

“The Interpretation of Labyrinth in Modern Architecture”

Katarzyna Witasiaak

Technical University of Lodz

Abstract: *Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche shared the thought, if we had wanted and dared to create architecture in the style of our souls, the prototype would have been a labyrinth. The aim of the paper is to show that the words of the German philosopher are confirmed in our reality. We dare to create architecture based on the archetype of the labyrinth which is proved by an observation of life. The topos of the maze is one of the oldest mental figures, which has been used by men to this day. Labyrinth is an extreme type of road where we can lose or find ourselves. The center gives the path its significance. The Path also emphasizes the target because it reveals forces, the human being has to face with. A maze is also a unique question that our imagination has been bothering our mind for many generations. The mysterious subject of labyrinth has been touched by philosophy, ethnology, archeology, art and architecture. Nowadays, there are interesting architectural imitations of the timeless symbol that provoke fertile interpretations. The paper is to show the translation of the enigmatic symbol in the architectural modern world.*

Keywords: *labyrinth, road, architecture, symbol, archetype*

1. Introduction

Labyrinth is etched in our consciousness as an unusual spatial symbol of transition. It is the mirror of the path of life, where we can discover ourselves. Referring to the German philosopher Frederick W. Nietzsche, I believe that we have the courage to create architecture based on the archetype of the labyrinth, which is caused by the experience and observation of life. The remark that our presence in the world can be compared to labyrinth derives from prehistoric times and is still present nowadays. Therefore, constantly we are creating architecture in the fashion of our souls. For centuries, architects have used the archetype of labyrinth to harmonize our consciousness and subconsciousness and to activate the deepest layers of our spirit.

2. The Etymology of Labyrinth

While the idea of the labyrinth and spiritual message is clear and transparent in all its mystery, the etymological origins of the concept are not. According to many experts, the word labyrinth derives from the Greek word labrys which is a double-edged ax. This sign also reveals associations with the city Labranda that worshiped the god Zeus, whose attribute was a double ax. Labyrinth could be also associated with expressions like: "labra" or "labirion" which means cave or mine.[1] Romanian scientist and philosopher Mircea Eliade similarly binds the symbol of labyrinth with the cave "Labros". According to him caves were transformed into mazes. These structures were involved in a process of initiation. [2]

Basing on labyrinths we can make typological distinctions: mazes as quotes, mazes-buildings and buildings inspired by labyrinths, green structures shaped by man, natural caves as a prototype for labyrinths. Underground caves are considered as the origin of the maze. The first in the world "quotes" of the symbol were engraved in the older Stone Age at the entrances to the caves. The oldest known example of labyrinth is a square meander on a clay tablet from Pylos in Greece. These forms are also presented in the form of circular rock engravings in Camonica Valley in Italy. The connection between the spiral and the maze can be noticed. Both of those structures may symbolize the idea of creating the world from a single principle and the development of a new life which can become a place of rebirth. [3]

3. Mandala and Labyrinth - Related Symbols

In Eastern cultures mandala is a graphical symbol of a square inscribed in a circle, that can show a stable structure of the spirit. It is encoded in the story of the creation of mandala, which symbolizes the cosmic and celestial areas. In the Western rites equivalent of mandala are stone circles of Stonehenge in England. The

researchers conclude that Stonehenge is an earthly reflection of space areas. Stone circles are considered to be the center of rituals of passage. Similarly, science refers to the meanings of the labyrinth, as a symbol of cosmic vision of the world, which is involved in ceremonies of initiation.

There are large graphic symbols of labyrinth and mandala, which are involved in the rituals of transition. Physical passage through the various parts of the mandala leads to the center, in order to experience the symbolic cleansing - catharsis. Liturgy of the mandala is similar to the labyrinth and the purpose of initiation. In medieval times the maze was called the 'Road to Jerusalem'. Physical passage through the labyrinth, which was depicted on the floor of Gothic churches, could replace even a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. [4]

4. Labyrinthine Buildings

There are lots of historical examples of buildings created in a form of labyrinths. Ancient historians had a knowledge about buildings intended for mazes. Herodotus visited one of them located around the village of Hawara during his expedition to Egypt. Diodorus of Sicily also mentions a tomb as an Egyptian labyrinth built by the order of King Mendes. This building became the likely inspiration for the Cretan labyrinth at Knossos built by Daedalus. Plinius in his "Natural History" also mentions mazes on Lemnos and Samos. The maze is defined by the author as the most remarkable achievement, for which man has ever spent materials.

The Twentieth Century also brings interesting reflections on the symbolism of the passage in the context of the labyrinth. Architect Le Corbusier in relation to the promenade at the Villa Savoye and to an Arab architecture speaks about the power of an act of passage. This allows you to see the organizing principles that architecture opens before us. In 1929, Paul Otlet put forward the idea of creating "Mundaneum" - a Global Research Center in the Service of International Trade. This Center would be built in Geneva, designed by Le Corbusier. The architect designed the building, where three parallel strings would run along the spiral. Le Corbusier said that the world is evolving, developing, changing and the form of the building was meant to show it. [5] Mundaneum building was to have a pyramid shape, as Ziggurat at Babylon. In the article "Figure and Experience: The Labyrinth and Le Corbusier's World Museum", Antony Moulis also compares the building to the labyrinth. The experience as a troublesome road is repeatedly disclosed on the route of the museum, which surrounds and blinds the viewer. It is a museum, in which the visitor takes place along a continuous wall. The trail leads the viewer from the center to the edge of the museum, which evokes the form of the mysterious archetype. On one hand the labyrinth is a site of knowledge of movement, on the other, a site of blindness. The experience of the labyrinth is re-described in the space of the route. [6]

