A BIG LABORATORY NAMED CITY

Deddy Halim

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The labyrinth is seen as a city. It “formed a circle, and was surrounded with walls and ramparts, but in a place of moats there yawned a gloomy abyss, apparently boundless and bottomless. Light shone only above the city, while beyond the walls it was dark pitch.” – Jan Amos Komensky a.k.a Comenius (1592-1670)

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Isn’t that what urban people experiencing their city nowadays? They become strangers in their own city. They move around from one building to another, automatically programmed in the routine activities day by day, driven by consumptive lifestyle and conditioned by global capitalism. They go shopping inside and outside the malls, the shops, the bars and cafes, one after another just like going through labyrinth and stop for a while in one of its chamber for eventually they continue to the next chamber. They are not aware if their behavior is already conditioned. Moreover, they don’t even know what they are doing. In their mind only to find something they need as soon as possible without knowing that actually the thing they are looking for is not necessary important.

CITY LABYRINTH

What the city looks like for their citizen? How do they see their massive physical environment settings? For Londoners, they will see themselves entrapped in a jungle of concrete blocks while for Jakartans with 13 millions inhabitants, they are undersieged in the chaotic urban sprawl blocks, both inner city and suburban area. The underground philosophies are may opposed to western mental constructions. Nevertheless, either Easterners or Westerners, there still persists underground stream of thought in which architecture is ministers itself for its spaces. Both Londoners and Jakartans, whether urban people in developed countries or in developing countries, look their city towards the labyrinth as a form that they interpret. Or, we can also say the labyrinth is the form that tells us: interpret for the city is made for that. The different between both polarization lies on the degree of complexity and the forms of the labyrinth, but the bottom line is the same which people inside the city lives with anxiety in confusing world, between choices and dead ends. Of this perspective urban people is no more than laboratory rats entrapped in a maze to find the best chamber fitted to their live, assumed secure (although not!) and comfort (only in rats mind!).

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Architecture, as for human activities, is unnatural and thus aggress the environment. Each architectural vision involves a wave of violence and the potential for delinquency is present in every architect. The architectural act implies destruction, for each building superposes itself either to an existing one or to nature. But building is also an act of cultural continuity, the city represents its society’s culture, it is the way in which the city communicates with its people, with its own language (Van Berkel & Boss, 1994).

The city is also a labyrinth. It is that negative space we see from a bird’s eye point of view. It is down there and once in it we don’t see but its walls. We are able to know it is there because we live in it. But to understand it we have to visualize it from above. The city is not the buildings on the main square. The city is each square, each street and each garden that makes it up (Cullen 1962). Every city has characteristics of the labyrinth. We have the effective way to get to an appointment in certain spot of place as soon as possible or, the long way if we want to get to know the city by traveling around intentionally before we get to the spot. The city maintains its labyrinth spaces for our pleasure, our confusion, or for the most profound reflections of our mind. It was forecasted and predicted very precisely by Comenius 400 years ago, when cities are not yet developed and no metropolitan existed. Today, thousands of skyscrapers and towers are built, flyovers, toll roads and interchanges superimposed one another, super-blocks arisen with its multifunction architecture, megalopolitan cities are born with their hyper complexities. But the question is: Has Urban People found their exit way from the labyrinth? Or they just become entrapped more deep in their city labyrinth since the maze is no longer horizontal but vertical as well and developed sprawling wildly without any patterns which make human being hardly to understand the cities in their cognitive process. They are wandering around from one labyrinth to other labyrinth.

FROM LABYRINTH TO LABYRINTH

The labyrinth is psychological constructs to be interpreted and its meaning goes beyond a simple form. It is an imaginary space, an intellectual space, a concept, an image, a spatial form, and in its real form, an architectonic space. In the field of Urban & Architectural Psychology, built environments and spaces always seen as mental constructs of people towards their physical world.

If human beings are confronted with a real labyrinth, a constructed one, so the first impression will be that of a wall for it cannot be grasped completely from its base. What makes a labyrinth is the wall that separates the outside from the inside. A labyrinth invites in and it is not such if one is still outside. The action happens inside since the labyrinth stimulates action, movement that implies a course of time and space. If human beings think of a labyrinth they do not only think of a wall, they may think of a serpent in it, of a garden, or a drawing of spirals with one way in and one way out, they imagine it from a bird’s eye point of view. This means they always think of a labyrinth from the outside and above. And it is natural if they want to solve its secret for the best position to do so is from where we can contemplate the whole.

