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▶ **To cite this version:**

Jerzy Kociatkiewicz, Monika Kostera. Into the labyrinth : tales of organizational nomadism. Organization Studies, 2015, 36 (1), pp.55-71. 10.1177/0170840614546154 . hal-02423775

HAL Id: hal-02423775
https://hal.science/hal-02423775

Submitted on 25 Dec 2019

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Into the Labyrinth: Tales of organizational nomadism

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Abstract

Labyrinths and mazes have constituted significant spaces for tales of transformation, from prehistoric designs through the myth of the Minotaur and the pilgrimage design in Chartres cathedral to contemporary novels and pictorial representations. Labyrinths and labyrinthine designs can also commonly be found in present-day organizations. This text, based on an ethnographic study as well as on an analysis of academic discourse, explores their significance as symbol and as physical structure. Drawing upon the notion of transitional space, it presents labyrinths as an indelible part of human experience, an archetype, and a sensemaking tool for understanding and explaining organizational complexity. The unavoidable presence of labyrinthine structures is presented as a counterpoise to the reductionist tendency towards simplification, streamlining and staying on-message, allowing or demanding space for reflection, doubt and uncertainty.

Keywords

archetype, labyrinth, identity, organizational space, symbolism

Entrance

Our initial engagement with this study stems from an interest in labyrinths and mazes sustained over many years: fascination with formal designs as well as with more general experiences of losing and finding one's way, of learning and traversing complex pathways. Our reason for writing the article, however, is the wider significance of the symbolism of labyrinthine structures throughout history, across cultures, and, finally, in organizational practice and theory. In a labyrinthine narrative of our own we wish to express and represent the symbolic role of the labyrinth as one of the fundamental principles of organizing and storytelling – as to mark the paths where they overlap and merge.

The contribution of this text is located within the area of organizational symbolism: an understanding that interpretation of symbols is crucial for understanding organizational realities (Czarniawska, 1997a; Gagliardi, 1990; Stablein & Nord, 1985; Turner, 1986). We propose that recognizing the labyrinth as a prevalent, if not often acknowledged, organizational symbol or interpretive scheme can serve as a valuable and indeed, necessary, means to broadening the discourse of organizations in areas such as identity (Kenny, Whittle, & Willmott, 2011) or the narration of everyday organizational experience. The acknowledgement of the prevalence of labyrinthine shapes and structures

Article published in 2015 in *Organization Studies* 35/1: 55-71, DOI: 10.1177/0170840614546154. This copy includes the content of the article, but does not follow journal layout or page numbers.

generates non-negligible problems for organizational analysis (not least that of undermining legitimacy of the simplistic models, so ubiquitous in managerialist discourse, as direct representations of reality), yet it not only enables the expression of ideas and experiences commonly encountered but not often voiced within the mainstream discourse of what Bauman (2007) has termed the liquid times; it may also help counteract some of the maladies of liquid modernity, such as the pervasive sense of discontinuity, shallowness and fragmentation of life (Bauman, 2000).

Our text is located within the narrative tradition of writing social sciences (Baruch, 2008; Boje, 2001; Czarniawska, 2004; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995; Gabriel, 2000; Hansen, Barry, Boje, & Hatch, 2007). But if narratives need to have a clearly delineated plot (Gabriel, 2000), then it is also true that some plots are less explicit than others, some tales seem to go in circles, meander and loop back on themselves. As much as contemporary hyper-rational turn in social sciences and elsewhere (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2012a) has strived to eradicate such writing and force all academic writing into the neat and concise form of what is known as the journal article style, crooked tales, twisting sentences, complex plots still exist, hidden on the margins and in everyday experience. We believe that

[t]heories do not "represent" reality; theoreticians take upon themselves to represent other people and even nature (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995, p. 27).

And so, the labyrinthine aspect of organizations is waiting to be represented, a task which we take upon us in this text. Organization theory has much to gain from a conscious blurring of genres, especially in times when boundaries are being questioned (Czarniawska, 1997b). Our desire is to juxtapose and consciously bring together several genres taking up the theme of labyrinth and to re-inscribe them through writing the experience of organizations and organizing.

Because of the significance of wider cultural settings to our investigations, we opt for a narrative method for our examination of the role of the labyrinth archetype; we rely on literature and myth, focusing on the plots and the metaphors associated with the occurrence of the labyrinth as a key element of the narrative (Czarniawska, 1999, 2004; Kostera, 2012). In addition to narrative analysis, we also present results of an ethnographic study (Van Maanen, 1988) we carried out, focused on exploring the experiential and aesthetic (Warren, 2008) aspects of labyrinthine organizational spaces. This too we recount and interpret in a narrative way.

