



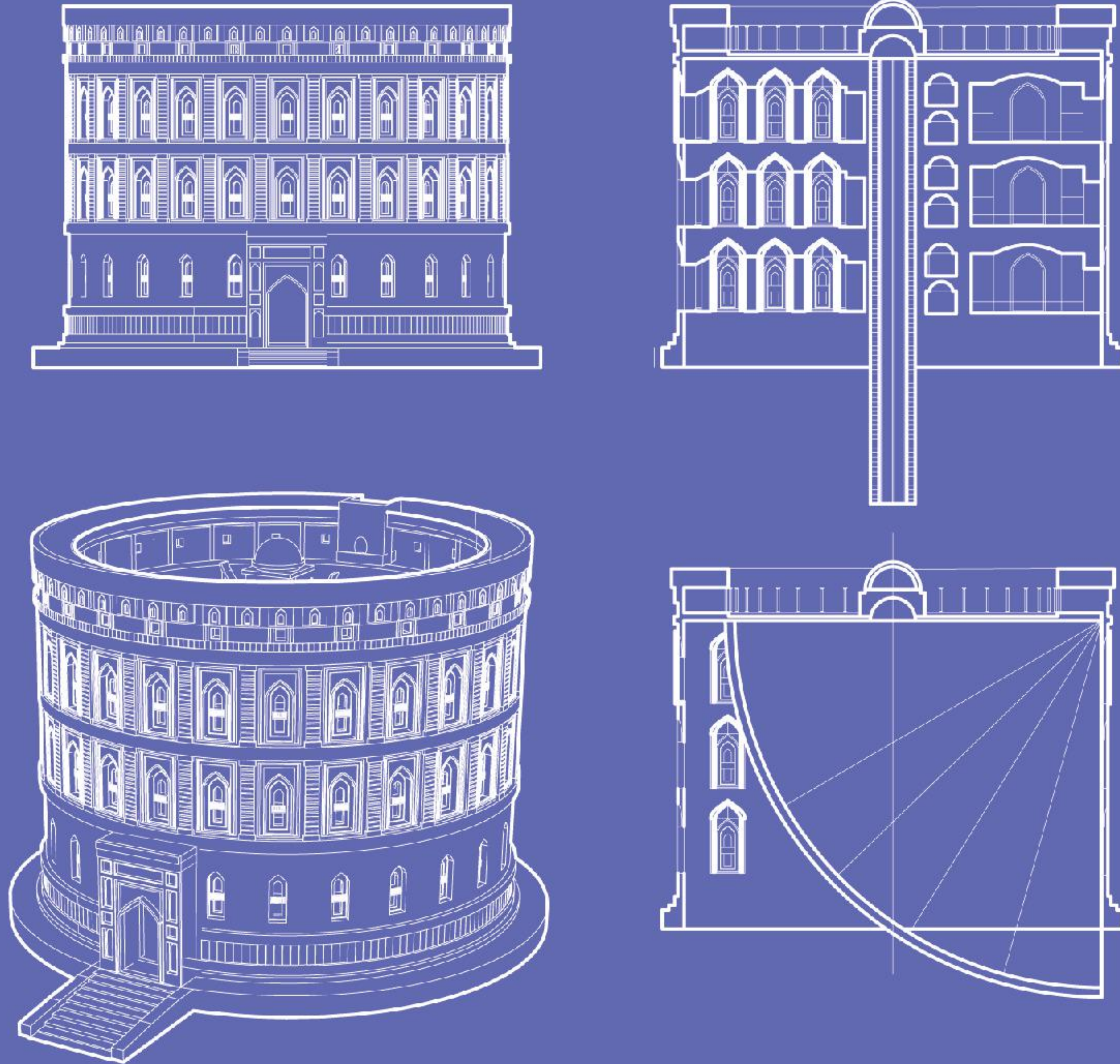
# С А М А Р К А Н Д

**RECONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL  
IMAGINATIONS:**  
HISTORICAL WORLD-BUILDING THROUGH  
LITERATURE ON MEDIEVAL SAMARKAND

