

## **The Great Pyramid**

*Jens Thiel, President of the Friends of the Great Pyramid e.V.*

*Presentation at the Futurological Congress, Westfälischer Kunstverein*

*Münster, November 18, 2006*

How do we want to live? And die? What should be done with our mortal remains? And how can Germany find its way back to glowing future prospects? The path through this short series of seemingly unrelated questions grows more uncomfortable with every step. Good answers are not close at hand – though they do exist.

The Great Pyramid is an intervention by the *Friends of the Great Pyramid*, an association founded explicitly for this purpose in November of 2006. It was first introduced in Ingo Niermann's book *Umbauland*, published only weeks before. We find ourselves at the very beginning of our work. Over the next several months, we will be conducting analyses and arranging many meetings. Though we can only present a rough sketch of these activities here, we are grateful for the generous support of the German Federal Cultural Foundation's "Future of Labor" fund, without which none of this would be possible. This allocation of resources may seem surprising at first, but will become clearer later.

The Great Pyramid takes on the subjects of peace, death and afterlife, work and wealth in Germany. It is about the future of this country, which is currently struggling to find its way in an increasingly more globalized world, but also about the future of each of us – about the fate of our few dozen kilograms of body mass that we all will leave behind. Again this appears to be an astonishing combination at first, but one that is no longer so far away considering our proposal.

### **A Tomb for All People**

First a few facts, since no idea has a chance at realization without empirically plausible demand, no matter how passionately you cling to it.

The number of human beings living on our planet at this time is estimated at approximately 6.5 billion. Around 9‰ of these people die every year, or about 59 million. Ways of dealing with the bodies of the deceased are many: In some cultures they are burned, so that their ashes can be dispersed over the ground, into rivers, or buried in urns. Others entomb the corpses, either in

caskets, or swathed only in fabric. The customs and rites vary greatly, though the desire for a site dedicated to the memory of the departed is universal.

The novel burial forms that have appeared in the West over the last few decades are by contrast more like ephemeral spectacles. A loved one's corpse can be soaked in liquid nitrogen, pulverized and pressed into glass-like pearls or diamonds for beloved to wear. Other funeral directors offer the option of scattering ashes from a hot air balloon or mixing them into concrete, where they are molded into a dome-like shape with holes and dropped to ocean floor, becoming a kind of playground for fish and sea life.

Monumental tombs were once erected to honor rulers. The Egyptian pyramids are by no means the only ones of its kind; many other civilizations practiced this now outmoded custom. Even a moderately large mausoleum, such as the one built for Abraham Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois, is only more difficult to imagine today. Only a simple, ground level stone decks John F. Kennedy's grave, placed less than seventy years later. Dedicating a more or less gigantic monument to an individual seems inappropriate to us today. Newer constructions of this kind, such as Kim Il-Sungs mausoleum in Pyongyang, are more likely to cause head shaking than the intended honoring of the departed. None of us is willing to grant such an exceptional honor to anyone anymore. How would it be then, if instead of a chosen few, we were erect a monument to all of humanity, to this exceedingly successful and resourceful species, and all of us would be able to participate both physically and personally - even if only after our biological existence has come to an end?

The thought of creating a memorial site for many is not unheard of. Visionaries were sketching collective pyramidal tombs even in the days that followed the French Revolution. The groundbreaking *Neuer Begräbnisplatz* (New Burial Site) was open as early as 1787 in Dessau, Germany, designed as a smooth, completely flat surface completely free of gravestones. In a letter to his sister, the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin wrote of the new memorial park: "Indeed, there is a great humanity and beauty in the idea being realized there."

There is much that separates us six and a half billion people: different places, languages, cultures, abilities, religious persuasion or its absence, along with the different ways that we perceive the reasons for the current world order, its permanence and future prospects. In death, the only undisputed certainty that we have, we may stand a more realistic chance of finding a common ground than we do in life. Perhaps the new knowledge of a shared resting place would even shine a gentle light of fraternity on those who know that, in the end, everyone will be resting together anyway. The Great Pyramid

is open to all contemporary and future living and deceased. It offers every human being a final resting or memorial place. Ethnic group, religion and status are of no importance. A boundless peace prevails both within and around the Great Pyramid.

### **The Largest Building in the World**

To sketch the dimensions of such a structure: the ground ashes of a person fill a nearly 3-liter container; the hydrated body retains fifty times that volume. Proper reverence and engineering considerations forbid a construction made of ashes and corpses; it would require a receptacle to contain them. Concrete is the only suitable material for this. The *Friends of the Great Pyramid* will therefore be working with the F.A Finger Institute at the Bauhaus University in Weimar, an institution that has dedicated decades of research to the development of high-performance concretes. This high performance capacity is indispensable to the Great Pyramid.

