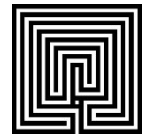


The Labyrinth of Padua

Roberto Milazzi



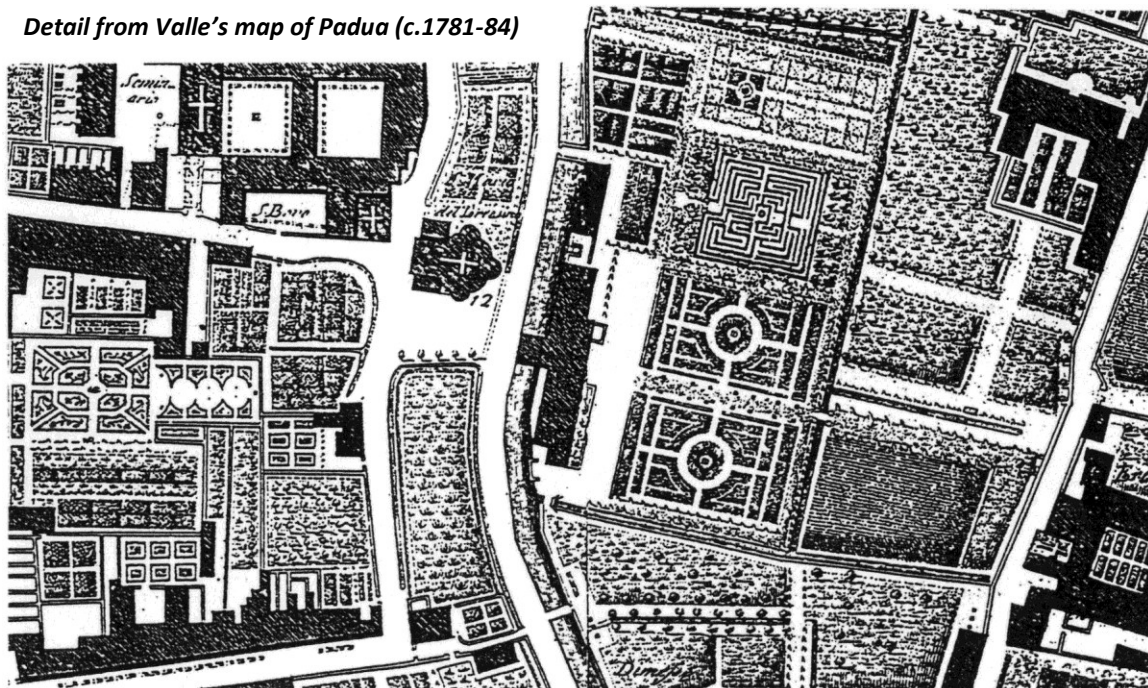
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Urban design is a temporal art, so states Kevin Lynch in his famous book *The Image of the City*. This art, over the centuries, has been applied in many ways, by the vision of princes and lords, but mostly by the shared perception of many inhabitants of a territory. A map as representation of “the state of the things” is not an innocent matter of tracing lines according to pure vision, as the eye is not innocent itself. There’s always a design in how the author of a plan lays down its statements (as every line traced has the strength of a statement) and tracing lines is a subtle way to show - and hide - how things are.

Since I discovered *Caerdroia*, nine years ago, I regretted the scarce resources I could count on to start my research on labyrinths in Italy, particularly in my region, Veneto. In Santarcangeli’s book, Veneto is reported as the region where mazes flowered most vigorously in the Italian peninsula, especially in the last century of the Venetian Republic. The only two mazes surviving in the region would appear to be at Villa Pisani (Stra) and Villa Barbarigo (Valsanzibio). So, I moved my attention to the ancient maps, in search of further evidence.

I discovered the object of this article almost by chance, thanks to the sharp view of Junko Asatani, a Japanese student of History of Art. We were visiting the library of the ancient seminary of Padua, open to the public for the first time as part of the celebration for the third century of the seminary. The labyrinth, one inch / 2.5 cm. square, was on a map of Padua by Giovanni Valle (1781-1784). This gorgeous map appeared to me in all its glory for the first time. It measures many feet square and shows with a great love for detail, the green areas of the town, nearly half the area within the outer circle of walls.

Detail from Valle’s map of Padua (c.1781-84)

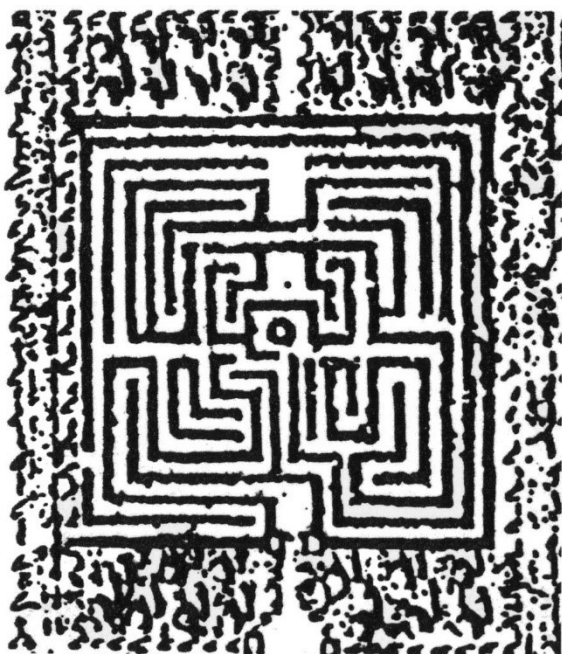


A maze usually is associated with a rich garden and it needs room enough to develop itself in all its potential complexity (and remain practical). The classical shape (square or circular), having usually seven to ten concentric circuit, implies a diameter of more than one hundred feet, 30 metres. These facts suggest that mazes were mainly present in the major gardens of the landowners’ villas in the countryside. A labyrinth near an urban palace was surely a rare thing, as sufficient space was limited within the city walls of the crowded ancient towns. But during the late 14th century the enlightened lords of Padua, the “Carraresi,” widened the complex network of towers and walls to embrace the new developing areas, ensuring free room for

