

Practices of Stewardship: Albion Millennium Green and the Albion Millennium Green Labyrinth as an Agent of Care (Working paper)

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Contribution to 'Redesigning Stewardship', Goldsmiths, 16.09.2019



Introduction

This presentation draws on my local-community involvement as a 'Friend', and more recently a Trustee, of an Open Space in south-east London: Albion Millennium Green in Forest Hill, SE23, work that has begun to intersect with my academic concerns at Goldsmiths, not only as a scholar in the field of Visual Culture but also with respect to an increasingly pressurized issue within UK Higher Education: the pastoral care and well-being needs of university students and staff. My focus will be on a very particular aspect of the Green's stewardship, namely, the way in which this space (which is open 24/7, every day of the year) appears, in part, to be cared for by *a piece of design*, a labyrinth that was constructed in the space in 2013 by a local artist, Maria Strutz. Remarkably – and this is an observation I would now like to test - this structure would seem to have been operating consistently and quietly over several years as a powerful and always-present agent of care in what is at once an indisputable site of local, natural beauty *and* a local trouble spot; in its latter manifestations, the Green counts among its users local drug-dealers, drug users, vandals who have set fire to and otherwise attacked portions of the Green, and criminals intent on burglarizing adjacent properties. Within the Green-as-trouble-spot, this composition of curved lines composed of grass, moss, sticks and stones embedded in the earth, has supported the environmental preservation of the location in which it is positioned; its site has never been harmed. In addition, as a design that is also activated as people patiently walk its winding path to the labyrinth's centre and back out again, users, including me, report its powerful personal and thus also social impact as it helps strengthen such

confidence-building characteristics as quietude, reflectivity, fortitude and flexibility of mind, characteristics that are transferrable into other contexts. My question therefore is this: might the strategic introduction of labyrinths into other public trouble-spots have a similar impact? My presentation concludes with a proposal for a collaborative labyrinth-building project (or a series of such projects) to be carried out at Goldsmiths/in New Cross as a means of choreographing increasingly healthful patterns of behaviour, thought and feeling, individually and collectively, in this location. This experiential project would also be framed as a piece of collaborative research, using, I would suggest, a mix of phenomenologically-based research techniques and methodologies (including Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis or IPA), action research and quantitative data collection from which measurable comparisons and claims may also be made. But before continuing with this topic, I would like to return to the Green and to a broader summary of the opportunities and challenges it presents in terms of stewardship.

The Green, its (Human) Users, and Questions of Ecological and Community

Wellbeing

Albion Millennium Green (one of 245 such Green spaces created in cities, towns and villages across England to celebrate the turn of the Millennium) is located on about a hectare of land, somewhat hidden, alongside a railway path and in a plot that links areas of mixed council and low income housing and more moneyed, middle-class residences. Previously the site of a tennis club that had fallen into ruination, the Green's natural assets now consist of winding paths through a mix of urban woodland and parkland, the beginnings of a community orchard where foraging is encouraged, and two small ponds. In places, remnants of old tennis posts, netting and portions of concrete show through. (There are of course much older and deeper histories at issue; for many years, Andrew Orford, chair of the Friends of Albion Millennium Green, has been assembling and researching these matters.)

The Green was developed at the start of this century under the Countryside Agency's Millennium Greens' scheme and received matched funding from the London Borough of Lewisham. As with all Millennium Greens, it is privately owned by a charitable trust (Albion Millennium Green Trust) which is charged with protecting and enhancing the space for the benefit of the local community in perpetuity. As such, the Green's viability depends on the active, ongoing work of Trustees and Friends and on the continued use of the Green by

locals; without this, and as has been the fate of other local Green Spaces, the Green is vulnerable to the actions of developers seeking to build housing and to the enactment of compulsory purchase orders. Although privately owned, as indicated, a requirement in the Trust deeds is that the space is open to the public throughout the year and at all hours – it is in this sense that it is a public space.