We begin our exploration by looking at the variety of contexts in which the labyrinth — which we regard not only as an allegory or a symbol but also as an archetype (Jung, 1968, p. 6) — remains relevant to contemporary practice and discourse, and locate the ways in which its broader understanding and incorporation can help address some of the shortcomings of the dominant managerial and organizational approaches. Then we present some of our empirical explorations of the idea of the labyrinth in organizational settings, and finally we reflect on the enlightening uses of the labyrinth in the thinking of organizations, as well as in the making them happen. The text does not proceed in a straight line towards this conclusion because it is a labyrinth itself.

The Story of the labyrinth

It is not easy to even estimate when labyrinths first appeared: The oldest extant designs date from around 3000 BCE, but it is probable that the notion of a labyrinth originated with an earlier lived ritual, such as that of a maze dance (Layard, 1936), rather than with a drawn representation. Russell and Russell (1991) saw labyrinths as a primitive way of organizing space, superseded by more sophisticated practices of mapping and representation. The idea does not seem overly persuasive as labyrinth patterns, while appearing very early in the history of various cultures, remain common throughout their subsequent developments--including, notably, our own contemporary cultural settings. In contrast, Hermann Kern (2000) presented labyrinths as signs of cultural sophistication, indicating conceptual complexity.

Labyrinths are commonly distinguished from mazes, particularly in English language literature (this is not surprising, as many other languages, e.g. Greek, French, or Polish do not differentiate between the two words). Most often (e.g. Eco, 1986; Kern, 2000), the underlying distinction is that of unicursality versus multicursality, i.e. whether the pattern consists of a single path or of branching passages. Visual representations favour unicursal labyrinths (the earliest multicursal designs appear only in the Renaissance), but textual traditions from early antiquity onwards tend to stress the possibility of losing one's way, i.e. multicursality (Doob, 1990). Moreover, the very origin of the Greek word labyrinthos (usually translated as some variation

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of 'the place of the two-headed axe') is bound up with the palace complex in Crete and the myth of the impenetrable structure housing the Minotaur. The other famous labyrinth of antiquity, a vast palace structure in Egypt described by Herodotus (which might or might not correspond to the ruins discovered in Hawara), is not described as having either a central goal or a single path leading through it. Slightly more recent labyrinths inscribed in many medieval Christian cathedrals, have been understood as constructed to symbolize the soul's arduous journey towards salvation or the recreation of the harrowing transformation of death and resurrection (Doob, 1990). They are usually unicursal, but not universally so: The design found in Poitiers, for example, includes branching passages and dead ends, despite serving the same spiritual purpose as unicursal patterns. The distinction is thus difficult to maintain with any precision, but also not relevant to our study: Our contribution is exploratory rather than analytical; we endeavour to show the extent to which labyrinths are useful, and used, as tools and metaphors for understanding the complexities of organizational settings.

A Study in Transitional Space

From the earliest dances and etched patterns through the myth of the Minotaur and the pilgrimage design in Chartres cathedral to Borges' (1998) and Pelevin's (2005) contemporary reappropriations of the theme, labyrinths and mazes have constituted important sites for tales of transformation. They play a significant narrative and cultural role which we would like to focus on in this text, in particular with regard to organization and management. It is our intention to explore the labyrinth as an archetype of transitional space. We understand archetypes in the Jungian (1968) way, as common patterns located within the collective unconscious, ready to hold images, symbols and narratives. Archetypes are a crucial component of social reality and its interpretation, though their existence is often not consciously acknowledged. In organizations, they can serve as very nearly inexhaustible resources of ideas for inspiration and renewal, when acknowledged and reprocessed through stories, theories, and images (Kostera, 2012).

Martin Bowles (1993) speaks of archetypes as "forms of apprehension which give rise to ways of thinking, feeling, imagining and experiencing" (p.399). When linked to experience they provide a thread connecting the intersubjective, external world to the ideas of an ancestral past and a sensitivity that may bring insight and inspiration. They may be used depict and interpret vitally important yet not ostensibly visible organizational aspects and processes, such as the dark side of organizing (Bowles, 1991; Carr, 2002), ethical attitudes and the practice of virtues (Bowles, 1993), the deep interrelatedness of organizational roles (Moxnes, 1999), and culturally and morally complex aspects of leadership (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2012b; Moxnes, 2013). Finally, management and organization as such are, on a deeper cultural level, also myths rooted in archetypes, they involve participants in heroic quests; indeed, they strive to replace traditional religious beliefs and consolations against life-destroying forces (Bowles, 1989). In this text we are taking such a broader look, but we focus on the domain of the unmanaged and unmanageable (Gabriel, 1995), always present in the margins of the normal organizational reality: the transitional space.

Transitional spaces are the physical manifestations of liminality: the state betwixt and between more stable states and realities (Turner, 1974; van Gennep, 1960); the transitory stage in rituals, especially in rites of passage (Turner, 1969); a state of blurred boundaries where the usual constraints of common cultural definitions do not apply. They are the spaces set aside for enacting change or transformation (Knox, O'Doherty, Vurdubakis & Westrup, 2007), or the indefinite spaces that allow for many interpretations and uses (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2011). We set out upon this journey, following the tradition of seeing spaces as narratives (Panayiotou and Kafiris, 2011; Yanow, 1998).

