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The Labyrinthine Aesthetic in Contemporary Museum Design

Paul Basu

In 1888, in the shadow of the Hawara pyramid, about 80 km south of present-day Cairo, the archaeologist W. M. Flinders Petrie located the site of the legendary labyrinth of Amenemhat III. This famous monument was already of considerable antiquity when Herodotus visited and wrote about it in the fifth century BC. In his *Historia*, Herodotus records that the labyrinth surpassed even the pyramids in magnificence and, significantly, that he found it beyond description, literally “greater than words can say” (MacAulay 1890, p. 185). Through passages going this way and then that, from courts into chambers, from chambers into colonnades, from colonnades into other rooms, Herodotus evokes a vast and bewildering structure, which “afforded endless matter for marvel” (ibid., p. 186).

It wasn't until 1911 that Petrie led an expedition to excavate part of the labyrinth. Alas, he found that it had been “so completely ravaged [in the Roman period] that only a great bed of chips showed its site” (Petrie, Wainwright, & Mackay 1912, p. 28). Nevertheless, fragments of that fragmented monument were collected and distributed to some 32 museums throughout the world, from Cairo to New York to Manchester,

and to Petrie's own collection at University College London. More recently, the Petrie Museum and the Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis at UCL have been experimenting with virtual-reality technologies, extrapolating from such fragments a navigable three-dimensional digital representation of the labyrinth: an experiment, one might say, in the form of the virtual museum (Shiode & Grajetzki 2000).

To remain within the physical space of the Petrie Museum for the moment, however, what is striking as one wanders around its cramped corridors, between display cases crammed with these fragments from antiquity, is the labyrinthine nature of the museum itself – and, of course, the Petrie Museum is not alone in this respect. But whereas the epithet was once invoked as a criticism of poor museum design – in 1882, for instance, Sir John Soane's Museum was described as a “labyrinth stuffed full of fragments,” which had a “perplexing and oppressive effect on the spectator” (Adolf Michaelis, quoted in Millenson 1987) – today, as the grand taxonomic schemas and narratives are being contested, the essential ambivalence of this perennial architectural symbol has been mined more constructively. Indeed, to borrow a phrase coined by André Gide, I suggest that the labyrinth has become a *mise en abyme* in museum design: a pattern within a pattern, a self-reflecting mirror of the museum text within the museum text itself. In this essay, then, using the works of Daniel Libeskind as exemplars, I consider the application of the labyrinthine aesthetic as an architectural and narratological experiment in contemporary exhibition and museum design.

The labyrinth, as Ferré and Saward note in an afterword to the English edition of Hermann Kern's monumental study of the form, has experienced a remarkable revival in recent years, becoming, once again, a vibrant concept that pervades many aspects of public consciousness (Kern 2000, p. 314; see also Saward 2002). This popular renaissance of a Renaissance trope is also reflected in a proliferating discourse across numerous academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences (e.g. Cipolla 1987; Doob 1990; Faris 1988; Snyder 1997; Teski & Climo 1995). While drawing upon its insights, I make no attempt to encompass, let alone synthesize, this diverse literature here. Instead I seek out a path between disciplinary digressions, and my discussion will inevitably take on a somewhat labyrinthine form itself as I pass from detour to detour, pursuing certain corridors of thought, while leaving others unexplored.

Detour 1: The Labyrinth as Embodiment of Paradox

As the embodiment of paradox *par excellence*, I suggest that it is precisely the labyrinth's ability to embrace contradiction that makes it such a potent symbol for our own uncertain and relativistic *Zeitgeist*. The labyrinth thus simultaneously represents order and disorder, clarity and confusion, integration and disintegration, unity and multiplicity, artistry and chaos. This duplicity is deeply perspectival: to the "maze-walker" immersed in the structure's passages, the labyrinth is constricted, fragmented, and confusing, whereas to the "maze-viewer," able to rise above the convoluted chaos and perceive its pattern, the dazzling artistry of the labyrinth is made apparent in all its admirable complexity.

Despite the potential diversity of the labyrinthine aesthetic, there are actually only two paradigms of labyrinth design: the unicursal and the multicursal (figure 2.1). The unicursal maze features a single path, which may twist and turn to the point of desperation, but which entails no dead ends or choices between paths. As Penelope Doob argues in her study of the labyrinth in classical and medieval thought, such mazes are infallible guides to their own secrets, defining precisely the only course to be taken

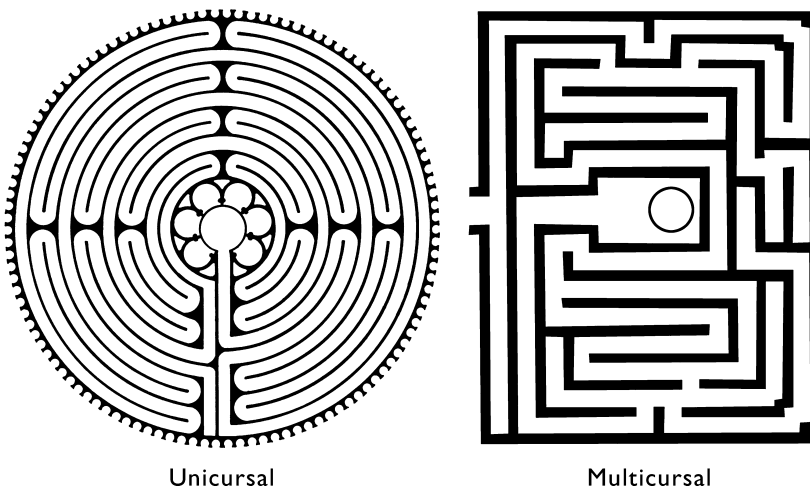


Figure 2.1 The two paradigms of labyrinth design: the unicursal (left) featuring a single path with no dead ends or bifurcations; the multicursal (right) featuring multiple choices between paths, some leading to dead ends. Paul Basu.

