THE ARCHITECTURE OF MY MADNESS

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The architect designs the physical spaces where life takes place. They construct the world within which we live, study, work and die. In our homes, schools, offices and hospitals the scripts of our lives play out surrounded by glass, bricks, timber or steel.

Architecture has the power to control. It contains space and people within walls. Whether by choice or against our will the building is a container of life. The architect designs both the home and the prison, the university and the hospital.

Architecture has always played a large part in the madness of my life. I studied Architecture at University and never wanted anything to do with working in the world of “mental health” research or activism, however this is where I have found myself. I would like to tell the story of my madness through the buildings and spaces which tried to contain it.

The house

The architect Le Corbusier claimed that the “house is a machine for living in” (Corbusier, 2013: 4). The machine I grew up in was a nice, unassuming detached house, sitting at the top of an ordinary cul-de-sac, on an ordinary road in a little town.

Nothing special.

The house was a place of kindness and love. I was greatly loved by my mum, brother, grandmother and our cat Angel. I remember lovely times in our garden playing cricket. I remember playing computer games with my brother and the delicious Sunday dinners my mum used to cook.

The house was also a place of cruelty, abuse and tyranny. My father was abusive. He ruled over the house with his anger and his threats. He said he would kill himself, he would kill us, he would kill our Angel.

I was afraid of our ruler.
The house was not a place of safety for myself.
My madness was born in that house.

I was lucky that my home was in a good state of repair, had a nice garden and was in a “nice” neighbourhood. The house or as Cameron rightly points out, more importantly the home plays such an important role in recovery. Safe housing played such a large part in my own story.
Choice has also played another key role. As a person who has been abused, a person who has been hospitalised against my will and has had forced treatment, choosing a place to live and creating a home for myself was vital to me regaining power over my life and personal freedom.

**The University**

When I was 14 I wanted to be an architect. My art teacher flying around the classroom telling me about Frank Lloyd Wright and other great architects inspiring me to choose that particular career path.

I went to University and loved studying architecture, making models, drawing and travelling the world. I fell in love with the concepts of sustainability and the beauty of green buildings. I started teaching at the University, inspiring students with their designs, lecturing on climate change and environmental design.

I would go out with friends, drink wine and talk about art, philosophy, politics or gossip about boys. I had many friends, many laughs, tears, and discussions of both depth and superficiality. I was on the road to a career as a lecturer in architecture, my dream job. On the road to marrying a nice man and living the middle-class dream of barbecues and intelligent, polite conversation.

It was a beautiful dream. Sometimes I wish I could fall asleep again. Unsee what I have seen. Unknow what I know.

It is at the University on its beautiful green campus with its grand buildings where I went mad. My mind was my place of freedom whilst I grew up. Within my imagination I constructed worlds to live in.

When I started living freedom, whilst at University, I remembered my trauma and I went mad in the tiny room of my student accommodation.

I saw beyond.
I saw beautiful things.
I saw painful things.
I saw meaning.
I saw truth.

The University was not a place of safety for myself. My madness exploded free.

I ended up in a mental hospital.

**The hospital**

I went to hospital for help.

What I found there was more pain and abuse.
I witnessed horrific human rights abuses and treatment. I experienced them myself.
And I met the most extraordinary, kind and wise people I have ever met.
Not doctors or nurses but the patients in the “asylum”.
The clinical world did not accept my madness nor even try to understand. My freedom was lost along with the opportunity to heal my wounds of trauma.

The hospital was not a place of safety for myself.

Righteous anger brewed.
My madness grew more and more.
The architecture of my madness

The streets

On the streets I searched for truth, in the heart of my madness I wandered the streets, at night, alone. Friends and family were worried, said I was unsafe. The quiet of the night, the cold air, the homeless sleeping in shop doorways, a 24-hour fast food restaurant for sustenance. Nothing happened to me on the streets. I was not attacked, not abused, not sexually assaulted as people feared I may have been. Perhaps I was just lucky, but for me the streets were safer than the hospital wards where I was abused in every way possible.

The city streets are different in the day. There is a strange peace at 3am. Hardly a car, a quietness as the lucky people sleep.

Those who can sleep, how lucky they are? Sleep evades me, my trauma keeps me awake at night. The ideas, fears, anxieties dancing in my mind. The walk a way to evade the thoughts. Call the crisis team and that is what they suggest. Go for a walk, have a bath, call a friend. At 3am when the trauma arrives and the possibility to sleep disappears what choice do I have? A friend at 3am?

I find my friend in the written word. Stay in my bed and I write, my trauma flowing, hoping someone will read it, connect, believe me, accept me and respond.

This year I found someone to write to at 3am.

A friend, a fellow survivor, a peer.

She knows who she is.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

We wrote, wrote and wrote in emails on any day, at any time.

My stories of pain, abuse, laughter, songs, art, poetry and spiders flowed into emails, emails to a friend.

And she replied.

Those emails were filled with humour, sadness, anxiety, fears, paranoia, joy and pain, so much pain.

The emails heal me.

Within the architecture of the internet I found my saving grace.

Sharing and being responded to.

Being accepted.