Users of the Green include locals for whom it is, at the very least, a useful short-cut, local dog walkers, Forest Hill residents and workers wanting to relax in the space, local schools, and two local nurseries who run Forest School for toddlers. Users also include the Friends, the volunteers who actively take care of the Green: mainly individuals with a strong interest in environmentalism and community action. Formally, stewardship of the Green (and the required fundraising that is also at issue) is coordinated by means of joint Friends/Trustee meetings every two months and monthly workdays on the Green organised by Friends but open to all. Informally, other locals voluntarily care for the Green in an equally consistent manner – for them (several of whom live in adjacent care-in-the-community housing) it is regarded as the equivalent of tending their own back garden. As formally noted in FAMG minutes, this inclusive arrangement works well, and is welcomed and appreciated. Occasionally, issues may arise concerning best practice with respect to plant- and site-management but these are invariably resolved quite easily.

In accordance with the Trust's objects, community events, art projects and parties on the Green are periodically organised collaboratively by the Friends and various groups of users including local schools. These have the further value of increasing the Green's visibility and encouraging greater local involvement in its enjoyment and its stewardship – as noted, ongoing public use of the Green is vital for its survival in the face of alternate pressures (principally new housing needs). I am currently assisting Bruno Roubicek, an environmental artist and performer and a Trustee, to plan an edition of LEAF (Little Ecological Arts Festival) to be held on the Green during 1-4 May 2020. The first edition took place in 2013.



The Green-as-Trouble-Spot

As indicated, and certainly at first sight, the Green is a beautiful and tranquil semi-wild space. However, as soon as I became actively involved as a Friend of the Green, in 2016, it became apparent that this space may also justly be described as a local trouble-spot – in two senses of the word. In the first place, again as noted above (and although this is not necessarily always evident to the Green’s day-time users) drug dealers, drug users, vagrants, burglars and vandals also make the Green a base for operations (portions of the Green have occasionally been set on fire, and in 2018 newly installed notice boards were almost immediately destroyed). This has made the Green not only a blessing but also a persistent source of anxiety and insecurity for those living nearby. These problems are not unique to our Green; this is a persistent problem affecting parks and green spaces and makes the stewardship of such places a matter of ongoing challenge and negotiation.



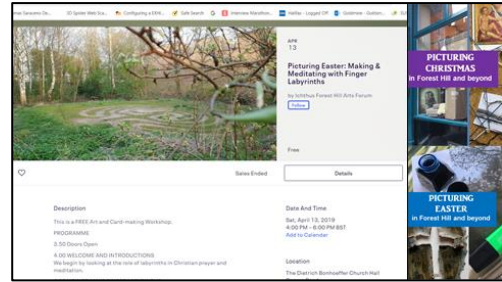
During the summer of 2018, over a period spanning several weeks, a particular challenge to the safety and usability of the Green arose when a group of drug addicts set up a squatters’ camp, depositing rubbish, drug paraphernalia and human faeces onto the site. However, as became clear in the process of documenting what was taking place and by looking more closely at some of this evidence, the Green was also being used by the squatters as a forum for making visible (or publicizing) accounts of personal trauma. This is where that second notion of the Green-as-trouble-spot comes into play. In one case, a squatter had installed a banner (actually a pink cot bumper) above her tent. Although covered with multiple references to the word ‘love’ and with cute drawings, images of the Christian cross (in one instance encased in the shape of a coffin) were also repeated over its surface and may have referenced both love for, and the death of, a child. According to Albion Millennium Green Friends with some understanding of this individual’s background as a victim of persistent child sexual abuse, this may – or may also - have referred that individual’s own loss of childhood innocence and security. These revelations could have provided a possible entry-point for a meaningful conversation, I realised afterwards, but this

wasn't to be; due to evidence of drugs and drug taking, the squatters (who otherwise did have a right to set up camp on the site) were moved on by the police. More recently (Autumn 2019) a different expression of individual troubledness was posted in the Green, apparently by or in the name of one of the volunteers: a set of weather-proofed announcements was attached to a tree. It combined apparently autobiographic references - to dyslexia, Asperger syndrome, unstable personality and recurrent depression – and accusation, including the heading 'Inequality' written in large letters and the statement: "Your big, wer'e wer'e small. Your'e right wer wer'e wrong. Your'e rich wer'e poor." To whom was this accusation addressed? To the world at large? Or to us as Friends, who may indeed be perceived as privileged on these terms?



