

*Are you aware of these shocking truths?*

- The Great Wall of China was meant to be a ditch!
- Angkor Wat was built facing the wrong direction!
- The Leaning Tower of Pisa does not lean!
- The Taj Mahal received a mastectomy!
- Napoleon was buried in a cesspit!
- The Eiffel Tower is a shameless hussy!

Architect Ho Kwoncjan, digging into history (and digging up dirt as well) now reveals these terrible truths... and more!

***DON'T READ THIS BOOK***

“...the author must have been tripping on LSD when he wrote this...”

– *The Straight Times*

“...if you believe this book, you are either insane or have a really weird sense of humor.”

– *The New Dorker*

“...I don't understand a word of it, but I love it!”

– *Donald Frump*

“...the Surgeon-General has determined that reading this book is dangerous to your health. You may die laughing.”

– *The Food and Drug Administrator*

“...May your son become an architect.”

– *Ancient Chinese curse*

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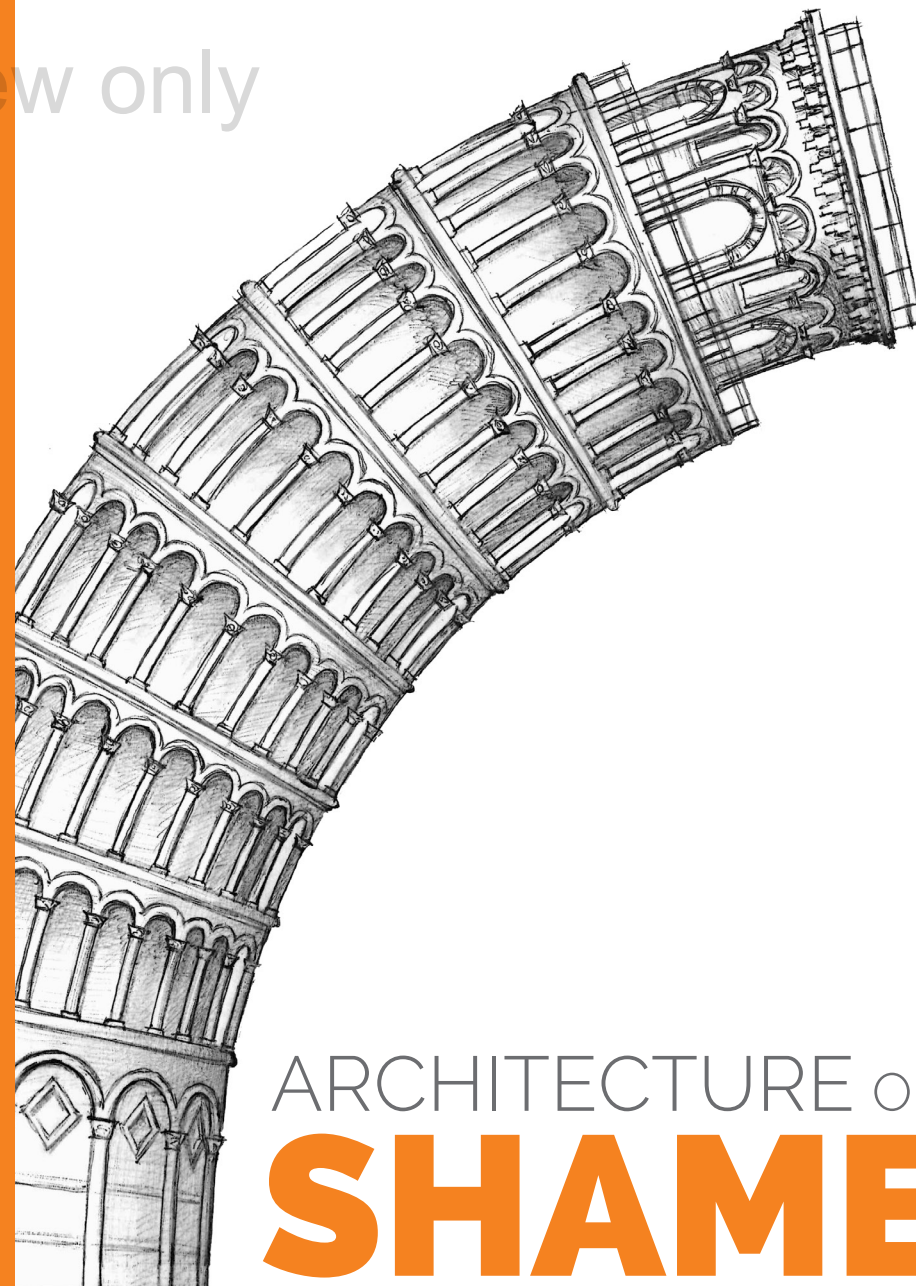
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## DEDICATION

When anthropologist Margaret Mead did her research in Samoa, she took a short holiday at a nearby island, where cannibalism was still practiced. Needing some coffee, she entered a provision store – where she saw three glass jars, crammed with human brains.

The first jar was labelled: *Engineers' Brains, \$5.00/gram.*

The second jar: *Accountants' Brains, \$7.00/gram.*

But, the third one surprised her: *Architects' Brains, \$1,000.00/gram.*

She asked the shopkeeper: “Why are the architects’ brains *so* valuable? Is it because they are creative, imaginative and talented?”

The shopkeeper gave her a hard look. “Lady, have you any idea how many architects we have to *kill*, just to get *one lousy gram*?”

