

Navigating the Labyrinthine

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Abstract: *This paper presents research undertaken which explored the experience of creative practice by creative practitioners. I was particularly interested to gain some understanding of how people engaged with the space of creative practice, identified as 'the studio', and within the project articulated as the labyrinth. A key outcome of the research was the discovery that the space of the studio could be articulated as practised place (de Certeau, 1984) and that engaging with this is a process of navigating the labyrinthine.*

Keywords: *design practice, space, labyrinth*

Exploring the experience of creative practice

What is the nature of the space of creative practice? In particular how do people articulate their understanding of the acts and location of that practice? This paper briefly outlines research which explored the experience of creative practice by creative practitioners. In this project I was particularly interested to gain some understanding of how people engaged with the space of creative practice and the creative process, which was identified as 'the studio' and within the project, was articulated as the labyrinth. In this paper I focus on the two key data installations of the project.¹

This research evolved from my uncertainty as to what is meant by the term 'the studio', particularly as it relates to creative practice. The studio is a term that is used broadly within art and design disciplines. It is used to describe a place of work, creation or teaching. It can also be used to describe an approach to working or creating i.e. to have a studio-practice. Often the studio as a location is a shared space and, at times, it is a collaborative space. Donald Schön refers to the studio as a place of action and problem solving, where the implicit is made explicit, and in educational terms it is 'an exemplar for learning-by-doing' (1985, p. 6). My intention in this research was to investigate these terms and make them tangible as they related to the experience of creating by doing, particularly by creative practitioners. As the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues, it is the voices and reflections of artists and designers and their descriptions of how they make meaning of their processes that provides the real basis for new developments (Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

Many have turned to the labyrinth in their efforts to make meaning of the abstraction of experience. For this project the labyrinth was selected as the model and the metaphor for

conception of the studio as a site for reflective practice. The labyrinth provided a structure around which discussion and exploration of 'the idea of the studio' could take place. Similarities were identified in relation to the language and expectations of engagement with the space of the labyrinth or creative practice and the studio. Early research of the literature on labyrinths and my initial conversations with colleagues about the experience of creativity and studio practice, revealed similarities between creativity as a process of transformation, and reflection as tool for realisation and change. These were ambiguous terms and connections and they sparked my desire to know more about the space and experience of creative practice and the labyrinth.

The historical use of the labyrinth as a physical space of contemplation leading to action was also influential in its selection. This aspect of the labyrinth and the many ways that contemplation occurs (e.g. walking, tracing, crawling or praying), aligned with my interest in the role and potential of physical engagement in relation to creative practice. The creative process does not occur in the mind alone. As a process of sense-making and communication it draws on our many ways of perceiving and being in the world. As explored by Merleau-Ponty (1964), our perception of and interaction with the world is an individual, holistic and kinaesthetic act. It is through our senses that we perceive and we create knowledge. According to Merleau-Ponty, 'a being capable of sense-experience ... could have no other way of knowing' (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 15). This research considered whether the same might be said of the way in which people experience the act of creation.

This research project was designed around three key areas of action and focus: the exploration of creative practice, the construction of labyrinthine² installations and the participation of others within these environments. The participants in the research were a selection of fifteen practising artists and designers. Their thoughts, reflections and actions informed the progress of the research.

From the labyrinth to the labyrinthine

Within this research project two landscape installations were the prime sources of data, and they have provided the context for working with the participants. Their design and construction was the vehicle for exploring the acts of making and experiencing. As an exploration through practice, of the phenomenon of reflection in labyrinthine space, it seemed appropriate to construct environments rather than to just talk, read and imagine what the potential relationship might be; building the installations and inviting others to engage with them enabled this to be a sensorial and experiential investigation.

The decision to construct landscape installations as models for exploring the space of the studio was based on my desire to work with environments that were free from constraints of similarity (for example an internal working space), so that I could draw attention to features and conceptions of space that refer to aspects of the studio and creative practice in the abstract (containment, expansive space, randomness, physical challenge and the senses). As argued by Anne Whiston Spirn (1998, p. 15), 'the language of landscape is our native language ... The language of landscape can be spoken, written, read and imagined... Landscape, as language makes thought tangible and imagination possible ... the meanings of landscape elements (e.g. water) are only potential until context shapes them'. For this research, this has been the role of the landscape installations; they have been tools for facilitating language and reflection and the context for the discussion and consideration of the themes and questions by the participants and me.

The two locations selected for the installations were the forest and the desert and they represented the transition from the labyrinth to the labyrinthine within the research findings. At both locations I constructed an installation, each exploring the specific attributes of the site and aspects of the labyrinthine. The two sites were selected for their contrasting attributes, both physically and metaphorically, within Western cultural traditions. The design of each installation was both a response to the location and my research focus with *Desert* being a response to my *Forest* findings.