A trace in the labyrinth seems to show us the way and invites us or makes us walk through it. This makes it a narrative space or a sequence. For architect Rem Koolhaas and his colleagues (1997) architecture is a negative space, in it things happen, life goes on in its absences, in them we expect something to happen; the non-built space signifies and gives value to the architectonic spaces. Historically, at the beginning the labyrinth or a maze in English was essentially a garden created for the amusement of people. One would enter it and try to find the way out as soon as possible. Its intentions were to mislead or to make one loose his way and his bearings. Whoever walks through the labyrinth follows either the right path or the wrong one for there is one good path and one bad one. The idea is to find the way out as soon as possible. The sooner the better for what is called effectiveness, or the optimal way, which actually would be a straight line. Is it not in this same way that modern culture thinks, where the idea of progress is marked by the effectiveness of the straight line which, taken to the extreme, moves our society very fast and gives meaning to urban life?

In city planning, the labyrinth has evolution from only makes people walk through the whole in order to get to one center into more than one center or sub center or the point of interest. There was only one door out and it is the same one that gets you in, but nowadays there are many doors to go in or out. Many centers position you and make you change your bearing. The places that usually become our identity which could be parks, landmarks, squares and even more cafés, department stores, movie theater in the malls, discotheque, library, museum or any other architectonic built spaces which enable people to identify themselves and affiliate with. Where is the confusion that we thought is intrinsic to the labyrinth? We are faced once again by the
enigma of the labyrinth. This labyrinth is more metaphorical. We cannot get lost on a road that leads to only one place and with only one option to choose from, forward-backward, inside out, unless we don't know if we are walking towards centers or away from it. Today the labyrinth seems to have more sense: Where does good lie and evil? The purpose is not only about finding our way out but to question ourselves as to why we are heading in or out. Thus it is a more reflective figure than contemporary labyrinth.

Urban people are wandering around from one labyrinth to another, starting from their home where they are separated within rooms from their own family, going to work when they drive the braiding roads and entrapped by partition with their workstation, shopping thru the malls from one shop to another, walking in the downtown narrow gangways and alleys, lost in the building blocks jungle and tower and so on. All urban people are living their live from one labyrinth to another.

Trying to labyrinth the megalopolitan cities, the recent competition of Transbay Terminal in San Francisco announced by the Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and held by the Transbay Joint Powers Authority, a regional government body created in 2001 to bring about the construction of a new transit terminal in San Francisco is clearly shows that urban people, even in the most powerful nation in the world, is still entrapped in the labyrinth, even worst they entrapped deeper and deeper.

King and Curiel (2007) reported three proposals for what would be the tallest building on the US West Coast were unveiled and amid architectural fanfare and political buzz. The three proposals are similar in several ways: cloaks the terminal in glass, and each tops the tower with a translucent or open crown with wind turbines tucked inside it. Although there's no guarantee that any of the towers will be built or the designs to be selected by public officials will reach the vision by the development teams, but the designs and the favorable response from elected officials - showed that the recent startling changes to the city's skyline are only a prelude to what architecture could offer to the city labyrinth. They are no more than proposing another new center as the destination in the San Francisco labyrinth for its citizen and put the highest tower in the west coast (again, could be not built!) to mark the new center from distances. It is absolutely what Kevin Lynch (1960) talked about how citizens perceive their own city. They use the mechanism of human cognitive process to identify places.

The tower is accompanied by a transit terminal that is intended to become a major civic gateway. Through this facility, San Francisco people can create a statement to the rest of the world while creating a seamless transportation network connecting the Bay Area to the rest of the region and state so that the labyrinth now is extended to the regional scale and cities become only sub centers. In the early planning, it was assumed that any tower alongside would climb no higher than 550 feet. Now, though public officials say the extra height is merited not just to boost the land sales, but to show that San Francisco continues to measure itself against other cities of global status that are seeing super tall towers proposed. Will we labyrinth not only the city and the country but also the world and beyond? Whatever proposals do emerge will be scrutinized by potential foes in a city long wary of high-rises. Indeed, to erect any tower will cast shade on a public park. Again, Comenius is right for saying light shone only above the city, while beyond the walls it is pitch dark.

