

BY JON VARA



1. The Temple of Philosophy in the Ermenonville Garden in France was deliberately left unfinished to symbolize the incomplete state of human knowledge. **2.** Carved from a sandstone boulder, The Hermitage folly is said to have standing room for 18 visitors. **3.** An inscription on The Killiney Hill Obelisk above Dublin Bay reads “Last year being hard with the poor, walks about these hills and this were erected by John Mapas, June 1742.” **4.** Connolly’s Folly, County Kildare, Ireland, reportedly provided work for hundreds of workers after a crop failure in 1740–41. **5.** Ireland’s Jealous Wall was built for an irate landowner who wanted to block the view of his estranged brother’s nearby home.

Well-Built Folly

In everyday language, the word “folly” usually refers to a foolish action or object. But to an architectural historian, it has a more precise meaning: a folly in that sense is any decorative building that has little or no practical use.

True architectural follies are relatively rare in North America. (Building follies in the more general sense, of course—as exemplified by oversized, haphazardly insulated, and poorly air-sealed residential structures—are not uncommon at all.) But in much of Europe—and especially Great Britain and Ireland—there’s a long tradition of architectural follies. Wealthy estate owners in the 18th and 19th centuries were fond of stone follies that could be

astonishingly large and elaborate. The Jealous Wall in County Westmeath, Ireland, for example, is a full three stories high and more than 150 feet long. At the other extreme, The Hermitage folly—near the English hamlet of Littlebeck—consists of just one stone.

In some instances, follies served as public works projects in a time before government relief programs for the poor. Ireland’s so-called “famine follies” were designed by prosperous landowners as a way to pay unemployed laborers to turn their hands to something without taking productive work away from those lucky enough to have it.

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