Penelope Doob (1990) distinguished between labyrinth as a structure, characterized by the dualism of confusion and complex order, and labyrinth as subjective process—the traversal that can signify liberation or a difficult progress towards enlightenment. In this latter sense, regardless of whether the journey meets with a success or a failure, the labyrinth forms an archetype of transitional space. Jacques Attali (1998) describes it as an

> opaque place of paths whose routes need obey no prior law. It may be ruled by chance or improbability signaling the defeat of pure Reason (Attali, 1998, p. xxvi).

The pattern may be simple or complicated; it can contain a single path or a multitude of branching

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passages. Its traversal might involve reaching the centre, crossing its expanse, or reaching a designated exit. It is always enclosed by a border, usually a square or a circle. In Attali's (1998) interpretation, focused of the transforming aspects of the labyrinth, such space can be equated it with the principles of nomadic travel, aiming to understand oneself rather than to arrive at a destination.

First, the nomad must travel lightly. The only type of accumulations favored are ideas, experiences, knowledge and relationships [...] Secondly, it must never be forgotten that the nomad is hospitable, courteous, open to others, and attentive to gifts and obligations [...] The third principle commands us to remember to be on the alert. (ibid., p. 76)

By travelling the labyrinthine path a person embarks upon a powerful journey, one that may lead into completely new realms and realities; by learning to know oneself one loses and finds oneself anew. The transitional space of the labyrinth carries liberating power: It may be a space reclaimed by the underdogs, or forgotten by management and reconstructed by the organization's participants as a cultural sanctuary or symbolic retreat. It may provide a source for change beyond managerial control, a creative change available to self-managing and anarchic organizations.

Does it apply also to organizations and organized settings, we wondered? In order to see where the path of the labyrinth may lead us, we have studied accounts of past, present, and fictional labyrinths and walked numerous extant structures, including turf labyrinths (Saffron Walden, St. Agnes), hedge (Barcelona, Vienna) and mirror mazes (Prague), ecclesiastical labyrinths (Palermo, Italian churches), and a number of labyrinthine structures that defy easy categorization, such as an underground museum and exhibition space (called Labyrinthus) in Budapest and an inventive piece of public art (a station of the London underground).

All these experiences inform our study, though in this text we relate only two purposeful explorations of contemporary labyrinthine contexts. We relate these as ethnographic accounts (in the tradition of organizational ethnography and following in the methodological footsteps of Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992; Rosen, 1991; Van Maanen, 1988; Yanow, Ybema, Wels, & Kamsteeg, 2009) of our journeys through two labyrinthine spaces: the University of Essex in Colchester, United Kingdom, and an IKEA store in Warsaw, Poland. These narratives, presented in first person singular to emphasize their experiential character, relay our findings from participant observation (Kostera, 2007; Rottenburg, 2000) in the usual functioning of these spaces and focus on experiencing labyrinths. They also serve to highlight the possibilities and limitations of understanding contemporary organizations as labyrinths and, more importantly, the promises and shortcomings of these very spaces held up to the paragon of the archetypal labyrinth.

We treat all of our material as narratives, derived from texts or from our own ethnographic explorations, and we interpret them on several planes, using Roman Ingarden's (1960) model of phenomenological reading of texts, according to which a text should be read on several levels, in order to uncover the different layers of meanings and symbols. To set the stage for such a reading, and before we delve into the passages of physical labyrinths, we need make a short detour and review how the notion of labyrinth and maze appears in other relevant textual sources. The next section, thus, comprises a narrative analysis (Boje, 2001; Czarniawska, 2004; Gabriel, 2000) of labyrinths in academic journals, with a focus on management texts. It allows us to chart the narrative function of the labyrinth which, we argue, is a harmfully limited and limiting one.

Talking the Labyrinth

Classical literature hints at two distinct ways of experiencing labyrinths: as an observer or a builder and as a wanderer (or, in a later medieval guide, a pilgrim). The observer, like Herodotus in Account of Egypt, and like the academic authors explaining organizational complexities, presents labyrinth in terms of its guiding principles and distinguishing features

[i]t has twelve courts covered in, with gates facing one another, six upon the North side and six upon the South, joining on one to another, and the same wall surrounds them all outside; and there are in it two kinds of chambers, the one kind below the ground and the other above upon these, three thousand in number, of each kind fifteen hundred. (Herodotus, 1890/2006, n.p.)

Taking the measure of the labyrinth that confronts women leaders, we see that it begins with prejudices that benefit men and penalize women, continues with particular resistance to women's leadership, includes questions of leadership style and authenticity, and

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– most dramatically for many women – features the challenge of balancing work and family responsibilities (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 70)

Such perspective presents labyrinths as complex and requiring close study in order to be understood, but ultimately rational and solvable and conforming to clearly delineated rules. Doob (1990) collates this perspective with early visual representations of the labyrinth: universally unicursal, providing the viewer with the experience of complexity and perhaps a drawn out process of mapping rather than of confusion and danger. If the viewer identifies with the builder, such a labyrinth represents complex artistry, mastery of a difficult medium, and discipline in design and construction. For the observer, it implies convoluted order, circumscription of chaos, and the difficulty of acquiring knowledge.

