

LABYRINTH PATHWAYS



14th Edition : October 2020

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*Dancing on the Pumpkin Maypole Labyrinth
at the TLS Gathering in New Harmony, Indiana, November 2010
Photo: Jeff Seward*

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Touching the Earth Lightly: Labyrinths of Light & Shadow

Jan Sellers

In recent years I have been researching the presence of labyrinths in university and college settings around the world. Building on earlier explorations of teaching and learning with labyrinths in academia, I have focused on landscaped or permanent labyrinths. The research, nearing completion, currently includes over 200 labyrinths in 16 countries. These include labyrinths indoors and outdoors; in very private, and in public spaces; in meadows, courtyards and rooftops; at arboretums and in remote locations such as field study centres and outreach hubs within isolated communities.

Those are the statistics, and some of the settings. But time and again, I have been distracted, subverted, or led away from the mass of documentation by the sheer fascination of individual labyrinths hard-won and joyfully achieved. Some projects are profoundly moving: led by doctoral students, the new (2019) labyrinth at the University of Delaware, for instance, honours the ‘silent teachers,’ those who have given their bodies for medical research. I think of research students building a stone labyrinth on a remote Russian island in the White Sea, and the labyrinth learning community with their labyrinth plans at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Canada. As I write, England (as with many countries) faces stricter rules constraining freedom of movement. I long to travel, and in spring to visit the world’s labyrinths in flower, such as the crocus labyrinth in Aberdeen, Scotland, and the lavender labyrinth in Stuttgart, Germany. The research has become a joyful and surprising journey of exploration, with many stories to hear and to tell. This article shares the story of two labyrinths, both created to touch the earth lightly: labyrinths that have an ephemeral quality but that have a continuing presence in their particular setting.

Though I was familiar with the idea of ‘touching the earth lightly,’ its possibilities for a labyrinth context came into sharper focus for me as I read about Jill Raggett and Steve Terry’s work with landscape and land studies students, overseas and at Writtle University College in Essex, England. One project with artist in residence Jim Buchanan at Writtle included the creation of a turf-cut labyrinth, still in place and changing with the seasons. Other initiatives led by the artist included

a labyrinth of light projected onto a temporary pool of water created in an old barn. Labyrinth and barn “were united in a poetic and dramatic interplay, linking the historic fabric of the building with immediate and ephemeral light and shadow.” Following the residency, Jill and Steve worked with students in Finland to create a labyrinth of golden birch leaves, and with their own students in England to create patterns with cherry blossom and dew, exploring always the impact of creating change in a physical space. I found myself immediately responsive to this sense of lightness, to the idea of working with the leaves and blossom, light and shadow that fall around us. For me there is a spiritual dimension to this, an essential need to work with the gifts that the earth, the land, gives us: to work with, rather than against, recognising ourselves as part of the earth and the land.

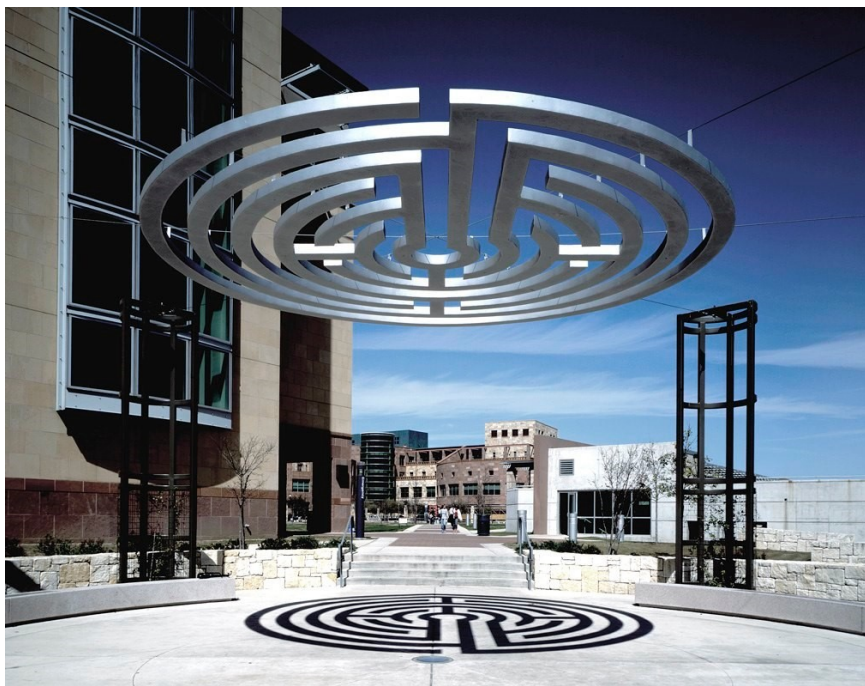
I’ll turn now to the first of two labyrinths to explore in greater detail, labyrinths crafted to lay out on the ground as labyrinths of light.