After completing her research, Ms Mead returned to the same island, and to the same provision shop. Everything was the same, or almost:

*Engineers' Brains, \$5.00/gram.*

*Accountants' Brains, \$7.00/gram.*

*Architects' Brains, \$0.50/gram.*

She turned and stared at the shopkeeper. "What's going on? Why did the architects' brains become so cheap? Last time it was a thousand dollars per gram – and now it's just fifty cents!"

The shopkeeper beamed. "*Technology*, madam! We now have a new device – it just *sucks* the brains out of their ears! Five seconds flat – and they walk out whistling!"

Ms Mead was stunned. "You mean – they are still *alive*?"

The shopkeeper sighed. "Lady, *everybody* knows that architects *never* use their brains."

This book is dedicated to my fellow-architects and their microscopic brains.

## PREFACE

Every year, schools of architecture around the world hatch out batches of fresh-faced architects, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, eager to inflict their talent on the long-suffering world.

But before receiving their degrees, the graduates are herded into the school's underground dungeon. You may not believe it, but *every* school of architecture has such a secret dungeon, cold and dank, lit by flickering torches, tastefully decorated with iron shackles and skeletons. Here the trembling graduates are told the dirty secrets of our profession: the booboos, blunders and misdeeds of various architects down the ages, resulting in...

*A hole in the middle of a roof...*

*A bakery that exploded...*

*A cathedral with mismatched towers...*

*A temple built ass-backward...*

*A tomb the corpse can't get into...*

These are shameful secrets, whispered by one generation of architects to the next, but carefully kept hidden from the rest of world. And to enforce it, the Dean of the faculty then appears, masked and dressed in black like Torquemada – the Head of the Spanish Inquisition – and the graduates are forced, at sword point, to swear an Oath of Silence.

*“... and if I whisper a word of this to anyone, or post it on Facebook or Instagram, may the lightning strike me; may I die a thousand deaths! May I be crucified upon my T-square, and my laptop explode on my lap; may my ACAD files turn to mush, my SketchUp files turn to ketchup, and my very cursor be cursed...”*

Oh, it is a terrible oath, the equivalent of *omertà*, the Mafia code of silence. If you betray it, you will find on your pillow, not a horse’s head, but your own.

Why such secrecy?

Because if the public finds out what we architects *really* do (aside from doodling endlessly) – we’ll all be out on the streets, selling apples (or worse, durians) from little carts. And not only architects, but engineers, surveyors, masons and carpenters will also suffer the same fate.

Nobody will dare to build anything anymore, and we’ll all end up living in caves.

But it is time the world learnt the truth. I will break this tyranny of silence, this *omertà*! In these pages I will dare to

point fingers and name names, and reveal the idiotic mistakes and nefarious skullduggery practised by my profession – not to mention contractors and owners – down the ages, right up to modern times.

Dear reader, brace yourself to face the shocking truth.

## 01 THE REAL SECRET OF THE PYRAMID

Probably more nonsense had been written about the Great Pyramid of Cheops than any other building on Earth: it was built by aliens from outer space; it was an ancient astronomical observatory; it focused cosmic power and sharpened razor blades... However, the real mystery was this: for a building of such enormous size, why does it contain so little space?

Until recently, it was thought that the Great Pyramid contained only a Descending Corridor, which led to an Ascending Corridor (apparently King Cheops couldn't quite decide whether to go up or down) plus a few small chambers, today all empty. And these chambers are *small* – smaller than a squash court, which makes one wonder – where did the King store his food, clothes, jewellery, furniture and all the other luxuries he surely needed for the Afterlife?

Why build such a massive tomb with virtually no useable space inside?

In 2018, Egypt sent a top-secret team to Singapore – to learn from our Captive Merlion Breeding Programme. (If

you think the Merlion is invented by the Singapore Tourism Promotion Board in a fit of phantasmagoria, learn that our genetic engineers had grafted genes from an orangutan into a dugong.)

The Egyptians wanted to know how we Singaporeans did it. They wanted to breed a Sphinx. “We tried many times,” they wailed. “But it always came out looking like Donald Trump.”

Of course, no government ever gave up a secret without getting one in exchange. WTO defines this as ‘fair trade’. (Schoolboys do it too: *I'll show you my report card if you show me yours.*) After intense negotiation, the Egyptians agreed to let us in on *their* big secret: *The Hidden Chambers of the Pyramids*. However, to ensure silence, they would reveal it only to *architects*. (That's because architects *can't* talk. We architects just draw, or at least pretend to.)

When our little group of excited architects arrived at Cairo Airport, we were met at the gate by Fatimah, the director of Egypt's Secret Museum.

“Secret Museum?” we asked her, puzzled. “What's the point if nobody knows it's there?”

“Just wait, I'll tell you,” Fatimah smiled.

We were bussed straight to Giza. I will not trouble you with yet another awestruck description of the Wonder of the World, for the Wonder of the World looked like a triangular ant-heap. The Great Pyramid was crawling with tourists – the Americans huffing their way up, Germans puffing their way down, Chinese yelling at their children, Japanese taking shots of each other...

I noticed a man surreptitiously hack a bit of stone off one of the blocks and pocketed it.

Fatimah followed my gaze. “Souvenir hunter,” she said, contemptuously.

“Can’t you stop them?” I asked.

“It would take an impossible number of CCTV cameras,” she sighed.

I also noticed an oddity, halfway up the east side. It was a little wooden shack, erected against huge slabs of stone, and on its padlocked door was a sign: “NO ENTRY EXCEPT AUTHORISED STAFF (This is not a toilet).”

