

The Persian Connotations of Tiny House Architecture

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*...Mirrors on the ceiling
The pink champagne on ice
And she said, "We are all just prisoners here
Of our own device"
And in the master's chambers
They gathered for the feast
They stab it with their steely knives
But they just can't kill the beast.

Last thing I remember
I was running for the door
I had to find the passage back
To the place I was before
"Relax," said the night man
"We are programmed to receive
You can check out any time you like
But you can never leave!"*

—“Hotel California,” The Eagles

Tiny houses have emerged as a popular architectural trend, reflecting a minimalist lifestyle and sustainable living ethos. However, beyond their physical dimensions, tiny houses embody a complex interplay of cultural, psychological, and philosophical dimensions. This essay is a short journey into the intricate connections between Lacanian topology, Persian connotations of tiling, the torus, magic squares, and posthumanist ideas within the context of tiny house architecture.

Persian Connotations of Tiling (Kash)

In Persian culture, the word “Kash” carries rich connotations, signifying both tile (Kashi) and unfulfilled desire as well as the city of Kashan (a city famous for its tiles) and the word Kashaneh which simply means a tiny house¹. Notwithstanding the historical and etymological connections between different meanings that come out from the word

¹ کاشانه (Kashane): According to Dehkhoda Dictionary, “kashane” refers to a winter house or a small and humble dwelling. In literary usage, it symbolizes both the anticipation of life's future. The term is often employed poetically to evoke images of longing and transient beauty. In the context of bird nests, “kashane” signifies a cozy dwelling adorned with glass, suggesting a delicate and luminous habitat. In short, “kashane” encompasses notions of shelter, illumination, and existential contemplation within the confines of domestic space.

<https://vajehyab.com/dehkhoda/%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87>. Accessed March 31, 2024.

“Kash” the same acoustic image of this root is enough to wire all these meanings together. This linguistic *double-entendre* intertwines with the physical act of tiling, where each tile represents not a fragment of possibility or longing but the exact repetition of the same very possibility and longing. The meticulous craftsmanship of Persian tiles, often adorned with intricate patterns and motifs, evokes a sense of aesthetic harmony and transcendence. When applied to tiny house design, the incorporation of tiled surfaces imbues the space with a new transcendental layer of meaning, inviting occupants to contemplate their desires amidst the beauty of the sorrowful narrative that brings them there. *الدنيا سجن المومن* (the world is the prison of a believer) is a celebrated hadith of the Prophet of Islam. You see that to be able to see the world as a prison you should be a believer first.

The Torus and Spatial Dynamics

The torus, a geometric shape resembling a doughnut, holds significance in Lacanian discourse as a symbol of continuity and containment. In tiny house architecture, the toroidal form manifests in the circular flow of space, where boundaries between rooms dissolve, and occupants navigate a seamless continuum. This spatial dynamic mirrors Lacan's notion of the subject's traversal through the psyche, where distinctions between self and other blur, and desires circulate endlessly within the symbolic framework.

Magic Squares and Symbolic Order

Magic squares, mathematical constructs with equal sums along each row, column, and diagonal, offer a glimpse into the underlying order of the universe. In Lacanian theory, the Symbolic order imposes structure and meaning onto subjective experience, shaping desires and identities. The connection between a magic square and a torus lies in their underlying geometrical properties and the way they handle spatial relationships.

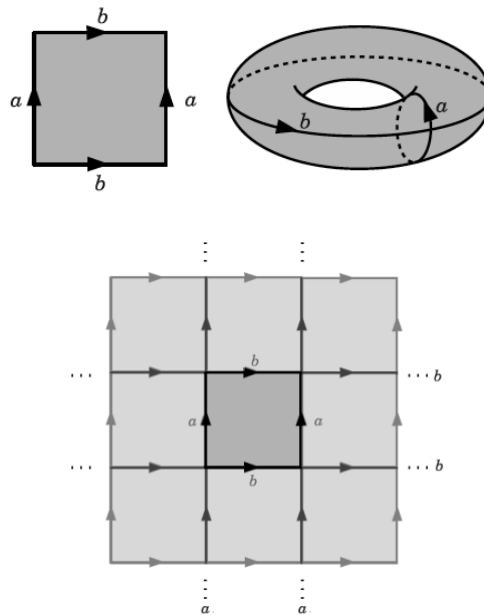
A magic square is a square grid filled with distinct integers such that the sum of the numbers in each row, column, and main diagonals is the same. Now, consider a magic square where each row, column, and diagonal sums up to the same number. When you traverse from one cell to another in this square, you're essentially moving through a continuous loop, much like the surface of a torus.