5. Modern Labyrinth

The theme of meandering and mysterious roads has been credited to the architectural form by another architect Peter Eisenman. More than two thousand concrete blocks create a spatial maze in the project of Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. Eisenman mentioned the inspiration of a mown field. The labyrinth of stacked cubes of pressed straw made a great emotional impression on the architect. He felt lonely and cut off from the world in the place like this. This experience helped him to find a form for expressing loneliness, which is the essence of suffering of the victims of the holocaust. On the edge of the forest of columns viewer is still surrounded by life. From the east side, pillars descend almost to street level. The height of concrete blocks changes. It goes almost from the ground level to nearly five meters above the surface. The author strongly believed in the power of the structure. He was not afraid of manifests through paintings and graffiti on the blocks. He claimed that, they would become part of the monument.[7]

An example of searching the way to our inner world, basing on labyrinth, it is my design of the museum situated in the area of the former Nazi Death Camp in Sobibor. The form is so severe and so unreal, which highlights its neutrality and openness to religious diversity. The project plan consist of 16 square wooden blocks, which contain offices and sanitary facilities. The road between blocks is covered with glass and presents the exhibit space. Everyone chooses their own direction while exploring the museum as they make a choice of their way of life. The project is to emphasize that the most important is the path to their own internal reality. Natural material of wood, which stands above culturally established meanings, makes the museum more universal. The perceived object does not impose any meanings. We can find them in our own reflection as if we were in the labyrinth. Our perception becomes muted, unbiased. We can reflect and make better choices in the labyrinth of life.

6. Various Fields of Expression

Subconscious perception of labyrinth manifests itself in various fields of expression as video, drawing, sculpture and architecture. Giovanni Battista Piranesi was a venetian architect from the 18th century, who created a series of graphic works, which he called 'prison of the imagination'. He presented visions of powerful, dark labyrinths. Piranesi gave them a new, timeless dimension and captured the atmosphere of labyrinths that had no way out. The inspiration for the unreal interiors, overwhelming with their gigantic scale, was the architecture of ancient Rome. Dutch painter Maurits Cornelis Escher noticed that labyrinths without an exit create the architecture of our dreams. These dreamlike visions trace back to deep levels of our perception and make us engage our archetypal memory. [8] The puzzle of Escher's labyrinth cannot be solved, it has no exit neither entry. Sculptures of Richard Serra provoke thinking about the labyrinth from the perspective of minimal art. He made an intriguing intervention in outer and mental space. He creates a clean, detached from cultural contexts spatial forms made of plane rolled steel. His sculptures like labyrinth hide a secret, experimenting with human psyche and emotions. One of the most famous Serra's art is certainly the installation 'The Matter of Time' exhibited in the largest gallery in Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. [9]

7. Summary

Jeff Saward, one of the greatest experts of this symbol, said that the resurgence of labyrinths takes place when cultures re-define themselves, when communities make a re-evaluation. The starting point for thinking about a maze is the road. The road becomes a ritual of passage from the profane to the sacred. Labyrinth is an extreme type of road on which we can both lose, as well as find ourselves. Labyrinth is an extraordinary question that our imagination has asked our mind for many generations.

8. References

- [1] P. de Saint Hilaire, *Tajemny Swiat Labiryntow*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Czakra, 1994, pp. 259.
- [2] M. Eliade, *Sacrum-mit-historia*, Warszawa, Panstwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1993, pp. 20.
- [3] S. Magdalena. *Koło życia - historia, symbolika i znaczenie mandali na tle dziejów i kultur świata*. Praca magisterska napisana pod kierunkiem prof. zw. Andrzeja M. Bartczaka, Lodz: ASP, 2007.
- [4] Ibidem
- [5] St. Lorentz, *Philosophy museums in the future ... Past Memorial Book in honor of Professor Stanislaw Lorentz the hundredth anniversary of his birth*, Warsaw 1999, p. 11
- [6] A. Moulis. (October 1996). Figure and Experience: The labyrinth and Le Corbusier's World Museum. *Interstices : a journal of architecture and related arts*, 4. Available: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/43472239_Figure_and_Experience_The_labyrinth_and_Le_Corbusier%27s_World_Museum
- [7] M. Czaputowicz, U. Cyrynger, J. Marszałek, Z. Antkiewicz, J. Burek, A. Ciecieląg, A. Dobrowolska, G. Dumala, W. Gonda, E. Jankiewicz, A. Komornicka, W. Kunicki-Goldfinger, J. Machnowska, R. Micka, M. Pawlak, A. Zakrzewski, *Berlin-Miasto Pamieci*, Berlin, Wydawnictwo Anthea, 2015, p. 36
- [8] J. Krenz, *Architektura znaczen*, Gdansk: Wydawnictwo Politechniki Gdańskiej, 1997, p.12
- [9] R. Serra, *The matter of time : Musée Guggenheim Bilbao*, Société française de promotion artistique, 2006, p.30