructure behind, as demonstrated by water pumps and substations disguised as suburban houses; or where the façade has been added retrospectively, as is often the case with telecommunications towers dressed up as trees, crosses, silos or water towers. Some of these examples will be revisited momentarily.



FIGURE 1 58 Joralemon Street, Brooklyn, New York. Source: E. H. Morris, Wikimedia Commons, 2016.



FIGURE 2 23-24 Leinster Gardens, London. Source: Hywel Williams, Wikimedia Commons, 2005.

The Evolution of Architectural Fool's Gold

It is helpful at this juncture to consider the historical trajectory of camouflaged infrastructure and how it relates to modernist and postmodernist architectural theories, as while one might expect it to ebb and flow in parallel with shifting ideas about form and function, there is a somewhat surprising regularity to the use of camouflaged architecture beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the twenty-first. Perhaps the first example of this phenomenon in Australia can be found in the 1857 Hyde Park Obelisk in Sydney (Fig. 3), constructed from sandstone and inspired by Cleopatra's Needle (relocated from Alexandria in Egypt to London in the 1870s).⁵ The Hyde Park Obelisk is in keeping with its landscaped setting, appearing to passers-by as one of a number of decorative monuments that sit benignly in the open space. The structure's real function, however, was to vent noxious gasses from the sewerage system hidden below, and its 22-metre height was designed with the intention of releasing these fumes above the heads of unsuspecting Sydneysiders.⁶ A similar concept was adopted for the Chicago Water Tower and Pumping Station, both of which were completed in 1869 in a confident castellated architecture that would not look out of place on a northern English country estate.⁷ Though these structures are now dwarfed by skyscrapers, their grandiose appearance continues to project wealth and prosperity rather than utilitarian function.



FIGURE 3 Hyde Park Obelisk, Sydney.
Source: Jason 7825, Wikimedia
Commons, 2008.

The opening decades of the twentieth century saw a proliferation of architectural camouflage in several major cities in North America, led by companies such as Con Edison, Pepco and Toronto Hydro. One of the first of these examples can be seen in the muscular red brick Duncan Station at 29 Nelson Street, Toronto, completed in 1910 by in-house architects tasked with disguising Toronto Hydro substations as inner-city offices and upscale warehouses.⁸ As urban sprawl drove demand for electricity, water supply and public transport in the suburbs of these cities, utility companies adapted their architectural camouflage to fit the surrounds. Beginning in the 1930s in Washington, D.C. and continuing through the twentieth century in other parts of the United States, Pepco implemented a substation construction programme that adopted residential architectural forms and styles to mask electrical utilities behind single-dwelling suburban façades.⁹ Toronto Hydro pursued a similar policy well into the 1980s, periodically changing the styles of the substations being constructed so as to keep pace with architectural trends in the surrounding suburban neighbourhoods.¹⁰ The continuity of such programmes throughout the twentieth century is notable, as they do not appear to have been impacted by modernist theories of architectural 'honesty' and the expectation that a structure's interior and exterior should directly correspond with one another. Rather, the styles adopted were 'honest' in the sense that they contributed to an experience of suburban life that matched the aesthetic expectations of the communities that the disguised facilities serviced.

Postmodernist and more recent architectural approaches do not appear to have had much of a stylistic effect on these camouflaged façades either, though they may have further complicated the underlying debate about the most 'authentic' or 'honest' solution to such design problems. Examples such as New York City Metropolitan Transport Authority (M.T.A.)'s controversial Greenwich Village ventilation facility (first proposed in 2007 and still under construction in late 2015) highlight the complex design expectations, which disguised infrastructure is sometimes asked to fulfil.¹¹ The M.T.A.'s first proposal was guided by the local community's request for something that was historically contextual: the resulting design incorporated a floating brownstone façade over a concrete box encasing the facility, and might

generously be described as basic but clearly contemporary with obvious historical flourishes.¹² It was strongly criticised by locals and the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission as being “flimsy”, “brutal” and overly “faux historical”, however, at which point local conservation experts advocated for a design that was more “honest” about the interior function.¹³ Subsequent proposals ranged from a foliage-covered vertical garden to a stark grey concrete monolith, but these were also met with opposition: this time the criticism was that the designs were not respectful of the neighbourhood’s historic architectural character.¹⁴ By 2011 the M.T.A. had returned to its original iteration, albeit with adjustments made to the windows and massing so that the façade would more closely mimic the brownstone terrace style of the area. It was this design that eventually went to construction in 2013, despite ongoing protests by locals and conservation groups.¹⁵ This is a particularly complicated example given the facility’s prominent location in an affluent New York neighbourhood, but the unresolved issue of the most appropriate solution for such a structure is illuminating. It highlights a range of competing agendas influenced by modernist, postmodernist and conservationist philosophies. The outcome is a confusing and still-incomplete structure that was described by one local in late 2015 as “hideous beyond words” and bearing little resemblance to what would typically be expected from a licensed architect.¹⁶ Perhaps the discord experienced in this instance is an indication of the direction that architectural camouflage will take in the future, or perhaps it is a sign that the end of the trend altogether is near; these are possibilities that will be revisited in the conclusion of this paper.

