

Urban Labyrinth: rebuilding everyday life in Beijing's inner city

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Abstract

The origin of labyrinth can be traced to as early as the origin of dwelling. In the domain of urbanism, labyrinthic structure used to have great importance for defense in middle ages.¹ But today the open-grid structure proved to be the paradigm of centrality for most modern cities. It is the constant movement, flow of matter and energy other than the interaction between static territories with walls and gates that form our contemporary urban landscape. This paper based on the example of Beijing's inner city area (Not Forbidden city, therefore it is not related with the issue of power and social hierarchy.) tried to re-estimate labyrinth from spatial complexity to its social effects on local inhabitant's everyday life. It started with the spatial analysis on urban fabric by challenging the conventional understanding of Beijing as an ideal grid city, and then focused on the social effect during its transformation process by taking the "sorting mechanism" of space as one singularity (long term tendency)². The axial map was used both as an analytical tool and the main conceptual framework, the "layered centralities" model especially, of the spatial research. Combining with other aspects, this paper examined the issue of emergence and self-organized behavior by zooming into the everyday life of local inhabitants inside the super blocks (In another words, it concerned with how "the singularity of sorting mechanism" has been divergently actualized): It tried to explore how certain large-scaled urban programs can temporarily locates themselves in such a heteropic spatial condition by looking this phenomenon in a generic social transformation (the declining or opening process of "unit system" after the Reformation in 1978). This process temporarily operated against the natural tendency of the "sorting mechanism" by forming a lot of hidden attractors on the labyrinthic spaces inside the super blocks. Furthermore, this paper also tries to give a design proposal on how to optimize those conditions, how to open the closed super blocks to fit the needs of contemporary life. In short, instead of directly open those super block to transform it into modern grid system, neither to reload the traditional "ladder" pattern, this project tried to slow down this opening process and making use of this alternative stable states as the reservoir for emergent novelties.

¹ Jacques Attali, (1996) *Chemins de sagesse -traite du labyrinthe*, translated to Chinese by Haiying Qiu.

² Manuel Delanda, (2002) *Intensive science and virtual philosophies*, London, Continuum press.