But before I could ask, the bus stopped at the boat museum, built to house the ancient ship that ferried the pharaoh to his final resting place. The restored ship was magnificent, and we all went ‘ooh’ and ‘aah’, but Fatimah seemed curiously embarrassed, and ushered us into a little briefing room. It was here that the real surprise hit us...

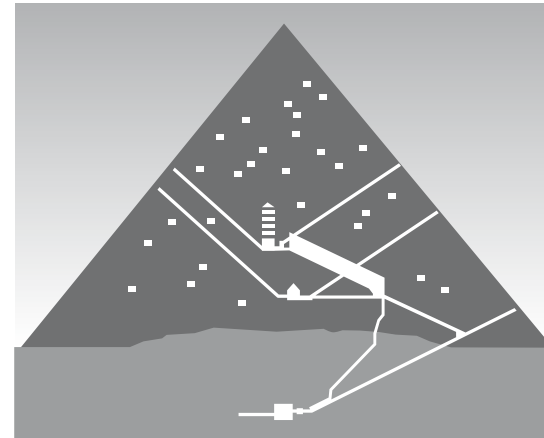
“*The pyramid is full of holes!*” Fatimah told us.

Whilst we gaped at her, Fatimah continued: “There are *hundreds* of chambers hidden within it. Actually, we knew this all along – it’s an extremely ancient lore, handed down by generations of architects – but nobody knew where the chambers were, until the 2016 Neutrino Survey...”

Neutrinos are tiny particles that penetrate through everything, like X-ray, and can be used to detect holes and crevices hidden within apparently solid objects. The survey revealed that implanted into the Great Pyramid are hundreds of chambers, scattered at random and undetectable from

the outside. In short, the pyramid resembled a piece of Swiss cheese.

Fatimah explained, “The builders laid down layers of stone blocks, but every few layers, they left a gap between blocks, filled it with grave-goods – thrones, regalia, clothes, food, everything the King would need in the next life – and then covered it with the next layer of stone. In short, all these goodies were built *into* the pyramid from the start! They could not be stolen because there were no passages that led to them! Clever, eh?”



*Pyramidal Swiss cheese – the Great Pyramid of Cheops.*

“The grave-goods were installed even *before* the King died?” we asked. “Wouldn’t they be a little stale by the time they actually buried him?”

“What’s a few decades, compared to Eternity?” she replied.

“But if they were locked into solid stone, how would *the King* get to them?” someone asked.



“According to their belief, the King’s spirit – his *ka* and *ba* – can travel through solid stone.”

“If he had become so ethereal, why would he need all that stuff at all?”

Fatimah shrugged. “Theology is never logical... and in any case, the matter became moot. You see, the designers made one major boo-boo. They built *corridors* that led to the burial chamber. These passages were discovered by robbers long ago and the burial chamber was pillaged – including Cheops’ mummy, leaving only an empty sarcophagus. So, the grave-goods remained but the King is no longer around to enjoy them. Ironic, isn’t it?”

“But surely, the architects had no choice!” I protested, defending my long-dead predecessors. “They *had* to have corridors. How else would they get the King’s body in?”

“They should have cremated him and poured the ashes down an air-vent,” Fatimah laughed. “As you pointed out, he had become ethereal. He wouldn’t need a body at all!”

“Theology is never logical,” I muttered. Then, I thought of the shack I saw earlier. “Speaking of air-vents, that shack is *your* secret entrance, right?”

Fatimah nodded. “One of several. Behind the locked door is a tunnel excavated by a remotely controlled robot. It drills its way through to the chambers, and another robot goes in to retrieve the grave-goods. Thanks to the Neutrino Survey, we have a complete, three-dimensional map showing the location of each chamber. We have recovered quite a collection and would be able to open it to the public in a few years’ time.”

Someone said, “They would go well with that magnificent ship we just saw!”

Fatimah blushed. “Well... that ship is a fake.”

We stared. Fatimah hurriedly explained, “We just copied a design left by Thor Heyerdahl. Its purpose is to hide the *real* secret – which is an underground museum built directly under it!”

“We want the real thing!” we all whined in unison. “Can we see it?”

Fatimah nodded, and pressed a button. Suddenly, nausea swept over us. We were falling! Fatimah laughed. “The entire briefing room is an elevator! We are now descending into the Secret Museum!”

Gravity returned as the descending room slowed and came to a stop. A door opened, leading to an immense underground hall. There were hundreds of glass display cases. Workers were all around, moving artefacts in, installing new exhibits...

*The Secret Museum!*

Fatimah led us to a glass case. “This is a throne we discovered in one of the chambers. Lovely, no?”

“Cheops must have had a big round bum,” somebody giggled.

Fatimah looked pained. “Ancient Egyptians had very strong notions of proper posture. For instance, you have to sit in the exact middle of the chair. Perching casually on a corner wasn’t allowed – and in this case, self-punishing!”

“Ouch!” we all laughed.



*The Great Bum of Cheops.*

“Why are the legs lifted up?” I asked. “The lion-claws are elevated by cylinders. Why?”

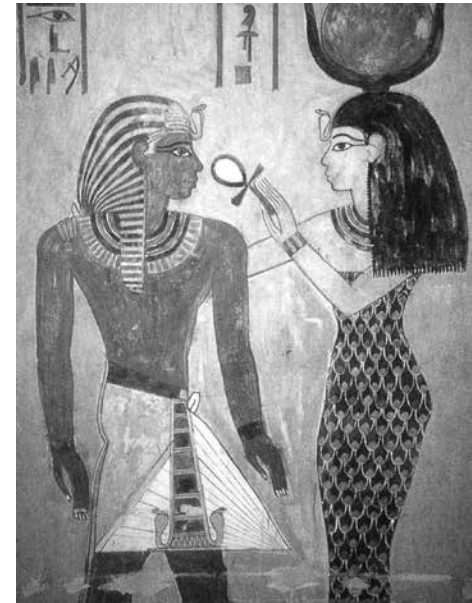
“The Nile floods annually,” Fatimah said.

