



Infinite souq

Description

Retractable queue barriers funnel airport passengers in twisted but orderly lines. These security labyrinths manage large numbers of people within a confined space. They also keep people on the move, turning compliant travellers into *unceremonious processionalists*.

Umberto Eco thinks the detective story is like a labyrinth. He identified 3 types of labyrinth: the kind that has a centre, and a single, convoluted path leads eventually to it. You can't get lost there. I think a security maze is like that.

The second type of labyrinth has junctions along the route where you have to make choices. There are dead ends and you may have to backtrack. Navigating such a maze/labyrinth requires trial and error. Some shopping plazas at airports are like that.

Infinity maze

The third type of labyrinth is *rhizomic*. You get caught in loops, but Eco is also referring to sets of complicated interconnecting passageways: "where every path can be connected with every other one. It has no center, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite" (57).

I think Eco means that the rhizomic labyrinth is the world as lived. You could think of a *souq* that way "the common trope of the bazaar as organic, changing, multi-level, unplanned. As I've mentioned before, in the words of Roger Caillois, such places seek

"to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind" (p.23).

You get lost in the souq (and even want to) to savour its sights, sounds, smells and confusions "and to experience *vertigo*.



Navigating the rhizomic labyrinth's [twists](#) and turns requires detective work. As a semiotic scholar and writer of mystery fiction, Eco thought that the world in which the detective operates, "can be structured but is never structured definitively" (58). I take this as a deliberate contradiction or a paradox.

And who amongst us is not at some stage a detective: sifting evidence, interpreting and exercising indirect, abstruse and [abductive](#) inference within a confusing landscape and in a contradictory labyrinthine headspace?

Labyrinth designers

The world is a labyrinth, but it's rare for clients to commission architects, landscape architects, engineers and others deliberately to create spaces as labyrinths.

For most purposes, labyrinths are highly inefficient. They are all threshold, all circulation, at best with nooks, statuary, benches and landmarks along the way. They don't provide functional articulation, i.e. rooms with particular purposes. Nor do they accommodate views out, or daylight coming in.

They slow down transition and require you to negotiate space in a convoluted back and forth or circular manner. They obscure and confound navigation.

Learning from labyrinths

But architects incorporate lessons from the labyrinth, reference them, and respond to them. The labyrinth serves as a metaphor for the city, its infrastructures and communication networks, a subject for further investigation.

Photos on this page were taken in Fez, Morocco, 2007. The map below was on a wall aiming to show tourists how to navigate the sights of the city by following routes marked with coloured signs. At that time the map itself was disintegrating and the route signage was poorly maintained, and some signs

were misplaced.



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Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. labyrinth
2. maze
3. rhizome

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