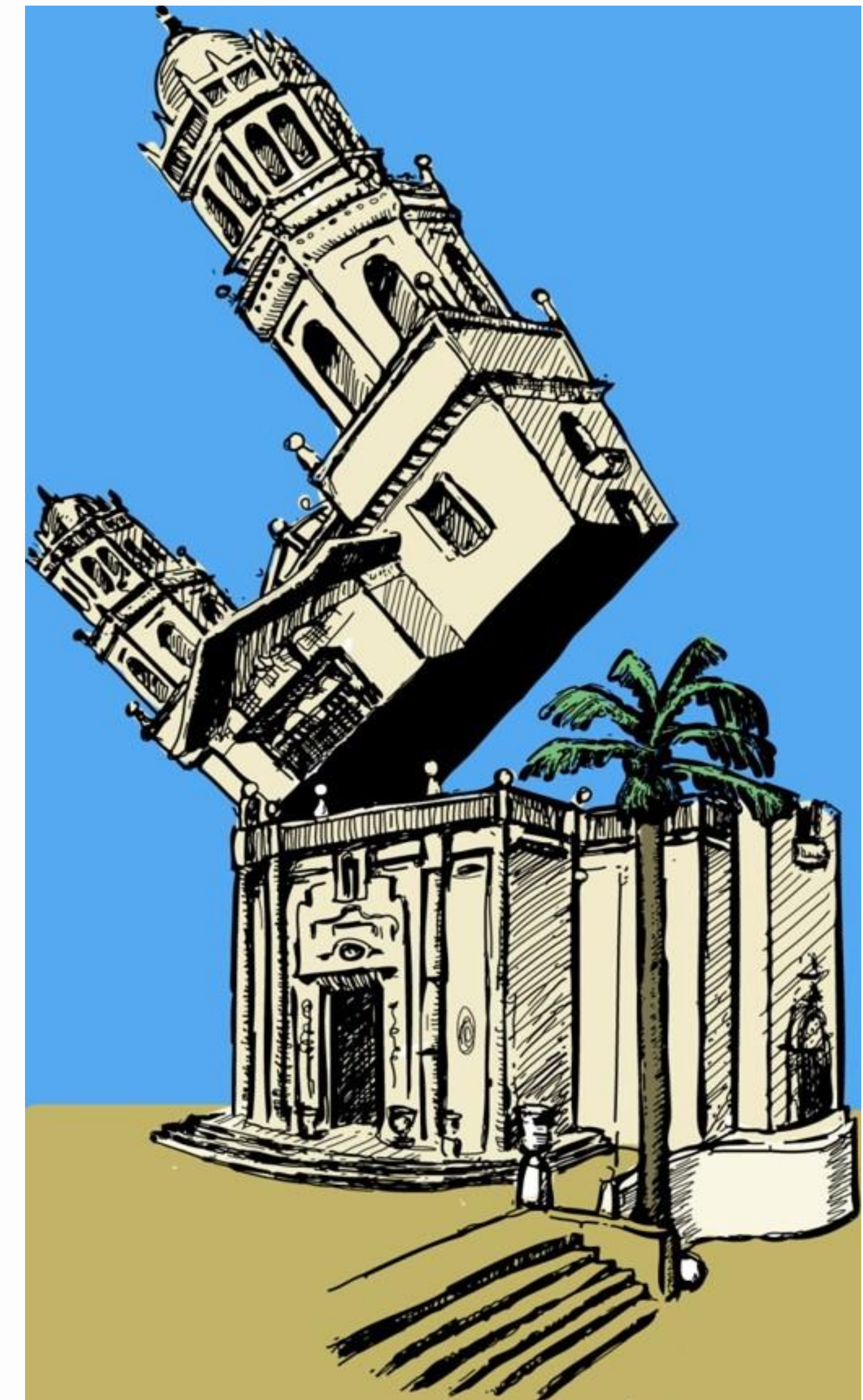


# 47 Hearst Castle

Some years ago I was on the West coast of America, driving from LA to San Francisco and decided to visit Hearst Castle, the legendary home of Howard Hughes. I had to book my visiting time in advance, and park some way from the Castle, where I was met by two guides, who would



“Many of the world’s great innovations have been made by reversing conventional logic”

take us to the Castle by coach.

There were about 20 of us in the visiting party, and the guides started their briefing by passing round brown paper bags, and insisting people put fruit, cigarettes and chewing gum into them. My thoughts at this stage were not particularly positive. I'm not fond of organised group tours - I much prefer to wander round in my own time and space. Things did not look good.

We were taken by coach to the Castle, and as we offloaded, we stood in the main forecourt, and had a second briefing, which completely transformed my expectations.

"Firstly", said one guide, "about photographs..." (My heart sank. I love taking photos, and knew the Castle was very photogenic). "...take as many as you want, where you want, how you want. Because this Castle is so fantastic, all your photos will be great, and a great

advert for us, to encourage others to visit...”

“We’re here,” said the second guide, “to take you through the Castle, so you don’t miss anything. We’re also here to help in any way. We are not like typical guides elsewhere. We will not stop and say our piece in any of the rooms – but we will be happy to answer any questions you might have – in fact, that’s the only way you’ll get information from us. We’re pretty sure that between us, we know

everything – everything – there is to know about this place, its history, its objects and its occupants. But you never know – you might catch us out...”

And so off we went. Into the first room. Everyone gazed around, in silence. One guide was at the front of our group, and the other at the back. The one at the front said: “any questions?” Silence. So off we went to the next room...“Any questions?”. Silence. Then someone asked: “so, where

are we now – and what was the previous room called?” – and we were off and running.

The whole visit was a joy. Everyone got involved, asking all sorts of questions. As the tour progressed, the questions became less and less conventional – almost a contest to see just how much the two guides knew. It was almost like a moving quiz show, with two ‘Mastermind’ experts whose specialist subject was ‘Hearst Castle and its times’. Two of my

questions were: “is that centrepiece on the table silver?” (“yes – it’s Georgian, weighs 10 lbs, and was given to Howard Hughes as a gift by Winston Churchill”). “Who was the last person to sit

“... this was truly about putting the customer at the heart of the visitor experience.”

here?” (“Charlie Chaplin, in 1943”)

We all had a real blast. The tour was over in a twinkle of an eye, and is easily the standout tour of my life - so far.

The lesson for me was twofold...

Firstly this was truly about putting the customer at the heart of the visitor experience.

Secondly, it was also an

example of a key creative thinking principle: reversal.

Many of the world's great innovations have been made by reversing conventional logic: Domino's Pizzas were the first, for example, to take the pizza to the customer; ships now carry their cargo in containers on top of ships' decks, rather than beneath them. Every single other museum or heritage visit I've been on always has the guide telling the visitor the relevant information...

“If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten” (R. Kipling)

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