Classifying Architectural Fool's Gold

The debate over the M.T.A.’s designs for the Greenwich Village ventilation facility highlights another central issue for camouflaged architecture more generally. Should such acts be so convincing as to completely dupe passers-by, or should they instead aim for a more casual disguise that is appreciated by the viewer for what it is – a concerted effort to provide an aesthetically appealing landscape that is undisrupted by ‘ugly’ infrastructure? The answer to this question can depend on the kind of infrastructure being obscured, as there are instances where disguise is utilised primarily for reasons of security. The previously mentioned subway vent masked by the heritage façade of 58 Joralemon Street in Brooklyn, New York is one such example: authorities remain reluctant to officially confirm the otherwise widely-known function of this structure despite recent interest generated by several popular websites.¹⁷

A similar veil of secrecy cloaked approximately 250 World War II-era military bunkers in Switzerland until the early 2000s, when the efforts of photographer Christian Schwager and journalist Anneke Bokern forced authorities to acknowledge their existence.¹⁸ There are numerous historical examples of military facilities being camouflaged (as well as the related notion of the Potemkin Village), but the Swiss bunkers are of note in this discussion because rather than obscuring them with foliage or burying them underground, a decision was made to disguise the structures as chalets, their façades customised by theatre painters to blend with local architectural styles.¹⁹ (Fig. 4) Interestingly, Schwager’s and Bokern’s research also uncovered the design requirement of the bunkers’ camouflage: they needed to deceive planes passing overhead and be convincing to the naked eye at a minimum distance of twenty metres; any closer and it was conceded that the disguise would become apparent.²⁰ It is examples such as these that demonstrate one of the virtues of architectural fool’s gold: its ability to assist in the securing or defence of valuable infrastructure and - in extreme cases - the protection of human life.



FIGURE 4 Villa Rose, a military bunker disguised as a chalet, in Switzerland. Source: Schutz, Wikimedia Commons, 2009.

There are instances of architectural camouflage where the design is intended to contribute to or maintain an aesthetically pleasing landscape without necessarily denying the existence of the infrastructure altogether, however. The clearest manifestation of this can be seen in the rapidly growing number of telecommunications towers being 'disguised' as trees, flag poles, crosses, water towers, and silos, amongst other things. (Fig. 5) This has occurred around the world since the 1990s and has been captured by photographers such as Robert Voit (United States) and Dillon Marsh (South Africa).²¹ It is perhaps most comprehensively documented in the United States, where the websites of companies such as Stealth Concealment and Larson Camouflage openly advertise the wide range of options they have on offer.²² Similar companies operate in Australia but are less forthcoming with their design solutions and existing installations, while the popular geocaching forum *Waymarking.com* reveals numerous other examples in places such as Morocco, France and Namibia.²³

The often-kitschy appearance of these towers has made them a popular topic of design journalism and art criticism (particularly seen in the work of Bernard Mergen), and the designers of the telecommunication disguises have discussed their philosophy freely.²⁴ Denise Dubie quotes extensively from interviews with employees of Larson and Stealth in her 2004 article on American cell-phone tower disguises, and it is apparent that the primary goal for such companies is to create (or maintain) something beautiful, and not necessarily to maliciously deceive.²⁵ One employee expresses disgust at a nearby example of a poorly designed pine-tree telecommunications mast, claiming that neither he nor his company would "be involved with anything ugly or cheap."²⁶ This is the message communicated by Stealth Concealment's website, too. In one electronic brochure, Stealth boasts that its 'concealments' (the preferred term in place of 'disguise' or 'camouflage') are carefully crafted to match the surroundings, and the creations often border "on true artwork".²⁷ In another brochure, Stealth suggests that its freestanding structures ("from bell towers to clock towers, crosses to lighthouses") could "introduce an element of charm to your cityscape" or "add a visual highlight to the rolling countryside."²⁸ Though even the briefest of perusals of these companies' websites shows that they are conscious their customers might prefer to obscure telecommunications towers completely, there is also a clear design philosophy being promoted. Communities are encouraged to think of this infrastructure as an opportunity to "enhance an area," "add visual drama," or bestow a "custom showpiece" or "iconic landmark" on future generations.²⁹ Whether or not such aesthetic ambitions are actually accomplished is not up for debate here, but such claims do add a further dimension to the way one evaluates or critiques the camouflaged designs.



FIGURE 5 Cell phone tower in New Hampshire, United States. Source: SayCheeeeeese, Wikimedia Commons, 2008.