In contrast, a first-person perspective of the labyrinth carries quite different and much more frightening connotations. Such strongly negative experience of the labyrinth is brought to mind by the convoluted narrative, organizational, and physical structures described in Franz Kafka's two novels (both, perhaps significantly, unfinished at the time of the writer's death): The Castle and The Trial. While the words maze or labyrinth never appear in the novels, The protagonists (K. and Josef K., respectively) have often been interpreted as stumbling through labyrinthine settings (e.g. Cornwell, 2006; Kenosian, 1995). They both encounter incomprehensible bureaucratic systems which not only exercise inordinate amount of power over them, but also overwhelm and ultimately kill them (though the finished text does not reach this point in case of The Castle). These systems are primarily organizational labyrinths, though they both also take physical form. The Castle itself is never visited by K. and, indeed, is hidden from view by mist and darkness when K. arrives in the neighbouring village. Yet the reader is made aware of its many departments and the circulation of files and messages between them. In The Trial, Josef K. found himself in a literal maze as he

went over to the stairway to get to the room where the hearing was to take place, but then stood still again as besides these steps he could see three other stairway entrances, and there also seemed to be a small passageway at the end of the yard leading into a second yard. (Kafka, 1925/2005, n.p.).

Perhaps due to their unflinching portrayal of bureaucratic machinery, one of the major topics in organization theory, Kafka's novels present one of the few literary labyrinths to have elicited considerable interest in management and related academic disciplines. Martin Parker (2005) draws parallels between Kafka's vision and that of Max Weber, with both representing

organisations as labyrinths with endless corridors and locked doors hiding evil secrets. Or, as the places where monsters are fabricated, and people themselves become monstrous (p. 159)

In a similar reading, Iain Munro and Christian Huber (2012) see Kafka's labyrinths represent the mythological counterpart of Weber's theory-focused examination of organizational bureaucracy. For Hodson, Martin, Lopez, and Roscigno (2013), Kafka provides a critical dissection of bureaucratic dysfunctions that complements a more positive Weberian vision and, more crucially, stands in contrast to the sanitized readings of Weber's model that have come to dominate organizational literature. It should be noted that the last decade saw the publication of a large number of texts applying insights from Kafka to organization theory, in stark contrast to his relative absence from management discourse in the previous decades. His labyrinths have been found helpful in understanding not only of the state apparatus (the ostensible subject of his works, as examined in e.g. Batko, 2013), but also private sector corporations (Hodson, Roscigno, Martin, & Lopez, 2013) and, indeed, the pervasiveness of bureaucratic forms in contemporary life (Warner, 2007). The theme of the labyrinth does not explicitly appear in all of these works, though they are united in presenting the image of a murky, complex, confusing, and sinister organization: this is the labyrinth without an exit, as poignantly symbolized by the unfinished state of Kafka's novel at the time of his death.

Other labyrinths appearing, much less frequently, in contemporary academic discourse in general and organization studies texts in particular, are similarly portrayed in an almost invariably negative way. ¬However, where Kafka's characters differ from the protagonists of the academic texts is in their apparent passivity in dealing with labyrinths – the mazes of journal articles clearly invite active approaches and favour the resourceful. They are usually bound up with action on part of the protagonist – almost all the academic titles mention mazes in context of associated activities performed by the reader or the study subjects within the general context of a trip through the labyrinth (of

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'corporate democracy': Joo, 2003), with Jackall's (1988) Moral mazes forming the notable exception. Such actions include venturing into the labyrinth (of Stark Law: Weiser, 1995), navigating the (evolving regulatory: Fahey & Rinaldi, 2008; WLAN management: Mathias, 2008) maze or (process: Blustain, 1998; institutional: Blenner, 1992) labyrinth (this is by far the most common verb), finding a way through the (venture capital: Bruno, Tyebjee, & Anderson, 1985) maze, steering through the (medical: Walkinshaw, 2011) maze and, hopefully, coming out of the maze (Vanderzwaag, 1983). More enterprising wanderers might try their hand at mapping the maze (for management: Hinkle & Kuehn, 1967), leading through the labyrinth (Revanna, 2007), or guiding clients through the (long-term care: Opiela, 2003) maze, while less orthodox approaches can involve simplifying the (return-to-work: Shafer & Graham, 1995) maze, managing through the maze (Power, 2004), sorting your way through the maze (of information management: McCune, 2006) or even helping customers sniff through the fragrance maze (Gupte, 2011).