(Doob 1990, p. 48). The multicursal maze, on the other hand, features an array of choices between paths and embodies frequent testing and repeated confrontations with uncertainty. Movement through the multicursal maze is thus repetitive, halting, and episodic, with each forking path requiring pause for thought and decision. In contrast to the unicursal maze, the essential experience of the multicursal maze is therefore one of confusion, doubt, and frustration as one ambiguity follows another.

So profound is the difference between unicursal and multicursal labyrinths that many writers, including Kern, recognize only the unicursal form as labyrinths, referring to the multicursal variety as mazes (Kern 2000, p. 23). This “clash of paradigms” arises from distinct representational traditions in the visual arts and in literature. While classical and medieval visual representations of labyrinths often invoke the bewildering *multicursal* “labyrinth-as-building” of classical mythology and literature (most notably the Cretan labyrinth built by Daedalus to imprison the Minotaur), they are virtually all *unicursal* in form. Doob argues, however, that classical and medieval scholars used the same word, *labyrinthus* or *laborintus*, to denote both forms and suggests, therefore, that we engage with the inherent ambiguity of this complex symbol rather than attempt to reduce its complexity by subjecting it to a more recent desire for categorical consistency (Doob 1990, p. 44). Persuaded by Doob’s argument, I use the terms “labyrinth” and “maze” interchangeably throughout this essay to refer to both unicursal and multicursal forms.

Despite their structural differences, the two paradigms of labyrinth design share important characteristics. Most fundamentally, both are based on the concept of the path: a journey from a beginning to an at least imagined end. Yet neither model permits straightforward access to this postulated destination. Rather, the journey is characterized by circuitousness and meandering, by detours, delays, and diversions, which serve to fragment and frustrate progress. As a subjective experience, the journey through the labyrinth is thus transformed, through the disorienting twists and turns of the unicursal form as much as the repeated choices of the multicursal, from a straightforward linear progression into a disjointed sequence of movements and perceptions.

This intentional fragmentation of the path reminds us that the labyrinth is above all an exercise in *planned* chaos and that this architectural and metaphorical form has a pedagogic function. In the Middle Ages, the word labyrinth was most commonly spelt *laborintus*, and was believed to be

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derived etymologically from *labor* and *intus*, meaning “labor within” (ibid., p. 97). If, as Doob suggests, the maze may be understood as representing the laborious journey from, let us say, confusion to understanding, or from ignorance to knowledge, then the unicursal and multicursal models also represent alternative paradigms for progressing from one state to the other. Thus the unicursal maze-walker, having no choice but to pursue a singular, predetermined route, follows a universal and authoritative curriculum, learning by precept; whereas the multicursal maze-wanderer participates more actively in her own education, proceeding by trial and error, learning by dialectic (ibid., p. 57). As “process- and progress-orientated” metaphors, both models imply the possibility of “convertibility” – that is, they both envisage “a perspective-mediated conversion from disorder to order” as the maze-walker discerns the pattern in the chaos and, transcending the maze, effectively becomes a maze-viewer (ibid., p. 52). Whether this envisaged transcendence is finally achievable in practice is another matter and is something to which I shall return later. For now, however, we should at least acknowledge that there is, as de Certeau puts it, a “lust to be a viewpoint,” a desire to escape the labyrinth and perceive the whole (1984, p. 92).

Objective pattern and subjective process, singular persistence and pluralistic choice, precept and dialectic, ordered chaos and chaotic order – it is the capacity of the labyrinth to embody such apparent contradictions that makes it such a powerful technology to think with and to engage with the epistemological dilemmas of a late-modern age that has rejected absolute truths.

Detour 2: The Modern and the Postmodern?

Given that both the unicursal and multicursal labyrinth paradigms were apparent to classical and medieval scholars, it may seem foolish to frame their contrariness within more contemporary epistemological debates. As a heuristic aid, however, it is perhaps too tempting not to locate the unicursal maze (and the maze-viewer’s perspective) within a modernist aesthetic and the multicursal maze (and the maze-walker’s perspective) within a postmodernist aesthetic. Thus, after Hassan (1985), a familiar set of contradistinctions is suggested, which will resonate throughout my discussion.

LABYRINTHINE AESTHETIC

embraces

<p>unicursal paradigm (maze-viewer) <i>modern</i> objective concept integration/continuity order/clarity form (conjunctive, closed) design hierarchy artifact/finished work distance totalization/synthesis presence determinacy/precept whole/centerd root/depth interpretation/reading <i>lisible</i> (readerly) narrative/<i>grande histoire</i></p>	<p>multicursal paradigm (maze-walker) <i>postmodern</i> subjective experience disintegration/discontinuity disorder/confusion antiform (disjunctive, open) chance anarchy process/performance participation deconstruction/antithesis absence indeterminacy/dialectic fragmented/dispersed rhizome/surface against interpretation/misreading <i>scriptible</i> (writerly) anti-narrative/<i>petite histoire</i></p>
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Such binary logic lies behind an often made critique of the modern museum, which contrasts its narrative approach with the supposedly anti-narrative approach of the postmodern museum. Thus Wolfgang Ernst argues that “It should always be clear that the museum visitor is in a kind of archive, in a collection of materialities, not to be confused with the narratives symbolically or imaginarily . . . wrapped around them” (2000, p. 33). “The museum”, he writes, “should no longer be subjected to the paradigm of historical narrative” and should instead be allowed to display its “proper, archaeological, discontinuous, and modular mode of assembling words and objects” (ibid., p. 18). On the one hand, I agree with this position, that the “expressive value” and semantic potential of material artifacts should not be “hermeneutically controlled” or reduced to serve some didactically predetermined *grande histoire* – for instance, as in the “story-of-a-nation” approach adopted at the recently opened

Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh (Calder 2000). But such a view also displays a somewhat narrow, “unicursal” conceptualization of narrative as a schema for imposing coherence, continuity and order onto the possibly incoherent, discontinuous, and disorderly complex of curiosities in a museum collection. I want to suggest an alternative: that, like the labyrinth, narrative can also be both unicursal and multicursal, both orderly and disorderly, continuous and discontinuous, tending at once toward closure and disclosure.

Detour 3: Drawing a Configuration out of a Succession

This broader, Ricoeurian, conceptualization of narrative reconceives emplotment as an “integrating process” that serves to synthesize a succession of heterogeneous elements, events or incidents into an intelligible whole (Ricoeur 1991, p. 21). Such a conceptualization is rooted in a reading of Husserl’s phenomenological theory of time consciousness, which asserts that we can only experience the present against the background of what it succeeds and what we anticipate will succeed it: that events, as we encounter them, are charged with the significance they derive from what Husserl terms our “retention” and “protention” (Carr 1991, p. 163). Like the maze-walker’s labored path through the labyrinth, narrative thus becomes a particular sense-making path through the textual landscape: a process through which we wrest an intelligible “configuration” from a spatio-temporal succession of experiences that have no intrinsic meaning in themselves. As Ricoeur stresses, this process of emplotment or configuration occurs not in the “text” itself, nor in the “reader,” but is the “common work” of both: a confrontation between the “horizon of expectation” (the reader’s world) and the “horizon of experience” (the world of the text) (1991, p. 26).

By considering the exhibition as “text” and the exhibition visitor as “reader,” Mieke Bal has applied such narrative theory to the space of the museum. Recognizing the necessarily sequential nature of the museum visit, Bal discusses how the heterogeneous elements of an exhibition become linked through the visitor’s itinerary, so that walking through a museum becomes analogous to reading a book (1996, p. 4). Bal reminds us, however, that there is not only a “reader” and a “text” to consider, there is also the “expository agency” of the curator or designer whose discursive strategies often remain invisible in the museum display

(*ibid.*, p. 7). Bal's particular concern is therefore to expose this authorial/authoritative presence that hides behind, yet structures, the seemingly "natural" narrative configurations of the museum text and thus to reveal the constructed nature of its apparently self-evident meanings.

If we accept that narrative can be both "product" and "process," the challenge would seem to be how to use narrative to deconstruct narrative without merely replacing one *grande histoire* with another. And here I return to the notion of the *mise en abyme*, originally a heraldic device in which a particular motif is repeated within itself, but which has been adopted by literary critics to refer to the self-reflecting, labyrinthine plot twists and turns of the *nouveau roman* (Dällenbach 1989). "The *mise en abyme*", writes Gregory Ulmer, "is a reflexive structuration, by means of which a text shows what it is telling . . . displays its own making, reflects its own action" (1992, p. 140). Employed as an architectural and narratological technology, I suggest that the labyrinthine aesthetic may be understood as such a reflexive structuration in the museum text. Continually exposing the processes through which its own meanings are made, the labyrinthine exhibition de-centers curatorial authority and disrupts the persuasive "straightforwardness" of the museum's grand narratives and taxonomies through its constant refraction of alternative configurations. Such an organizing principle may be deemed experimental insofar as it reconceives the multiple engagements between people and things, words, sequences and spaces, which constitute an exhibition as a *heuristic* process: a process, which, through creative experimentation, is generative of new understandings rather than merely reproductive of existing, intentionally programmed ones. In this sense, effective exhibition or museum design might be measured according to the degree to which it creates the opportunity for and provokes such inventiveness in the visitor's experience (Ulmer 1994).

Detour 4: Spaces of Encounter: Getting Lost in Libeskind's Labyrinths

Every age, it might be said, has its own Daedalus, and there are grounds for suggesting that the Daedalus of our own age is the celebrated architect Daniel Libeskind. Characterized by their constraining corridors, fragmented paths, acutely angled walls, dead ends, voids, and asymmetries, many of Libeskind's "deconstructivist" museum designs draw explicitly upon a labyrinthine aesthetic. Here I shall be concerned with three examples: the

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Felix Nussbaum Haus, Osnabrück (opened in 1998); the Jewish Museum, Berlin (opened in 2001); and the “Spiral” Extension to the Victoria & Albert Museum, London (a controversial project which, having failed to attract public funding, was finally abandoned in 2004). Libeskind is not only an inventive architectural practitioner, but also a prolific writer and theorist: not only a Daedalus, then, but also an Ariadne, leaving a thread of words and drawings that provide an interpretive pathway through these buildings (see especially Libeskind 2001). Libeskind’s commentaries are, of course, particularly expressive of authorial intention and it is important to stress that there are other interpretive routes to be explored, opening avenues into differing perceptions and experiences of these spaces. My intention here, however, is to concentrate on Libeskind’s experimentation with the labyrinthine aesthetic as a principle of design.

