

**ROMAN MOSAICS FROM
CATHERINE STREET, EXETER**

by

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INTRODUCTION *by* Neil Holbrook

In 1988 a previously unknown fragment of Roman corridor mosaic was uncovered by Exeter Museums Archaeological Field Unit in excavations on the site of St Catherine's Almshouses, Catherine Street, Exeter (SX 921926). The fragment, which measured 3.4m x 2.3m, was subsequently lifted and is now on display in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter (Acc. No. 866/1989). Because of the importance of this find, which is undoubtedly the finest Roman mosaic yet to be recovered from the city, it was decided that a note should be published in advance of the full excavation report.

In May 1942 the premises of the Church Army (formerly St Catherine's Almshouses) and the Country House Inn in Catherine Street were damaged by bombing during the Blitz. Following the Blitz their bomb-damaged sites lay derelict, affording the opportunity in 1943 for Mr A. W. Everett to undertake a survey of the standing remains and to excavate some small trenches. Everett's work demonstrated the existence of areas of Roman mosaic beneath the Almshouses (Taylor 1943, 74-5), and this led Lady Fox to commence excavations on the site in 1945 (Fox 1952, 45-9). These partially uncovered one range of a Roman stone town house and located three areas of mosaic and one of plain red tessellation within the building. In 1946 the mosaic fragments were lifted and taken to the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (Acc. No. 28/1946; *National Geographic Magazine* 90 (1946), 547).

In January 1951 Lady Fox was able to maintain a watch on a contractor's trench for a sewer in Catherine Street (Fox 1951, 40-1). This revealed two rooms of a range which lay at right-angles to that excavated beneath the Almshouses.

In 1987-8 excavations were undertaken by Exeter Museums Archaeological Field Unit on the site of St Catherine's Almshouses and the adjacent property in advance of reconsolidation and landscaping. These elucidated further the plan of the north-east range of the Roman house, and also determined the structural sequence which preceded it. The earliest activity on the site was represented by the construction of the rampart and two ditches of the first-century Roman legionary fortress. The inner ditch was filled during the period of military occupation but the outer one remained open until the later second century and was probably finally infilled only when the town earthwork defences were constructed in the last quarter of the second century. While the outer ditch was still open a new street was laid out immediately outside it, and this was resurfaced on a number of occasions. The street remained in service after the filling of the ditch, which was directly overlain by a substantial timber building. The building was modified and rebuilt on at least one occasion before falling derelict, when the whole site (including the street) was covered with dumps of domestic refuse. It was from above these dumps that the stone town house was constructed.

THE STONE HOUSE (Fig. 1)

The house is known to have possessed at least two ranges; excavation has concentrated on the north-east range beneath St Catherine's Almshouses, the north-west range beneath Catherine Street having been noted only in the watching brief.

Within the excavation area the north-east range consisted of a single row of 6.2m wide rooms with a 2.9m wide corridor along the south-western side. It is possible that further rooms may have existed to the north-east of those examined but in the one area where it was possible to investigate this point the evidence proved inconclusive: only clay dumps were encountered. The range had a length in excess of 25m; its south-east end did not lie within the excavation area. The stone walls of the building had been very heavily robbed in the early medieval period and the foundations of clay-bonded trap fragments survived only in a very few places. Portions of five rooms and the corridor have been examined. Room 1 possessed a plain mortar floor, Rooms 2 and 3 mosaics. The floor in Room 1 lay 0.5m below the surface of the mosaic in Room 2 and it is possible that this may have been a hypocaust basement, the *suspensura* having been entirely robbed in the medieval period. The narrowness of Room 3 (c. 2.1m) suggests that it served as a cross passage. Room 4 was floored with plain red tesserae. This room was even narrower than Room 3 (c. 1.9m) and rather than being another passageway it is suggested that the south-east wall may be an addition and that the red tesserae originally formed the border to a mosaic panel in a larger room which was subsequently reduced. Further mosaics evidently existed in the north-east range, for a row of blue and white tesserae on a bed of brick mortar was observed in the side of a modern intrusion 15m south-east of the south-east wall of Room 3 (marked M on Fig. 1).