“You call this a flood? Having lived in Bangkok, I’m not impressed,” I snorted.

On the back of the throne was a strange scene. Fatimah explained, “The female wearing the cow’s horn is the goddess Hathor. And, the man is King Cheops himself.”

“The goddess is holding the *ankh*, the symbol of life!” I exclaimed, proud to show off my knowledge. “It’s the ‘Opening of the Mouth Ceremony’ and she is giving him Eternal Life!”

Fatimah coughed. “Well, that’s what we *used* to think. But the inscription made it clear that she is giving him a pacifier.



*King Cheops getting a pacifier.*

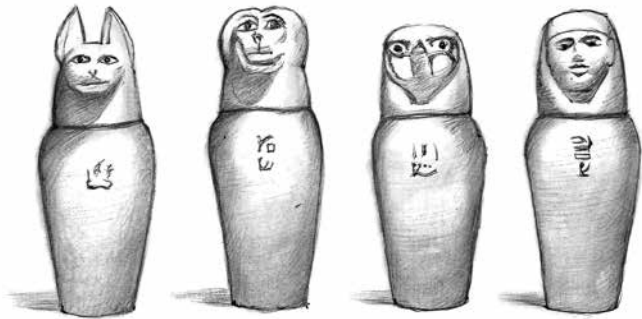
The ancient Egyptians believed quite literally in rebirth, and when you are reborn you are just a baby.”

“Why is his skirt jutting out in front?” somebody asked, curiously.

Fatimah looked embarrassed. “*Please* don’t ask!”

I snorted. “It’s to hide his... you know. He may be a big baby, but she is one sexy bimbo!”

Fatimah gave me a dirty look. Blushing furiously, she dragged us to another glass case. Inside were four dolls, three with animal heads and one human. She opened the case with a key and gingerly removed one of them, and with a twist unscrewed the head, revealing a hollow interior.



*Ancient Egyptian thermos bottles.*

“These dolls can be opened. I wonder what they once contained.”

“Maybe they are canopic jars,” someone murmured. “You know, to hold the mummy’s heart, liver, guts and so on.”

“Nah!” I scoffed. “Don’t be revolting. They are thermos bottles.”

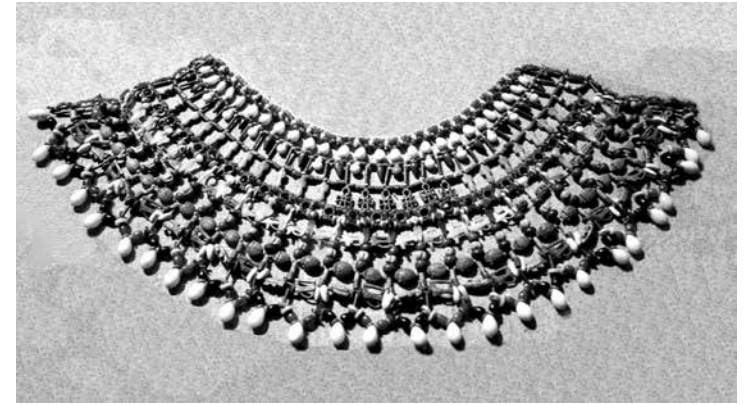
In the next case was a strange, small mat made entirely of beads, but in a curved shape. “Is that a pectoral?” someone asked. “Like, you wear it around your neck, over your chest.”

“No, it’s a doormat,” Fatimah explained.

“That’s a crazy shape for a doormat,” we observed.

“Not at all! You place it so the centre of the curve is at the hinge, you see, so that every time the door opened, it would sweep across the mat and clear it of debris. The mat is self-cleaning!”

“They should have reconfigured the beads to read ‘Welcome,’” I observed solemnly.



*Self-cleaning doormat.*

“Would you be surprised that they also invented the urinal?” Fatimah asked. She brought us over to the next display.

“You’re joking!” we exclaimed. But here it was – King Cheops himself, in his pyjamas, standing with arms slightly raised, facing a wall.

He looked a little embarrassed. “If his *ka* and *ba* are ethereal, why would he need something so – physical?”

“Don’t ask,” Fatimah rolled her eyes.

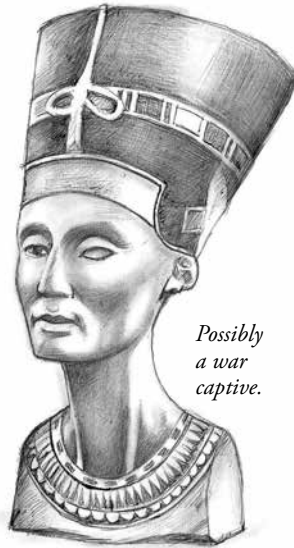


*Ancient Egyptian urinal.*

In the next case I discovered a bust of a gaunt and emaciated woman, wearing a tall blue hat of some sort. She looked like an inmate of a concentration camp. We all felt rather sorry for her.

“Who is this?” I asked.

Fatimah looked uneasy. “We are not sure. We suspect it is a prisoner of war, a captive. See how hungry and starved she looks? Poor thing, the tendons on her neck are standing out. We also suspect she had been tortured – look, one of her eyes had been gouged out!”