EXPERIMENT WITH URBAN PEOPLE

According to Roland Barthes (1976), the pleasure of a labyrinth lies in moving through it. The labyrinth is not only the centers but also the whole, walls shape its form but the space that has any sense to us is the space we can move in: the negative space! And this negative space, is it not the one that interests architecture?

For urban people the image of whole city was important because it was seen as a metaphor for the cognitive process. They don't know the city while loosing its petals. To know the city they must understand that it is a whole and only then will they know it. They can not grasp the city labyrinth while in it; they know the city labyrinth from the outside but they must go through it. The labyrinth is a whole, from narrow gangways and alleys to the super highways. From the moment they see the labyrinth able to represent a more abstract concept than form, they can also see it as a representation of a way of thinking, for eventually can reflect their cultures. If they are no longer on the right path and they see that even progress is not marked by the straight line, they still can believe in the circularity of daily living processes or even philosophical, and build a different reality from the one they
live in. Some people will move from one block to another while others jump to next city if they can not hold the labyrinth any longer. It is clear our inability to understand other cultures is due to this simple difference between one labyrinth and other, or to clarify to the conception of one metaphor or other.

Manipulating urban people with the labyrinth setting and layout is applied very common among shopping mall managements; from the traditional market to deluxe mall, in the western or in eastern part of the world. The more people lose their orientation the more easy they are persuaded to buy something (Cook, 1970). While their body exhausted and fatigue by being lost, their mind will be easy to be fascinated with eye-catching products just for releasing tension and anxiety of being lost. Even Junkfoods can be most wanted escape since foods release serotonin in the brain to make our mind relax but usually before it backs normal people has driven by consumptive mode. It is exactly like Barthes paraphrased about the pleasure of labyrinth.

CITY AND CONDITIONING

City is a place to form the behavior of human being. Forming behavior relied on received stimulus which is later given a meaning based on knowledge and experience. The interchanges are the obvious samples how easy individual’s behavior can be formed. No matter how complex the labyrinth of the interchange - like spaghetti - will confuse urban people but if they follow the right direction they can arrive to the destination set up before. Not obeying path and direction will cause chaos. Although there are tempting short ways to cut off the lanes but if they won’t obey the rule they will suffer traffic and accident. Here we can see that rules and regulations can be used to form urban people behavior where eventually they will internalize the rules and become habits for driving their car programmed unconsciously. Regulations can differentiate good behaviors from the bad.
How to convert a person whom formerly altruistic and having prosocial behavior into an egoistic individual? Just move him into the city! Slow but sure he will become selfish. Psychologists affirm that behavior of human being intrinsically represents individual interaction process with its environment as manifested that he is a life being. According to behaviorist point of view, attitude and behavioral patterns can be formed through environmental inuring and confirmation process. Starting from this view, inuring and confirmation process can be formed through many instruments of the city such as vehicles, buildings, roads, interchanges, shopping malls, office layouts, furniture settings, information & communication technology, and even television programs.

A city is groups of people living in a large built environment. Of this perspective, city can be seen as laboratory, which its condition can be manipulated depends and urban people are the object of experiment. Some will protest with this understanding simply because they do not want to be treated as an object of experiment since human being can chose and cannot be ordered easily like a Pavlov’s dog in Classical Conditioning theory. However, Skinner with his Operant Conditioning theory proved that animals also can chose, and even more they can commit suicide simply because they won’t be forced. Of this reason, the term of object of experiment has changed into subject of experiment since experimentee is assumed having awareness towards its behavior. Nevertheless, both Classical Conditioning and Operant Conditioning are having the same goal that is to force the experimentee to do what the experimenter want. The easiest way is to give the experimentee a feeling of pain, physically and/or mentally so that the experimentee will listen and obey. Skinner used electric shock for pigeons and rats to force them choosing a certain knob without current among other knobs with current. But there was also behaviorist like Tolman and Hull who use reward, instead of punishment, to the rats if they perform well in order to obey what is wanted, so that they will repeat the wanted behavior voluntarily which eventually the behavior become habits.