To illustrate this, let's imagine a 2x2 magic square. If you start at row 1, column 2 and move “out,” you enter row 1, column 1, effectively wrapping around the square. Similarly, in a 3x3 magic square, moving out from row 1, column 2 would lead you to row 3, column 2 of the adjacent square (=tile), maintaining the square's magical properties.

| | | | | | |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| 4 | 3 | 15 | 8 | 4 | 3 |
| 11 | 12 | 6 | 1 | 11 | 12 |
| 10 | 13 | 0 | 7 | 10 | 13 |
| 5 | 2 | 9 | 14 | 5 | 2 |
| 4 | 3 | 15 | 8 | 4 | 3 |
| 11 | 12 | 6 | 1 | 11 | 12 |

A magic torus tribute to Dürer²

This wrapping behavior mimics the characteristics of a torus, a geometric shape resembling a doughnut, where movement in one direction loops back around, forming a continuous surface without edges or boundaries. In essence, traversing a magic square is akin to navigating the surface of a torus, where movement in any direction can lead to a seamless transition to another part of the structure.



Torus is in effect 2-D.

The torus, despite its seemingly three-dimensional appearance, operates effectively in two dimensions. Each repetition within its structure, whether denoted as “a” or “b,” translates to a movement into an adjacent tile or square.

In the context of a tiny house, the layout and arrangement of spaces take on a symbolic significance akin to encoding. Every corner and angle within the tiny house becomes imbued with a narrative of human desire, serving as an index that points towards itself as an unfulfillable longing existing beyond its physical confines: The arrangement of

² “Magic Squares, Spheres and Tori.” Magic Square Tribute to Dürer, 500+ Years After Melencolia I. Blog Archive, 7 December 2014. <https://carresmagiques.blogspot.com/2014/12/melancholy-in-magic-squares-tribute-to.html>. Accessed March 31, 2024.

spaces within a tiny house can be seen as symbolic encoding. By incorporating elements of magic squares into architectural design, we can understand the tiny houses as repositories of this symbolic resonance caused by the ad-hoc iterations of the same irritating logic that they portray for their unique existence. As the dwellers of their prison, they are free to ponder the same recurring patterns of the perplexing logic they embody in their very existence.

The Meaning of Kashi

In Persian, “kashi” holds a multifaceted meaning, encompassing various associations such as tile, glazing, and house numbers. It refers to a type of thin brick that artisans decorate with painted designs and then glaze and bake to resemble ceramics. In Iran, particularly in Kashan and Khorasan, kashi is renowned for its quality and craftsmanship, often used to create ornate dishes akin to china. Additionally, “kashi” can denote glazed tiles or bricks adorned with intricate patterns, commonly found in architectural decoration. Furthermore, it is used colloquially to refer to house numbers or plaques installed by municipal authorities. This rich cluster of associations highlights the significance of kashi in architectural aesthetics, interior design, and urban planning, emphasizing its role in beautifying living spaces and providing identity to buildings.³



“Kashi: Where Sacred Words Meet Home Numbers.”
<https://www.tbakerman.ir/site/article?post=34>

Now, in the story of Rumi that I am going to tell you, the concept of “kash” emerges as a recurring motif, embodying the notion of unfulfilled desire or longing and the city of Kashan as a metaphor for this ephemeral world. Again and to go a bit deeper, “Kash” is derived from Persian, meaning “I wish” or “if only,” expressing a yearning or regret for something desired but unattainable. It reflects the sentiment of “what if” or “if only I had” in the context of missed opportunities or alternate choices. In Rumi's narrative, the moment of “kash” arises when considering the possibility of presenting oneself as this name (Ali) instead of that name (Omar), symbolizing not only the longing for acceptance or inclusion within the community but also the primacy of the signifier over the signified. The name over the bread. The Word over the Flesh. Thus, “kash” encapsulates the essence of unfulfilled desires and the lingering question of what could have been if I had done *that* instead of *this*.

³ Check the dictionary of Dehkhoda under the word کاشی as the most important etymological resource for Frasi words: <https://vajehyab.com/dehkhoda/%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B4%DB%8C-3?q=%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B4%DB%8C>

The Story of “The Stranger of Kash(an) City” شهر کاش غریب from the Sixth Book of Masnavi of Rumi

The story begins with the term “دوین” or “cockeyed” often associated with a condition called “parallax error.” In the context of the story “The Stranger of Kash(an) City” “غریب شهر کاش,” it could symbolize a cognitive distortion or misinterpretation of reality experienced by the protagonist, Omar. This distortion stems from his subjective perspective or biased perception, leading him to misunderstand the true nature of his surroundings, including the uniformity of the various shops in the city of Kashan. The use of “cockeyed” “دوین” suggests a discrepancy between appearance and reality, highlighting the theme of deception or misperception/misperception prevalent in the narrative.

