

City on a hill

Description

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The maze serves as a metaphor for the city. People get lost in the streets, corridors and communication systems of the city. Cities give the appearance of regularity, symmetry, and order, at least on a map. In his description of cities and places, the writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) affirmed that a maze is a house â??prodigal in symmetriesâ?• (423), which I take to mean a surplus of symmetries.

Probe deeper and you find the city overlaid and permeated by networks, circuits, dead ends and short circuits.

The best mazes appear ordered and regular from the outside, with slight twists and deviations that deliver the mazeâ??s contiguous tortuous space-filling pathways. Here are three other similarities between cities and mazes.

1. Panopticism

The unicursal labyrinth has a centre. Following the model of the city as a fort on a hill, that centre provides a vantage point. The unicursal labyrinth is similar to the panopticon, but there are differences.



Unlike Jeremy Benthamâ??s circular panopticon, the labyrinth assumes movement by those under the gaze of the central tower. In a labyrinth, those under surveillance are not passive but approach the tower, the centre. The tower assumes a defensive position. Under this spatial power structure, the journey represents ascent to a position of control and advantage.

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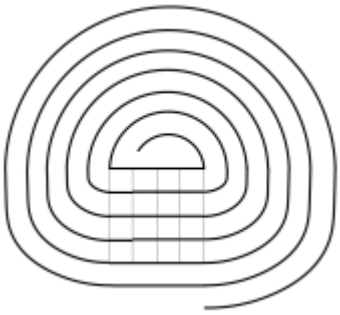
By emphasising movement, the maze metaphor varies the idea of the surveillance society and the city as a site of surveillance. We are being watched while on the move. The all-seeing eye tracks our movements.

The panopticon wastes space. Thereâ??s an empty over-scaled forecourt between the tower and the prison cells. On the other hand, the labyrinth fills its space between the central tower and the boundaries of the maze. In that respect the maze is more efficient spatially than the circular panopticon as a means of exercising control.

The centre of the maze is like the top of a hill. Thatâ??s where you are rewarded with a view. The centre provides the aha moment, where confusion gives way to clarity. Thatâ??s a more benign interpretation of the maze than as a means of control and defence.

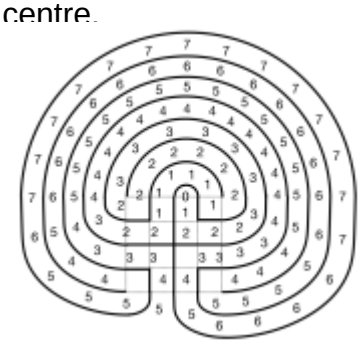
2. Near and far

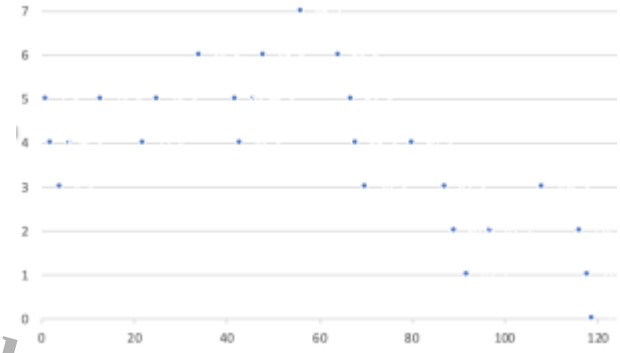
A unicursal maze extends the journey from the edge to the centre in a way that brings you closer at times and then moves you further away. Without that characteristic, the path may as well follow an ascending spiral, which can also be derived from the originary grid â?? but a spiral is not a maze.



The near and far, to-and-fro, movement of the classical unicursal maze contributes to the challenge of the journey. As Iâ??ve remarked already, for some traditions this movement towards and away from the goal models aspects of lifeâ??s journey, or any aspirational, hopeful, or dreaded goal-directed experience.

Hereâ??s a diagram showing progress around the maze. The numbers indicate distance in terms of rings from the centre. The graph shows the journey as an ever-diminishing oscillation towards the centre.





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The repeated near-far experience also resonates with Freudâ??s account of the uncanny. (The small child re-enacts the primal trauma of losing her/his mother [the object of affection] by throwing a cotton reel with string attached out of the cot and bringing it back in again, repeatedly.)

Think of the security maze at a crowded airport â?? the slow encounter and re-encounter with others in line as you loop back and forth towards the goal. Such inadvertent encounters with others is surely a feature of any maze journey as circulation routes, and people, rub against each other. That reflects the casual and occasional sociability of the city.

To update this observation about centrality the maze ought to serve as an illustration of paradox. The universe has its â??center everywhere and its circumference nowhereâ?• said Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) (Quoted by KoyrÃ©, 1957, p.17). Thatâ??s for another time.

3. Microcosm-macrocosm

The classical unicursal maze is derived from the basic architectural grid. In so far as the city is a maze, it participates in ancient legacies relating the city to the microcosm and the macrocosm. The paths of the maze reflect the oscillations of the sun across the sky relative to the north-south city grid.

The classical unicursal maze and its variants present as ordered, designed to be viewed from above. The ancient city of Knossos was apparently built on such a maze, but underground mazes have a different connotation to mazes mapped and exposed to daylight as planar diagrams. Thatâ??s also a topic for further investigation.

Notes

- Derrida wrote about language as if describing a labyrinth: â??â?¦ it can be called the play of the trace. The play of a trace which no longer belongs to the horizon of Being, but whose play

transports and encloses the meaning of Being: the play of the trace, or the diffÃ©rance, which has no meaning and is not. Which does not belong. There is no maintaining, and no depth to, this bottomless chessboard on which Being is put into playâ?• (Derrida, 1982 p.22). He also wrote about the endless play of inter-reflecting mirrors. See post: Almost to infinity.

- The maze might provide a better model of the hermeneutical circle â?? than a circle, especially if you think of a multicentred unicursal maze, where the journey takes the interpreter closer to and further from different centres at different stages.
- The master of the literary labyrinth, Borges, wrote in â??The Alephâ?•, â??A maze is a house built purposely to confuse men; its architecture, prodigal in symmetries, is made to serve that purpose. In the palace that I imperfectly explored, the architecture had no purpose. There were corridors that led nowhere, unreachably high windows, grandly dramatic doors that opened onto monklike cells or empty shafts, incredible upside-down staircases with upside-down treads and balustrades. Other staircases, clinging airily to the side of a monumental wall, petered out after two or three landings, in the high gloom of the cupolas, arriving nowhereâ?• (423).
- Borges quotes a twelfth century theologian: â??God is an intelligible sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.â?• (169). Borges elaborates on the history of this thesis in his essay â??The Fearful Sphere of Pascal.â?• As well as anxiety, according to Borges, Blaise Pascal (1623â??1662) related this account of the universe to the experience of â??vertigo, fright and solitudeâ?• (171). Borges also echoes this paradoxical thesis in relation to his infinite, labyrinthine Library of Babel: â??The Library is a sphere whose exact center is any one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessibleâ?• (59). And by library he means â??the universeâ?• (58).
- The photograph above is Conisbrough Castle near Doncaster, England.

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Reference

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1. Architecture

Tags

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2. labyrinth
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