As can be surmised from the titles above, these labyrinths and mazes appear most often as a metaphor for difficulty. Many of the texts noted above are editorials or essays rather than research reports, and thus given to more flowery rhetoric. But the metaphor is usually a throwaway trope, often used as a title that is never expanded or elaborated upon in the actual text. The one significant exception we have encountered is an elaborate description of the process of studying behavioral science, described as an exploration of a constantly shifting labyrinth (Massarik & Krueger, 1970). Building on classical myth and carefully exploring the metaphor, the authors convey difficulty and danger, as well as exploration and exhilaration inherent in study and research. This was the only academic text that rose above banality of the most common use of the metaphor, mirroring Harold Bloom's reflection that

[t]he labyrinthine became an image for the confusions of a lost life, yet that negates the image's wealth. All labyrinths are illusory, in that they can be mastered, sometimes by cunning, other times by chance. (Bloom, 2009: xvii)

Thus even such thoughtful appropriations and analyses of the trope share the same conviction that underlies the mazes used as academic platitudes: the notion that the problems mounting before the subjects, however unnecessary, absurd or even surreal they may be, inevitably turn out to be solvable by an active and resourceful subject or reader, promising success in dealing with the labyrinths, be it through navigation or sniffing.

Exploration 1: IKEA, Walking the Labyrinth

The exploration starts on the second floor, where a big basket full of yellow bags is placed by the entrance. We follow the example of the visitors who all grab one the bags.

"Don't get lost", I hear a woman admonishing a child, who, however, looks cheerful and not frightened of getting lost at all. The path is delineated by a wooden floor, lit up by the bright overhead lamps, giving off a warm, slightly yellowish shade of light, different from most supermarket lights that tend to be kept in bluish, colder ranges. On both sides of the floor there is a cornucopia of exhibits: light furniture on the right, bedclothes and pillows on the left, soon superseded by beds in all shapes and sizes. People stroll in the areas occupied by the furniture, but walk rather briskly along the path, that now had shifted from wood into a grayish linoleum. Now and again I see arrows, most of which point forward, pasted on the floor or placed somewhere overhead. Sometimes there are also passages between the flat exhibition areas: shortcuts, not for me, I am here to walk the whole path, in a steady pace, not stopping, nor meandering outside of the route, just as I would walk a turf labyrinth. The path is curvy, it leads through a variety of spaces, some of which are shining and metallic, holding kitchen elements, and some as velvety and soft, even the sounds are more diffused here: These are the areas with the curtains and blankets. A zone hosting the restaurant is not as straightforward to navigate, here both the arrows and the paths themselves are more ambiguous, I am not sure whether the full path includes the restaurant or if it does not; to be on the safe side, I pass through. This is a much more open space than the others and there is something lacking. It takes me a while to realize that the IKEA sign makes a much more modest appearance here; it is only prominent on the posters showing the menu of the day. A gray stairwell takes me downstairs, and I easily retrieve an unambiguous path, leading through several exhibition areas to a vast open hall. Here the path ceases, instead of a clear, horizontal way, the space seems to expand

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into a three-dimensional labyrinth of huge wooden racks and shelves, on which uniformly brown packages are piled. I decide to walk through the main alley, after having explored just one of the sideways. Beyond the hall there is a boisterous space, filled with smaller containers overflowing with colourful small objects such as glass bowls, candles, candleholders, small chairs, mats. People are milling around them, as if unsure whether to proceed to the finishing line, demarcated by gates and cash registers. I have not lifted anything into my IKEA bag so I do not need to stand in one of the longish queues but I am slowed down by the necessity to put away the bag and to squeeze past the casher and the buyers. As I exit, I see the food counters ahead of me, with an abundance of Swedish jelly sweets and chocolate boxes, happily piled and brightly lit up in the otherwise grayish space. I also notice a distinctly framed square on the floor between where I stand and the food. It is just one of the many gray linoleum tiles, but as if deliberately standing out and inviting to be stepped upon. I do so, carefully, and as both my feet meet the tile I look up and feel enlightened. Just as when I had been setting the final step in the middle of one of the turf labyrinths, I feel I have achieved something important, this symbolic path had led me towards a greater wisdom, but of what, I do not know. However, I feel I deserve a reward so I buy myself a bag of Swedish sweets. It is when I come home that evening that I begin to understand what the enlightenment was about: I begin to see IKEA products in my flat, I notice them as I never did before, I am secretly and profoundly aware of each IKEA logo I encounter, not just in my home, but, for several days, also in other places: in my workplace, in public spaces...
[fig. 1 around here]
While one of us was walking the IKEA labyrinth in search of enlightenment, the other was pondering over its design: I walked the recommended customer route through the store, counting noting down my steps and turns which I later recreated as an electronic map (see figure 1). The map, although presenting a simplified record, is based uniquely on the actual distances measured by the steps and directions I have taken. It is an embodied and not an intellectual testimony. The path reveals a largely unicursal design, although my notes depict the route as filled with distractions and small side passages. The way through proved easy to follow and readily signposted most of the time, except for two areas: the restaurant and the main storage hall where signs were either absent or contradictory. The meandering shape of the path, doubling up upon itself across the two floors of the store, recalls, much as it did in my experience of walking it, the temptation-strewn journey of the pilgrim depicted in medieval cathedral labyrinths.