In this anecdote, set in the city of Kash(an) (=Desire/What if...?), wordplay and subtle civility intertwine as a Sunni named Omar attempts to buy bread from bakeries in a predominantly Shia community. Each bakery owner, upon hearing the name “Omar,” silently signals to one another, refusing to sell bread to him. Instead, they redirect him to another bakery, continuing the cycle of rejection. The name “Omar” becomes a coded message among the Shia bakers, alerting them to the presence of a Sunni in their midst and prompting them to deny him service. The refusal to sell bread to Omar symbolizes the sectarian tensions between Shias and Sunnis, but Rumi uses this tension to hint at something more essential: the primacy of Word over Flesh. Through this allegory, the poem transcends every theme of exclusion, prejudice, and the perpetuation of division in society, serving to illustrate the nature of parallax error. Every shop is the same shop. What was sending him from one to the other in the empty hope of earning bread was his name. It was a false code that he was iterating like a Turing-incorrect machine over and over.

The main story is hard to read and hence to translate in English. You can find this story here: <https://ganjoor.net/moulavi/masnavi/daftar6/sh97/>

Here is an attempt to translate the verses in the form of a paraphrase:

The Stranger of Kash

[Section 97] Like the “askewed eyes” one, in the city of Kash, Omar, by name, transferred from one shop to another, and he did not understand that all shops are one, in the sense that they did not sell bread by Omar's name. Here, I shall make preparations, for I have erred; my name is not Omar. As I repent and make preparations at this shop, I shall obtain bread from all the shops in this city. And if, without preparations, I remain as Omar's name, I am deprived of passing by this shop, and I am parallaxed, and I have considered these shops separate from each other.

If you are named Omar in the city of Kash, no one will sell bread to you for a hundred dinars.

When you tell someone in a bakery that “my name is Omar, sell me please this bread from kindness.”

He (backer) says go to another bakery with breads fifty times better than mine.

If he (Omar) hadn't been cockeyed, he would have said there is no other shop.

So, the alchemy is the emergence of this straight-eyed on the heart of Kashi that can turn "Omar" into "Ali".

This is the shop where the baker yells the baker on the other shop: "Here! We have an Omar! Give him a bread!" So he sent you to a distant bakery.

Give bread to this Omar, my friend. Understand the secret from my voice.

He will do the same with you: "Behold! Omar has come to get bread."

When you were Omar in one bakery, you were deprived of bread from all the bakeries in Kashan.

And if you tell Ali in one shop to take it from here, the bread is without consideration and without trouble.

This tale illustrates the plight of the individual who only perceives the duality of One Two! Imagine then, the implications for those who behold Ten for each One.

In this Kashan (world) made of dirt, be orient-less like an Omar who is not Ali.

It is a matter of fact that it is very dilapidated for the cockeyed man; new nuts in every corner, like the sound of Tham.

If your eyes have become aware of the truth, see the head of both heads.

And you are free from place to place in this Kashan full of fear and hope.

Have you seen a rose or a tree in this river? Like every river, don't think of his imagination.

Because from the essence/eye عين of this reflection, God/truth حق becomes real and a fruit seller.

Parallax Error Perspective:

Rumi's narrative, with its subtle hints at the illusory nature of perception, invites us to contemplate the concept of parallax error within the context of tiny house architecture. Just as Omar's futile quest for bread underscores the deceptive nature of appearances, so too do the uniform facades of modern dwellings conceal a deeper reality. Though each house looks different and unique the machine and coding behind these houses enjoy the same structure. This repetition of identical structures mirrors the parallax effect, where slight shifts in perspective yield seemingly distinct views. In this way, tiny houses become symbols of the paradoxical relationship between sameness and difference, inviting us to question the validity of our perceptual frameworks.

Primacy of the Signifier Perspective:

Furthermore, Rumi's allegory encourages us to consider the primacy of the signifier in shaping our understanding of space and identity. The significance attached to Omar's name, which serves as a false code dictating his movements, mirrors the power of language and symbolism in constructing our lived environments. Just as the repetition of Omar's name perpetuates his cycle of confinement, so too do standardized architectural forms impose limitations on individual expression. By unpacking the layers of meaning embedded within the Rumi's story, we can begin to unravel the

complex interplay between linguistic constructs, spatial arrangements, and the quest for existential fulfillment within the realm of tiny-house-living as our era.