JENNY SUWIWATCHAI THESIS PROJECT

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## THESIS STATEMENT



This project adopts the concept of ‘world-making,’ understanding it as an integral part of historical studies where there is no objective truth. The project presents itself in the form of an illustrated whimsical tale featuring layered perspectives of Samarkand through time, bringing in fantastical casts and crews from well-known literature such as the *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, Ibn Battuta’s *Rihla*, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, the *Iskandarnama*, and the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam. The characters come together to formulate the ultimate plan for a heist, however, face the challenge of determining the objective reality of Samarkand as each experiences different narratives presented by historical complexities. It is arguable that architecture and the city are crime agents. To author Geoff Manaugh, a crime of space happens when users break the intended ritual of architecture. Within this fictional realm of the Ulugh Beg Observatory Grand Heist, the casts experience pushback from the building itself, breaking its own function to correspond with their perception of Samarkand.



## ARCHITECTURE AS HEIST

Geoff Manaugh wrote in *A Burglar's Guide to the City* that architecture is the ultimate aid de camp for criminals<sup>1</sup>. Because each building left behind clues as to how it functions, the events happening within its spaces are dictated to follow limited sequences. A crime happens when an unconventional user denies the appropriate rituals of space. An example of this is reflected in criminals slipping through airport security posts or when intruders jump over fences to enter a property. There is a crime of sequence, and there is a crime of space. To Bernard Tschumi, criminals are experts in navigating the real-life 'invisible walls.' They analyze architecture for shortcuts, hiding spots, and spatial tactics to achieve their unconventional purpose in that space<sup>2</sup>. In a heist narrative, the recruitment of an ensemble of criminals conducts spatial and sequential thinking, each bringing skillsets and goals unconventional to the space into the scene. Clues and tools for the mission are often scattered throughout the plot and utilized by different members of the cast.

In the case of the Grand Heist of the Secret Star Atlas, not only do the users of the observatory hope to traverse its mysterious interiors in radically unconventional ways, but they are also there to fulfill a purpose that has nothing to do with the observatory's function of stargazing. Using what they acquired from analyzing the city of Samarkand and its many ritualistic assumptions, the building fictitiously fought back to repel the thieves with its ever-changing interior. With both the users and the architecture committing spatial and sequential crimes, the denial to submit to a mundane ritual within space ultimately creates the greatest crime in Medieval history.

1) Manaugh, Geoff, "Committing Crime Is Just Another Way to Use a City"

