

Albert C. Smith, Ph.D., R.A., MRAIC  
Kendra Schank Smith, Ph.D., MRAIC  
Department of Architectural Science  
350 Victoria Street  
Ryerson University  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5B 2K3

[acsmith@ryerson.ca](mailto:acsmith@ryerson.ca)  
[kssmith@ryerson.ca](mailto:kssmith@ryerson.ca)

### **The Monster and Daedalus / Draft**

The story of Daedalus and the creation of his labyrinth, that contained the Minotaur monster, is a myth which offers an archetypical explanation of the architect's position within early societies. This is a recurring theme concerning the Greek architect that reflected prevalent Greek cultural ideals. The myth expressed and reinforced the social position, customs and cultural ties of the architect within Greek society. Though it is not necessary to regard the tale of Daedalus as a true story, it is commonly believed that the myth offers poetic insights into reality.

The myth of Daedalus, like architecture, can be connected to the concept of analogy.<sup>1</sup> The term in Greek later came to mean the consideration of similarities in concepts or things. Analogies are forms of inference: from the assertion of similarities between two things is then reasoned their likely similarity in other respects. This myth contains analogies important for understanding its meaning, and serves as an explanation for all pre-classical architects. The myth of Daedalus is told through the following story,

Having killed his nephew Talos out of professional jealousy, Daedalus was forced to leave Athens. He went to Crete, where he served in the court of King Minos at Knossos. Among his amazing achievements there was the construction of a 'daidalon', a life-like wooden cow covered with leather in which Queen Pasiphae hid in order to seduce a magnificent bull (a gift from Poseidon to the Minoan King) with which she had fallen in love. Daedalus' success with this task confirmed, once again, his skill as a demiurge. When, after seducing the bull, the queen gave birth to the Minotaur, Daedalus was asked to design a structure to contain this monster.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas Bulfinch writes, "The creation of the labyrinth by Daedalus may be connected with the creation of architecture. The labyrinth serves as a metaphor of human existence and that Daedalus' creation of the labyrinth can seem as a paradigm of order, the "primordial ideal of architecture." Humankind has a basic need to create order from chaos. Daedalus's structure, the labyrinth at Knossos, serves as an attempt to formulate such an order. It is not important that we know whether Daedalus's labyrinth actually existed, since it is generally accepted that the labyrinth is an analogy for a paradigm, the shared assumption that constitutes a society's attempt to set the standards of order, the 'primordial idea' of architecture.

Architectural historians generally accept that the first architecture was developed as a means of controlling nature, for example by providing shelter from the elements and protection from wild animals. However, this is not the only reason the first architecture was developed. E.H. Gombrich writes, "Among these primitives, there is no difference between building and image-making as far as usefulness is concerned. These huts are there to shelter them from rain, wind and sunshine and the spirits which produce them; images are made to protect them against other powers which are, to them, as real as the forces of nature." W.R. Lethaby writes in Architecture, Mysticism and Myth, "Architecture, then, interpenetrates building, not for satisfaction of the simple needs of the body, but the complex ones of the intellect."<sup>3</sup> This situation occurs because, as Lethaby continues, "all architecture, temple, tomb or palace was sacred in the early days and is, thus, inextricably bound up with a people's thoughts about God and the universe."<sup>4</sup>

When Spiro Kostof writes of the beginnings of architecture, he is describing modes of designing understandable measurements of nature in terms of boundary and monument.

Boundary and monument both imply a determined marking of nature. Humans impose through them their own order on nature, and in doing so introduce that tug of balance between the way things are and the way we want them to be.<sup>5</sup>

Such buildings are reminiscent of the boundaries marked out by past architects.<sup>6</sup> They were created as means of defining the boundless, operating as reminders of humanity's search for order in the seeming perplexity of nature.

This is likely the reason the mythical Daedalus was seen as maintaining such an important position within his society. Francoise Frontisi-Ducroux writes,

All sources agree that he (Daedalus) was an Athenian, son or grandson of Metion, a man who had been endowed with "metis", a kind of practical intelligence and ingenuity which could be deployed in many ways but was mostly associated with the wisdom of craftsmanship in the Athenian tradition.