There is no reason, or evidence, to suppose that these mosaics were not contemporary with the construction of the house. The corridor mosaic, however, was clearly an addition as it sealed a plain mortar floor. This floor exhibited marked subsidence as it overlay the infilled outer fortress ditch, and attempts had been made to level up the surface with light rubble before the construction of the mosaic. These efforts proved unsuccessful, for upon discovery the centre of the corridor mosaic lay c. 0.40m below the level of the red tesserae border.

The only knowledge of the north-west range of the house derives from Lady Fox's observation of the sewer trench in Catherine Street, although it seems clear that this range was better preserved than that just described. Parts of two rooms with mortared trap walls 0.5m thick above an offset course were exposed during construction, and one room had a doorway in its north-west wall. It is not known if this was an external doorway or whether it opened onto a corridor or a further suite of rooms. Both rooms examined were floored with brick mortar.

In the north-west range plain white mortar still adhered to the interior faces of the walls, while the demolition levels of the north-eastern range yielded a number of fragments of painted plaster. These were predominantly plain white or red, although one was lead-grey and another pink with 'splashes' of scarlet. The demolition levels also yielded numerous box-tile fragments, indicative of the presence of a hypocaust in some part of the building.

Thus it is clear that the building was of some size and pretention, but unfortunately the lengths of the two ranges are unknown; it is also uncertain whether the building was originally of L-shaped or courtyard plan.

Lady Fox (1952, 48-9) considered that the house was constructed at the end of the second or beginning of the third century, but a reassessment of the dating evidence points to a later date. Pottery found beneath the mosaics in Room 2 included three vessels which cannot be dated earlier than the mid third century, and very probably after c. 270 (*ibid.*, Fig. 17.40, very probably a double-handled jar; *ibid.*, Fig. 18.58-9). Similar flanged bowls were recovered in the recent excavations from the domestic rubbish deposit which preceded the construction of the stone house. It is unfortunate that no coins can be associated either with earlier occupation or with the construction of the house, and that these deposits have yielded comparatively little pottery. Nevertheless it seems unlikely that the construction of the house could date much after the second quarter of the fourth century for it is reasonable to expect that one or two of the common Constantian issues would have been recovered from the relevant deposits; the absence of any sherds of Oxfordshire ware from these levels also argues against a date well into the fourth century. Thus although the dating evidence is not particularly good it is reasonable to propose a range of the last quarter of the third or first quarter of the fourth century for the construction of the house.

Evidence for the date when the house was abandoned is provided by an analysis of the coin evidence. An occupation deposit which directly overlay the corridor mosaic but was firmly sealed beneath a large fall of roofing slates yielded a slightly worn *Fel Temp Reparatio* copy of 354-64, and the site as a whole has produced further examples of these copies and only a single issue of Valentinian I. Coinage of Valentinian I is relatively abundant in Exeter and so the sparsity of these issues from the site is significant. It seems unlikely therefore that occupation of the house continued much beyond the third quarter of the fourth century at latest.

THE MOSAICS by Peter Johnson

The three fragmentary mosaic floors from the St Catherine's building form an interesting group, indicating a town house of some opulence. The former existence of at least one other mosaic (south-east of Room 4) can also be demonstrated.

Room 2, 5.3 x 6.2m (Pl. 2)

Although very fragmentary, enough of this mosaic survived to permit a reconstruction of its design (Pl. 1, top left). The remains of guilloche knots in the north corner and on the north-west side indicate an overall maeander scheme developing staggered squares occupied by simple knots. This is the simplest possible reconstruction, allowing reasonably wide borders on all sides, perhaps being slightly broader along the south-west side. The decorative area would probably have been 3.2m square.

Room 3, 2.1 x 6.2m (Pl. 2)

The fragmentary remains of two adjacent swastikas were sufficient to show that this cross passage was decorated with a linear scheme of running swastika maeander. A broad border of coarse red tessellation survived along the south-west side, no doubt echoed along the north-east side.