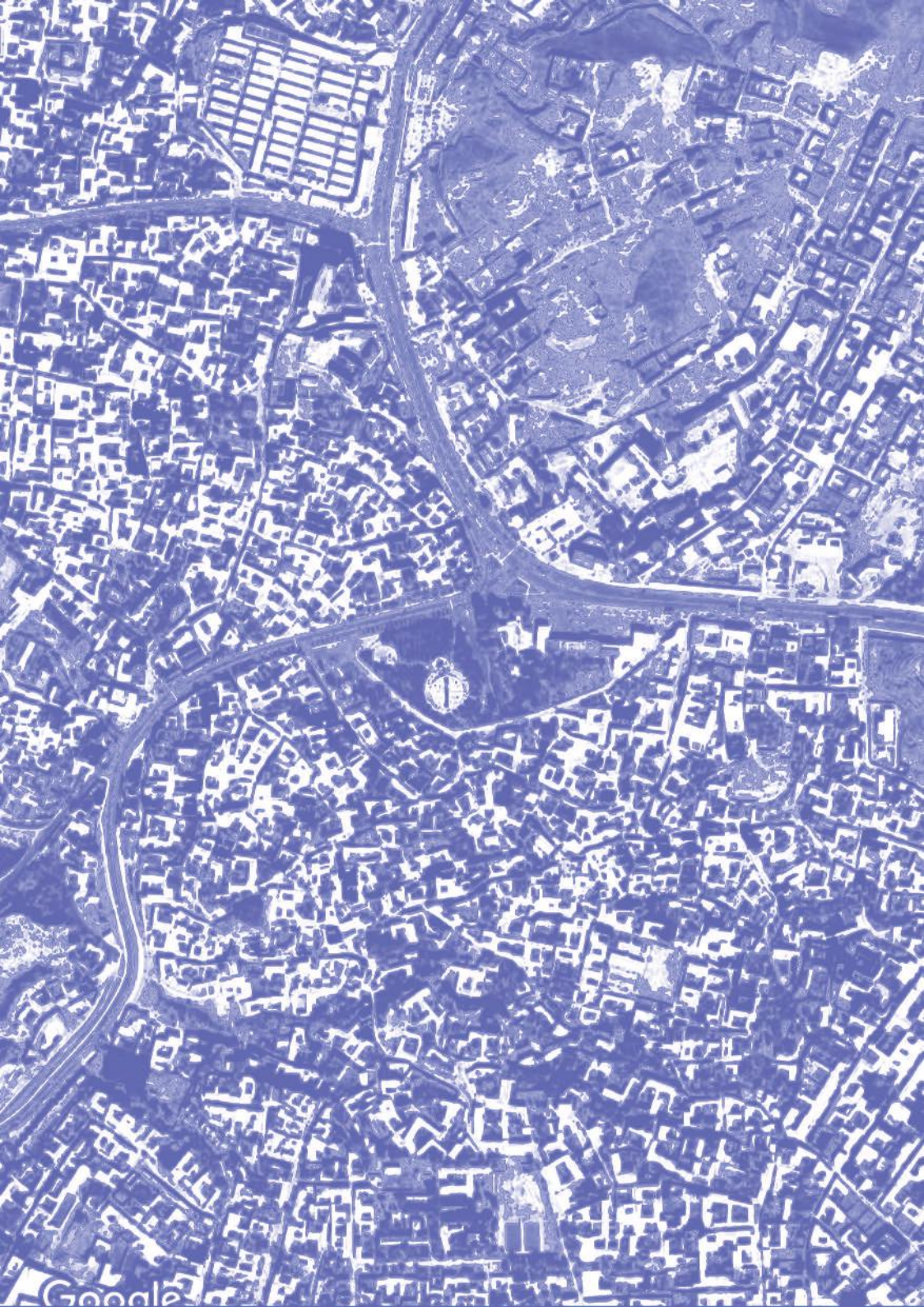
2) Manaugh, Geoff, *A Burglar's Guide To The City*

# INTRODUCTION



Humankind has always looked to the sky in wonder, with the desire to understand our place in the universe. Every star, regardless of how far away it is in reality, has a fixed position in our sky. Despite changes in power and the fall of empires, the sky remained unwavering.

Connecting the medieval Silk Road were three contemporary observatories, each holding a portion of the celestial atlas: The Mogao Caves in Dun Huang, The Ulugh Beg Observatory in Samarkand, The Taqi Ad-Din Observatory in Istanbul. Whoever is in possession of these atlases possesses the power to control the world. People far and wide traverse the route to seek them, four of whom had the same idea of conducting the greatest heist in history.





From Dun Huang, the Forty Thieves had the plan to steal the secret star atlas. They wanted to become rich and live the lives of kings.

Vidaar was the youngest of the Forty Thieves. To him, the city was the largest he had encountered thus far. Upon venturing through the crowded streets full of high sparkling turquoise domes, he could not help but gape in awe at the wealth displayed through elaborate waqf institutions donated by princes and princesses.

Looking over the walls of a building, he could almost see into it. Glamorous blue tiles and indistinct chattering came from the other side. Vidaar imagined the bulbous shapes appearing from behind the wall as colorful djinns from magic lamps, each responding to the wishes of beautiful but mysterious women clad in jewels, telling one another fantastical stories from a time long past.

Samarkand was a city of magic and sparkling jewels, one full of wealth to last forty lifetimes.



From Venice, the merchants wished to possess the secret star atlas. They wanted to monopolize the Silk Road for the Pope.

Marco Polo was the son of a Catholic Merchant. To him, the city was the most aligned with Christ out of all the others he had visited thus far. Upon stopping at the church of St John the Baptist, he could not help but gasped at the central column, floating a few feet above its base and holding up the dome's weight in its entirety.