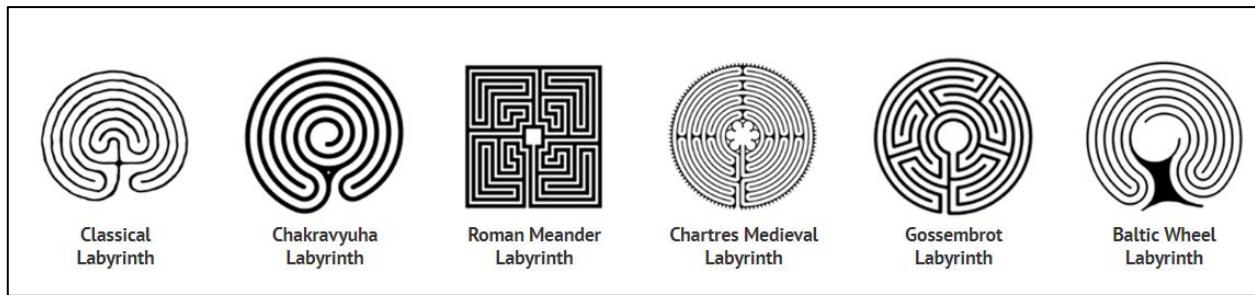
Stewardship of the Green and the idea of the Albion Millennium Green Labyrinth as an 'Agent of Care'

Stewardship of the Green has both environmental and social aspects and it is not always easy to hold them in balance. For instance, we have to negotiate a contradictory remit at the level of ecological care and design. On the one hand it is important to maintain as much woodland wildness as possible in order to protect wildlife and encourage bio-diversity. But on the other hand in order to ensure public safety, we find ourselves having to cut into that wilderness in order to create clearings and sightlines. Likewise, reflecting upon and working out how best to respond to the anonymous acts of aggression that are enacted upon the Green can be both wearying and stimulating. For all its promise, the Green is a contested space, throwing up problems for which there are often none-too-obvious solutions. This interests me a good deal; the Green seemingly functions at least in part as an intensified symptom (and microcosm) of local and well as broader social dis-ease and thus as a space that requires discernment and the determination to keep caring. But how?



It is at this point, then, that I wish to turn explicitly to the Albion Millennium Green Labyrinth. [Constructed in 2013 by Strutz](#), during the first edition of LEAF, it was formed from natural elements found on the Green, such as small stones and sticks, laid onto a relatively barren portion of ground, thus without the introduction of external materials onto the site. With intermittent but ongoing nurture over the years, and as moss and grass have grown into and onto its underlying structure, the labyrinth has taken root and continues as a still fragile, living entity. Significantly, through its presence, the labyrinth brings an overt dimension of spirituality and wellbeing into play which, as I suggested earlier, not only impacts on the Green itself but also the minds, souls and bodies of those who actively engage with it by walking.

The idea of the labyrinth as a powerful protector of the Green in its own right – or at least of that portion of the Green upon which it was constructed – first came to mind after the approximately three-week period of the 2018 squatter camp. Remarkably, although directly adjacent to, and surrounded by the camp's spreading refuse, I had noticed that *the labyrinth itself remained pristine*. Why? Was it, at a very general level, because this ancient and apparently universal design-concept, which humans have imprinted onto the land as well as onto objects such as coins and baskets for around four millennia, was registering as significant and perhaps even sacred, even if only at an unconscious level? Was there also something about its fragility that communicated a call for care or respect? In any case, it was due to this observation that I began to wonder whether labyrinths might be regarded not only as designed entities with the capacity to mediate human concerns for wellbeing but also as powerful 'agents of care' in their own right, as they quietly and persistently remain in situ. Aspects of what labyrinth scholar John W. Rhodes has called 'labyrinth effects' are perhaps worth summarizing now.



Unlike a maze there are no tricks or dead-ends embedded into the design of labyrinths. As a labyrinth-user, you *will* get its centre - a location that is never hidden from sight - as long as you keep your nerve and keep walking regardless of how often the path winds away from that centre. In this way, by cultivating persistence, labyrinths can instil into the lives of their users the transferable, confidence-building characteristic of fortitude referenced earlier, that is, the courage to keep going in situations that present themselves as challenging, or ambiguous, or appear even to be hopelessly unproductive.