The corridor (Fig. 2; Pls 1-3)

This had the most elaborate mosaic (Pls 1-3). With a width of 2.9m and a minimum length of 30m, and probably much longer, this was one of the most impressive corridor mosaics yet recorded in Britain¹. The surviving area of design comprises a St Andrew's cross of simple guilloche, bordered by four rows of cream tesserae, in turn enclosed by three rows of dark tesserae. This is flanked by two poised squares, that to the north-west containing a guilloche mat of 18 strands, each in four colours, that to the south-east containing a budded knot bordered by right-angled Z pattern. The remains of a second St Andrew's cross to the north-west of the guilloche mat and a second mat on the extreme north-west indicate a continuous scheme of poised crosses alternating with poised squares. The sequence may have been as follows:

mat/cross/mat/cross/knot/cross/mat/cross/mat/cross/knot.

Each triangular space between the poised panels and the parallel border lines was filled by a pale isosceles triangle inverted within, and tangential to, a dark isosceles triangle. The decorated area is bordered by the familiar coarse red tessellation along both sides. The guilloche mat is not perfectly regular and there is a mistake in the colouring of one of its strands, close to the north-east corner where a short section is entirely in white instead of blue, red, tan and white. The overall effect is of a well-ordered mosaic design, although there were some difficulties in executing the design.

Materials and colours

Four principal colours were used: blue (grey lias); red (brick and tile); tan (limestone); creamy white (Upper Chalk, probably Beer stone). A very pale grey was also used to supplement the creamy white tesserae in the guilloche, knots and mat, as a third, separate, row.

The sizes of the tesserae of the main design vary from c. 12 to c. 19mm square, the coarse border tesserae being c. 25-38mm across.

Commentary

The maeander designs of Rooms 2 and 3 invite comparison with many other mosaics of late Roman date from Britain, mainly in the South and West. Overall ('reticulated') maeanders developing staggered squares (Room 2) are a feature of some mosaics attributed to the Corinian 'school' or *officina*, based in Cirencester in the fourth century². They are not exclusive to them, however, as repeating maeanders, with small staggered squares as in Room 2, occur on fourth-century mosaics at Colliton Park (Dorset)³, Fullerton (Hants)⁴, Bancroft (Bucks) (Neal 1981, No. 5), High Ham (Som)⁵ and Newton St Loe (Som)⁶.

Linear schemes of running swastika maeander are common on late Romano-British mosaics as border patterns but the scheme lends itself more readily to the decoration of corridors and passageways. Very close parallels for the swastika maeander of room 3 are corridor mosaics from Frampton (Dorset) (Lysons 1798, Fig. 2), and Woodchester (Glos)

(*idem* 1797, Pl. 12). Both belong to suites of mosaics datable by style to the fourth century, produced respectively by *officinae* of Durnovaria (Dorchester, Dorset), and Corinium. A Corinian corridor mosaic from Withington (Glos) had a similar maeander but, unusually, executed in interweaving red and blue bands (RCHM 1976, Pl. 14 (lower)).

In studying ancient art, and Roman mosaics in particular, it is inevitable that the more elaborate the design, the fewer the parallels, and this is the case with the St Catherine's corridor mosaic. This scheme comprises elements paralleled on other Romano-British mosaics but in a unique combination. The most striking element of the Exeter corridor design is the St Andrew's cross, rarely occurring in Britain but widespread throughout the Roman Empire. A lozenge design from Cirencester (Admiral's Walk), assigned to the late second or early third century, had four spaced guilloche crosses, albeit reticular to the design and not poised as with true St Andrew's crosses (Neal 1981, No. 34). Similar crosses of guilloche but with inner solid lines running the length of their arms occurred on a mosaic now lost (Pavement 'D') from the intriguing late Roman (temple?) complex at Frampton (Dorset), attributed to the Durnovarian *officina*. Another lost Durnovarian mosaic from Frampton⁷ is of more interest, having a single St Andrew's cross used as a filling motif in a square panel next to a threshold (*ibid.*, Pl. 4). The guilloche cross motif, poised and reticular, also occurs in Africa, Germany, Italy, Spain and Cyprus, from the second to fourth centuries but more commonly in the fourth. Usually the space occupied is the by-product of a lozenge-based design but occasionally, as at Exeter, the motif is given more prominence.