Looking at the details of the miracle column, he could almost see its age and history. The column once belonged to the Mohammedan inhabitants but was carried over to serve the church. Marco Polo imagined the profit the community could have garnered if the miracle of St John was to be marketed as a major religious destination, inviting in more believers under the Pope's wings.

Samarkand was a city of tourism and profit, one full of great miracles and the fame that came with them.

## THE PILGRIMS



From Tangier, the pilgrims wanted to appreciate God's heavenly symphony composed within the secret star atlas. They wanted to connect with the heavens.

Ibn Battuta was one of the pilgrims. To him, the city has the biggest religious schools he had encountered thus far. Upon weaving through the packed courtyard of Ulugh Beg Madrasa, men and women recite their prayers in Arabic, instantly forming a sense of brotherhood amongst fellow Mohammedans, inspiring

many to give alms and food to the poor.

Looking through the geometrical patterns of the facades, he could almost guess its sequence. The arabesque textures in combination with holy quotes from the Qur'an decorated the student chambers above. Battuta imagined the madrasa's interior as study halls, each containing studious teenagers and their mentors, learning and debating over the correlation between faith and science.

Samarkand was a city of religion and spiritual destination, one full of faith and education to understand the heavens.

## THE STUDENTS



From all around the world, eager students wanted to know where they stand in the vast universe using the secret star atlas. They wanted to understand astronomy and its significance to their existence.

Fatallah Al-Shirwani was one of the students. To him, the city has the highest level of scientific education he had discovered thus far. Upon correcting his mentor's mistake, he was promoted into an elite class of upperclassmen who got to look through the gigantic

sextant of the great Ulugh Beg Observatory outside of town, an astronomical machine of its time.

Looking up at the stars from the sextant's calculated curve, he could identify the arrangement of each constellation. The Jawza, the Saratan, and the Asad, all were recorded in the principal's notebook. Shirwani wondered if the notebook he saw in the hands of his principal, Sultan Ulugh Beg, could be the legendary star atlas people buzzed about.

Samarkand was a city of science and curiosity, one full of questions and no answers.





That night at the old town inn on the outskirts of Samarkand, each group came together to conduct a plan for the great heist.

"Samarkand is a city of treasures and magic. We will need forty more men to fight off the djinns, surely there are the ones guarding the secret star atlas!" Vidaar declared.

"Samarkand is a city of tourism and profit! We will need to ask around for other miracles, surely one of those must be the secret star atlas!" Marco Polo suggested.

"Samarkand is a city of religion and faith. We will need to pray before bed tonight, surely God will lead us to the secret star atlas," Ibn Battuta said.

"I believe that the star atlas is kept within the observatory of Ulugh Beg," chimed in Shirwani upon eavesdropping on their conversations. "There were notes within his books referring to it, though I do not know where the records were kept."

They all shared a glance with the same thought in mind. Working together, the heist possesses a higher rate of success. Therefore, the four groups decided on a plan. Each night, one of them would sneak into the observatory to scout out the rooms and the surrounding perimeter. On the fifth night, they all should possess enough information to execute the heist.

# 01

Самаркандская  
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**O**n the first night, Vidaar snuck into the observatory. The guards had all fallen asleep, which meant that he could scale the wall and enter an office through a window. Cracking open a door, he walked into a room clad with ancient air bricks. The room was full of overgrown trees and dancing fairies under the light of an old oil lamp<sup>1</sup>. Araqit, the fairy queen, revealed to him that the land the observatory stood on was in fact, a land gifted to them by the ancient king Afrasiab<sup>2</sup>. He was beckoned to join the fairies around their campfire, their beast legs thumping along to ancient music<sup>3</sup> as the moon slowly faded and dawn arrived.

The young thief returned to the old town inn with his reports on the observatory.

“It was overrun by fairies,” he said, “and the building was made of air bricks to defend against soil salt.<sup>4</sup> The columns stood on conjugated stone pins and are made out of wood.”

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1) Ganjavi, Nizami, Isktandarnama, p164.