*Possibly  
a war  
captive.*

The next exhibit was more cheerful. It was part of a food offering, but the content looked amazingly fresh, despite its millennia of storage.

“Don’t be fooled!” Fatimah snorted. “It’s made of painted wood.”

“The King can’t eat wood,” I mused.

“So what? As you pointed out, his spirit is ethereal. So, they made fake food, but it contains the *spirit* of food. The



*Food offering.*

spirit of the King ate spirit food – right? But, come and look at what else they ate.”

Fatimah led us to the next case. “Brace yourself, this may be a little shocking.”

We gasped at the stone relief. “They ate *children*?”

“Frankly, we aren’t sure. What were those tiny humanoids the King was munching on? They might represent children, but they might be aliens. If so, all those UFO people may be right...”

By the end of the tour, we were all exhausted. As we left the hall and went back up, Fatimah told us, “We are about half-way through extracting all these artefacts. I estimate that



*The King munching on... a small creature.*

within five years we would be finished and can announce it to the world, and finally open this museum to the public.”

I asked Fatimah, “Why so hush-hush? Why can’t you announce your findings already?”

She looked shocked. “*Of course*, we have to take all this stuff out before we announce it.”

“What would happen if you announce it *now*?”

She screamed, “Haven’t you *seen* all those thousands of visitors clambering all over the pyramids? Can you imagine what would happen if we tell them it is filled with treasure?”

Her voice rose to a screech. “All those tourists will *tear the pyramid to pieces*. There won’t be a single stone left standing on another!”

## 02 THE GREAT DITCH OF CHINA

It had been said that the Great Wall of China is the only man-made object visible from outer space. Whether true or not, it was certainly a vast undertaking. However, it may come as a surprise to its millions of annual visitors that the Great Wall started, not as a wall at all, but as a *ditch*.

In 220 BC, King Yinzheng of Qin conquered all the other nations ‘like a silkworm devours a mulberry leaf, thus bringing all of China under a single rule. He grandly named himself the First Emperor. A total control freak, he standardised the weights, currency, length of carriage axels, and most importantly, the Chinese script. (He also introduced punctuation, but that never caught on.)

Most famously, he resolved to erect a defence along the northern edge of China, to block the frequent incursions by marauding Xiongnu and other nomads.

He decided on a moat.

Since then, historians had debated his peculiar choice. One explanation was that the First Emperor followed the

School of Five Elements, and since the preceding dynasty, Zhou, was associated with fire, the new Qin dynasty must be associated with the next element, namely water. “Water extinguishes fire,” the First Emperor said, despite the fact that the Zhou dynasty had already burnt out long before.

However, a more mundane reason might be that, whilst still a king, he had successfully fortified his capital with a huge moat and became convinced of its efficacy. Historian Sima Qian quoted him saying, “Nomads can’t swim.”

Whatever the reason, works started on a vast moat in the rugged terrain of north China. It was to be fifty metres wide and over a thousand kilometres in length. To fill it, a canal was dug from a tributary of the Yellow River to bring water to the northern hills.

It was a measure of how megalomania utterly blinded rulers to the ordinary facts of life – and how fear instilled by tyranny caused men to keep silent – that 210 kilometres of the moat was actually dug, and the canal was completed, before an engineer named Wan finally plucked up the courage to tell the First Emperor a simple fact...

Water is *flat*.

The moat, running up and down the hills, would never work. Any water introduced into it would simply flow to the lowest point and spill out. The idea couldn’t hold water – no more than the ditch.

After burying Wan in the ditch, the First Emperor summoned the Grand Master of Dao, who had been busy with preparing the Elixir of Immortality. “Forget Immortality,”



*The First Emperor, being told his idea wouldn't hold water.*

he told the trembling Grand Master. “Make water flow uphill or you’ll be mortal tomorrow!”

The Grand Master summoned his disciples, and made a grand procession to Dead Camel Pass, where the newly completed canal intercepted the moat. As the First Emperor watched, the priests burned incenses, beat drums and chanted incantations. Then, they summoned up their collective *chi*...

They were buried right next to Wan.

A group of Confucians also came, uninvited. They brought along wooden stools, drank wine, and jeered at the Dao Master and the First Emperor: “The ‘Way’ that can’t be spoken is a cul-de-sac!”

They were buried next to the Daoists.

By now, it was obvious that gravity would obey no one, not even an emperor. So, the Master of the Legalist School said, “Divide the moat into sections, each one higher than the next, separated by bunds to hold in the water! Thus, the Son

of Heaven may impose his will upon All-Under-Heaven!" This modification was hurriedly carried out at a section of the moat, but even before they were filled with water, the First Emperor could already see how the enemies could simply walk *on* the bunds.

"I might as well put up a sign saying, 'Welcome to China!'" he growled.

The Legalists were buried in the ponds.

These mass graves were discovered in 1994. The 887 skeletons were badly decayed, but in the hand of one was a strip of bamboo, on which was hurriedly scrawled the words, "Never tell an emperor a lie."

Another bamboo strip said, "Never tell an emperor the truth."

A third strip declared, "Never tell an emperor *anything*."

The First Emperor then decided to make a virtue of necessity and proclaimed that digging the ditch was merely a clever ruse to deceive the nomads. The *real* intention was to extract soil for building a mammoth rammed earth wall, which he proceeded to encase in brick and stone. Thus, the Great Wall of China came into being, running roughly parallel to the now-abandoned ditch.