Labyrinths may also be used quite purposefully to develop flexibility of mind and heart. The journey towards the centre of the labyrinth is often described as a reflexive journey (grounded in quietude) – an opportunity to review one’s life perhaps - leading to fresh insight. As such, it can help integrate past, present and hoped-for future. It may alternatively be described as a journey of relinquishment (possibly of assumptions, presuppositions, apparently fixed ideas or negative emotions) – as a phenomenologist, this aspect of labyrinth-walking is of particular interest to me. Here again, the time spent at the labyrinth’s centre is an opportunity to await and receive a sense of alternate insight and possibility. These are then carried back into everyday life on the journey of return. While most labyrinths require the walker to retrace their steps, some (for instance, the Baltic Wheel Labyrinth) also provide users with the option of an immediate exit. I have often walked the labyrinth not only in order to obtain fresh perspectives on practical questions of everyday life, but also as a way of addressing intellectual questions I have found myself grappling with in the context of my research and writing.

Experiences of this kind are supported by a growing body of empirical evidence concerning the physiological and psychological benefits of labyrinth-walking. Indeed, since the late 1990’s, the construction of labyrinths and the practice of labyrinth walking have been encouraged by various health-care institutions around the world. See by way of example the 2018 research paper by Philip James Behman et al (Alberta Children’s Hospital

Research Institute) entitled '[Short-term autonomic nervous system and experiential responses during a labyrinth walk](#)' published in the peer-reviewed journal *Cogent Psychology*. Prior to that, in the 1980's and 90's, the contemporary resurgence of interest in labyrinth usage was primarily located in churches and in other religious and spiritual contexts. Other invaluable sources of reference, inspiration and training include [Veriditas](#), [The Labyrinth Society](#), the Projects Website of labyrinth artist [Jim Buchanan](#), and the [Labyrinthos](#) website. Since 2009, World Labyrinth Day has been celebrated on 4 May. In order to promote the benefits of labyrinth-walking locally– and also in order to increase local awareness of the Green – during 2018-19 I interviewed Strutz and featured the Albion Millennium Green labyrinth in a community workshop and publication project (*Picturing Christmas in Forest Hill and Beyond/Picturing Easter in Forest Hill and Beyond*, publication pending). The workshop-and-publication project was initiated by a local arts group (the Ichthus Forest Hill Arts Forum), co-facilitated by a local artists and teacher, Walter Hayn, and me, and was funded by Lewisham Council.



Proposal for a collaborative labyrinth-building project as a literal means of ‘turning around trouble’

Over the last year, a connection between my Albion Millennium Green Labyrinth observations, my community workshop and publication projects, and my academic work has become increasingly evident. It corresponds in particular with my long-term research into how aesthetic (and therefore also embodied) strategies might be used to ‘turn around trouble’ – as I call it – of especially intractable kinds. Thus a question that has now arisen is this: might the strategic introduction of (ideally co-created) labyrinths into other public trouble-spots potentially bring about verifiable positive environmental, personal and social change? I have in mind a location that intersects the Goldsmiths campus and the

surrounding, inner city area of New Cross, which, like the Albion Millennium Green Labyrinth, is in the London Borough of Lewisham.

This would be an interesting addition to the several labyrinths and labyrinth-related sites and projects that may be found in [London](#). An intimate example may be found at St Olave's church near Tower Bridge, for instance. Also of note is artist Mark Wallinger's extensive 2013 [Labyrinth project](#): 270 art works, each one a differently configured design, created to celebrate 150 years of the London Underground.



Significantly though, since 2000, several UK universities have started incorporating indoor and outdoor labyrinths into their campuses, including the [University of Edinburgh](#) (2004) and the University of Kent (shown being built, left below, in 2008) to name but two. Many universities also use portable fabric labyrinths and portable finger labyrinths as part of their wellbeing and, increasingly, also their learning and teaching provision. A recently published book edited by Jan Sellars and Bernard Moss, [Learning with the Labyrinth: Creating Reflective Space in Higher Education](#) (Macmillan, 2016) offers a wealth of insight and practical advice. My own first prolonged connection with a labyrinth was in a university setting. It occurred while teaching at the [University of Michigan](#) during 2007-2008 (right below).

