



Truth, lies and architecture

Description

Do buildings lie? The *UK Trade Descriptions Act* prohibits sellers from circulating false or misleading descriptions of their goods and services. Legislation across most countries echoes the spirit of the UK Act. Informal reference to the challenge of false trade descriptions circulates amongst professional and consumer stakeholders within retail, education, health, and the built environment.

The spectrum of dubious truth claims within the built environment spans from obvious fraud by unscrupulous developers, design firms, suppliers and contractors, to enthusiastic endorsements that overstate the qualities of a building development and raise expectations beyond the capability of the project to deliver.

I see this range of assertions that fall short of full truthfulness as the darker end of human society's tendency to cultivate *expectations*, promises and hopes via its buildings, environments and artefacts. The philosopher Martin Heidegger called this capacity to anticipate "foreprojection." Perception, interpretation and worldly engagement could not operate without it. Architecture participates in the cultivation and delivery of expectations, whether or not they are well founded. Most buildings, by their forms, imagery, arrangements, infrastructures, displays, screens, and the stories people tell, encourage expectations amongst visitors and occupants that resonate as true or false in varying degrees and for different communities. Architectural photography, models and imagery further encourage ambiguous and sometimes confounding expectations.

According to a critical reading, as well as revealing truths, built environments and their representations are capable of concealing truths and promoting falsehoods. They can obfuscate, camouflage and [dissimulate](#) — themes developed by scholars such as Roland Barthes as matters of overt and covert communications within socially constructed [semiotic systems](#).

At least in the mainstream press, fact checking and truth telling starts with the assumption that lying deviates from the evidence of the senses and some correspondence with reality. I prefer *story-telling* as the starting position. Lying is not simply a deviation but is grounded in the age-old human propensity to tell stories.

Expectations and promises are delivered via stories, i.e. sets of assertions that interrelate to create an internally coherent narrative. Lies belong within categories of story telling that instil expectations that will never be met by experience, observation and evidence. See post: [Rogue fan fiction: the peculiar case of QAnon](#).

A phenomenology of lying

Yuval Harari's book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* foregrounds the human propensity to gossip, to tell stories about other people. By this theory, human language developed as a way of exchanging information about the world and surviving better through cooperation, but "the vast majority of human communication" whether in the form of emails, phone calls, or newspaper columns "is gossip." (26).

That observation leads Harari to assert that the focus is usually on wrongdoing: "Rumour-mongers are the original fourth estate" (27), that is, the press. Subsequently he lauds "the unique human capacity to invent: It's the ability to transmit information about things that do not exist at all" (27).

It's a short step in this story of cognitive evolution to recognise the significance of legends and myths, and the peculiar capability to classify some stories as true or false, and to reject, ignore or sanction the latter. For my interpretation of C.S. Peirce's take on truth and evidence see post: [Hunch, symptom, clue](#).

Rogue real estate

The way cities develop is typically a response to a range of pressures involving assertions that fall along complex spectra of truth and falsity reflecting different power interests and value systems in the city. In recent years the challenges posed by the ethics of promoting, marketing and procuring urban developments has played out on the world stage. The prominence of the narratives surrounding the US-based real estate company Trump Org brought the role of truthless story-telling into focus.

Due not least to the elevation of its Chief Executive Officer to the role of US President in 2016, the dubious ethical practices of one particular urban development company has elevated the challenges of truth and falsity in public discourse, to the extent that some have asserted we live in a post-truth era. See earlier post [Is post-truth politics a thing?](#)

The current peculiar falsehood by Trump and his supporters is that he won the 2020 presidential election, in spite of the certified vote count to the contrary.

Perhaps as therapy, I listen to the [Mea Culpa](#) podcast by Michael Cohen, Trump's former "fixer" and now fierce detractor. Amongst his many criticisms, Cohen says Trump really knows nothing about real estate. What Trump does well is promote his brand. He's a branding expert. The brand is now tarnished of course. In any case, branding flirts along the line between truth and falsity, and buildings are caught up in that.



References

- HMSO, *Trade Descriptions Act Chapter 29* (1968), 3; “Policy Paper: Consumer Rights Act 2015,” Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2015, accessed 7 June 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/consumer-rights-act-2015/consumer-rights-act-2015>.
- Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (London: SCM Press, 1962); Adrian Snodgrass and Richard Coyne, *Interpretation in Architecture: Design as a Way of Thinking* (London: Routledge, 2006).
- Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1973).
- Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (London: Penguin, 2011), 26.

Note

- Image above is a model on display in the Dundee’s V&A Design Museum with the caption: “Early study model for Maggie’s Centre, Dundee 1999 designed by Frank Gehry. Frank Gehry’s concept for the first new-build Maggie’s Centre, in Dundee, brought the initiative to international attention. His design draws on traditional Scottish buildings and techniques with its white roughcast exterior and conical tower recalling Iron Age brochs (round drystone structures). These echoes are juxtaposed with a folded metal roof that glints in the sunshine. Inside, huge windows offer spectacular views across the River Tay. Foamcore, paper and tape. Maggie’s (on loan from Gehry Partners, L LP).”

Category

1. Architecture

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1. Peirce
2. post-truth
3. QAnon

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