In the two millennia since, the 'Great Ditch' had eroded, and only traces of it remains. A few valleys are all that can be seen today – a silent and nearly forgotten testimony to the absurdity of absolutism.

#### AFTERWORD

According to Sima Qian, the First Emperor decided to bury eight thousand soldiers next to his tomb, to guard him



*The valley (left) is a remnant of the 'Great Ditch'.*

forever. After all, he had already buried nearly a thousand Daoists, Confucians and Legalists.

"Let a hundred flowers bloom," he proclaimed. "But only one hole be dug."

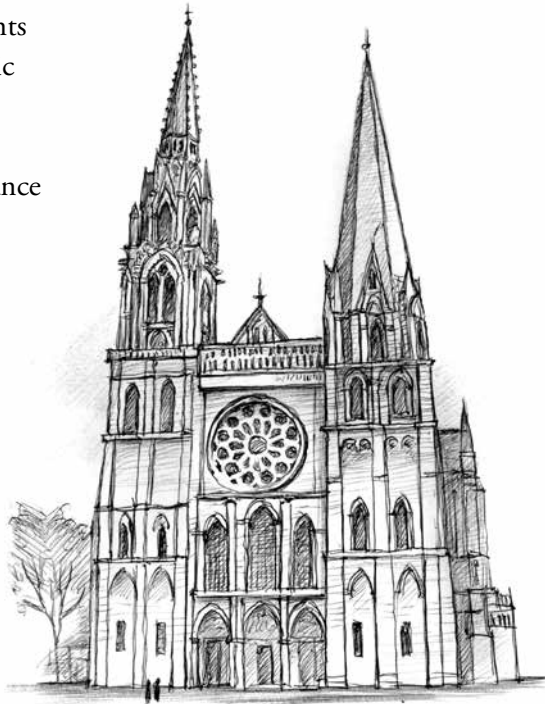
His minister Li Si whispered, "Scholars wield ink-brushes, but soldiers got *real* swords."

The First Emperor took the hint and made terracotta dummies instead.

## 14 VIVE LA DIFFERENCE!

Architectural historians agree the Chartres Cathedral represents the apogee of French Gothic architecture. Yet, it has one glaring abnormality: whilst every other cathedral in France has symmetrical towers on their west fronts, Chartres Cathedral's two towers are obviously mismatched, the north tower being taller and more ornate than the other. How did this occur?

*The mismatched towers of Chartres Cathedral.*



The first church on this site burnt down in 858 AD. It was rebuilt and burnt down again in 962 AD; rebuilt and burnt down again in 1020; rebuilt and burnt down again in 1134; rebuilt and burnt down *yet again* in 1160; and finally, in 1194 – it would seem the good people of Chartres had ‘arson’ written in their DNA.

The fire of 1194 was extensive. Although the bases of the two towers survived, the upper portions collapsed. The townsmen, stirred by the Bishop, went to work at once, rebuilding the choir and nave, and by 1215, this work was well underway.

The Bishop, impatient to see the towers rebuilt, hired *two* master-builders, each with his team of masons. One, headed by Roger de Hauteur, was to build the north tower; the other team, led by William Le Vite, would build the south.

Knowing how architects could dawdle when left to their own devices, the Bishop summoned the two teams after Christmas Mass and announced, “Let there be a competition! A purse of five thousand gold écus, to whichever team that builds the *fastest and tallest!*”

After a slight gleeful pause, the Bishop continued, “Plus, a lifelong dispensation to eat bacon during Lent!”

Thus motivated, both teams made frantic preparations over the winter, but the wily Le Vite stole a march on his rival. Disguising himself as an elderly nun, he snuck into de Hauteur’s workshop, and managed to inspect his wooden model. He was pleased to find that de Hauteur had planned a short tower with a single storey and a small spire. Returning to his workshop, Le Vite finalised his design: an octagonal base



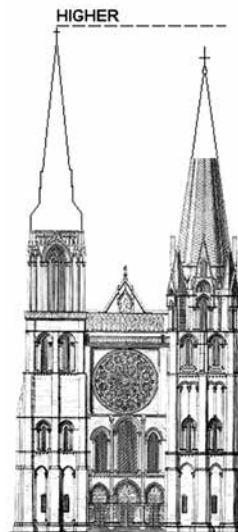
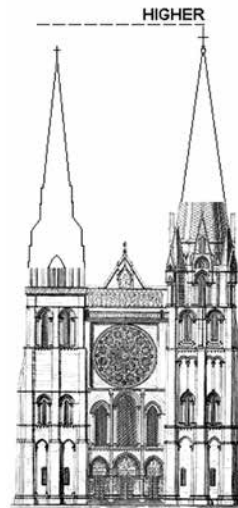
with eight pointed arches, surmounted by a steeple that would rise at least ten feet higher than de Hauteur's pinnacle.

Spring came, and both teams went to work. Le Vite built rapidly, and by early summer he had completed the octagon and started on his steeple. de Hauteur, by contrast, appeared to be having trouble, for his work proceeded slowly and his piers stopped below the springing of the arches.

Le Vite was gloating and rubbing his hands, but in fact, he had fallen into a trap.

Knowing Le Vite would spy on him, de Hauteur had built a *deceptively short model*. When he saw Le Vite commencing the base of the steeple – for it would be too late for Le Vite to add another floor – de Hauteur revealed his true intentions. He extended his tower upwards, raising the springing of the arch far higher than what his model showed. This would pump his spire up at least twenty feet, higher than Le Vite's steeple.

