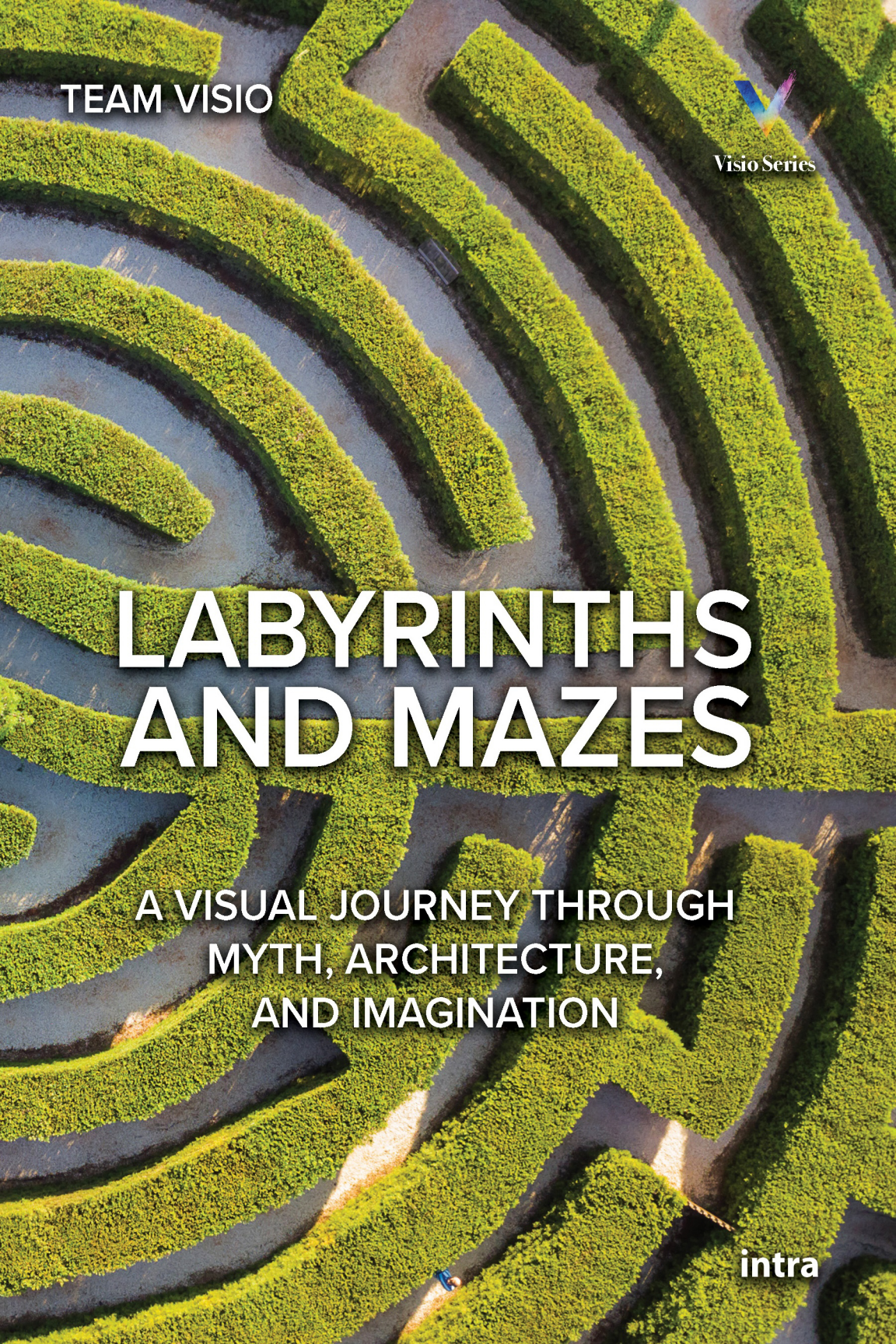
TEAM VISIO
Visio Series
LABYRINTHS AND MAZES
A VISUAL JOURNEY THROUGH MYTH, ARCHITECTURE, AND IMAGINATION
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Introduction

1. Ariadne's Thread: Archetypes, Myths, and Symbols

Since ancient times, the labyrinth has stood as one of the most powerful and enduring symbols in human culture. Its meaning spans centuries, religions, and artistic traditions, constantly shifting in form but always retaining a core essence: the winding path, the search, and the return.

The foundational myth is the Greek tale of the Minotaur, imprisoned within the labyrinth built by Daedalus in Crete, from which only Theseus escaped—thanks to the famous thread of Ariadne. Since then, the labyrinth has come to symbolize mystery, the unconscious, the trial of initiation, knowledge, and even salvation—but also deception, imprisonment, disorientation, and loss.

Cultures around the world have shaped their own versions of the labyrinth: Eastern mandalas, Nordic ritual dances, Celtic stone circles, Islamic tiles with infinite geometric repetition, and the intricate garden designs of the Renaissance. The labyrinth does not belong to any single era or people—it speaks to a universal human condition: the quest to move forward, through obstacles both real and internal.