An extension to the Cultural History Museum in the German town of Osnabrück, the Felix Nussbaum Haus was the first of Libeskind’s building designs to be completed. The extension was commissioned to house a collection of about 160 works by the German-Jewish painter Felix Nussbaum. Nussbaum was born in Osnabrück in 1904 to a well-respected family and, after studies in Hamburg and Berlin, he achieved early success as an artist, winning a Villa Massimo scholarship in Rome in 1932. After the National Socialists came to power in 1933, Nussbaum went into exile, traveling restlessly throughout Europe and eventually settling in Brussels. In 1940, following the German occupation of Belgium, Nussbaum was arrested as an enemy alien and imprisoned in the internment camp at Saint Cyprien in the south of France. He succeeded in escaping from Saint Cyprien and returned to Brussels, where he went into hiding to avoid further persecution and recapture. In July 1944, however, he was denounced, caught, and transported to Auschwitz, where he was killed. Even in the most constricted of conditions, Nussbaum continued to paint until this final deportation and his paintings chart both his own personal artistic odyssey and the tragic fate of the European Jews in the first half of the twentieth century. Thus the lighter themes of his early work (scenes of family life, tranquil landscapes, Jewish holidays) increasingly descend into dark, claustrophobic visions of alienation, imprisonment, and hopelessness.

Responding to the significance of this particular artist’s life and work as emblematic of the abysmal experience of the Holocaust, Libeskind conceived the Osnabrück extension as a “Museum without Exit,” in which “every element of the spatial organization, geometry, and programmatic content . . . refers to the paradigmatic destiny of Nussbaum”:

The museum is the retracing of the fatal elements and dead ends of Nussbaum's life. It is a projection and accessibility to those dead ends as a way of orienting and re-orienting ourselves in the space of the museum and of that history. This architecture opens the space to his paintings, to his experience of what the Shoah meant – without abstraction, without the statistics of six million, but of one human being murdered six million times. (Libeskind 2001, p. 92)

Libeskind achieves this dialectic between “spatial organization” and “programmatically content” by drawing upon a labyrinthine aesthetic, structuring the museum as a series of interlinked galleries, corridors, ramps, and bridges, which shape one's experience of the exhibited artworks without interpreting them according to some reductive script. Those works painted, for example, while Nussbaum was hiding out in a small attic room in Brussels are placed within the dimly lit “Nussbaum Gang,” a narrow corridor “that does not allow for aesthetic distancing, but rather allows for a context that communicates the claustrophobic and dimming environment in which they were painted” (ibid., p. 96). While the architecture is expressive in this way, bringing one closer to Nussbaum's experience, it is also alienating, creating, through its angular walls and intersections, a sense of fragmentation and disorientation. Encountering blank walls, dead ends, and dark corners, instead of explication, we are forced to consider the limits of expressibility: to ask ourselves what is paintable and what unpaintable.

The labyrinthine character of the Felix Nussbaum Haus is heightened by the pathway-like structure of its galleries, which meet with sudden breaks and unpredictable intersections. This disjunctive quality is described by Thorsten Rodiek in his architectural monograph on the museum:

The paths, the alternation of narrow and wider spaces, the contrast in the materials, the diagonal arrangement in the external facades or the lighting covers, the cracks in the ceilings and floors and the aggressive, acute angles – all this ultimately means that the architecture is experienced as a fragmented unity, whose main characteristics are dynamics, expressiveness, emotionality and richness of metaphor. In this architecture there is no standing still. (1999, p. 67)

Indeed, the museum's architecture unsettles in many ways. Here, Rodiek argues, a physically discernible “making uncertain” of the visitor is taking place (ibid., p. 28). This is, then, a troubling space that disturbs one's

habitual perspective. A space in which, as one follows the unicursal path of Nussbaum's destiny, one can easily become disoriented. It is a demanding space in which the visitor is forced to meet the "challenge" of the architecture, not through abstracted contemplation (it resists straightforward visual comprehension), but through the physical act of walking, through exertion (ibid., p. 21). Approaching Nussbaum's last known painting, "Triumph of Death" (1944), the floor literally gives way beneath one's feet and one is suspended precariously by a metal grille above the galleries below. Arriving at this vertiginous aporia in the "Museum without Exit," the sensation is of having undergone an ordeal, and as one gazes at Nussbaum's portrayal of the *danse macabre* – its grotesque cadavers reeling over the ruins of Europe's supposed civilization – one is reminded of the choreographic function of the classical labyrinth, the "Truia" or "dance floor" that Daedalus "cunningly wrought" for Ariadne (*The Iliad* 18.592, cited in Kern 2000, p. 25). And, of course, one realizes that there *was* an exit to the labyrinthine prison that Nussbaum's life had become and that the artist's own triumph was in being able to confront it with such satire.

Libeskind states that the intention of his design for the Felix Nussbaum Haus was to rebel "against the idea that a museum is appearance, stasis or icon rather than substance and dynamic" (2001, p. 92). Employing a labyrinthine aesthetic, Libeskind succeeds in making vulnerable the biography and oeuvre of Felix Nussbaum, unsettling any settled meaning and opening up a "space of encounter" in which the visitor is called upon to play an active role. In effect, Libeskind creates a *mise en abyme*, constructing a frame around the frames of Nussbaum's life and works. Into this befittingly disjointed frame the visitor must enter and so become "part of the picture." If, as Libeskind writes, the Felix Nussbaum Haus "is about the placing and displacing of memory" (ibid.), then the visitor, too, is placed within that house of memory: placed in a position, that is, of reconsidering his own position in relation to the history of the Holocaust.