2) Ganjavi, Nizami, Isktandarnama, p165

3) Lanzillo, Amanda, Imagining Samarkand: Fruitful Themes in 13th-16th Century Literature on a Silk Road City, p252

4) Nurmukhamedova, Shoira, Architecture of Uzbekistan of The Ancient Period, p53





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**O**n the second night, Marco Polo snuck into the observatory. He sold the guards up front some good wine and fine beer, which meant that he could easily enter once they have had too much. Creeping into a corner service room, he wondered about the hands which created these beautiful celestial tiles. In the room, he bumped into a man adorned in a Castilian garment. Clavijo, the Castilian ambassador, revealed to him that many of the crafts were made by a diverse set of masons who came from all around the world<sup>5</sup>. He was greeted with no animosity, and upon sharing his name, Clavijo exclaimed in excitement as they both drank together until the moon slowly faded and dawn arrived.

The merchant returned to the old town inn with his reports on the observatory.

“There was a Castilian who does not sleep,” he said, “and the building was built by a diverse group of skilled masons. The sultans enjoyed their service and tossed them each a coin when construction goes according to plan.”<sup>6</sup>

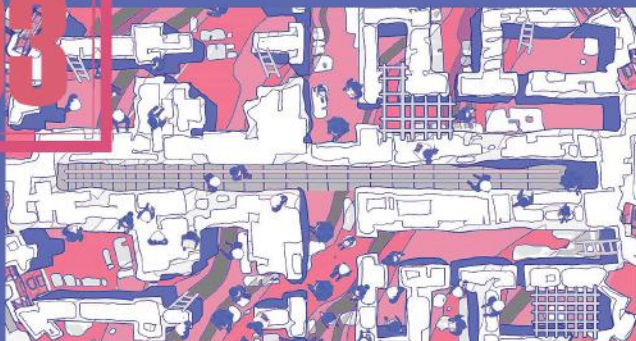
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5) Clavijo, Ruy Gonzalez, p170

6) Clavijo, Ruy Gonzalez, p171



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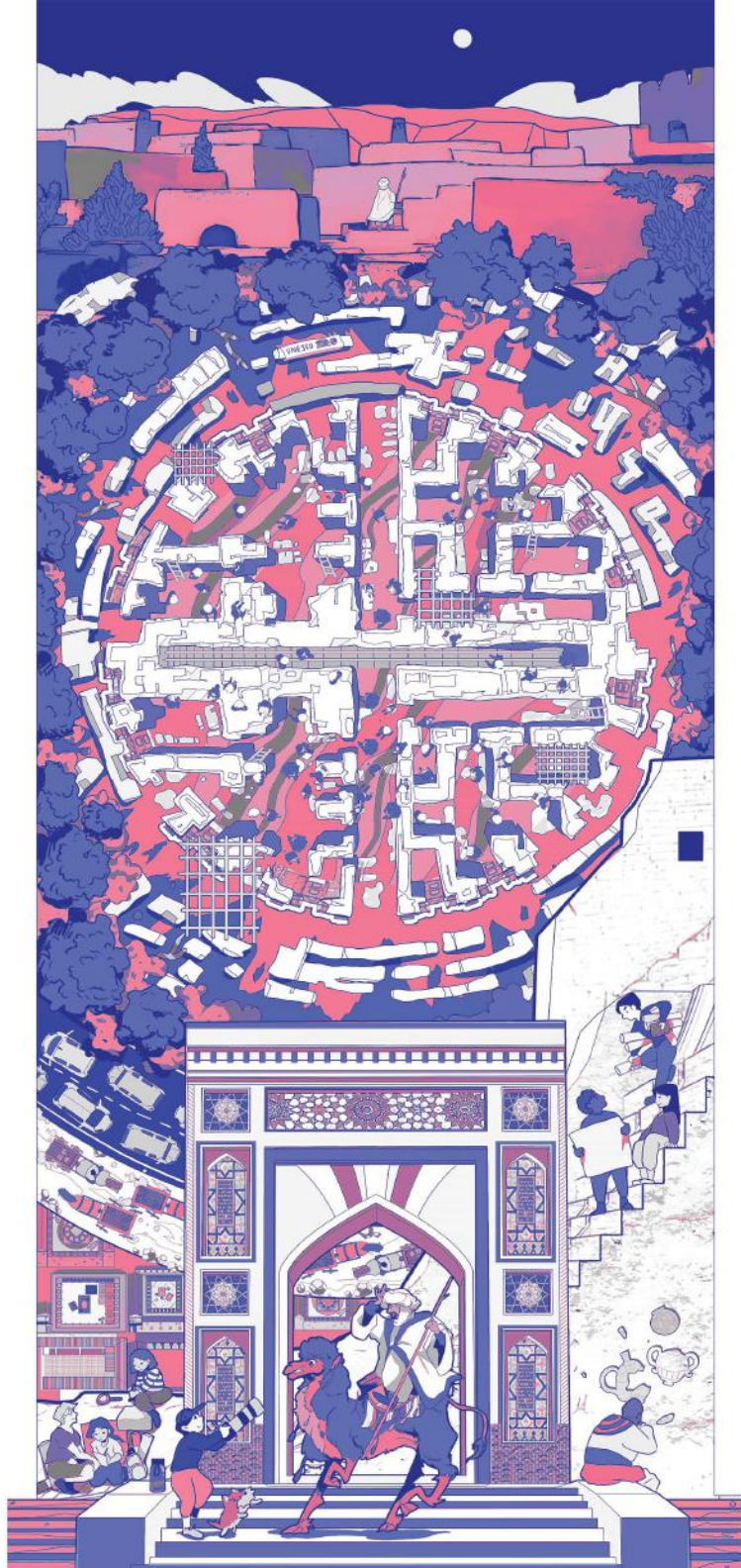
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**O**n the third night, Battuta snuck into the observatory. He crept into the building while the guards were doing their night prayers. Crossing the bridge that arches over the Fakhri sextant, the moon shone through from its mirroring oculus, revealing a group of students in unfamiliar attires. They were sketching the architecture of the observatory, or, what is left of it. Klaus Herdeg, the group leader, revealed to him that they were there to study the remains of great architecture. After the death of Ulugh Beg, the observatory was demolished, and its remains were used for the construction of other buildings. Battuta accompanied the students in their architectural sketching session until the moon slowly faded and dawn arrived.