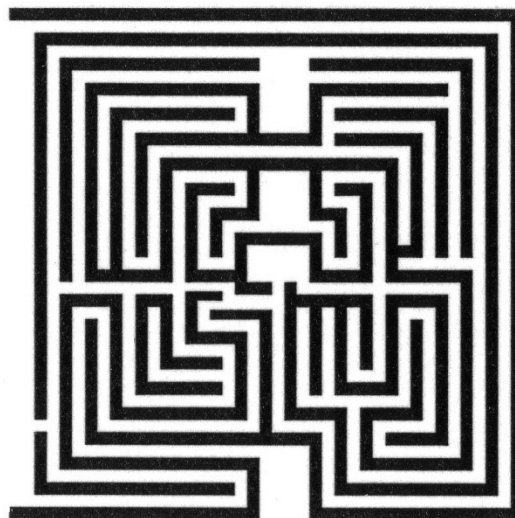
agricultural uses to feed the people in case of siege. The widest area devoted to this use was south of the inner circle of the walls and was named Il Vanzo. The meaning is uncertain: it could refer to the expansion of the city into the countryside or to the fact that it was a swampy, unattractive area (vanzo = avanzo = scrap). The area was subject to intense water management during the 16th century, thanks the work of the Bollani lords. In a map dated 1568, by Gasparo dall'Abaco, we find their name associated with many hydraulic works and the whole area is named Brolo dei Bolani - Bolani's garden. I couldn't find further information about which kind of garden it could be, but I suspect a pure economic use, with no aesthetic concessions.

A later map drawn by Francesco Bertelli (1658) shows the area belonging to the Lords of Papafava. The quality of the design is raw and contains many imperfections. The author notes: *Giard.o e luogo di delitto / degli Ill.mi Sig.ri Papafava in Vanzo*. The design appears to be more a homage than a faithful portrait of how the garden appeared in that time. In view of the dedication to a member of the Papafava family, it is curious that a mistake is hidden in the phrase reported above. It literally means "Garden and place of crime of the noble lords Papafava in Vanzo." In the Latin language there are two words which in the past participle could be confused: deligo "to choose" and delinquo "to miss" or "to mistake." The past participle of deligo is delectus, delinquo is delictus. The garden in the map appears as a "garden of delights," almost in the Hieronymus Bosch sense.

The map by Giovanni Valle is the first to record the real appearance of the gardens and we can believe that if a maze is reported at this time, there really was a maze. But we cannot be so sure about the path. It clearly seems a maze, good for a garden of pleasure, but the plan clearly derives from a unicursal scheme, modified along the main axes. Hard to say if the modification took place in the mind of the planner or during the life of the maze itself.



Detail of the hedge maze from the 1780s map of Padua by Giovanni Valle



Reconstructed plan of the Padua hedge maze, by Roberto Milazzi

The hedge maze clearly did not survive for long, for in a map by Luigi Patella (1842), the former villa appears as the "Collegio femminile di Maria Crocifissa" (female college of Mary Crucified). The garden had surely ceased to be source of delights some years before. Villa Papafava was probably built in the early 18th century. It appears to be coherent with the scenographic re-ordering of the southern end of the main street crossing Padua from north to south. It appears in an etching by Francesco Bellucco, of the church of Torresino, whose name derives from the presence of a tower, built along the first outer expansion of the town walls by the Carraresi in the 1370s. The present facade of the church (1718-1720), originally built in the early Renaissance as a chapel, is due to the work of Girolamo Frigimelica, who also planned the buildings, the stables and the renowned labyrinth of Villa Pisani, too. Also shown in the etching is the Major Seminary, planned by Gregorio Barbarigo, bishop of Padua (1664-1697), and built by his nephew Gian Francesco Barbarigo in the 1720s.

Now, we've to note two important things about the Barbarigo family: The labyrinth of Villa Barbarigo, on the Euganean Hills a few miles south-west of Padua, was planted - together with the rest of the gardens - by Antonio Barbarigo, Gregorio's brother, in 1688. The garden contains many alchemical metaphors displayed through the sculptures, architecture and fountains. The library of the bishop itself seems to show an alchemical order: it consisted of three rooms, the first and the last still known as "Sala Nera" and "Sala Rossa" (Black Room and Red Room). The villa faced a canal, according to the habit of the Venetians, but later the canal was covered and the garden of the Villa was cut by a large road, to connect the historical heart of the city to the new expanding "Citta' Giardino." That road caused the destruction of the left wing of the church, partially visible in the Bellucco's etching behind the Seminary corner and symmetrical to the right wing.

Actually, now on the site of the maze, there stands a hideous concrete condominium block, ironically named Condominio dei Fiori - Condominium of Flowers!

Roberto Milazzi, Padova, Italy; 1998.

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Cartography

Map of Padua by Gasparo dell'Abaco, 1568; Map of Padua by Francesco Bertelli, 1658; Map of Padua by Giovanni Valle, 1784; Map of Padua by Luigi Patella, 1842 - all in Padua Civic Library.

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