Being believed.

She has saved my life this year.

This year is the year I accepted my madness and I recovered what I lost or rather what was stolen from me, in the childhood and then by the mental health system.

My freedom.

The cafe

The place I come to write. The act of writing, the way to solidify my thoughts, to make the stream of consciousness possibly understandable. My madness is like all the connections of everything all at once and the inability to share with others, to connect. The act of writing slows the pace and offers the possibility of making sense of the stories and thoughts dancing like a dervish in my mind.

So the cafe. So many kinds. My favourite places are quiet, not empty, not silent but where my thoughts can slow. The lighting gentle, the furnishings dark, beautiful adornments on the walls, softness and style.

I love to try different ones most times, in different cities of the world. Sitting outside can be a preference if the weather is right, the air pure, the view worthwhile and again the quietness.
Quiet but not silent as I like the hum of a little life, a little of the world to connect with. As the words flow, not on a piece of paper but my phone, my act of writing on a phone in an email, like writing to a friend, to connect with someone in the world. Writing to myself or writing to another, a way to express the madness and stories of my life.

The cafe is a place of both solitude and the possibility for connection. The architecture of the interior or connection with the exterior needs to inspire.

And it needs to have good coffee, there needs to be good coffee.

I will avoid the chains, with their lack of personality, all the same or at least they try to be, like people trying to fit in, be the same, be normal.

Fuck normal. I want different, I want music, poetry, art and originality. I want madness. Do not fix me.

The coffee is also disappointing like sadly many people.

I just wish people were kinder to one another.

I heard of an initiative called kindness cafes, which are a “pop-up movement in the spirit of giftivism. To encourage human connection and kind acts around the world” (Kindness Cafes, n.d.).

I think I would like to have a coffee in one of those cafes.

With a peer.

With a friend.

I have with my email pen pal.

We have sat eye to eye a few times and drank coffee and ate avocados on toast.

Together in person.

Me and my internet pen peer.

The park

Sitting on a bench in meditation or thought, alone or with company.

In the connection to nature and the universe can the silent mind reside. At one with the sounds of birds, the bark of a dog, the drop of a leaf, the subtle or loud conversations of lovers, families or one man and his dog.

Most days I go for a walk in the humble park near my home to try to still my mind, to forget the horrors of the past and be at one with nature and the moment. Again the crisis team suggestions go for a walk, have a bath, call a friend.

Can you go to the park and scream or howl to the moon?

Not if there are others there.

Is it possible in company to scream, howl or even laugh too loudly?

Is it acceptable to truly feel and to express joy, sadness or distress?

Must our emotions always be suppressed, through physical restraint or medication?

What if we had places to set or emotions free?

Is the hospital the only venue for the screams of the soul to be released?

Can there be architecture to contain madness?

Is madness too wild?

Can people handle wildness?

Nick Totton in “Wild Therapy – Undomesticating inner and outer worlds” argues that wildness of the human psyche and the landscapes that surround us is vital to our sanity. His approach to working with people is to be open to the spontaneous and the unexpected (Totton, 2011).
The architecture of my madness

The office

The office box of academia has hard, solid walls, locks and keys.
They use swipe cards there, like in hospital.

Once whilst working in a survivor-led organisation with a fellow mad woman and allies we did a take-over of the building and transformed it into a locked ward. We stuck up signs like on hospital wards forbidding people to use the toilet or leave the building for a cigarette unless at certain allotted times as an act of taking away a human's most basic needs and desires. This was a celebration in honour of Creative Maladjustment week and Dr Martin Luther King Jr’s call that one cannot be sane in an insane world. It was a Mad Carnival celebration of colour, pride and chaorder.

Chaos and order is how I describe my madness.
The inbetween.

For a day the University building became a place of madness, play, joy, sharing, honesty and the holding of deep pain. The office plain, white walls covered in the art of anarchy, rebellion or revolution. To me I class the office as a place of the slow evolution of thought or at least that is my hope. For a person who has an interesting relationship with time, one might say I live in a beautiful and difficult trauma time, the pace makes an activist both frustrated and righteously angry. It can be a place of ignorance and fear. Within the clear glass windows the academics wish to keep their secrets hidden. I as the survivor researcher, as the peer opening up the most painful of traumatic wounds as part of my job faced by silence, pitying eyes or empty words.

How brave, how sad, how different her experiences are to our nice lives of middle class privilege with our nice homes and comfortable lives?

I have joined the ranks of middle class privilege and I am glad. Should I feel guilty after I spent years living on pitiful Personal Independence Payments in and out of hospital? Sometimes I do and sometimes I don’t.

The building a symbol of silence and the hidden. A place of possibility of uncovering truth.

Slowly.
The white walls of formality make it look like a prison.

It is the people within that makes this place at times a prison to me as a mad woman. A prison of mind, where only evidence-base’s, RCT’s or gentle, careful words are tolerated. No tears or anger just smiles and niceties.

How false?

I sit in the toilets and cry at the injustice in the world and the powerlessness I feel. The toilet becomes a safe place, a place of refuge, solitude and feeling. In this multi-million pound architectural statement, I find comfort in the toilet, the least considered of architectural spaces.