The pilgrim returned to the old town inn with his reports on the observatory.

“It was somehow uprooted overnight by infidels!” he said, “there was no trace of any room nor vault. There was no sign of a star atlas anywhere.”

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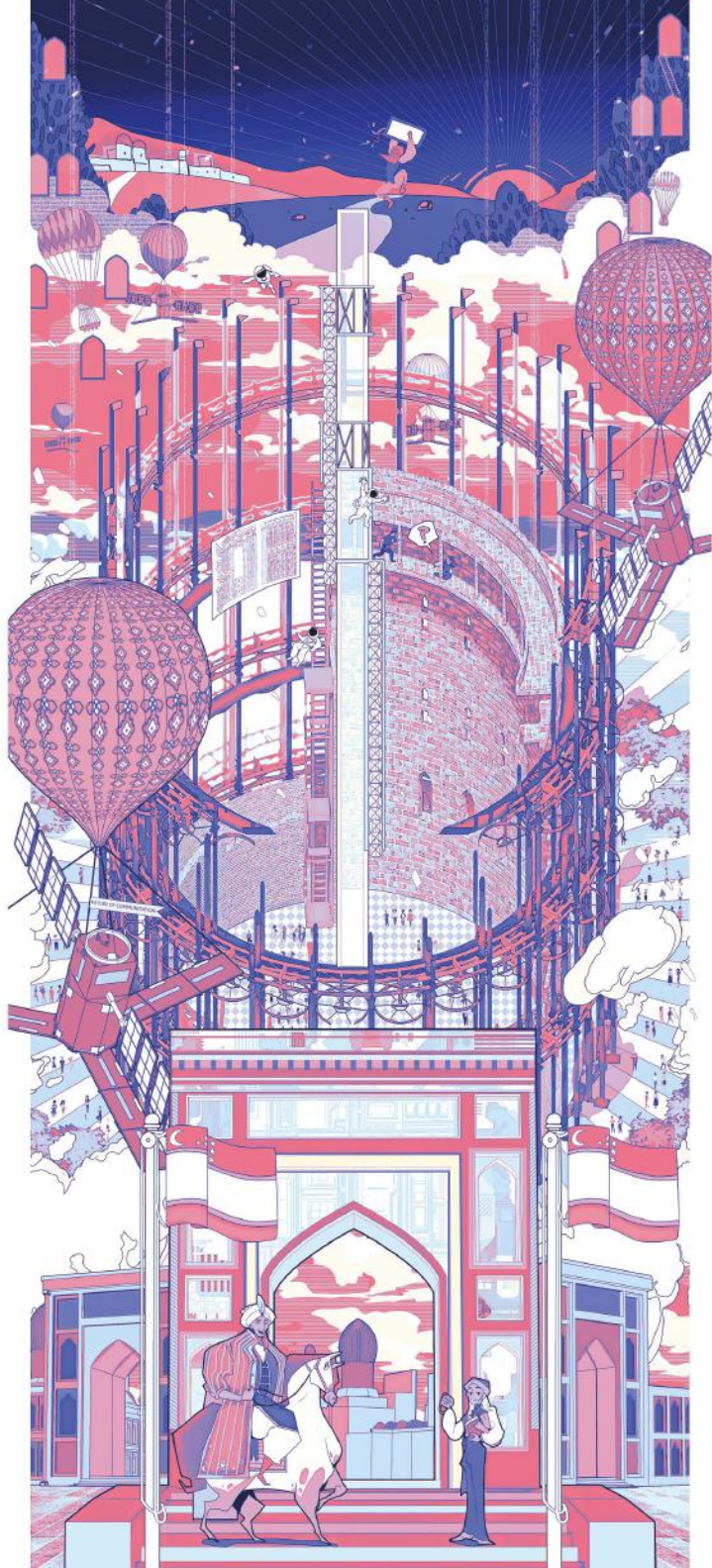
**O**n the fourth night, Shirwani snuck into the observatory. The guards knew him well, which meant that he could give himself entry with the excuse of a forgotten schoolbook. Pressing a button on a metal panel in front of a peculiar box, he found himself getting transported to the very top of the observatory. There were metallic scaffoldings everywhere and in a glass display, was Sultan Ulugh Beg's notebook.