Forest

... travellers who, finding themselves lost in a forest, ought not to wander this way and that, or, what is worse remain in one place, but ought always to walk as straight a line as they can in one direction and not change course for feeble reason, even if at the outset it was perhaps only chance that made them choose it; for by this means, if they are not going where they wish, they will finally arrive at least somewhere where they will be better off than in the middle of the forest (Descartes, in Harrison 1992, p. 110).



Figure 2: Forest, cloth installation, September 2003, Australia.
(Photography: Shane Hearn)

Locating the first labyrinth within a forest, with its tall trees and random sense of order, mirrored the aspects of the labyrinth that I wanted to explore. I wanted to draw on the symbolic nature of the forest as a mystical space and the home of many childhood stories. The forest is often presented as a place of the unknown and uncertain; the wild environment that is not controlled by civilized human development such as the tamed city (Harrison 1992). In the forest we can rarely see the horizon, and when we do it is usually when we look out from the forest to clearings and other places. It is difficult to heed Descartes' advice and to walk in a straight line – the line of reason and certainty across the forest. The apparent sameness confuses us. It is easy to meander and find oneself rambling on circuitous paths through and around the trees, always glimpsing potential paths ahead. To locate ourselves within the forest we must concentrate in the same way that we do within the labyrinth.

According to Descartes anywhere was better than being in the 'middle of the forest', so great is its darkness and potential for cultural demise. Just as the forest is a collection of trees and as a resource, represents the potential for change, it also represents the darker and emotional aspects of our beings. These characteristics of the forest resemble the language used to describe creativity and the creative process (illogical, emotional, the unexpected, juxtaposition of ideas and elements etc.). I was interested in these comparisons and apparent contradictions, and wondered how it might be possible to explore and relate them.

Forest was an exploration of the labyrinth and its relationship to reflection and creativity through the construction of a fabric labyrinth based on a traditional design. This was the labyrinth as a structure and a space as experienced through the forest and the cloth structure I built within it.

Whilst engaging in and responding to the aesthetics of the structure, the participants in the research expressed a certain fear of the *Forest* structure, finding its winding path and controlled view disorientating, yet at the same time it was a safer place than that of the greater forest. As such, the labyrinth became a safe place within a broader unknown whilst its own characteristics drew them to a cautious engagement with themselves, the space and their memories.

Desert

Desert was the second installation of the project.



*Figure 3: Desert, landscape intervention, June 2004, Australia.
(Photography: Author)*

Desert was a significantly different installation from *Forest*. Whereas *Forest* was a literal interpretation and creation of a labyrinth in a landscape, *Desert* was an exploration of the labyrinthine and endeavoured to work with, rather than on, the landscape. The desert was selected as the location for the second installation as I wanted to explore a location that was vastly different from the forest; a location that was the antithesis of the confinement and 'mystery' of the enclosed forest space. The desert with its connotations of openness, vastness and infinite horizon, seemed to have potential as such a space. I anticipated that the more open and exposed nature of the desert environment would suggest and reflect a more 'open' understanding of the labyrinth and an exploration of the labyrinthine.

The desert of this research is that of the Flinders Ranges in South Australia. The desert of the Ranges does not conform to the popular image of the desert in the way that flat, open expanses of sand and salt lakes do. This desert is a ragged mountainous formation, hundreds of millions of years old with craggy rock faces, saltbush, cypress trees, waterholes and occasional flowing creeks (Bunbury, 2002). Like the desert of the plains, it is a harsh and isolated landscape with searing heat, an inhospitable nature, breathtaking beauty and a foreboding sense of isolation. Unlike the open expanses of desert sand, there is a sense of life; there are animals, birds, plants, wild flowers and markers of human engagement including roads, signs, campsites and homesteads (used and ruins).

Water is essential to all life and in the desert it is ever present, mostly through its absence. It is the absence of water that most defines the desert space and separates it from the forest. In the Flinders Ranges, trees, plant and animal life mark the presence of water and, for brief periods, it actually flows down creek beds and rivers until finally sinking into the artesian waterbeds. Thus this desert landscape has the markings of 'life', however fleeting. The climate is extreme and water is an infrequent visitor yet always leaves traces of its presence and thoroughfares.



*Figures 4 & 5: Desert, landscape intervention, June 2004, Australia.
(Photography: Author)*

The ability of water to define and construct landscape is significant. Spirn (1998) speaks of the language of the landscape, the structures and the stories. This is a language that evolves over time and water (like wind) is essential in its formation. She writes, 'Water flowing, like sun shining, shapes and structures landscape' (p. 88). In surveying this landscape, the creek beds were existing thoroughfares or paths across the landscape. Their role in creating the grander landscape narrative seemed to be the most appropriate site for the installation and my exploration into creative practice and location. This time the installation was a marked path along a creek bed. The objective here was particularly to explore the act of 'noticing' (Mason 2002) as a tool for engagement with space and subsequently create a sense of location. This was one of the key themes to emerge from the participants from *Forest*, people noticed things and became aware and engaged with them. This was true of their practice, they felt that they noticed and engaged with people, places and things and drew on them in their own creative work.