Lewis deSoto is an American artist and author of Cahuilla (Native American) and Latino descent. Based in California and New York, he is Professor of Art at San Francisco State University. His wide-ranging work includes site-specific art installations that challenge and question our relationship to the land. In 2003, Lewis deSoto was commissioned to create a major work of art for the Downtown Campus of the University of Texas, San Antonio. His design is called *Labyrinth Gateway* and is inspired by the work of Tomás Rivera (1935-84), a much-loved poet and university scholar with a passion for education. Rivera was the son of Mexican American migrant farm workers. From childhood work in the fields, he became a leading figure in the emergence and recognition of Chicano literature.

Labyrinth Gateway encompasses a circular courtyard at the south-east corner of campus, an entrance for pedestrians now known as the Tomás Rivera Plaza. Lewis deSoto designed a ‘floating’ silvery labyrinth that hangs suspended above the plaza, supported by cables from six trellises that in turn support flowering jasmine. The labyrinth, 6.1m (20 ft) across, is made of aluminium with a titanium skin. Its shadow falls across the courtyard, a shadow labyrinth that can be walked at certain times of day. Quotations by the poet are carved in stone on benches in the plaza: strikingly, Rivera describes literature as a unifying labyrinth, a place to deepen our understanding of our common human condition.

The nearby Humanities Building hosts the Tomás Rivera Student Success Center. This has real meaning for me: I worked for many years at the University of Kent, in England, developing a similar initiative, the Student Learning Advisory Service. In Canterbury, students can

stroll across campus to find the labyrinth settled in grass and stone on the hillside. Here in San Antonio, students can step outside the door to find the labyrinth at their feet: they may walk through the labyrinth's shadow when they visit the Center for guidance or simply when they arrive on campus. I am drawn to this – the lightness of touch, the beauty of the concept, the way in which the metaphor for all of our journeys is laid out in light and shadow for students at critical times in their lives. The plaza becomes a place for reflection as well as a 'gateway' connecting city, street and university.



Labyrinth Gateway, by Lewis deSoto, University of Texas Downtown Campus, San Antonio. Photo courtesy of Lewis deSoto

The labyrinth has six circuits and is medieval in style. I have not yet been able to visit; my studies of its presence, in photographs and from Google Earth, will have to suffice. In my imagination I walk slowly from the sidewalk. My feet scuff dust as I enter the plaza; I smell the jasmine in the hot sun. The sounds of traffic fade; I gaze at the sheer quietness of shadow, the labyrinth pattern laid gently by sunlight across the floor. Like the shadow of a tree, the pattern flows across a step and up the edge of a wall. A bee buzzes in the jasmine and spirals upwards, and my gaze follows it, to the sculpted labyrinth form that seems to hover above. It is an unlikely and extraordinary presence. I

cannot look up for long as the sun is too bright. In shade, I rest on a smooth stone bench flanking the central space of the plaza. The stone is cool, comforting. I read the words of Tomás Rivera. I rest. I wait, as the labyrinth moves slowly across the ground; I wait for the earth to turn, to move beneath the shadow. It is sun and earth together that draw the pattern into place. I too have been drawn here. When all is in alignment, I stand. I bow my head. In quietness, which becomes elation, I walk and dance the labyrinth.

This courtyard plaza, this labyrinth garden, has been created in challenging conditions. The Downtown Campus was specifically created to bring higher education into the city centre: the Tomás Rivera Plaza is at the south-east corner of this campus, very close to a slip road and the raised motorway that cuts across the city. Seen from Google Earth, the plaza has an unexpected but fragile beauty. There is something about this labyrinth that speaks to me of the complexity of city life, and of simplicity – of the space we need, the air we breathe.

I turn now to a very different and much smaller city, Winchester, in Hampshire on the edge of England's South Downs. To the south of the city is St. Catherine's Hill, topped by a historic labyrinth dating back to perhaps the 17th century. To the west is the University of Winchester. I've visited this University several times and have facilitated labyrinth events here; I'm drawn to the ethos of the University, its social and spiritual commitment to its students, staff and community. On this hillside campus, the University includes two labyrinths amongst its recognised sacred spaces. Uphill, in the West Downs Quarter, is a seven-circuit classical labyrinth on a secluded lawn, part of an exploratory installation in a garden setting known as the Cosmic Walk. Downhill, at the heart of campus, is the award-winning University Chapel, a Victorian gothic building beautifully restored and extended in 2015. Inside the chapel is a labyrinth installed in 2019, my focus for this article.