As Mircea Eliade noted in Rites and Symbols of Initiation (1958), the labyrinth represents a passage from one state of being to another—a symbolic death and rebirth. It is no coincidence that many ancient civilizations associated it with rites of passage, the transition to adulthood, or the discovery of the self.

In modern times, writers and thinkers such as Jorge Luis Borges, Umberto Eco, Gaston Bachelard, and Carl Gustav Jung have explored the labyrinth as a mental structure and a metaphor of the psyche. For Jung, the journey through the labyrinth mirrors the process of individuation: a descent into the shadow, and a return to the center of the Self.

2. A World of Paths: Unicursal Labyrinths and Multicursal Mazes

Despite their countless forms, labyrinths can generally be divided into two fundamental types, each with its own logic and symbolism. In English, a

distinction is often made between labyrinth—a single, unbroken path—and maze—a complex network of choices, forks, and dead ends. In practice, however, the two terms are frequently used interchangeably in both scholarly and popular discourse.

To ensure clarity and consistency throughout this volume, we have chosen to adopt the term labyrinth for all references, regardless of structure. Each entry explicitly indicates whether the form is unicursal (a single path) or multicursal (a branching, decision-based layout) under the heading "Typology."

A unicursal labyrinth—such as the famous floor design of Chartres Cathedral or many ancient ritual forms—offers a single, winding path with no choices or branches. Once entered, it inevitably leads to the center. These labyrinths are often symbolic, meditative, and associated with introspection or spiritual transformation. Prehistoric spirals carved into Atlantic rocks, Buddhist mandalas, and Zen gardens can all be seen as unicursal journeys—tools for focus, purification, and reflection.

Multicursal labyrinths, by contrast, are defined by decisions, disorientation, and cognitive challenge. These are the domains of strategy and ambiguity: from hedge mazes in royal gardens to North American corn mazes and modern escape rooms, they reinterpret the archetype as interactive, playful, and mentally stimulating.

This essential distinction is explored in The Idea of the Labyrinth by Penelope Reed Doob (Cornell University Press, 1990), which emphasizes that while the unicursal form evokes a sense of certainty and destination, the multicursal form represents ambiguity, risk, and discovery.

From a cognitive perspective, recent research in neuroscience and architecture—such as studies conducted by Yale University's Place & Memory Lab—has shown that labyrinthine environments activate brain regions associated with navigation, memory, anxiety, and euphoria. We get lost—and in doing so, we learn something fundamental about how we find our way.

3. Symbol, Experience, Architecture, and Play

This volume brings together labyrinths of every kind—ancient and modern, natural and constructed, sacred and playful—spanning every continent. Some are sculpted by water or ice, like Arizona's Antelope Canyon or the volcanic caves of Cappadocia. Others are architectural, like the Labirinto della Masone, designed by Franco Maria Ricci as an ideal city of culture. Still others are urban: favelas, medinas, and neighborhoods that grow organically, like living organisms without a map.

Labyrinths can be immersive experiences—visual, tactile, and physical. They can teach us about space, time, courage, limits, and perception. They can be spiritual tools or "toys for grown-ups." They may lie flat on a floor, rise vertically, or extend for miles like invisible cities.

Some exist only in stories or in the mind. Borges built them from mirrors and branching paths. Eco led us astray in a Gothic library in The Name of the Rose, and in The Absent Structure distinguished among "classical," "mannerist," and "rhizomatic" labyrinths—anticipating the web and digital networks. Cognitive psychology studies labyrinths as models of decision-making, uncertainty, and exploration. Contemporary artists use them to disorient and engage the public, transforming space into a metaphor for thought.

The six thematic sections in this volume are designed to guide the reader from sacred origins to contemporary reinterpretations. It is a narrative journey that traces the evolution—and gradual secularization—of the labyrinth archetype. We begin with the mythical and spiritual (Part I: Archetypes of the Sacred and the Mythical), move through the ceremonial and political (Part II: Labyrinths of Power and Delight), explore the organic and earthly (Part III: Labyrinths of Nature and the Earth), shift into the collective and urban (Part IV: Urban Labyrinths), engage with the modern and intellectual (Part V: Architectures of Complexity), and conclude with the playful and popular (Part VI: Labyrinths of the Land and of Play). A passage from sacred pilgrimage to secular experience.

Each labyrinth in this book is, ultimately, a story, a place, an invitation to get lost in order to find oneself. The maps, images, and QR codes will guide you—but, as every true labyrinth teaches, it is your own gaze that will chart the path.

READING NOTES

To enhance the reading experience and make it more immersive, this book includes QR codes that provide instant access to external digital content. A QR code is a two-dimensional barcode that, when scanned using the camera on a smartphone, tablet, or computer, automatically opens a link.

For each lighthouse entry, you'll find several main QR codes:



Google Maps: to explore the exact geographic location of the structure, view it from above, and, when available, activate Street View for a virtual outdoor tour.



Google Earth: to observe the structure in three dimensions, contextualize it within its urban or natural environment, and appreciate its visual and architectural impact from a global, immersive perspective.



YouTube: to watch videos and documentaries providing further insight into the site.

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