The description next to the display revealed to him that this is the star atlas they were looking for. He was overwhelmed with joy as he lifted the glass box from its base...

The student sprinted back to the old town inn with his reports on the observatory with the cops chasing him the entire way.

"There were strange flying boxes," he said, "and the building was made of scaffoldings and lit-up display screens!"





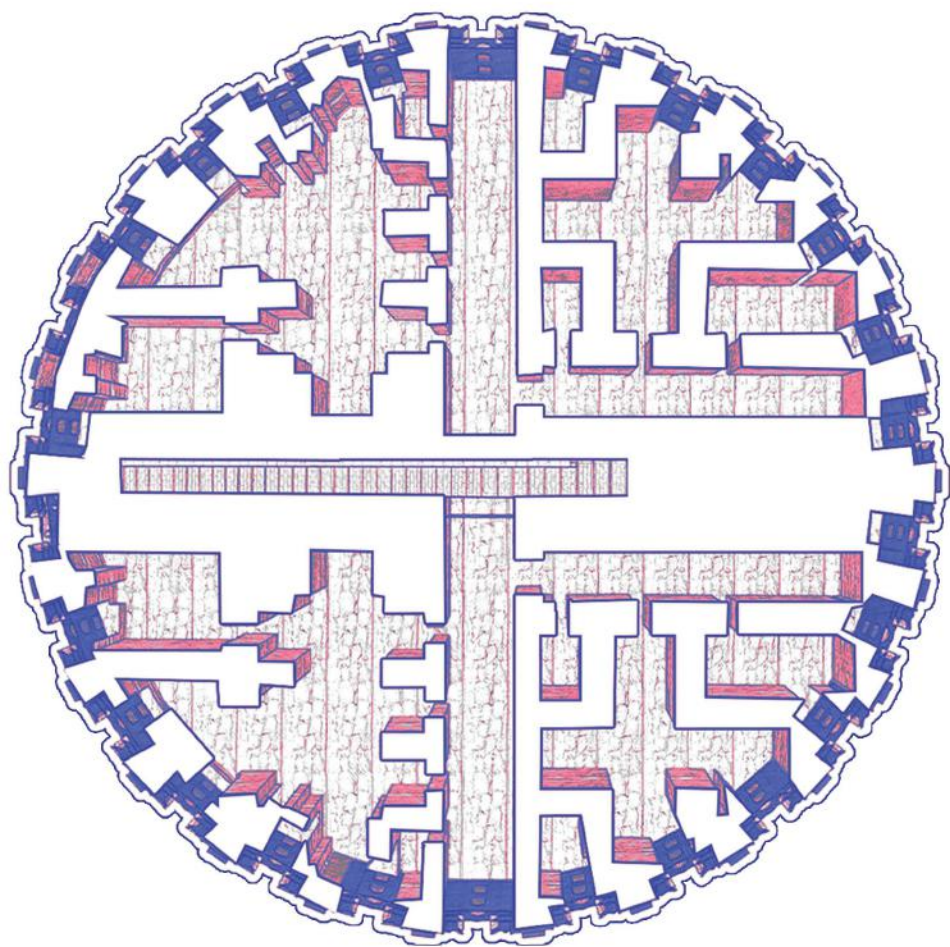
"That is not right," argued Vidaar, "it was full of fairies and mud air bricks!"