Navigating the space of practice

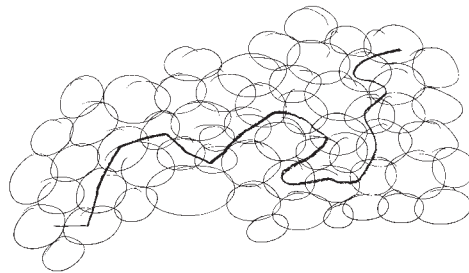
At both locations I constructed an installation that explored the specific attributes of the site (physical and metaphorical) and my perception of the space of practice. *Desert* was a furthering of findings from *Forest*. There I had played with the experiences of confusion, containment and pathways, the themes of noticing and collecting emerged from the participants. This was not only a direct response to the structure but also a reflection on their practices. As I delved into the participants' comments and on the literature it became apparent that for many of the participants noticing and conscious connection to action was a more appropriate term than reflection for expressing their engagement with their practice. *Desert* was an exploration of this methodology for engaging in transition through space, a process of navigation from one location to another.

As argued by Thrift and Crang (2000), space is a complex term; it has many potential meanings and interpretations. When conceiving or speaking of space as location, we find ourselves also speaking of place; within the everyday vernacular the two words are often used interchangeably. Yet, as Crang and Thrift note, it is space that dominates much of contemporary discourse across the disciplines, stating that 'Space is the everywhere of modern thought' (2000, p. 1). Space is an abstract term that can be used to convey an idea or concept, or it can be an actuality referring to a location and/or time. In contrast, Casey (1997) argues that it is place that is everywhere and that our current preoccupation with space has caused us to distort or ignore the importance of place. Place, he states, is 'as requisite as the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand, the bodies we have' (Casey 1997, p. ix). Casey's argument was consistent with the research findings.

Casey, like Tuan, believes that it is not possible for us to exist outside of place, and space is the broader entity in which we, and everything, exists; whether we know or recognise it, space exists (Tuan, 1977, p. 7). Tuan argues that place exists within space, it is what we create through connection to specific locations within space; 'places and objects define space' (p.17).

De Certeau (1984) argues that space is not this fixed or empty location, rather it is place that is a fixed position and space is a construct of our practices. Furthermore it is the practices of everyday life (humanity) that facilitate the dialogue between these two entities. Thrift speaks of place as being 'place space', a 'human' space, which becomes place only through its relationship to the particular rhythms of life (2003, p. 7, 8). Massey and Thrift refer to these as 'moment[s] in a wider relational space' (2003, p. 280). Place is defined or defines location

(the map), while space is the construction of the intersections as experienced through the practices of life. 'Space is a practised place' (de Certeau 1984, p. 117). From my research it has become apparent that the construction of a sense of place is one way of articulating people's experience of creative practice. This is practice as transition from one location to another, navigated by points of noticing and connection as was explored in *Desert*. This is creative practice as a placed practice, and the places of the practice may be physical locations or points of connection and possibility.



*Figure 6: The labyrinthine path from place to place.
(Drawing: Author)*

This research project explored the labyrinthine experience of creative practice via the landscape. Edward Relph states, 'Landscape is both the context for places and an attribute of places' (Relph 1976, in Casey 2001, p. 417). Casey argues that the relationship between body and landscape is reflective of self and place. He claims, 'both body and landscape are so deeply ingrained in the experience of the human subject as to pass unnoticed for the most part', and it is through 'reflective awareness' that we are able to make conscious connections (p. 417). Through the landscape we are able to identify and relate to place, for the landscape is of place, bound by borders and the horizon. As the body moves across the landscape, the 'self' (via the body) transitions from place-to-place. The commentary by the participants in my project supported Casey and Relph's statements on the relationship between the individual and space and the construction of meaning. In this case, the bodies were those of practising designers and the landscape they referred to, the creative space of their practice, with each project, act or point of noticing taking the form of a place of connection within the trajectory of creative practice.

Labyrinthine space was the prime focus of this research project. Initially, the exploration of the labyrinthine as a model for the experience and form of the studio was drawn from the literal patterning of the labyrinth, an imposed structure on an already existing labyrinthine space (the forest). Over the course of the project and in response to my findings, my interpretation

of the labyrinth evolved to embrace the convolutions of a labyrinthine path full of twists and turns that acknowledges the individual and works with the external, whilst marking its own way through the terrain. The labyrinthine space of the studio ideally is organic, responsive and interpretive and navigating this space is a process of transformation and the subsequent practise of place.

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Endnotes

- ¹ I use the term 'data installation' to refer to the two landscape installations that were part of a phenomenology-informed data collection process. In addition to the design and construction of the installations, interviews with the research participants as well journal entries and artefacts that refer to their experiences of the installations were drawn on in the data analysis.
- ² The term 'labyrinthine' refers to something relating to, resembling, or constituting a labyrinth. In this case it is interpreted as having or incorporating Reed Doob's 'idea of the labyrinth' (1990, p.5).