Exploration 2: University of Essex Colchester Campus, Living the Labyrinth,

The university complex, built in the 1960s, and expanded numerous times in the following years, was also reportedly inspired by the medieval architecture: that of the Florentine town San Gimignano. The inspiration is not immediately apparent to our eyes, though prevalently brutalist architecture lends the campus a fortress-like appearance. Large portion of the campus forms a multilevel, interconnected and, yes, labyrinthine structure where losing one's way seems an inevitable part of traversing the winding corridors. Various sections are painted in different colours, which we believe originally served to differentiate between spaces occupied by different departments, but subsequent growth, relocation, and reorganization of the divisions mean that currently there is no link between the colour of the corridor and the function of adjoining rooms. Many corridors meet at oblique angles making orientation all the more difficult. Rooms are numbered, but there is a variety of room-numbering schemes operating in different sections of the campus complex. University webpage guide to finding one's way around the campus includes general advice such as "[a]lways find the floor level first" (University of Essex, 2013, n.p.). This rule, it should be noted, is not entirely useful, as passage between different building complex is possible only on select levels. The website also offers concise explanation of some of the room numbering systems found around the complex (of which there are several). The most common one is described thus:
If the number has three elements the room is in the Computing Service/Hexagon area around Square 4. An "S" in the number indicates the room is to the south of the square, an "N" to the north. The middle number indicates the floor the room is on. For example, 4SW.5.12 is on level 5, on the south side of Square 4 and room 12 in this area. If the first element includes "NW" the room is in the Essex Business School/History building. The entrance to this building is indicated by

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"4N"; for example, 5NW.6.12 is on level 6 of the Essex Business School/History building and is room 12 in this area. (ibid., n.p.)

The description ignores some of the idiosyncrasies of the system, such as the first number denoting the location of a notional outdoor square (numbered 1 to 5) that the room is near, or the existence of a newer building addressed as 2S2, but it witnesses the general governing principle: Rooms are numbered according to their position on a three-dimensional grid rather than to the way one should go about reaching them. Consequently, newer additions to the campus complex could not be accommodated to the same system, and thus require other instructions, such as:

If the number has two elements and the second element has two digits, the room is in the Link building/Biology area and the first number shows the floor. (Note: some of these room numbers are expressed as a single element, eg "038".) (ibid., n.p.)

As a consequence, finding an unfamiliar room, and sometimes even a familiar one, can prove a problem, and the campus can be quite accurately envisaged as a multicursal labyrinth, much like the Cretan structure built by Daedalus and famously traversed by Theseus. There are other similarities apart from its baffling design: The Minotaur's prison was a public building, and has often been depicted (particularly in medieval iconography) as a three-dimensional, fortified structure (Doob, 1990). Yet the mythical labyrinth's importance stems from the story woven around it, not from its architectural features, and so we should look at the campus primarily as a site of experience. It is a space encompassing many destinations, where different wanderers traverse the passages in search of their own specific goals. One of us worked at this university while preparing the first version of this text and figure 2 records his journey through the labyrinth in the space of one workday. The figure illustrates certain complexity, yet it charts the course of a person familiar with all the visited destinations—it does not plot any experience of getting lost (but then, maps rarely do), nor the full extent of the structure.

[fig. 2 around here]

As a university, this labyrinth is also at least potentially a site of transformation (Milchman & Rosenberg, 1997), a labyrinth where reaching the spatial goal serves a preamble to the personal quest where success is by no means assured. Of course, the myth of Theseus tells not only of the personal courage and resourcefulness of the main protagonist, but also of his gaining the ability to escape the labyrinth by using the ingenious solution devised by Ariadne: a ball of yarn allowing him to record his movement and then to retrace his steps to the exit. During our study of the campus, fire-escape plans posted on some of the walls were often used as local maps (they covered only the immediate area) allowing some orientation. Since our leaving, the university has introduced new computer and smartphone software allowing plotting routes between different rooms on the campus, and promising, in a future update, to provide real-time navigation. We do not, however, expect the new software to eliminate labyrinthine peregrinations: as Martin Pops (1974, p. 99) rightly noted, "[t]he ball of twine is both labyrinth and clewline."

Making Sense of the Labyrinth

The linguistic trawl through the textual mazes of the academic journals and the two experiential vignettes presented above show quite different labyrinths of organization and a variety of possibilities of traversing them and of accounting for one's travels. We recounted our analytical attempts to follow the often misleading metaphorical signposts of academic discourse, the meditative and meandering path through a furniture store, and the overview of a complex university structure. Together, they provide us with some basis for a wider reflection on the relevance of labyrinth experience and labyrinthine thinking for organization and management theory.

