The New Metropolitan Library in Chicago, a dual-layered urban fabric whose network of infrastructures creates a labyrinthian language

Urban Condition as Labyrinth

A labyrinth by definition is a confusing spatial condition brought about by a network of logics that tend to be hidden from the occupant. One could argue that this also describes the urban condition: even when one begins to think they comprehend the logic behind the city’s infrastructure, there is no way they could possibly understand the full extent and interconnectivity of the entire fabric. In a similar fashion, it is also interesting to note that most visitors first arriving in a city, tend to find themselves easily lost – a further characteristic shared with the labyrinthian model. It would seem, then, that an iconic urban environment and its complex infrastructural network would provide the perfect site for a New Metropolitan Library model that seeks to architecturally reflect these relationships within its formal language of the labyrinth.

Organized Chaos: Creating an Extroverted Labyrinthian Model

If the labyrinthian model is to be introduced as a formal language to begin to shape the contextual and infrastructural relationships within and outside of the building, then the term labyrinth must again be redefined. A major issue with the traditional labyrinth is its tendency to be extremely introverted; that is, the occupant’s disorientation is maintained through opaque material choices and a strict control over what is shown of the space’s context. While experientially intriguing to a degree, this type of labyrinth could be placed anywhere and has little to no negotiation with its site - something arguably extremely unhealthy for a metropolitan library in an urban condition. The New Metropolitan Labyrinth, then, must seek to become extroverted; it must organize itself in a way that disorients the occupant only so far as it aligns with infrastructural and contextual cues and networks. In this way, the identity as a labyrinth is maintained, while the disorientation takes on a purpose. The occupant is only disoriented because the spaces are not linked in an expected manner; however, by exploring and engaging the spaces, the logic behind the organizational structure is gradually revealed as the occupants’ movement through and interaction with the space begins to physically map out these relationships.

Formal Lenses: Mapping Chicago / Media to Derive Form

How then can form begin to be derived from a conceptual labyrinth of infrastructures? As a preliminary formal exercise, it is valuable to begin to look at different mapping techniques to see how different infrastructural conditions within the bounds of Chicago have begun to be visualized. By treating each of these graphic representations of the city as different lenses with which to view the city’s various conditions, patterns of nodes and interconnectivity can begin to be derived and understood. By doing the same with not only the city but current informational databases, these formal realizations of conceptual relationships begin to drive ideas of circulation and form within the library’s form. While greater control must be applied later on in order to maintain authorship and stance within the newly extroverted labyrinth, these formal realizations create a solid basis upon which the labyrinth can begin to be formed.