Guilloche mats are common elements on corridor mosaics of Corinian origin, e.g. at Cirencester itself (17 The Avenue)⁸ of mid fourth-century date and at Woodchester (Glos) (Room 8: Lysons 1797, Pl. 12) datable to the first quarter of the fourth century. Nowhere else, however, are they poised and in series as at Exeter. Budded knots were also popular with Corinian mosaicists but also occur on other late mosaics throughout the south. Right-angled Z patterns also tend to be a late feature but are more widespread, e.g. in Dorset, Gloucestershire, Hampshire etc.

One other corridor mosaic from Exeter merits attention here; a floor recorded in Pancras Lane in 1881⁹ having interlaced circles with, at their centres, budded knots only slightly smaller than the one surviving on the St Catherine's mosaic. Of equal interest are the pale isosceles triangles inverted within dark isosceles triangles used as filling motifs, as on the St Catherine's corridor, and it is tempting to view this as being produced by the same mosaicist.

It is difficult to attribute the St Catherine's mosaics to one particular *officina*, although parallels have been drawn with mosaics of Durnovarian and Corinian origin. The corridor mosaic, a secondary floor, is more elaborate than the two primary mosaics (Rooms 1 and 2) in this building and is probably later, laid by mosaicists influenced from both Corinium and Durnovaria, perhaps at a time when mosaic *officinae* were merging their repertoires around the middle of the fourth century. At this time individuals and small groups of mosaicists appear to have been increasingly itinerant. The corridor mosaic shows perhaps more Durnovarian influence than those of Rooms 1 and 2, appropriate to a slightly later date. Two Corinian *officinae* were active during the first

half of the fourth century, the 'Orpheus *officina*' specialising in Orpheus mosaics during the first quarter of the fourth century, and the slightly later 'Saltire *officina*' apparently ceasing operation by the mid fourth century. Almost simultaneously, it seems, the Durnovarian *officina* expanded its output by successfully exploiting the ever-dwindling market. A 'Durno-Corinian' phase of the Durnovarian *officina* was first suggested by Smith when discussing the Littlecote Orpheus mosaic in Wiltshire¹⁰, dated to around AD 360, and then applied by the present writer to the Cherhill mosaic (Johnson and Walters 1988, 83), also in Wiltshire and a product of the mid fourth-century expansion of the Durnovarian *officina*. The Exeter mosaicists (Rooms 1 and 2) may have been more peripatetic, deriving their repertoires from the two *officinae* while both were still trading fully. By the time the corridor mosaic was laid, however, the Durnovarian *officina* appears to have entered its Durno-Corinian phase.

Apart from the mosaic from Admiral's Walk, Cirencester, assigned though not securely dated to the late second to early third century, the Romano-British parallels for the St Andrew's crosses are of fourth-century date. The heyday of the Corinian *officinae* was the first four decades of the fourth century; thus a date in the early fourth century may be suggested for the mosaics in Rooms 2 and 3. The corridor mosaic must be a little later, probably dating to the second quarter of the fourth century, and no later than c. 350 AD; the Pancras Lane mosaic may be roughly contemporary.

