



Source: Deborah Smith, 'Patterns of Islamic genius crystal clear centuries ago', *Sydney Morning Herald online*, 26/02/07.

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In the late 70s a group of Anglo and Jewish author/architects designed a book called *A Pattern Language*. Ostensibly it's about architecture: buildings, houses, structural semiotics, methods of design practice. If you knit your bones into the words on the page, if you let the flesh of your own memory punctuate the sentences, if you let the stutters and pregnant pauses of your life breathe through the space between the words, which gives Derrida's notion of 'différance' a whole new bent, then maybe it's a book about things kept safe from the everyday, things hidden beneath the skin, like a haiku poem etched onto the canvas before the artist's hands do the work of a different textual kind. It is a book about signs and symbols...what they say, what they don't say; what they show, what they keep secret. It could be about magic.

Around the same time, somewhere else a Jewish academic wrote a book called *The Architecture of Memory*. As an ethnographer, she specialised in the study of collective memory, mapped the lives of one Algerian household containing a family of Jews, a family of North African Muslims and a family of Christians living in cramped conditions under French colonial rule. Her informants from this house (including herself, I think) talk in many tongues. The bodies walk in many ways, the co-ordinates of belonging and unbelonging chart this very particular diasporic micro-history, through moments in time...the early 60s, the last generation before Algerian Independence; a grass roots United Nations, globally under-acknowledged.

Also in the 70s, a mathematical physicist rediscovered the medieval Islamic architectural technique named after him as the quasicrystalline Penrose design, (Mr Penrose not Mr Quasicrystalline) a design that by design is not repeatable in any order, a design formed by two tiles that can only tile the plane aperiodically, a random effect that is difficult to map. It seems a bit odd that an archaic design is named for its re-discoverer, not for its original presentation, that is, Quasicrystalline Design of Ancient Islam. Perhaps the fractility of the design is enough to ponder, without adding the politics of naming to this micro—discussion.

So what was it about the 70s that brought all this architectural genius to the fore; spatial and temporal architecture? I can't answer except to suggest it could be magical or spiritual, that territory so few want to map. Maybe not so few. Even Pythagoras thought numbers were magical, and his followers too, right down to the twentieth century wordsmith W B Yeats and a random selection of poets.

I do wonder...and I know with absolute certainty that wonder is necessary to any study...I wonder about the number 7, as a friend of mine did in her book *A Body of Water*. The Buddhists often work in 7s, she told me in that book. Numerology on another hand would have me add the numbers up then reduce them and so arrive at a new number. Therefore, the 1970s equals... $1+9=10=1+7=17=8$. Number 8. Aha, lots of occultists and spiritualists think much of number 8. So perhaps hidden between the layers of work in the 70s we are led to the number 8 and whatever messages it contains, you know the deeply veiled ones. Number 8 directing cutting edge thinking in the 70s. It sounds far fetched but why not? If people can make sense out of A squared plus B squared equals C

squared then maybe someone can make sense of this. This is a mathematical story after all. As an innumerate dyslexic, please know I've spent an hour getting those numbers in the right order.

In the 1980s, a Sydney author who wrote about *Leaning Towards Infinity*, has another take on the number thing, infinity being the most ineffable number of all. She told me about the secret of number 9, when my daughter was having trouble with times tables. She said 9 always comes back to itself, no unbelongingness there. Her research, that far exceeds the magic of number 9, is recorded in her book where Frances, the main character goes to a Mathematics conference in Greece, carrying a borrowed suitcase, with a secret number inside. She was a genius, a mathematical genius, as yet too humble to know it. This character, Frances, thought the multigenerational family drama began because of the shape of her mothers breasts, but knew it REALLY began because of something written on the margin of a page stuck on the wall; a number something.

Obscurity and marginality has something to offer here. The ancient Islamic architectural patterns have existed in buildings in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Afghanistan, and other Muslim countries since they were built, the pristine perfection of the random quasicrystalline design sitting there for centuries probably understood, possibly revered by local people until the more latter observances of folks like Roger Penrose and Peter Lu. The former decided to name the design—after himself, the latter has dug differently and identified five different tiles and named them according to shape: the bow tie; the diamond; the pentagon, the hexagon and the decagon. What might Pythagoras have made of this, and Plato, and Orpheus and more recently Yeats and George Bernard Shaw? Even Freud in his correspondence with Wilhelm Fliess had an obsession with cosmic mathematics.

So what is so captivating about maths and design? Is it the infinite possibilities that numbers—put to work in architecture and other places—provide? What of the architecture of the soul, of memory, of patterned language? How are they drawn, re-drawn, erased, edited and refracted, and by whom? Where is the certain knowledge that wonderers and wanderers alike seek? Is it so embedded in the everydayness of our walk and talk, that looking for examples is unconscious, unnoticed or just unnecessary, or not in need of locating, nor in need of naming, just scribbled in a margin somewhere by a woman?

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Shé Hawke.

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