Detour 5: Unfolding the Spiral of Discovery

Although it now seems unlikely that Libeskind's controversial extension to the Victoria & Albert Museum (the V&A) in London will ever be built, I include a discussion of it here since, of all his museum designs, it draws most explicitly upon a labyrinthine aesthetic. Indeed, by calling

the proposed extension “The Spiral,” Libeskind invokes a geometric form that shares many characteristics of the unicursal labyrinth and is often incorporated into labyrinth design (Purce 1974). The proposal for the extension was not, however, “conceived as an a priori form or ‘ready made’ artifact” imposed upon the V&A site, but emerged as a response to the tortuous complex of buildings and galleries that comprise the existing museum (Libeskind 2001, p. 154). Many acquainted with the museum will recognize their own experiences in Libeskind’s speculation that more than ninety percent of visitors to the V&A are lost within five minutes of entering its fifteen kilometers of gallery spaces (*ibid.*). Rather than considering this a design flaw to be “straightened out” in his proposals, Libeskind regards this as an appropriate, if accidental, metaphor for the late-modern condition in which the positivist paradigms of rationalism and certainty have given way to a contemporary *Zeitgeist* predicated on uncertainty and perspectival contingency.

The twenty-first century will not be about finding ourselves, but losing ourselves much deeper in the history that created the future. So I did not try to make a box that gives everybody clear, easy routes to the Raphael cartoons, to the Greek collections, to the Cast Courts, to the Constables, to the Frank Lloyd Wright rooms – I followed the labyrinthic collection into the innermost recesses of the spiral of the V&A itself. (*ibid.*, p. 151)

Like many of Libeskind’s museum designs, the proposed Spiral extension gives architectural form to this contemporary epistemological crisis. Indeed, through such designs, Libeskind uses architectural form to deliberately confront the visitor with uncertainty, provoking a crisis in the visitor by refusing to satisfy her desire to readily grasp the principle or position that structures the museum’s text and reassuringly establishes its meaning. Libeskind’s museums withhold such reassurance. Such a strategy draws attention to the problematized nature of positionality in an age which, Libeskind maintains, has denied all principles: “What does it really mean to have a principle?” he asks. “On what is the principle based, and who is to guarantee and legitimate any principle today?” (*ibid.*, p. 145). Thus the Spiral is not conceived as a “stage” for the V&A’s collections (the “white cube” approach), but as “a thinking about how and what a museum does” (*ibid.*, p. 151). To these ends, Libeskind argues, “the architecture is very strongly responsible for giving vectors for how a Museum operates in the future” (*ibid.*).

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Although, technically, the proposed V&A extension takes the form of a continuous spiral, for the visitor – the maze-walker – this spiral is not evident, there being no privileged position from which to view its pattern. There is therefore no possibility of transcending the spiral and assuming the maze-viewer’s perspective: no totalizing vision is permitted. Furthermore, since this is not a “traditional spiral” with a single center and axis, but a “contemporary spiral” with multiple centers and multiple axes, it opens in a plurality of directions along many trajectories, and provides an array of unexpected routes, spaces, and ambiances to be experienced by the visitor (*ibid.*, p. 157) (figure 2.2). The unicursal form of the spiral is thus disrupted to create a multicursal maze or, as Libeskind puts it, a “labyrinth of discovery”:

This image of the labyrinth is not only a symbolic device, but a reinforcement and intensification of the unique qualities of the V&A. This emblem of a heterogeneous and open system of organization for the artifacts and exhibitions provides a diversity of experiences woven into a net of similarities and differences – an aggregate of traces about unexpected topics still to be explored. (*ibid.*)



Figure 2.2 Architect’s model of the interior of the proposed “Spiral” extension of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. Courtesy of Studio Daniel Libeskind.

The visitor's journey through the spiral is not intended, therefore, to unfold in a linear fashion like a unicursal narrative leading the visitor to a particular conclusion, but is transformed into an exploratory process along multiple paths: an open-ended experiment in meaning-making.

We should, however, also recognize the paradoxical nature of Libeskind's experiment. To assert, for example, the impossibility of having a position is, surely, a position in itself. And, while no exterior, omniscient perspective is permitted in the architectural form of the Spiral, its architectural space is nevertheless situated in a wider discursive field – Libeskind's writings and drawings, for instance – in which the artistry of the architectural artifact is made apparent. Similarly, even though the design disrupts the telling of a predetermined, linear narrative, the visitor passing even randomly from object to object and gallery to gallery is engaged in an unfolding narrative process as he makes associations between the objects and spaces encountered. In Barthesian terms, the museum is thus transformed from a "readerly" (*lisible*) text to a "writerly" (*scriptible*) one, in which, as Libeskind insists, the visitor becomes "engaged in the work not as a voyeur but as a participant" (*ibid.*, p. 151; cf. Barthes 1979). Positional and antipositional, artifactual and processual, continuous and discontinuous, Libeskind's proposed Spiral extension, in common with his other museum projects, embodies contradiction in a manner entirely consistent with the labyrinthine aesthetic.

Fragmenting the museum text into its composite *lexias* or "reading units" in a manner akin to Barthes's *S/Z* (1990), such a multi-lineal approach to museum design destabilizes the traditional roles of reader and writer, visitor and curator, redistributing authorial/curatorial power. The museum thus becomes a "site of activity," involving the visitor in a metonymic labor with and within – *labor intus* – the museum text, in which the visitor is called to (re-)establish meaningful relationships between the purposefully "dis-integrated" parts of an imagined whole.