The Great Pyramid's construction consists of arranging millions of identically sized grave containers and memorial stones, with their position to be chosen at random. The ashes of the deceased are buried in an urn, which is then enclosed in a receptacle measuring 90 x 90 x 120 cm.

Those who are geographically too far removed from Great Pyramid or whose religious beliefs forbid cremation may opt to set a like-sized memorial stone instead. Memorial stone capsules contain other remembrances, and can be custom-designed to suit any individual color, image or relief preferences.

This basic data allows an easy projection of the Great Pyramid's development: after 1,000 stones, it would only reach a height of 12 meters. After a mere million individuals have found their final resting place there or set a memorial stone, the Great Pyramid will be almost as tall as the Great Pyramid of Giza. After 100 million burials, the Great Pyramid will cover a square surface of 835 meters and have reached 557 meters in height. If only one percent of all deceased chose a stone in the Great Pyramid, it would reach these proportions after only 17 years. Should the new burial form become a custom even within a single culture, more Great Pyramids would need to be erected or smaller stones would have to be set. A 1.2-kilometers-tall pyramid with the capacity to hold one billion graves would face the physical limits of construction and would be very difficult to operate.

Even establishing a smaller pyramid and sealing the receptacles together will be no easy task, but isn't it more intuitive to erect a sturdy, steadfast monument of this kind rather than another fragile skyscraper? Structurally,

any skyscraper is doomed to ruin if there is no one to maintain it during the decades of an impending Dark Age.

The Great Pyramid, by contrast, will stand as our testament to coming generations even in the face of our civilization's collapse. In thousands of years, when the Giza Pyramids and Cologne Cathedral have long been eroded or been swallowed by the drifting desert sand dunes, it will still be standing.

### **The Great Pyramid in East Germany**

Even with its two-fold benefit as both a burial place and its development as a testament to early third millennium culture, the Great Pyramid is far from exhausting its own pragmatic purpose.

Our suggestion is to construct it in economically wheezing East Germany. The region, which is without exception rated as structurally weak by the European Union, will lose up to a quarter of its population by the year 2050. Even now, the population density is far lower than the Federal average. Sufficient space for the Great Pyramid is available. Until now, no effective mechanisms for transforming the shrinkage into economic health are in sight. Demolishing the charming Plattenbau districts is not enough; it doesn't provide the remaining residents of the de-populated areas with a new livelihood. Currently more than every fourth person there is looking for a place in the employment market.

There has been no lack of attempts to jumpstart the regional economy. A few have been successful; many have failed with aplomb. The Federal State of Brandenburg, for example, already contains over three veritable large-scale ruins: a one and a half meters deep, 9,000 square-meters-large concrete foundation was poured for a microchip foundry in Frankfurt/Oder. After the original plan failed, only further government subsidies made it possible for a solar cell manufacturing plant to be scraped together on its massively oversized foundation. To listen to politicians talk of this little misadventure over and over again, you would think that no other, more original solution was possible; they continue to sing the praises of solar technology for the umpteenth time.

No transport airships are assembled in the colossal, 107-meters-tall cargo lifting facility just south of Berlin; instead, the forlorn tropical paradise theme park there faces inevitable bankruptcy. Just a few kilometers further south is the Lausitz Ring, gasping and struggling to keep its financial head above water. Instead of becoming part of the lucrative Formula 1 racing circuit as it

was once intended, it is just barely keeping its doors open with 3<sup>rd</sup> class racing events.

Others fare better: in Bilbao they cleverly commissioned a flashy new Frank Gehry building, Dubai heaped spectacular islands into the tropical sea, California invented World Cinema and the personal computer. The optimal solution for Germany is the Great Pyramid, since everything needed is already there: the infrastructure, including water, optical telephone lines, road and railway networks, is excellent – in the East even more so than in West Germany. In Leipzig and Berlin, two major airports located only 150 kilometers apart will soon be competing for international travelers and cargo. Even the powerful container ports in Hamburg and Bremen are not too far away and are connected to the region by waterways.

Former East German cities were attractively renovated with billions in government subsidies before slowly dying out. Internationally renowned cultural heritage sites – Dresden, Potsdam, Wörlitz and Wittenberg to name a few – are expecting visitors. In the Lausitz area and south of Leipzig, abandoned brown coal pits abound and eventually fill up to form spectacular lake basins. Other dried-out strip mines have been completely given over to nature, which has succeeded in forming steppe-like biotopes previously unknown to the whole of Western Europe.

