

Front to Rear: Architecture and Planning during World War II

Conference co-organized by the Institute of Fine Arts, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, and Princeton University's School of Architecture

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Institute of Fine Arts, New York University
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Mobilization of Modern Design: Architects' and Artists' Pursuit of Camouflage during World War II

During World War II, architects and artists mobilized their knowledge of color, light, shadow, material, texture and form to assist the military with camouflage, particularly the protective concealment of targets on the ground. Over twenty schools including the Pratt Institute and the Chicago School of Design offered wartime courses in camouflage to train designers in the theories and techniques of civilian defense, concealing factories and confusing aerial bombers. Students learned to isolate basic principles of visual perception and to use them for camouflage projects including the construction of decoys and the use of various materials to "garnish" the netting draped over guns, trucks and tanks. They were taught to plant trees to disrupt the shadows cast by an object and to use paint for patterning or "countershading" to blend equipment and buildings with the natural and urban surroundings. Most importantly, the students were taught that in order to conceal a target on the ground, the camoufleur needed to understand the bombardier's view from the air and the "process of vision" by which he selected and targeted a site on the ground. This vision was enhanced by new technologies including aerial photography, infrared photography and of course the aircraft itself. Practices for deceiving "both the eye and the camera" were also displayed in a traveling exhibit curated by the Museum of Modern Art in cooperation with the Pratt Institute and the U.S. Army Engineers Board of Fort Belvoir, Virginia. The principles of perception and strategies of concealment in the show informed the public that camouflage was a job for professionals, and that an amateur could do more harm than good by dabbling in it himself. Similarly, the camouflage courses at the Chicago School of Design gave architects and artists the opportunity to collaborate with experts in the United States Armed Forces and in private industry. In all areas of camouflage, architects and artists combined their artistry with an informed understanding of new technologies of vision to support the effort to win the war. Many camouflage manuals speculated that the lessons learned, about the importance of dispersal and of informal arrangements of buildings and landscaping, would remain useful after the war was won.

Joy Knoblauch is a Ph.D. candidate in the History, Theory, and Criticism of Architecture at Princeton University, focusing on the interaction between architecture, government and population. Her dissertation argues that the newly softened institutional environments of the Great Society era were sites of biopolitical research, shaping a new direction for the discipline of architecture toward an enriched understanding of the heterogeneous occupants of architecture. She has a Bachelors of Architecture from Cornell University, a Masters of Environmental Design from Yale University and she has worked in architecture offices in Ithaca, New York and San Francisco, California. Knoblauch's research is supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Centre Canadien D'Architecture (CCA) and the Fellowship of Woodrow Wilson Scholars (FWWS).