TO SPOIL OR TO THREAT

Basically there are two ways of creating a behavior that is by giving reward or punishment. One creates a spoiling atmosphere while the other creates a threat. Therefore if we want to make a society having certain behaviors as wanted, just create the fear (terror for instance) so that environmental atmosphere makes people feel painful if they won’t behave as wanted (obey the terrorist) or on the contrary just pamper the people so that they are happy to behave as wanted. The first one is done by forcing and the other one is done voluntarily. For example, if we want to make people not crossing the roads promiscuously just give an electric shock by giving the road median a current. Or spread out the police dressing in disguise in the crowds where they can fine the violator very high as done in Singapore, so that people will feel there is cruel police among them and always spied on them. On the contrary, if we want to pamper the people so that they want to cross the road in the wanted spot voluntarily, we have to make a crossing-line with travelator like found in the airports. It also create disintegration among social classes in society. Therefore instead of behavior determined by physical environment, the physical design accommodates behavior.

Strategy of pampering is much more human than threatening the people. By giving presents, bonus, and lucky dips to the society, they can be very consumptive as wanted, especially if the atmosphere of the mall and its shops can spoil them comfortably, completed with air conditioning and swaying music. But it can also happened vice versa, where physical environment determined by behavior patterns of the society. A Real Estate in Cul-de-sac or enclave design with exclusive gateways will be more saleable since it can protect the society from the riots, threats, and terrors though in the end it also create disintegration among social classes in society. Therefore instead of behavior determined by physical environment, the physical design accommodates behavior.

Spreading fear and creating threatening atmosphere will easily force people to create certain behavior. This strategy used effectively by mobs, starting from streets, traditional markets, terminals, political parties, and to government level. Hoodlums in the streets can threaten people by saying will not protect the merchants from troubles if there is no security money paid to them (though they are the ones who make the troubles!). Police shadows the vendors in the streets who won’t give money to them. A member of the senate will be excommunicated and recalled if he won’t obey his party’s interest. Formerly, public officers in Indonesia would be fired if they didn’t choose the ruling party in election. Electric company will stop to distribute electricity if the price won’t be raised by the city council, water
supply will be cut if consumers delay the monthly payment, and so on and so on.

CITY PLANNERS: THE EXPERIMENTER

For scholars like us, interpretation of the city and its people implies movement, the journey to the centers of the labyrinth. People that are able to go through the labyrinth and come back are the ones who has understood and deciphered it. For city planners the interpretation of a city is also a creative act for they create it, reproduce it and decode it. This could be the thread that keeps us getting lost inside the construction, mental or real, of space.

City planners and government officials should apply reward approach instead of punishment to treat and to manage their citizen. They have to make a lovable living atmosphere so that they will love their labyrinth and do not want to move to other labyrinth in other city. They have to improve their citizen’s welfare and well being. Try to create comfortable transportation modes so that people can experience the city labyrinth cheerfully. Makes the city cleaner, exciteful and pleasantful to live in complete with beautiful green landscape, anticipates anual flooding by building proper waterflow system, provides sustainable waste disposal facilities and so on. For non physical strategy, creates more jobs so that informal sector can be reduced and the city will be cleaner since the illegal booths & vendors will dissapear in the streets, limits personal vehicles so that the traffics will be smoother and the labyrinth is more comfort to go through, controls urban population since we know density is strong correalated with aggresion behavior which stimulate chaos in the city and eventually create many social problems. In short, city planners must try to make urban people enjoy to live in the city, just like an experimenter try to make their rats enjoy their labyrinth.

Seeing the city as a great figure of laboratory, city planners will find that involving urban people implies to the activities happened and could be manipulated in a labyrinth. The space of architecture is a labyrinth built by each and every building made. The architect who wants to get to know his profession gets on his way towards “the promised land”, deep into the labyrinth of the city. In the same way they constructed a significant micro-universe, the architect creates labyrinths of meaning in which each element is declaration of its own secret. For each one of us the labyrinth could present itself in different figures, it could represent something subjective or concrete. But above all the labyrinth is a space and open to manipulations. Get experiment!

References