The observer's descriptions can emphasize the size, majesty, or ingenuity of the presented labyrinth, but invariably fail to reproduce the confusion, disorientation, and sheer difficulty of its traversal. This is, as we have noted in describing academic use of the labyrinth as metaphor, a perspective of avoiding the ambiguity and uncertainty accompanying transformative experiences: an attempt to witness the labyrinth and remain unchanged.

For the builder, the labyrinth is also a structure that does not affect his or her identity. Its design can be construed as a test of skill (a challenge that Daedalus of myth was never able to resist), it might be expected to deeply affect its future visitors or inhabitants (Le Corbusier's megalithic buildings come to mind here), but not the builder or his/her dependents. Thus, the IKEA store can offer winding passages for the shoppers

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and less visible shortcuts for the staff and knowledgeable visitors, and when Daedalus was thrust into his own labyrinth by King Minos, he devised wings allowing him and Icarus to avoid trudging through the maze.

It is only the wanderer who can expect to experience the labyrinth, and to be affected (perhaps even transformed) by the encounter. Even then, the lure of the quick fix is nearly irresistible: The thread of Ariadne or the wayfinding app promises to eliminate confusion, though the cost is rarely made clear. Theseus easily found his way out with the help of the thread, but things only went downhill from there. His romance with Ariadne never flourished, and his eagerness to go straight to the finish drove his father to suicide (Theseus, flushed with his success forgot to change the sails of his ship – a prearranged signal supposed to show the success or failure of his mission; his despondent father killed himself before the ship docked). In organization theory, the search for a quick fix (Case & Gosling, 2011) or a simple, linear solution (Burrell, 1996) tends to lead to problematic, if not outright deadly, results. Organizational life is complex, contextual, and changing –understanding and confronting it requires patience, perseverance, the ability to fail and to learn from failure and inconclusive results as much as the great successes and achievements. Indeed, as Karl Weick pointed out (1995), success stories are rarely useful material for learning: Too clear a path towards victory obfuscates contingencies, doubt, and ambivalence that necessarily accompany difficult situations and complex, labyrinthine organizational processes. A model, algorithm or, indeed, a floorplan can serve only as a start of the interpretive and sensemaking process necessary for traversing any labyrinth. It is no coincidence that Odysseus, the greatest navigator of classical myth, never drew a map of his meandering journey home to Ithaca.

Travels through Transitional Space

The textual analysis and experiential journeys through organizational spaces have showed us several possible uses of the transitional space that is realized through the labyrinth, either as a linguistic tool, a metaphor, or as a spatial construct, also a metaphor in the etymological sense: a vehicle for transport that makes moving possible. In contrast to most vehicles in use in modern societies, such as cars, trains, or airplanes, this one serves not to make us go faster, but to slow us down. It is not as absurd an idea as it may seem at first glance. Speed and incessant acceleration have been argued to be the currently dominant dogma (Baudrillard, 1992; Virilio, 2005), an addiction that turns every day into a race. Carl Honoré, in his book In praise of slow (2004) argues that this inhuman pace makes our experiences superficial, takes a toll on our relationships, and drives us towards an existential emptiness. Peter Case, Simon Lilley, and Tom Owens (2006) also criticize speed – in the context of organizing. They do not believe that speed is good or necessary for organizations; on the contrary, both the environment and our humanity demand that we slow down. Slowness is an essential feature and condition of enjoyment.

Most generally, then, the labyrinthine space slows down organizations and our thinking about them. But also, being a transitional space, it leads from one relatively stable state to another. We have encountered several such possible moves in our explorations. In the academic discourse labyrinths serve a narrative function, providing a concretized representation of the complexity of the protagonist's task or journey, and thus underscoring the achievement involved in successfully completing the tasks. But it is a very superficial reinterpretation of the labyrinths of myth, history, and literature, whose significance derives largely on their transformative quality: The archetypal labyrinth is a path of profound change.

In many of the articles we have analyzed, the labyrinth stands for all that is absurd, unnecessary, undesired in contemporary organizations, the transition through which is often impossible to avoid, but only because the organization in question is not sufficiently rational, straightforward or, indeed, reasonable. All these texts imply that life would have been better if these spatial entanglements were done away with once and for all: only then a full organizational rationality would be able to blossom.

That negative view of the labyrinth in much of the academic writings is understandable, and it does represent a strand of the mythical understanding of the concept: wandering dark and murky corridors can be dangerous as well as confusing. And the labyrinth's centre may well house a terrifying monster, the confrontation with whom requires skills quite different than those needed for traversing the winding passageways. In the world of contemporary management, the organizational labyrinth has become something of the shadow side of ordered effectiveness, or the dark, unwanted, and rejected aspects of what the

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rational organization would like to make itself to be like (Bowles, 1991; Kostera, 2012).

For better or for worse, though, these rejected features are an integral part of the organizational experience. And as such, the labyrinth needs to be acknowledged, considered, and, finally, integrated as simply ignoring the labyrinthine will not make its presence disappear. This cannot be done, however, without the abandonment of the dogma of hyper-rationality in the first place.