Detour 6: Reading between the Lines

The most labyrinthine of Libeskind's museum designs is also his most celebrated. Although the Jewish Museum in Berlin underwent numerous name changes during its convoluted evolution, Libeskind's preferred title for the project has remained "Between the Lines." Libeskind describes his concept as being about "two lines of thinking, organization, and relationship. One is a straight line, but broken into many fragments; the

other is a tortuous line, but continuing indefinitely” (2001, p. 23). Although Libeskind does not explicitly refer to the labyrinthine aesthetic, these two organizing principles are, of course, precisely equivalent to the two paradigms of labyrinth design discussed earlier: the multicursal and the unicursal. It is, however, Libeskind’s desire to embrace the contradictory and irreconcilable character of these paradigms in a single form – and to use this paradoxical form to engage with an irreconcilable history – that makes the Jewish Museum truly labyrinthine.

These two lineal principles are expressed throughout the museum and are fundamental to the architectural structure of the building. Thus, seen in plan or from above, the museum appears in the shape of a zigzag or lightning bolt (actually a dislocated Star of David). The zigzag is suggestive of the continuous, if tortuous, line of the unicursal labyrinth, and it also evokes the transcendent maze-viewer’s perspective, which alone is able to perceive the shape. True to form, however, this is an unattainable perspective in the Jewish Museum, since, as Libeskind remarks, the zigzag design is not in fact apparent to the visitor and is “surely an image only seen by an angel” (ibid., p. 25). Cutting through the continuous zigzag of the museum is the discontinuous straight line of what Libeskind terms “the void.” This void, suggestive of the fragmented path of the multicursal labyrinth, is an impenetrable cavity formed in raw concrete, which bisects the museum both horizontally and vertically. Contrasting with the exhibition areas, this void forms a “negative space” that penetrates the whole museum and which the visitor must continually cross via a multitude of bridging corridors as she moves around the building. According to Libeskind, this void refers to “that which can never be exhibited in the museum”: it is an “embodiment of absence,” reflecting the greater absence left in the wake of the Holocaust (ibid., p. 28). As the unicursal form of the museum is disrupted by the negative space of the void it effectively becomes a multicursal form, and the visitor’s abstract appreciation must be abandoned as he is forced to inhabit the embodied experience of the maze-walker. “As you walk through the building”, suggests Libeskind, “the walls, exhibition spaces, and the building’s organization generate an understanding of the scale of disrupted tradition” (ibid., p. 26).

The Jewish Museum was envisaged by its commissioners as an extension to the baroque Collegienhaus on Lindenstrasse, home to the Berlin Museum since 1969. Libeskind’s response, however, was to create what appears to be an entirely separate building, but one that can only be entered through a subterranean passage leading from the older building.

On the surface, Libeskind thus preserves what he regards as “the contradictory autonomy” of the two buildings, while, contrary to appearances, the two buildings are in fact bound together “in the depth of time and space” (*ibid.*, p. 27). Through such means Libeskind materializes programmatic resonances in architectural form: an assertion, then, of the inextricability of German and Jewish culture, but also a recognition that such connections have been systematically denied, made invisible, driven underground. This incongruence between the visible and invisible, between that which can be shown and that which is beyond representation, is also made apparent when examining the floor plans of the museum, where it is revealed that the underground floor has an entirely different shape to that of the building above (figure 2.3).

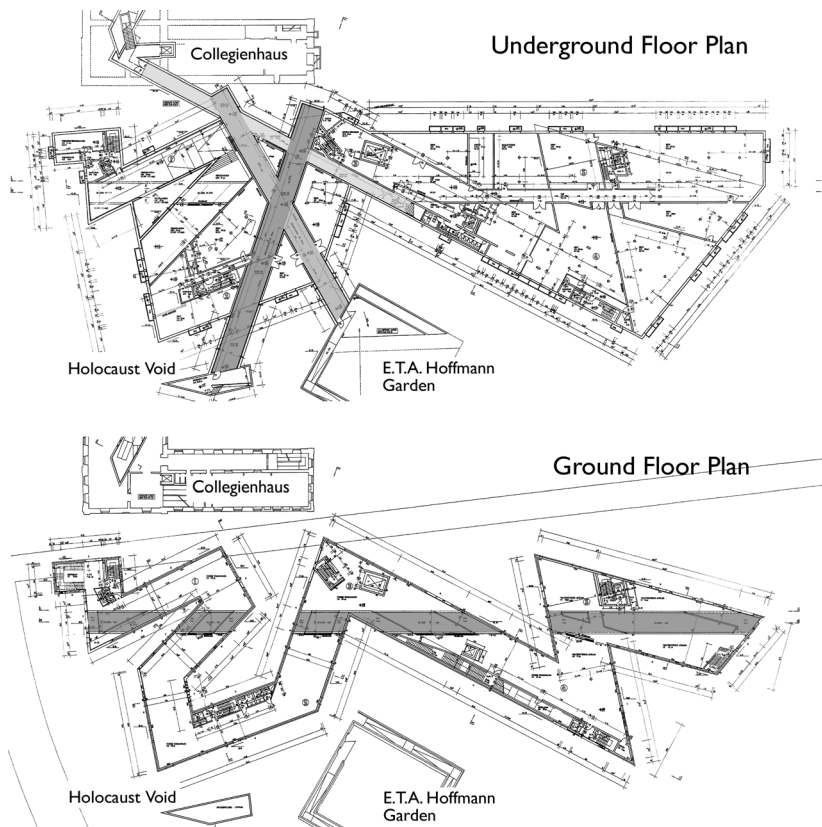


Figure 2.3 Underground and ground floor plans of the Jewish Museum Berlin. Courtesy of Studio Daniel Libeskind, annotated and shaded by Paul Basu.