Berlin has restored her 1920s allure and has newly emerged as one of the most enticing metropolises in the world for millions of penniless young people. Even they will be expecting death at some point, and with fond recollection of their time here might want to return to Germany.

Also the climate is becoming more and more pleasant – milder and drier, though there is no need to worry about a drought. Stable tectonics hinder earthquakes; epidemics and dangerous or bothersome animals present no great threat. Prejudices against unfamiliar religions can hardly present a problem, as the region is exquisitely secular; racial animosity will disappear when the residents grasp the idea of their foreign guests as a potential source of income. In short, the new German states are the ideal location for the Great Pyramid.

### **A Way to New Wealth**

Unlike with other large projects, there is hardly a need for government subsidies. The building of the Great Pyramid can simply begin. Once the proper foundation has been established, the construction commences on a small surface that can continually be expanded. First the first stone is laid, then the next and the one after that, while efforts are made to ensure that hundreds and then thousands of people ask to be put to rest or set a stone to their

memory there on a daily basis. The topology of the Great Pyramid allows for a wide variety of structural approaches: whether traced out initially with a large foundation of stones or beginning with a small, starting pyramid and expanding outwards, it makes no difference as long as it is clear which plan the building is to follow.

The most significant employment effects generated by this powerful economic catalyst are however not from its construction but, in a completely new way, from the service industry: Funeral services will need personnel to run them, the mortal remains have to be transported, mourners traveling with them will want hotel accommodation. Many will want to see the Great Pyramid for themselves before approaching death, so that they can have a mental image of their possibly final resting place. If the end is already in sight, the dying can give themselves over to professional care at special resorts with breathtaking views of the monument, where they can also receive counseling and comfort.

As easy as it is to erect a massive pyramid compared to other constructions, the technical challenges in view of its size are all the more complex. Even the exact construction site is in need of consideration; both geology and public transport issues are critical factors. The one long-term and the other only short-term, because once the Great Pyramid has been accepted, every traveler on road or highway leading up to it will benefit investors. The chosen Federal state must be also be prepared to abolish the antiquated German cemetery laws that appear to date from the Middle Ages. Traditionally, only the hasty burial of a coffined corpse or an urn was considered a form of sepulture. Until recently, the more than three million people of Muslim faith residing in Germany were forced to remove their dead from the country. A coffin-less burial such as prescribed by the Muslim rite is still only permitted in a minority of the Federal states, and Muslim cemeteries are still prohibited throughout Germany.

Globalization of the burial market has meanwhile taken hold: Cheap Chinese caskets threaten established U.S. manufacturers in their home market, while the practice of exporting deceased loved ones to the Czech Republic is becoming more and more popular among Germans hoping to save money on costly funerals. If Germany isn't careful, she will lose not only her newborns, but her citizens' corpses as well.

The steps that we as the *Friends of the Great Pyramid* will undertake until autumn of the coming year will not be the last on a long road to progress. In the first phase, which has only just begun, we will be analyzing questions of

engineering, spatial planning, economics and marketing and developing concepts.

Until the spring of 2007, we will be evaluating possible sites for the Great Pyramid before beginning the second section on the basis of our results. It is just as important to convince local and regional politicians as residents in the region. We will hold an urban planning competition for the area surrounding the site of the Great Pyramid. On account of our limited resources, the competition will be directed mainly at architecture students from around the world.

In the third phase, we will inform the broader public of our results. In September 2007, a symbolic cornerstone laying on the chosen site will be the kickoff for a broader international media campaign. Finally, a Great Pyramid Gala will take place in Berlin, so that new friends and opponents that the project has garnered can enjoy a festive evening together. A film crew will accompany the Great Pyramid progress and capture its beginnings in a feature-length documentary film.

Starting in December 2006, we will keep the public informed with our website [thegreatpyramid.org](http://thegreatpyramid.org), where they can read about of our interventions' progress in both German and English. Short abstracts will be prepared in ten languages spoken by a total of four billion people. Interested individuals can also make a commitment-free tomb reservation online, since proving the high demand of a product has always been the most effective endorsement.

There is of course no guarantee of success, even when the preconditions are good. Even if collective wealth has been promised just as often as permanent world peace has, it appears that a concerted attempt at this venture is worth every effort. The Great Pyramid will make it possible.