NOTES

1. The north porticus of the palatial villa at Woodchester (Glos) is 114 ft (34.7m) long and entirely in mosaic (Lysons 1797). The north porticus at Bignor villa (Sussex) is still exposed for a length of 24m and the full length is probably twice this (*idem* 1813). The north-south corridor at Frampton (Dorset) was 94 ft (28.6m) long (*idem* 1798).
2. At Chedworth (Glos), Room 22 of the bath-suite on the north range of the villa, datable to the fourth century (Neal 1981, No. 19). At Woodchester (Glos), Room 61. At Withington (Glos), where a corridor mosaic of Corinian manufacture had a maeander inset with bifurcated squares (*ibid.*, Pl. 16). At Beeches Road, Cirencester, XII, I, a degenerate copy of a Corinian design, datable to the mid fourth century (Neal 1981, No. 26).
3. Building 1, Room 13, datable to the early fourth century (RCHM 1976, Pl. 18 lower).
4. With at least one guilloche knot and datable to the fourth century (Neal 1981, No. 50).
5. Pavement 1; drawing in the Institute of Archaeology, Oxford.
6. Room 4; notebook of T.E. Marsh in Bristol City Museum.
7. Pavement 'A' (*ibid.*, Pl. IV). It is also worth considering the mosaic from Pound Lane, Caerwent, assigned to the fourth century, which has a central roundel with a cantharus, surrounded by lengths of guilloche forming a curvilinear St Andrew's cross (Neal 1981, No. 6).
8. From building XIV, 2, Room 10, dated to the fourth century (Neal 1981, No. 24).
9. Coloured drawing in Devon and Exeter Institution reproduced in Bidwell 1980, 72, Fig. 40.
10. Quoted in Walters, B. and Phillips, B. 1981, 12.

A NOTE ON THE RECORDING OF THE MOSAICS *by* Luigi Thompson

The overall drawing (Pl. 2) represents all the known tessellated area recovered to date from St Catherine's. With the exception of Room 4, sufficient of the floor of each room survived to permit a reconstruction of its design.

Of particular interest is the recently discovered corridor mosaic. This was recorded by tracing it at full size onto draughting film, using several sheets to cover the total area. This method has the advantage of a high degree of accuracy; it had also been used successfully by Lady Fox and A.W. Everett to record the fragments of mosaic from Rooms 2 and 3 in 1943-6 (original drawings in RAM Museum, Exeter).

Some problems were encountered by the writer, however, when translating this record into a final scale drawing. Since the original mosaic was not flat, some distortion was introduced into the recording. On remains of this nature a photo-mosaic, taken over a carefully laid 200mm grid contoured to the mosaic surface, is often to be preferred.

The site recording was translated onto the final drawing (Pl. 2) surface at a scale of 1:10. All the colours shown are those as if the mosaic had been freshly laid (and slightly dampened) and differ slightly from their present state. After the colouring of the surviving tessellation the areas of reconstruction were added in a pale grey. In this instance, as in most Roman geometric mosaics, the apparent complexity of the corridor design has as its basis a simple grid. The grid here (Fig. 2) is formed by squares at 45 degrees to the outer blue parallel lines from which all the elements of the design can easily be derived. Even so, the Roman mosaicist made a small error of setting out, causing one point of the St Andrew's cross not to touch the outer blue line.

The drawing was completed by the addition of the wall alignments in a pastel shade of their original purple volcanic stone colour.