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The visitor to the Jewish Museum emerges from the subterranean corridor that leads from the Collegienhaus into a labyrinth of sloping passages, which comprise the underground level of the building. The intersecting structure of these passages is accentuated by the clear lines of the lighting design, the starkness of the slate floors, and the straight, white walls, pierced only by occasional angular recesses. In fact there are only three main “roads” in this labyrinth, each providing a trajectory toward a particular destination, each narrating a different historical destiny for Berlin’s Jewish population. The first and longest road is called the “Axis of Continuity.” This ends at a staircase that leads, metaphorically, “to the continuation of Berlin’s history” and hence up to the main exhibition spaces on the upper floors of the museum. The second road, the steeper “Axis of Exile,” leads to a glass door through which one can exit to the so-called “E. T. A. Hoffmann Garden.” This garden, signifying the escape of exile and emigration, is itself a labyrinthine form, comprised of a tilted grid of 49 seven-meter-high concrete columns into which are planted willow oaks whose foliage tangles into a overarching canopy. As Bernhard Schneider notes, this “field of columns” evokes a range of associations: not least the labyrinthine “street grid between the skyscrapers of the New World” (1999, p. 50).

The third and final “axis” ends at the “Holocaust Void”: a stark 27-meter-high concrete tower, accessed through a heavy door. This tall, chill, acutely angled chamber is illuminated by a needle of daylight passing through an aperture high in one wall and is connected to the museum building only by the underground “Axis of Holocaust”: above ground, it stands isolate, a brutal and impenetrable form. Prosaically, an interpretation panel informs the visitor that “this tower commemorates the many millions of Holocaust victims.” More emotively, Libeskind writes that “the Holocaust Void is a place that has to be experienced as an end, which will forever remain a dead end. For they will not return” (2001, p. 27). The dead ends of the labyrinth are thus given an all too literal meaning.

The unresolved tension between the two principles that structure the architecture of the Jewish Museum is also manifest in the display of the museum’s collections in the upper floors. It is sometimes argued that the monumentality of Libeskind’s architectural vision for the museum is incommensurable with its curatorial vision (see, for example, Fleming 2005, p. 57). The building, as James E. Young muses, seems to forbid showing much else besides itself and is therefore in danger of becoming its own content (2000, p. 13) – a rather less generative employment of the

mise en abyme. Libeskind's intention, however, is to use the expressiveness of the architectural form to provoke a different relationship between audience and exhibit. In his entry to the architectural competition for the project, Libeskind argues that the "museum form itself must be rethought in order to transcend the passive involvement of the viewer" (2001, p. 29). To these ends, Libeskind explains that "standard exhibition rooms and traditional public spaces have been dissolved and disseminated along a myriad of complex trajectories in, on, and above the ground," and that "linear structures interact to create an irregular and decisively accentuated set of displacements, providing an active path and distancing the viewer in the investigation of the exhibits" (*ibid.*).

In his subtle analysis of the Jewish Museum, Young draws upon Anthony Vidler's (1992) conceptualization of the "architectural uncanny" to explore this "distancing" process. "Instead of merely housing the collection", Young writes, "this building seeks to estrange it from the viewers' own preconceptions" (2000, p. 17). The museum's disconcerting geometry thus subverts the "stabilizing function of architecture" and ensures that the museum never domesticates the events it engages with, "never makes us at home with them, never brings them into the reassuring house of redemptory meaning" (*ibid.*, pp. 2–3). The museum thus disrupts the continuity of its own exhibitions and instead draws attention to the gaps and absences of Jewish history in Berlin.

Detour 7: Walking in the Museum

In February 2003, Libeskind's "Memory Foundations" proposal was selected as the preferred design for the redevelopment of the former World Trade Center site in Manhattan. Writing many years before "9/11," de Certeau describes the serene sense of being "lifted out of the city's grasp" as he gazes down upon New York from the summit of Yamasaki's original "twin towers": "An Icarus flying above these waters, [one] can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below" (1984, p. 92).

There is, de Certeau concedes, an undeniable pleasure in "seeing the whole": it satisfies a "scopic drive" that has long been associated in Western tradition with a "gnostic drive" – to be "all-seeing" is to be "all-knowing." Seeming to make possible such a celestial perspective, de Certeau writes that the view from the World Trade Center's 110th floor

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“transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it” (ibid.). He argues, however, that the knowledge permitted by this vantage point is merely a “theoretical” simulacrum, a “facsimile” little different from the architect’s drawings or the urban planner’s charts. The panoramic “totalizing view,” which makes the complexity of the city comprehensible, is in fact quite blind to the “murky intertwining daily behaviours” that constitute the lived reality of the city (ibid.). The “readable city” is thus illusory, and the monumental figure of the “tower” plays no small part in the orchestration of the fiction. Predicting – poignantly, as it happens – an “Icarian fall,” de Certeau proposes a return to the “opaque mobility” of the city-labyrinth and to the everyday spatial practices of the city’s walkers “whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it” (ibid., p. 93).

