

Look at Me in Pisa; No, Don't Look at Me

By Dennis Payton Knight

Travelers of all nations visit the famous Leaning Tower of Pisa just to get themselves into photographs pretending to hold it up, or for the ornery types, to push the thing over. It is a "look at me" opportunity for the tourists, and a classic "don't look at me" dodge to the medieval builders who evaded responsibility for the famous tilt for nine centuries.

It should have been easy for the engineers in 1173 to foresee the ground being too soft on one side to support the rather shallow foundation of the seven-story tower which was built to house the bells for the cathedral next door. It rises 183 feet on the low side, and 186 feet on the high side, and the tilt is so severe that the top is displaced nearly 13 feet from where it should arrive at center.

The flawed engineering design has often been attributed to one Bonanno Pisano, a sculptor famous for castings in bronze, because his name was found on a plaque buried near the entrance. But Pisano left town shortly after the lean set in; language, if only by implication, for "Don't look at me!" There is some doubt as to whether Pisano was responsible because a 2001 study points to an architect named Diotisalvi because of similar works of his in the region, including another quite vertical bell tower in Pisa.

As construction progressed in 1178 only to the second floor, the tower began to list. The perplexing problem temporarily halted construction, but it didn't resume for another half century with the Republic of Pisa warring off and on again with its neighbors, Genoa, Lucca and Florence. After that long time span the soil stabilized, and construction resumed.

In an effort to make up for the tilt, the engineers built upper floors with one side taller than the other. War with Genoa interrupted the project again, and it took until 1319 to complete the seventh and top floor. Finally, in 1372 the bell-chamber, the very purpose for building the tower in the first place, was added with seven bells, one for each note of the musical major scale.

Over nine centuries tries have been made to force the tower back into vertical orientation. Sometimes they even worsened the tilt, but at least they succeeded in keeping it from tumbling all the way, which was fortunate, because the Leaning Tower of Pisa has become one of Italy's most treasured landmarks.

In 1964, the government began to solicit international engineering help to preserve the landmark in place. In 1990 the structure was closed to the public, strengthened and stabilized with lead weights and cables, and in 2001 the government declared the building safe. The bells are tolling, some folks are ascending its three hundred steps, while the look-at-me crowd poses for photos showing their best efforts to save from, or push to calamity, the famous Leaning Tower of Pisa.