"You're wrong," added Marco Polo, "it was elaborately made by international labor!"

"What are you talking about," cried Battuta, "the building wasn't even there!"

"Quit lying," stuttered Shirwani, "Its interior is nothing like anything I have seen before!"

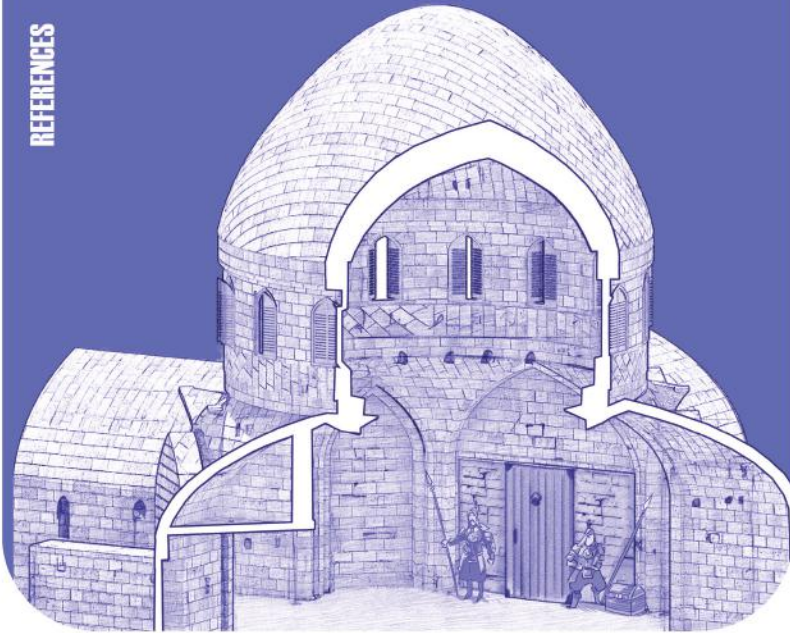
The groups could not conclude their view on the observatory. Their arguments alerted the guards who barged into the old town inn with warrants for unlawful invasion of property. Renouncing their plan for the heist, the Forty Thieves, the merchants, the pilgrims, and the students all fled in terror.



## ARCHITECTURE AS NARRATIVE

Part of why the project is presented through a story format is to suggest that architecture is a form of narrative. It is already established that History is narrative. However, the question remains whether architecture could perform the same roles as history in presenting the rituals of its users, whether it be in the past, the present, or the future. This thesis had chosen the creative liberty of reimagining the Ulugh Beg Observatory in Samarkand. As the observatory had long been destroyed, there was little to no evidence of how the architecture looked like, or how it was weaved into Medieval urban fabric. The only sources of reference were from Soviet excavations in the 60s and mention within Medieval to Early Modern literature which had taken place in and around the area of Samarkand.





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