In Hong Kong there is a golden toilet, in Japan the toilets squirt water to clean your most intimate of parts, there is the sustainable composting toilet and there is the hole in the ground. A place of evacuation, a place to dump your shit, your pain, your tears and your trauma. If only we could talk in the white walls of the office rooms our truths and share like peers our pain.

Can we sort through our shit together and come to some kind of solidarity?

I write about challenging things, I become righteously angry and I upset my colleagues and myself.

The office is not a place of safety for others.

My madness is disliked.

I am a disliked mad woman in the academy. I work in the academy, but I do not want to be an academic. I want to be a researcher, a mentor, an activist and a reflector. I guess I have to publish some papers as well.
A nice pay cheque does feel very nice.
I now have a nice life of middle-class privilege. I have a nice house, finally a home to make my own and a comfortable life.
Am I a hypocrite?
Am I a sell out?
Probably.

I am unfair to them.
Can they understand?
Can they know madness?
Can they know abuse?
Can they know injustice?
Can they know what it is like?

I have lived it.

If they do not understand, who will, where do I go?
To my emails. She is also a survivor and she understands.
I can write.

The theatre

I feel like an actress most days. Wearing different masks as I go to work each day.
It feels like a pantomime at times. A conference, a workshop, a lecture. As Shakespeare wrote “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players: they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages” (Shakespeare, 2009); I play my life each day. I am a recovery ninja battling in the shadows and in the light to reclaim the grassroots values of recovery and peer support in sometimes hostile and toxic environments. At least I am trying to be. Perhaps that is a grandiose scheme. I have never been called that before.
I am an activist, acting most days in a theatre of the oppressed (Boal, 2000).
Sometimes I wonder if it is only me.
So I send her another email.
And she understands.

The guest house

My godparents owned a guesthouse in Kent by the sea. I loved going there. It was a place of love. It was a place where I felt safe. It felt like home.
When I think of my godparents guest house I think of a place of retreat and a place of salvation. In the recovery movement the Soteria houses of “salvation” were set up to aid the recovery of people who had received a diagnosis of schizophrenia with minimal use of neuroleptic medication. The first house had 12 rooms for up to 6 people, 2 non-professional staff members and volunteers, who were chosen for their ability to create a safe, supportive, warm and relaxed environment (Thomas, 2014). The Hearing Voices Network in Australia co-produced a list of ways people who hear voices have said have helped them cope with distressing voices, many of which are very simple – visit a friend, draw, meditate, cry, dance, diary, sing, eat healthily, have
a cup of tea with someone (Baker and Romme, 2009). The Leeds Survivor Led Crisis Service Dial House open during the nights and over weekends offer visitors a place to relax in a homely environment, get some crisis support, be with others (Coles and Diamond, 2013). Have a cup of tea with someone.

My own madness can be a place of distress, a yearning for connection to others, a need for a place to find some kind of peer support.

This year I went to two residential workshops, which I found difficult, healing and profound. One of them was organised by Katie Mottram of Emerging Proud in the beautiful setting of a guesthouse in Norwich, surrounded by a garden with a pond and wildlife. In a circle we shared deep pains as human beings. Not all of us were survivors but we were all people willing to open up trauma and share. We were peers sharing a human experience without labels or “diagnoses”.

I swam in the sea, I laughed loudly, I howled to the moon and cried.

A lot.

About 6 months later I went to Port Ness on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland. Again, beautiful nature and a remarkable silence. The workshop was organised by Ron Coleman and his wife Karen Taylor and all 9 of us shared a human experience of “peer-ness”. Everyone was part of the journey and I offer them all my gratitude.

I swam in the sea, I laughed loudly, I howled to the moon and cried.

A lot.

When I went to Norwich, I forgave my father.

When I went to Port Ness, I forgave myself.

This is the power of peer support.

The city

The City and the Architecture of my Madness.

I have found unsafety in the buildings and places architects have designed.

I have found unsafety in my own mind.

What is safety?

What is a place of safety?

I needed a place to howl and scream and cry and my trauma to pour out.

I found that place.

In the peer retreats and in my emails to my friend.

Thank you to the architecture of the internet, which connected me to a person who is helping to heal incredibly deep wounds.

Thank you to the survivors and the peers.

Thank you to us.

Finally back to the guesthouse, the safe space of my childhood.

The physical architectural space.

And, the madness that which lives within me, yes that is like a guesthouse.

I welcome you in.

The guest house

My own experiences of psychiatric abuse and forced treatment have made me sure that there needs to be a better way to treat people than hospitals, restraints and treatment against the will of the patient.
I advocate the idea of the guest-house, the retreat and the asylum in the truest sense of the word. A place to find safety. I did not find safety on the wards, only trauma.
I advocate for beautiful spaces filled with kind and caring people.
I advocate for green spaces, for light and for fresh air.
I advocate for spaces where emotions can be held, explored and released.
I want a place of love not abuse.
I want home.
Home is in the heart.

We can be architects and design environments through our actions and ways of being which help not harm, love not hurt, heal not abuse.

Home is in the heart.

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