

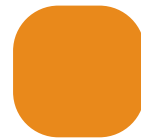
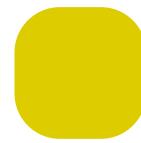
# A [MAZE] ING



A few weeks ago, en route to an important meeting, I found myself meandering helplessly through the corporate offices of one of Silicon Valley's most respected engineering firms. To my left stretched an avenue of beige cubicles; to my right, more of the same; overhead the buzzing fluorescent lights neutralized every shadow, and beneath my feet the pastel carpeting seemed to tell me only that the more I walked, the more I stayed in the same place. Everything around me looked like everything else. I had lost my way.

## SPACE

[by Barry M. Katz]



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## Amazing space, continued

What is strange about the corporate mazes we inhabit today is that the architects and designers who created them were not trying to confuse or to frustrate us,—just the opposite! They know that an hour spent roaming the halls in search of a cubicle or a conference room is an hour lost, but they are answerable to the corporate gods of flexibility, hierarchy and cost control. People in the modern age, having mastered the mass-production of objects, turned next to the mass-production of spaces, and the result is that we are more often lost than found. But it was not always this way. To the contrary, there is a long and honored tradition of designing spatial puzzles whose aim is to amuse and to amaze, to challenge and not simply to addle the brain.

The most famous of these is surely the fabled labyrinth of Knossos, home to the terrifying Minotaur. Once a year, when it came time to appease the wrath of old King Minos, seven Athenian youths and seven maidens were escorted into this precursor of the modern office building and—like the hapless office worker—never seen again. Fortunately, the Greek mythmakers left us with two quite different parables of way-finding. The wily Daedalus—the world's first corporate dropout—crafted a set of wings and made a daring aerial escape. The hero Theseus—a loyal company man—simply retraced his steps by following the trail of yarn that he had unraveled on his way in.

### **MAZES AND LABYRINTHS**

*Although the words tend to be used interchangeably nowadays, mazes and labyrinths are actually quite different. > The maze, technically, is a spatial puzzle full of blind alleys, false entryways and dead ends. The wanderer must continually choose between diverging paths and will find his way out by luck or by skill. > A labyrinth, by contrast, stresses the journey rather than the destination: a single, well-defined path—however intricate—leads the pilgrim inexorably into the center, and all that is required of him is patience, determination and will. Whoever conquers a maze gains freedom; he who conquers a labyrinth gains enlightenment.*

The figure of the labyrinth continued across the centuries: In the Christian Middle Ages, it took the symbolic form of mosaic tiles set into the floors of the great cathedrals at Chartres and Amiens, as if to mark the final stage of the pilgrim's spiritual journey. It came alive in the formal pleasure gardens of the Renaissance, whose twists and turns delighted royal visitors to Hampton Court or Versailles. As the labyrinth gradually lost its

character as religious symbol and aristocratic diversion, it evolved into the modern maze. It became a game of logic, a scientific puzzle and an adventure in rational planning with no beginning, no center and no end. Then urban grid and the modern office building, unwittingly, became its architectural expression.

The secret of the maze is to confuse the senses, not by making things foreign and unfamiliar, but by

making everything appear the same: parallel hedges of English yew, clipped to a uniform 6-1/2 feet favored by William III; regulation cubicles under a relentless grid of fluorescent lights dictated by cost-conscious facility managers in Silicon Valley. But transposed onto the modern workplace, one thing is clear: standardized spaces encourage standardized behavior, regulation-size ideas and modular thinking. If nothing more than the force of habit guides you to your desk, nothing more is likely to guide what you do when you get there. Happily, the modern-day Theseus has many ways to rescue the sense of place from the sense of space—some proven, some under active research by cognitive psychologists, anthropologists and

## Amazing space, continued

even designers. Technology has opened the door to help the lost find their way by utilizing electronic signage. The signs enable room reservation, display meeting details and even map directions so visitors can find their way. Interestingly, the same wayfinding techniques that allow taxi drivers to navigate their way through cities may be imported into buildings. In Halifax, Nova Scotia, the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce has transformed the galactic interior acreage of a renovated warehouse into a friendly village with street names and personalized addresses. Deployed creatively and in conjunction with one another, lighting, color and texture can provide subtle directional cues and demarcate zones of activity along functional or other lines. I know of one shared workspace that is draped with

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cascades of purple velvet: When a meeting is scheduled for "The Bordello," nobody has to look for it on a map.

In the last analysis, however, the architect and designer provide only the framework. Truly livable, navigable work spaces are ultimately the work of the people who move in and populate them once the designers have packed up and moved on. Left to their own devices, individuals will always ... individualize, and it is through this spontaneous activity of imparting identity to small spaces that familiarity is given to larger ones. Individuals are the real heroes of the story.

## Wayfinding in the Digital Age

Ever since urban theorist Kevin Lynch coined the term, "wayfinding" has dealt with the fixed and the stationary: the use of topography, subway maps and house numbers to find one's way about a city; the placement of foliage, furniture or artwork to create interior landmarks within buildings. In the future, however, wayfinding tools will respond to the new levels of mobility, fluidity and uncertainty that have become the hallmarks of the workplace of the Information Age.

A case in point is the family of Web-based information appliances being developed by Steelcase under the name Wizard Web Signs™. RoomWizard™ is an interactive, Web-based touch-screen that is mounted outside a conference room (or classroom or operating room) to inform people of the room's availability, help schedule spaces for impromptu meetings, or minimize interruptions once the meeting has begun.

We do not wander about in search of a room, but in search of the person or event that is likely to be found there. Wayfinding in the digital age puts the information where it is needed.