[tab. 1 around here]

The organization-sited instances of labyrinth that we have explored show two very different directions into which its transitional power may lead. In the case of IKEA it forged a bond between the walker and the organization, it imprinted the identity of the company in her mind, making her aware of its impact on the space surrounding her also elsewhere, outside of the enclosed space of the shop. The University of Essex campus, the labyrinthine structure was intended as an epitome of rationality and explicitness: room numbers and colours unequivocally designating destinations, connected design making the campus easily traversable. It failed utterly: The attempts at rationalization were subverted by the physicality of the archetypal labyrinth.

Archetypes have a tendency to be strong narrative propellers, to drive stories in one, and not other direction, and are therefore unmanageable (Kostera, 2012). The setting up of a rational system for the ordering of space within a path that belongs to the domain of the archetype of the labyrinth was a risky endeavour. Not only it was it not successful, but it stands out as a triumph of the irrational over the straightlined, of intricacy over order.

A Conclusion: Opening

The labyrinth ends with a concluding step: To arrive there, the wanderer has to walk through the entire passage, no short cut is allowed or, in many instances, possible. The labyrinth is a vehicle for slowing us down. This is the main piece of wisdom that we have derived from all our explorations, physical and textual. The current tendency to reject the past and focus entirely on the present was made into a dogma by management trends, emphasizing "flexibility", taken to mean an eternal shape shifting, acting on a perfectly fragmentized present, disembedded from any notion of historical context (Sennett, 1998). Notions such as identity and experience have lost their meaning; the only thing that applies is a façade, the front that is presented by the organizations, and toward them by their employees and managers. One has to look like a boss, present oneself like an experienced employee, make a good impression; and repeat it over and over again, as all organizational work nowadays is based on an incessant production of a convincing impression of self.

The presence of a façade implies a possibly labyrinthine structure behind it, but such realization requires the acknowledgment of the darker realities beyond the shiny surface. In a permanent theatre of vanity, the shadow remains repressed, and there is neither time nor place for the gaining of real experience or lasting learning, as this takes time and demands mistakes to be made. Liquid modernity, as Zygmunt Bauman (2000) calls it, is a time of deregulation, disembodiment of relationships, rejection of stability and long term commitments, replaced by relationships of constant bargaining and promotion of everything on the omnipresent markets, which seem to have taken over all aspects of life. Organizations inhabiting such times are made up of shortcuts: in employment rules, in the providing of labour, in notions of quality, in ethics. If something cannot be achieved via a shortcut, it is erased from the plans, it ceases to exist.

And yet it does. At the margins, in non-corporate organizational spaces, in private lives, people still take the road less travelled, read books they do not need for improving their financial standing, fall unprofitably in love, even do such unpoetic things as walking the dog in all but an effective straight line. They may not be able to talk about it in a language that is equally non-rational and tangled, because of the currently so pervasive financialization of the language of public discourse (Martin, 2002). Reclaiming the images and symbolism of labyrinths is one of the vital, even necessary steps toward a reclaiming of a human language, and with it, a voice to talk about experience in terms that open minds and not limit them to thinking in straight lines of profit and loss. Linearity kills, as Gibson Burrell (1997) pointed out. The meandering, winding, redundant and unnecessary complexity may save our minds from dullness, and our organizations from a profitable path to death: environmental destruction, unabashed exploitation of human beings and cultural austerity.

Through this text, we argue that labyrinths are inevitable: they form an indelible part of our experience and our culture, a way of understanding ambiguity, complexity, detours, and delays as well as deep-felt

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wisdom and the thrill of serendipitous discovery. Despite management's commitment to directness and efficiency, they exist in the practice and theorizing of organization, as our explorations revealed. Labyrinths represent an acknowledgement of and a path through the transitional space of the unmanaged organization, an organizational dreamworld, where one is welcome to pursue "double and triple meanings, discovering, twisting and distorting them, forever re-asserting their unpredictability and plurality" (Gabriel, 1995, p. 498). Oftentimes, labyrinths symbolize negative figures of darkness and despair, referring to a shadow side of contemporary organizations. If a catastrophic outburst of the shadow's destructive side is to be avoided, it must be acknowledged and integrated. This does not mean that labyrinths should not be feared: this is the lesson to be learned by glimpsing the Minotaur, and which organization theory has learned from Kafka. But it cannot be avoided. From Frederick Taylor's dreams of scientific management to the more recent visions of reengineering and organizational control through balanced scorecards and key performance indicators, the quick fix to organizational problems has consistently failed to materialize (Gosling & Case, 2011). We believe it is high time (for individual managers and theorists as well as for our discipline as a whole) to acknowledge the impossibility of linearity, and to admit that organizational labyrinths can only be traversed by walking the whole way, with no shortcuts allowed or even possible, until the end which is not, in itself, a solution. The end which does not provide an answer nor an artefact gained, but is just – and only this – an opening.

A meeting between yourself and the path you have walked.

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