

‘We no longer enter the universe of women, we no longer have that feeling of an adventurous entering, of a process that could produce unbearable frights.

The harem, like the cloister, is becoming extinct. Everything seems to be given on the surface of things.’<sup>1</sup>

In the corridor leading to the Ladies Pool are three large photographs. Faded to a patchy aquamarine, you can still make out groups of women amongst the shining surface of the water. In one photo they hold each other in a circle of clasped hands, the round straps of their swimsuits curving upwards to match their smiles. In another they are lined up arms outstretched, tips of fingers touching. In the third they lean back shoulder to shoulder against the wall of the pool. This scaffolding of hands and arms and smiles I have seen before in diagrams of collective structures: triangles, circles and lines.

On the day I visit the Baths there is the sound of drums from the room next door and there is much talk of pots. Apparently when you throw a pot one arm has to stay fixed in place to support the form you are making, while the other is free to work with the clay. As it turns in your hands you ask the question that was maybe asked before all other questions – what is this going to be?

‘Supporting contains an offer, an invitation. But first of all it establishes a relationship of inter-dependency, the entry into which is the opening up of potential communities, associations and active relationships.’<sup>2</sup>

Sarah tells me the story of a woman who wanted to make a space, but all she could make was an edge. It makes me wonder if all edges become boundaries, perhaps because it’s election day and there is so much talk of who can come in and who can’t and who deserves our care and who doesn’t. I’m speaking to Helen about women-only spaces and why we enjoy them so much and feel they’re important but can’t explain why. Talk of edges can be dangerous, but Wednesday night Women’s Nights were great, weren’t they? We miss them.

To make Eve a rib was taken from Adam. As immovable as the arching red ribs above our heads is the principle that put them there – that of health and cleanliness for all. But inside the space this principle created innumerable compromises have been shouted and whispered, it's my turn in the bath you've had your twenty minutes.

Celine says that

‘support is negotiation. It is not the application of principle, but the conversation towards something that it does not define’<sup>3</sup>.

Carla shows me the screens she has carefully inked. If I squint at the blocks of bright colours I can just make out the ghost of an arm pulling out of water, and a head coming up for air. There are some cities I have read of where, looking up at certain times of day you may catch a glimpse of bodies moving behind finely carved wooden screens, an ear or a hand held at the edge of inside and outside.

I rub myself dry with the towel waiting for me on the red door, and move through to the heated room where circles of yellow light puncture the ceiling. Lying back on the wooden bed I let the towel slip off and enjoy the comfort of air and body and, well, womanliness would be the word. Lynn tells me the story of a condemned Edwardian bathhouse where the council drilled holes in the bottom of the pool to stop it ever being used again.

As I stare at the ceiling I try to draw a line between three points, but the line runs away at the edges of my vision. All thinking is drowning on this day when Scotland has turned yellow and England blue and ominous vibrations shake these cool tiled walls. Maybe what is important can't be counted or said aloud, but we must find the words.

Joanna Peace, May 2015

---

1. Adnan, E (1993). *Of Cities & Women*. The Post-Apollo Press  
2. Condorelli, C (2007). *In Support*. Ahali: a journal for setting a setting, issue 1, 2007  
3. *ibid*