Another type of example can be discerned if one continues to think about these architectural forms in terms of their underlying purpose, though a generous definition of 'architectural' design and construction is needed for this final group. This is because the camouflage is added retrospectively, and typically without much alteration to the structure itself; the goal being to give the impression of occupancy and prosperity where there would otherwise be dilapidation and decline. One of the highest profile cases of this kind occurred in Northern Ireland in the lead-up to the 2013 G8 conference of world leaders, when a decision was made by the national government to invest €2 million in 'fake' commercial façades covering abandoned shops.³⁰ As journalists covering this programme noted at the time, the

intention was not to trick people into thinking the shops were real, because there were no products or services to offer potential customers and the 'trick' would quickly be discovered. Instead it was hoped that passers-by would appreciate the façades as indicators of more prosperous times, and thus perceive the region in its "best light" rather than its contemporary state of economic decline.³¹ A similar principle has guided the installation of 'decorative' boarding (mimicking curtained windows and flowering window boxes) on abandoned homes in several large American cities since the late 1990s, with extensive programmes undertaken in Cleveland, Albany, Chicago and Cincinnati by neighbourhood groups and local councils.³² Chris Toepfer, an artist who has made a living beautifying the façades of abandoned houses for over twenty years, explained in a 2010 interview with journalist Sandra Livingston that the point was to give people the impression that "someone has really invested time and energy into [the building] and is probably keeping an eye on it."³³ As with the fake storefronts in Northern Ireland, people were expected to discover that the façades were not 'real' - but in doing so, they might also come to appreciate the underlying effort being made to convey value.

'Faking' Authenticity? Concluding remarks

In returning to the broader issue at stake, that of the 'honesty' or 'reality' of this intriguing architectural 'fool's gold', it is helpful to draw on a constructivist view of authenticity. Wesener artfully summarises this as an understanding of forms and landscapes as "socially constructed" reflections of "people's perceptions, desires, interpretations and identities."³⁴ In his 1998 article on the fabrication of heritage David Lowenthal explains this type of authenticity as something that lacks "historical integrity" but carries "psychological weight."³⁵ Umberto Eco, in his analysis of Ripley's Museums' promotion of 'authentic' replica objects, comes to a similar conclusion: the authenticity is "not historical, but visual. Everything looks real, and therefore is real; in any case the fact that it seems real is real, and the thing is real even if, like Alice in Wonderland, it never existed."³⁶ This is an unsettling notion, and one with which the standardised practices and procedures of heritage conservation would struggle to come to terms. Certain design philosophies, such as those concerned with achieving congruence between form and function, would also challenge such an approach. The goal of this paper is not to settle such matters but instead to suggest another way of thinking about and evaluating such architectural camouflage. If one understands this phenomenon as a social construction that communicates the aesthetic preferences and emotional desires of a community at a particular moment in time, one might appreciate it for its sociological and anthropological value regardless of how one views its architectural worth. In taking such an approach it becomes possible to assess individual examples as historical artefacts with potential heritage significance, even if it is ultimately determined that the significance is socio-cultural rather than architectural.

Framing disguised architecture and infrastructure in this way may also give some indication of the future of this trend, if indeed it has a future at all. As was noted earlier in this paper during the discussion of the M.T.A.'s Greenwich Village ventilation facility, there are recent examples of designs being disputed or criticised by a diverse range of community groups, authorities and individuals. The M.T.A. case is particularly illustrative because it highlights the contradictory attitudes and expectations influencing the camouflage. Somehow the facility was expected to be historically and aesthetically sensitive to its surroundings whilst simultaneously being honest about its internal functions and twenty-first century construction, and it would appear that attempting to please everyone produced a final design that satisfied no one. Part of the underlying problem in this and other recent cases, it is argued, is that a point has been reached in the digital age where it is easy to discover, speculate on and debate specific cases of architectural camouflage. Services like Google Earth and Google Street View give visual access to buildings that would otherwise be obscured or restricted, while online groups and forums hasten the spread of knowledge about such structures. Local communities enjoy greater access to companies and authorities through a range of digital networks, and in turn these companies and authorities are eager to appear publically responsive and accountable.

What this means in a practical sense is that proposed designs will be increasingly disseminated and critiqued more efficiently and extensively than could ever have occurred previously, and this raises a number of issues. If a disguised façade is ultimately going to be designed by public consensus, one must question whether it is worth bothering with a camouflage at all: who is this façade for, if everyone in the local area has weighed in on its appearance, and anyone else could easily uncover the disguise by looking at satellite images, forums or news archives online? This devalues one of the potential qualities of architectural 'fool's gold' by restricting or eliminating its ability to offer security or defence via its disguised façade. Devaluation of its other key attribute, the maintenance or enhancement of the aesthetics of the surrounding area, is at risk in this scenario too, because the debate over style, materials and overall

design is played out in public and becomes far trickier to resolve. Thus, if the disguise is an open secret and the façade is also deemed unattractive or detrimental to the streetscape, as has been seen with the Greenwich Village case, then there is little value remaining in a camouflaged approach. It is no longer an authentic reflection of the desires, perceptions and beliefs of its contemporary society, nor does it offer the 'hyperreal' experience of a clean, prosperous and aesthetically appealing landscape that earlier iterations of architectural camouflage managed to achieve. This, it is suggested, is the direction that the phenomenon risks taking in the future, if indeed it is not already at this point now.

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