Le Vite was enraged, but not for long. Since he could not add another floor, Le Vite demolished his half-

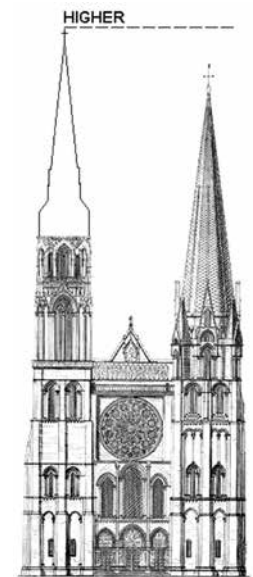
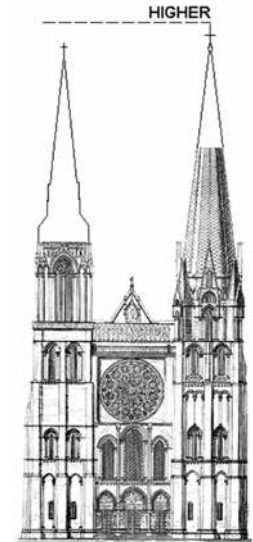


built steeple and rebuilt it at a steeper angle – a steeper steeple. By the end of summer, Le Vite's tower was complete, and its tip would surely soar higher than de Hauteur's pathetic little spire. And Le Vite resumed his gloating.

But his smugness was dispelled when de Hauteur unveiled his second surprise. Having completed his tall floor, *he added yet another floor to his tower*. Of course, this pushed his spire up higher still – an aspiring spire that trumped Le Vite's steeper steeple.

Le Vite was not beaten. He sent his men to Le Havre, purchased a mast from an old ship and smuggled it into his steeple at night. When he saw de Hauteur's spire nearing completion, he cut a hole through the tip of his steeple and pushed the mast through it – adding a crossbar as it went up – and triumphantly erected a crucifix three feet higher than de Hauteur's spire. To be sure, it was an oddly proportioned cross, suitable for a Jesus with short arms and very long legs. But taller was taller.

Furious, de Hauteur disputed Le Vite's action, "Your spire had already



been completed! You are not allowed to add more!”

Le Vite merely laughed in de Hauteur’s face.

Alas, a storm two days later broke Le Vite’s old mast in two. Triumphant, de Hauteur and his team went to the Bishop to claim their reward. The Bishop was now in a quandary, for he did not have the money. The nave had cost more than expected, and he had recently splurged on a lavish row of gargoyles; he had only twenty écus left in the kitty.

As de Hauteur made his claim against a now squirming Bishop, Le Vite unexpectedly stepped forward to dispute de Hauteur’s claim.

de Hauteur glared at him haughtily. “Do you deny that my tower is taller than yours?”

“I agree your tower is taller,” Le Vite replied smoothly. “But mine was completed *earlier*.”

de Hauteur went pale. “The reward goes to whoever built the *taller*,” he gasped.

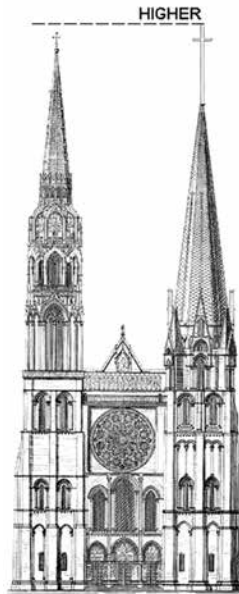
“No,” Le Vite replied. “It goes to whoever built it *faster*.”

“Your absurd crucifix broke just last week!”

“The cross was a mere afterthought. My spire was already complete. *You said so yourself*.”

“The prize belongs to the tallest!” de Hauteur screamed.

“The prize belongs to the fastest!” Le Vite yelled.



The clerk consulted his record, “You’re *both* right. His Grace promised the prize to whichever team that built *fastest and tallest*.”

Whilst the two architects tried to strangle each other, the Bishop had a brain wave. Pulling the two disputants apart, he said to de Hauteur, “I regret to tell you that you lost, for his steeple was indeed completed first.” But before Le Vite could start celebrating, the Bishop turned and said to him, “But you also lost, for his tower is indeed taller than yours.”

Whilst the two men gaped at him, the Bishop continued loftily, “You *both* lost. No prize to *either* loser.”

If the Bishop thought he could renege on his promise and save himself a bucket of money, he was sadly mistaken. The masons rioted. The Bishop was driven into his palace whilst the builders – now united by a common grievance – stormed into the Cathedral and barricaded themselves inside. They announced that *both* teams had won, and *each team* must be paid the promised prize money. Otherwise, they would set the church on fire.

The Bishop, trying to avoid his liabilities, had ended up doubling it. He appealed to neighbouring lords, but they sneered. In desperation, he imposed a huge tax on the population of Chartres.

For the people of Chartres, this was the last straw. In the past year, they watched, horrified, as their beloved Cathedral sprouted two unequal and mismatched towers; they had seen their Bishop make a mess; and now, they were forced to cough up *double* the prize money...



*The good people of Chartres had enough.*

The Bishop's residence was set on fire, with the hapless Bishop inside. The angry townsmen then battered down the Cathedral doors and slaughtered all the masons; but reserved different fates for the two chief masons. The first to go was William Le Vite – beheaded in the town square. Then, Roger de Hauteur was hanged, high up in his tower.

“He who finished first, goes first. He who built higher, hangs higher,” the rabble muttered.

The King sent a party of armed knights to restore order. The knights arrived to find the town eerily calm, everybody in the Cathedral tearfully attending the funeral of the Bishop. Puzzled, the knights questioned a few men near the door.

