

# Uses of Secret Doors within Ancient Egyptian Architectural Structures and How It Corresponds to the Use of Secret Doors Within Modern Architecture

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## **Abstract**

This essay illustrates the parallel between the use of secret doors—known as false doors in ancient Egyptian architecture from around the Third Dynasty, approximately 2686 B.C.–2181 B.C.—and the use of secret doors in modern architecture. The use of secret doors is closely examined by their types, function, materials and special characteristics that reveal or conceal their existence in both ancient Egyptian and modern architecture. The primary function of secret doors—serving as passageways to protect temples and tombs of kings and queens buried with treasures in ancient Egyptian architecture, and buildings connected by secret corridors that house leaders and valuables in modern architecture—forms the basis of comparison in this essay. The comparison shows exactly how the concept of secret doors was adapted from ancient Egyptian architecture and continues to serve its primary function today.

**Keywords:** secret doors, false doors, passageways, ancient Egyptian architecture, modern architecture

## **Introduction**

In ancient Egyptian architecture, symbols of strength and stability were predominant—deriving from the Egyptian worship of fearless leaders and Gods. Superior knowledge of mathematics and astronomy was reflected in the creation and design of Egyptian structures (Belliston, Hanks and Parry 4). Multi-columned structures were built with rooms that consisted of Egyptian writings on the walls (known as hieroglyphics), secret doors (Fessenden), and secret passages to protect burial chambers of kings and queens from grave robbers. This is because, “corridors are parts of a traditional cartography of power, in which both gaze and movement are controlled” (Hurdley 49). Today, hidden doors lead to secret corridors that connect to government buildings, libraries, churches and vaults in modern architecture, the same way secret doors served as a pathway between the living and the dead, leading to tombs that hid the bodies of Egyptian leaders in ancient Egyptian architecture.

## **Development, Techniques, and Uses of Secret Doors**

Although there are various styles of doors in modern architecture, there are only two types of doors, internal and external, also referred to as, interior and exterior. Both types of doors provide passage to and from structures, rooms, hallways and corridors that are often entries to a world of power, hidden treasures and the unknown. In ancient Egyptian architecture, internal and

external doors were also used as a passage to hidden treasures and the unknown. These doors called secret doors, or false doors, “also known as "Ka doors" as they allowed the Ka (an element of the "soul") to pass through them, were common in the mortuary temples and tombs of ancient Egypt from around the Third Dynasty” (Hill), approximately from 2686 B.C.–2181 B.C. (Hill), and the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1070 B.C). (Roehrig) According to F. J. Tritsch (113), secret doors on tombs give access to a sort of cavity at floor-level of which, is a good deal below the bottom of the opening, and from within they look very much like windows. In ancient Egypt, during the reign of Teti, in the viziers’ tombs in the Teti Pyramid Cemetery at North Saqqara, the decoration of east-west offering rooms was likewise standardized and became a model for much of the remainder of the Sixth Dynasty (Brovarski 1).

Secret doors and passageways in ancient Egyptian architecture were typically long in length or height, and extremely narrow in width. However, some doors were mere openings about 4-6 m. high, above the ground and filled with stone slabs—coffins could not pass through them, they were exceedingly small, yet they were called doors (Tritsch 113). Most secret doors in Egyptian architecture were made of limestone, highly decorated or “painted red with black speckles to resemble granite” (Hill). Some secret doors were flat surfaces with hieroglyphics and other Egyptian markings on the surface but were internal doors. Since secret doors were used as passages to burial sites of kings and queens, objects such as wall paintings, figurines, and huge statues (representative of the deceased), were placed in front of external doors that led to tombs. This practice created the perception that tombs were permanently sealed from entry, and artifacts were placed at the front of the tombs in memorial of the deceased. Similarly, secret doors in modern architecture that connect corridors and passages to hidden rooms and other unknown treasures, are normally adorned with photos or printed matters. For example, “Posters about lunchtime presentations and group meetings are taped or tacked onto fire doors and walls throughout the building” (Hurdley 52), as a way of concealing the existence of the doors until they are ready for use. Some other secret doors require moving objects such as a book or bookend on a bookshelf, a picture frame or wall mount, or simply a table or chair—leading to a vault or unknown treasures. Further, hallway and closet mirrors are often secret doors that lead to rooms with surveillance cameras and monitors, there are often used at wholesale and retail stores, and government buildings. Sliding doors are also embedded into walls that lead to secret passageways in modern architecture.

Religion and power played an important role in ancient Egyptian civilization, which was reflected in their belief that secret doors created a bridge between the living and deceased, and allowed the deceased to access living mortals by passing through secret doors. Secret doors were also demonstrative of Egyptian power since they were created to protect the temples and tombs of leaders who were buried with treasures. Likewise, the use of hidden and secret doors in modern architecture, mimic the same purpose in ancient Egyptian architecture. The concept of protecting leaders, albeit, living, in modern architecture, has been transferred to legislative buildings and private mansions. These structures’ superior power and multi-columned frames

consist of secret corridors and secret doors to protect leaders from fatal attacks. Government buildings such as the White House, the U.S. Supreme Court, and the U.S. Congress are modern structures supported by many secret doors. Similarly, the “Passetto di Borgo (also known simply as the Passetto, which may be translated as a *small passage*) is a corridor that connects Vatican City, more specifically St. Peter’s Basilica, with the Castel Sant’ Angelo” (Dḥwty). These prominent structures house world leaders while providing secret doors for their comings-and-goings, as well as for their protection. Additionally, in modern architecture, while legislative buildings (representing power) such as courthouses, police stations, and prisons have secret doors to protect leaders; churches (representing religion) have hidden passages and secret doors as sanctuary for religious followers, as well as to house and protect victims of religious and social discrimination, physical abuse, or those who are challenged by refugee and asylum matters.

## Conclusion

The use of secret doors in modern architecture is a concept borrowed from ancient Egypt that serves both internal and external usage to guard against attacks, protect known treasures and provide refuge for religious members. In ancient Egyptian civilization, secret doors were placed in structures to serve as protection for leaders who were deceased and to protect treasures that were buried with them, in the same way they are placed in modern structures to serve as protection for leaders and to protect valuable or unknown treasures.

The use of markings on external doors to identify internal secret doors are prominent in modern architecture the same way it was prominent in ancient Egyptian architecture. Symbolic structures such as figurines and huge statues in front of secret doors that led to burial sites of ancient Egyptian leaders, represent the same concept of chairs or bookshelves placed in front of secret doors that connect corridors and passages that lead to valuables today.

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