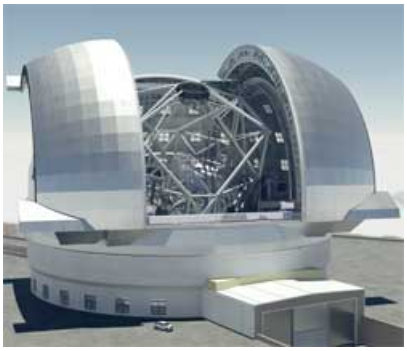
Hill blown down so telescope can go up

SANTIAGO, CHILE: Construction on the world's largest optical telescope began with a bang as workers demolished a hilltop in Chile's Atacama Desert.



An artist's impression of the E-ELT, the world's largest telescope that will take 10 years to build.
Image: Wikipedia

The European Extremely Large Telescope (E-ELT) telescope, being built by the European Southern Observatory, aims to give astronomers new insights into the origins of the universe and help search for potentially habitable planets elsewhere in the galaxy.

"Currently, we have no proof of the existence of an Earth-like planet at the same distance from the sun in our galactic neighbourhood," said astronomer Fernando Comeron, ESO's representative in Chile.

"That's not because they don't exist but because we didn't yet have the tools to detect them. With the E-ELT, we can," he said.

Construction will take about 10 years and the telescope will be put into service two years later. The first step, estimated to cost $1.4bn, involves razing around 5000 cubic metres of rock off the top of Mount Armazones.

The flat surface will support the foundation of the telescope, with an a main mirror, of 39m in diameter.

According to Comeron the new telescope's light-collecting surface will be 10 to 15 times greater than those of existing telescopes.

Thanks to its dry and cold climate, and the lack of light pollution from cities in Chile's remote Atacama desert the site provides an ideal location for astronomical research.

The ESO, a collaboration involving 15 mainly European countries, operates a number of high-powered telescopes in Chile, including the Very Large Telescope array and the Atacama Large Millimetre/sub-millimetre Array, or ALMA.

Source: AFP via I-Net Bridge