*“Riot? What riot? Alors, you must have heard wrong! There was no riot.”*

*“The bishop? Alas, a bolt of lightning struck his house, and he sizzled up, like a rasher of bacon during Lent. Alas! Alas!”*

*“The masons? Oh, they went away. You know architects, a bunch of fly-by-nights.”*

*“The mismatched towers? Oh, but don't you just love them? They're... so cute! So different!”*

*“Vive la différence!”*

painfully, as they were elderly and arthritic – and squinted up at the ceiling, attempting to spot the deliberate flaw. They failed, and were obliged to stop when the sun set, and oil lamps proved too dim to illuminate the ceiling adequately.

It was repeated the next morning.

This became a regular ritual, with Boabdil lying around the Hall of Abencerrajes in different positions, accompanied by his ministers, all gazing up at the ceiling until their eyes smarted. State affairs were transacted thus:

“Your Majesty, the Catholics are getting aggressive again,” his Chief Minister would say from the south west corner of the hall, trying to sound stern, although it was difficult to sound stern whilst flat on his back.

“Yes, yes... Help me find the flaw,” the Sultan – also on his back – would reply.

“Your Majesty, we must recruit more soldiers!”

“Do you think that yellowish bit over there is the flaw? Or just a stain?”

After a while, Boabdil dismissed his ministers and called in young men from the kitchen, stables and town. “Your eyes are young. A purse of gold to whoever finds the flaw!”

Thus, the Hall of Abencerrajes was filled with young men lying all over the floor in various strange positions. The ministers, left outside, peeked in through the half-closed door.

“What’s going on?” the Chief Minister whispered to his colleague.

“Maybe our Sultan had just slaughtered another clan?”

“I don’t see any blood.”

“Or maybe he got bored with his harem and decided to try an orgy with men... Look at that one, he’s got his head propped on another man’s tummy!”

“Nah! He’s just using him as a pillow.”

“But look! He’s opening his mouth and turning his head toward the other man’s... Eek!”

“Don’t be silly, he’s just yawning. Not what I would call sodomy. Besides, they are all looking up, not at each other.”

“I get it. They are all searching for the blasted flaw in the ceiling!”

“Oh, *that* again. Frankly, it would be better if they just sodomised each other,” the Chief Minister grumbled. “At least it would be over and done with!”

Secretly, the ministers bribed some of the young men to ‘find’ the flaws, but Boabdil was not so easily fooled.

“Your Majesty! I found the flaw! It’s over there!” a young man would cry from time to time.

“Where?” the Sultan would crawl over and stare.

“There! That dark bit next to the third facet on the fifth tier, second from the right...”

The Sultan would gaze and then say, “Nah...That’s just a shadow. Look again!”

After three months of failure, Boabdil went over to the Hall of the Two Sisters. This hall had a faceted ceiling every bit as complex as the other.

“I can’t find the flaw in the Hall of Abencerrajes,” he told the Sultana and his mother disconsolately. “You help me look here. Maybe we’ll have better luck in this room.”

The Hall of the Two Sisters soon became the Hall of Too Many Sisters, as the entire harem – along with any children old enough – laid themselves out on the floor, eyes searching. This started to look like a heterosexual orgy, except the ladies were all in a terrible temper.

“Your Majesty... Was *this* what you married me for?” his Sultana asked plaintively.

“Shut up... Lying flat on your back is part of your job.”

“On a soft bed, Sire, *not* on cold hard marble!”

“Get yourself a cushion if you want, just search for the flaw!” Boabdil snapped.

“Why is it so important?” his mother – who refused to participate – demanded.

“It’s driving me crazy,” the Sultan sobbed. “There must be a flaw somewhere, if I can only find it!”

Failing to find the flaw, the Sultan returned his attention to the Hall of the Abencerrajes, where he built a wooden scaffold, so he could climb up and examine the ceiling closely. This did not help much since he could no longer see the entire design. As an aid, he hired artists who would painstakingly copy a typical segment of the dome, from base to the tip, and use that to compare against every other segment. Three artists went blind in the process, and one went mad.

His Chief Minister interrupted one day. “Your Majesty, Queen Isabella has sent in an ultimatum.”

“What does the silly bitch want?”

“She wants you to surrender Granada.”

“Why? Does she want to search for the flaws too?”

Boabdil ordered another scaffold to be built in the Hall of the Two Sisters. As this was in the women’s quarters and it was unthinkable that the women be seen by outsiders, they were forbidden to enter the hall whilst the scaffold was being built, resulting in traffic confusion. When the scaffold was completed, the hall was reopened to the women – who knew, with a sinking feeling, just what was demanded of them. At least the scaffolds were upholstered.

Whilst lying on their backs one day, searching the ceiling they had come to hate, the ladies heard a great noise from outside. Boabdil, off in one corner examining a particularly convoluted facet, heard it too. He summoned the Chief Minister.

“Your Majesty, we are under attack,” his Chief Minister replied gloomily.

“Who dares to attack us?” the Sultan demanded.

“King Ferdinand.”

Boabdil thought for a moment, and asked, “Who’s he?”

The Chief Minister was struck speechless. “Your Majesty! He is the husband of Queen Isabella! Have you forgotten?”

“Oh yes... That’s what you get when two rulers marry each other. They come in pairs, like matching bookends.” Suddenly, he was struck by a terrible thought and blurted: “*This is the Hall of Two Sisters. Suppose the craftsmen left two deliberate defects? I’ll never find both!*”

Giving up in despair, the Chief Minister opened the city gates and surrendered to the Catholic forces.