De Certeau’s rereading of the city as a multitude of “migrational” processes rather than a “space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions” has much relevance for the study of the museum (ibid.). If we shift the site of de Certeau’s critique from the city to the museum, we are provoked into questioning the nature of the knowledge produced through those expository conventions employed to make readable the complexity of the museum’s collections. In place of the “imaginary totalizations” of classificatory schemas and organizing narratives, we might consider the more opaque networks of the museum-walker’s movements as corporeal enactments of Ricoeurian narrative processes: kinetic configurations, which “compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator” (ibid.; cf. Ricoeur 1991). To paraphrase de Certeau, we might say that the spatial order of the museum organizes an ensemble of narratological possibilities and interdictions, and that the museum-walker “actualizes” some of these possibilities, bringing them into being (1984, p. 98). But the visitor also brings into being other, unanticipated possibilities as the various improvisations that constitute the practice of walking privilege and transform certain elements, while abandoning others. Through such “pedestrian speech acts” the museum visitor appropriates the topographical system of the museum, opening up meanings and directions according to an itinerary that is only partly determined by its curator’s or designer’s intentions.

Such an analysis may be applied to any museum: the more complex the museum’s topography, the larger the ensemble of spatial possibilities and interdictions, and hence the more opportunity for the museum-walker to

improvise. But the labyrinthine museum is not merely a complicated space, it is also a complicating space. Young describes Libeskind's designs for the Jewish Museum, Berlin as "the spatial enactment of a philosophical problem" (2000, p. 10). Indeed, I suggest that Libeskind enacts architecturally the same problem that de Certeau explores in writing. While this critique of the production of absolute knowledge extends far beyond the museum's walls and beyond the concerns of architecture, Libeskind's achievement is to recognize in the labyrinth a formal expression of this epistemological crisis and to express this form in the architecture of the museum. Experimenting with the labyrinthine aesthetic, Libeskind thus "performs" what might be described as an architectural paradox, critiquing the concept of the museum through the medium of the museum itself. Here, again, is the reflexive structuration of the *mise en abyme*.

As Young notes, Libeskind's drawings for the Jewish Museum seem "more like the sketches of the museum's ruins" than proposals for a new museum building (ibid.). And, indeed, the ruins of the modernist paradigm are evoked beside the Felix Nussbaum Haus in a tumbled pile of neoclassical columns (figure 2.4). In galleries fragmented by empty voids, in shards of a shattered whole, in the twisted logic of a non-spiral spiral,



Figure 2.4 Evoking the museum's ruins. Exterior, Felix Nussbaum Haus, Osnabrück. Photograph by Paul Basu.

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and, most literally, in a heap of antique masonry, the visitor to Libeskind's museums continually stumbles upon the ruins of an ideology that still haunts the institution of the museum. Frustrating expectations, these museums play with the visitor's scopic/gnostic drive, but refuse to satisfy it. Rather than fulfilling the promise of rendering their obscure texts readable, providing a straightforward pathway from ignorance to knowledge, these labyrinthine museums provoke the visitor's own Icarian fall, thrusting her back into the troubling realms of partial truths and uncertainties. In this way, Libeskind's museums are truly expressive of the labyrinthine paradox in which both maze-viewer's and maze-walker's perspectives coexist, each implied in the other. Thus, even as we recognize that we remain forever maze-walkers, mired in the contingencies of our own subjectivity, the "idea" of the maze-viewer's transcendent objectivity haunts the imagination and motivates our onward journey.

Detour 8: To Arrive at Where I Started

Commenting on his designs, Libeskind repeatedly expresses a belief that the institution of the museum must be rethought in order to disrupt the passive voyeurism of its visitors. Libeskind's experiments with the museum form are not the results of such rethinking, they are materializations of the very process of rethinking. Drawing upon the process-oriented metaphor of the labyrinth, Libeskind creates of the museum's corridors and galleries an "active path," which not only invites the active participation of its walkers, but insists on it. As Doob writes of the labyrinth, so we might say of the labyrinthine museum: that, here, "means dominate ends, process obscures product, and the wanderer must continue, choose, or retreat with no sure knowledge of the consequences" (1990, p. 57).

The museum's active path is thus labyrinthine in another sense, since it is also demanding of its walker's labors – the labor, for instance, of reconfiguring the syntagmatic relationships between exhibits that have been dissociated from each other. There is, after all, no grand, unicursal narrative to follow here. Instead, the museum must be regarded as a space of narrative potential: a space that is potentially generative of a diversity of paths and stories, but which is reliant upon the enunciative spatial practices of each visitor to bring them into being. If the visitor is not inspired to such "labors within" the museum's walls, it may be legitimate to claim that the experiment fails. This is surely a dangerous policy for public

institutions devoted to widening participation and opening access. But the decentering of curatorial control also widens participation and opens access in other ways, and, indeed, the remarkable popularity of museums such as the Jewish Museum, Berlin would seem to suggest that Libeskind's disorienting architecture is not also an alienating one. On the contrary, we are intrigued by the puzzle of the maze and provoked by its complicating narratives, which cause us to question the procedures through which we routinely make simple sense of a complex world.

To enter the labyrinthine museum is to be called to find a passage of associations through the multicursal maze of its text: a passage of associations, which, if it could be traced – as Ariadne's thread, for instance – would paradoxically take a unicursal form. In other words, our movement through the nonlinear discursive space of the labyrinthine museum is necessarily a linear one, in which we reorder its disorderly displays according to our own interests and sensibilities, constructing our own narratives from the narrative potential implicit within its walls.

While, through our labors, we may discern a story – perhaps many stories – within the museum text, we are never left in doubt that the “whole story” is always beyond: that there are corridors as yet unexplored and undiscovered, that there is always an *excess* of meaning. Made conscious of the partialness of our knowledge and explication, we may be reminded of Herodotus marveling at the labyrinth of Amenemhat III: that no matter how eloquent the enunciator, the greater part remains “greater than words can say.”

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