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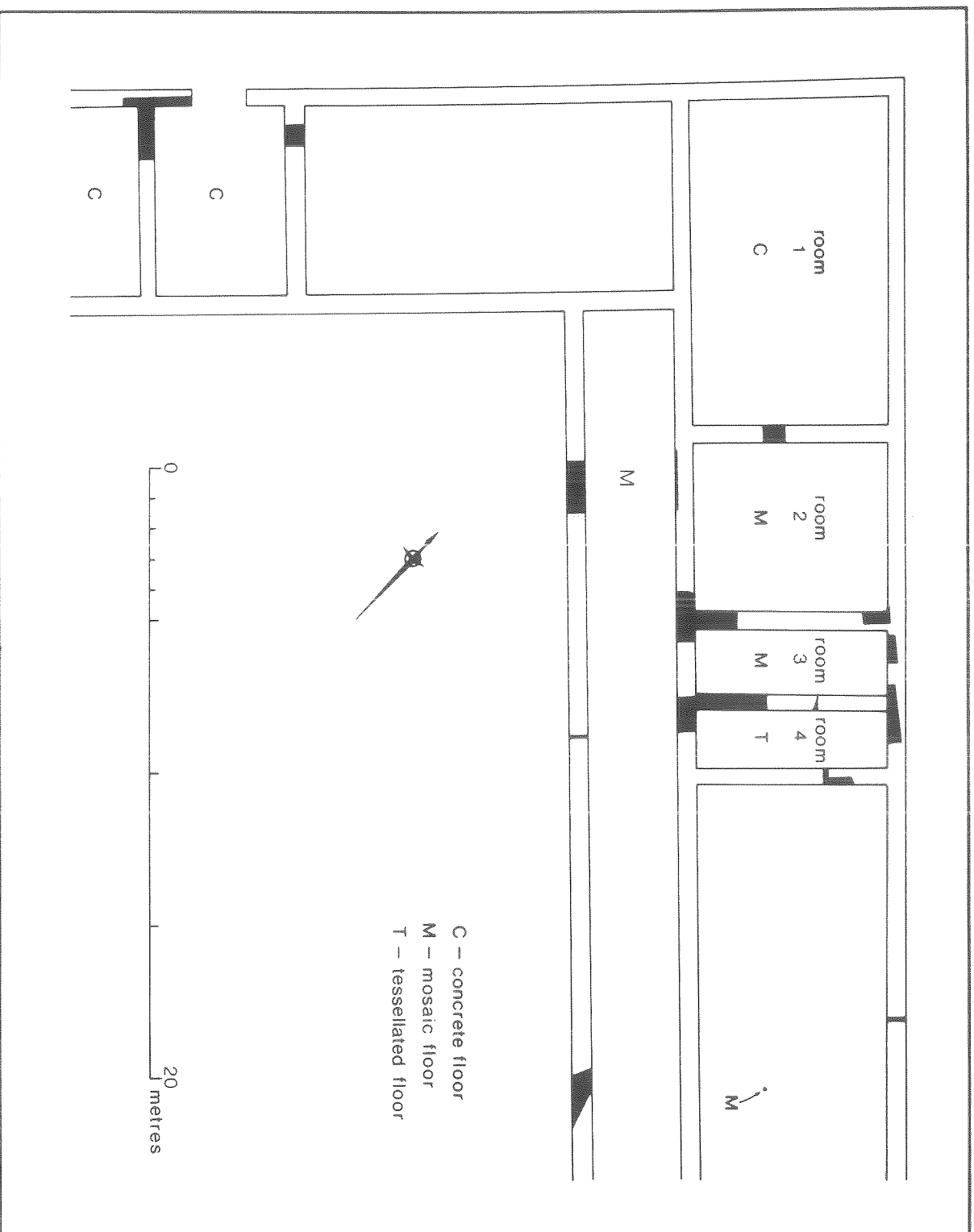


Fig. 1 Reconstructed plan of the late Roman town house.

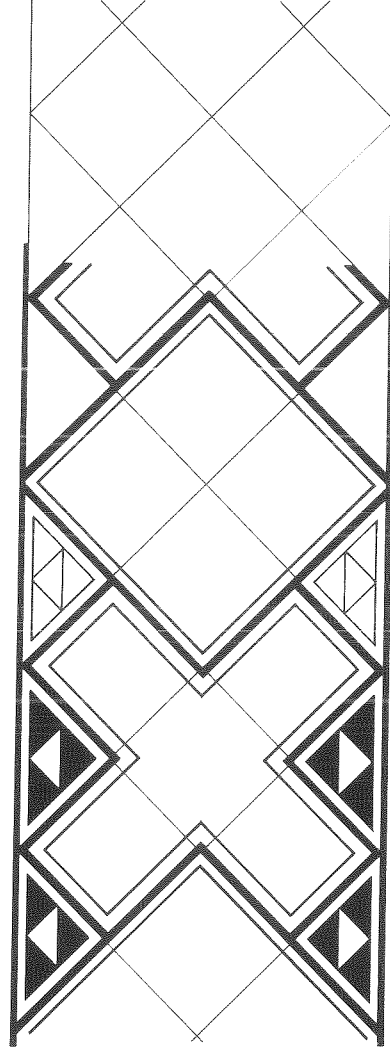


Fig. 2 Drawing showing the grid system for the origination of the corridor design (Luigi Thompson).