I visited this labyrinth in September last year, when I attended the launch of the new Winchester Institute for Contemplative Education and Practice. There were opportunities to spend quiet time in the chapel in the course of the day, and to walk the labyrinth there. This is a five-circuit labyrinth of light, permanently available at the flick of a switch and projected from a high roof-beam. Subtle rainbow colours edge the path. The chapel is not large but, though pews are rearranged to accommodate the labyrinth, there is no sense of congestion. Rather, the pale oak pews enclose and frame the labyrinth in a square, central space between the altar at one end of the chapel, and the font at the other. Curves, as well as straight lines, are an essential feature of the

chapel. The curving roof beams, the curve of gothic windows, are echoed in the graceful modern curves of the altar and font. On the floor midway between font and altar, the lines of the labyrinth seem to fit naturally, the wood glowing warmly as the light illuminates the polished floor. At certain times of day, light pours through the stained glass windows, colours cascading across the floor in a way that gives additional illumination and brightness to the labyrinth experience without diminishing the clarity of the labyrinth pattern.



Projected labyrinth, University Chapel, Winchester. Photo: Jan Sellers

I was struck by the sheer beauty of the labyrinth installation, its peacefulness, its simplicity, its ease of use and accessibility. It was a new experience to spend time walking this labyrinth. Most of my experience as a labyrinth walker has been with the subtle complexity of the seven-circuit classical, seven circuit medieval-influenced, or 11-

circuit medieval patterns. I was surprised at first by the predictability of the five-circuit path. At first glance it appears to be a five-circuit classical form, but in fact it is less complex, a meander pattern. This has some similarity with the Nazca Plain pattern in Peru, described by Hermann Kern as a labyrinthine pattern rather than a true labyrinth. It felt right to spend time getting to know it better, to experience it accumulatively. The light fell, my feet moved, my mind drifted as I walked again and again. Peace and quietness were the gifts that arrived as I walked.

I have learnt that students are already experiencing and valuing the labyrinth as a resource for reflection. Information and finger labyrinths are kept nearby; the chapel can be booked by students and staff, for teaching, learning and research. The labyrinth is the initiative of the Dean of Spiritual Life, Terry Biddington, and was designed by a lighting specialist in the Department of Performing Arts. Plans are in place to provide alternative gobos (the slides in place in the projector) so that different labyrinths can be experienced. Whatever the season or weather, a labyrinth is available for the university community.

There are contradictions within these reflections. I have not chosen today to focus on the labyrinths that perhaps have the lightest impact, made and re-made by human footfall or sketched with leaves and dew and sand. My focus has been on two academic settings within urban communities where art, craftsmanship and technology have all been drawn into play. Once installed, both labyrinths are to a large extent self-sustaining with minimal maintenance, one light source being the sun itself, the other using renewable energy.

I am writing as sunset approaches in London, England. I turn on a lamp, while on the hillside campus above Winchester, the labyrinth may also be lit for a solitary walker. In Texas, it's a hot September day, part sunshine, part cloud. The labyrinth may, or may not, be visible; there's no way for me to know. The sun will set in six hours. Tomorrow, whenever that might be, if buildings are open and weather permits, these two paths of light and shadow will be there again, ready for the patient walker.

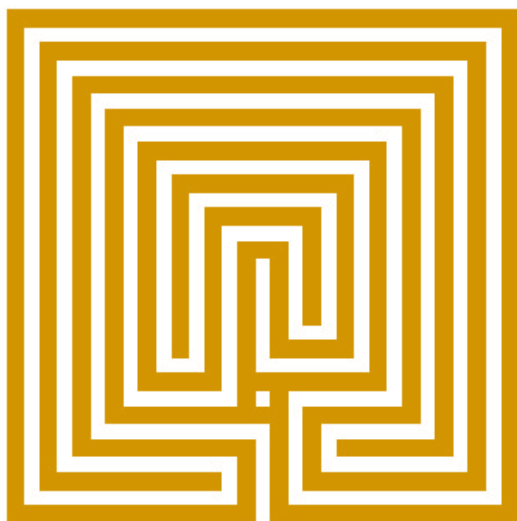
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Note

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