While in Athens, Daedalus worked as a sculptor. He was the reputed inventor of agalmata, statues of the gods which had open eyes and moveable limbs, a compelling manifestation of the mystery of divinity (the verb "to see" was reciprocal in Greek: whoever saw was also seen, and the blind were invisible). These statues were so lifelike that Plato remarked upon their amazing and disconcerting mobility, which was accomplished with techniques that are clearly those of the "daidala". Daedalus was also an inventor. Pliny enumerates the instruments that he invented while in Athens, including the saw, the axe, glue and, more significant for architecture, the plumb-line (cathetos or perpendiculum).<sup>7</sup>

Alberto Perez-Gomez makes the connection between the name Daedalus and the Greek word daidala which means to make or manufacture. The name Daedalus, more specifically, has been suggested by Perez-Gomez to be a play on the Greek word daidala which appears in archaic literature as a complement of the verb to make, manufacture, to

forge, to weave, to place on, or to see. Daidala were the implements of early society: defensive works, arms, furniture, and so forth.

Perez-Gomez writes,

The 'daidala' in Homer seem to possess mysterious powers. They are luminous--they reveal the reality they represent. It is a metaphysical 'light' of diverse and often bizarre qualities, evoking fear and admiration. 'Daidala', particularly jewels, are endowed with 'charis' (charisma) and thus with 'Kalo' (beauty) and 'amalga' (festive religious exaltation). 'Charis' is a product of 'techne' (art, skill, craft) but it is also a god-given grace. This mysterious emanation, whether artificially created or given by the gods, has the power of seduction. 'Daidala' are therefore capable of creating dangerous illusions.

'Daidala', or art objects, can appear to be what they are not, and the metal plates give a value to the objects that they would not otherwise have. The principal value of 'daidala' is that of enabling inanimate matter to become magically alive, of 'reproducing' life rather than 'representing' it. Hence the word also designates 'thaumata', marvelous animated machines with brilliant suits of armor and scintillating eyes. The more primitive Homeric texts emphasize the ability of the 'daidalos' to seem alive...<sup>8</sup>

Certainly Daedalus can be linked to the daidala through his automata such as lifelike statues, machine-like bull (which he built for Queen Pasiphae), his wax-and-feather flying machine and finally his labyrinth at Knossos. Daedalus' ability to create the machine-like daidala placed him in an extremely powerful position in his society.

Humankind has a basic need to create order from chaos. Daedalus's structure, the labyrinth at Knossos, serves as a scale model of man's attempt to formulate such an order. It is not important that we know whether Daedalus's labyrinth actually existed, since it is generally accepted that the labyrinth is an analogy for a paradigm, the shared assumption that constitutes a society's attempt to set the standards of order, the 'primordial idea' of architecture. Perez-Gomez writes, "The labyrinth is a metaphor of human existence: ever-changing, full of surprise, uncertain, conveying the impression of disorder."<sup>9</sup> Daedalus created the daidala (mechanism) of the labyrinth, which symbolizes the paradigm. But why was this labyrinth created?

Daedalus designed the labyrinth to contain Pasiphae's monstrous offspring, the Minotaur, half man, half bull. The idea of the Minotaur as monster is derived from the Latin monstrum, which means portent (an omen or prodigy) and from monere, which means to warn.<sup>10</sup> Monsters have similarities to soothsayers.<sup>11</sup> The divine monster symbolized a seemingly chaotic message from the divine Gods; consequently, the paradigm-like labyrinth attempts to demonstrate and define an understandable boundary around the message of the divine.

The Minotaur/monster was created from a union between a gift from the gods and a mortal. Daedalus, the mythological architect, created the labyrinth, and its significance has been directly related to the idea of dance by Perez-Gomez. He tells us, "In archaic times, the dance was the architecture. The space of architecture was the space of ritual and not an objective, geometrical entity."<sup>12</sup> Perez-Gomez also finds that after slaying the Minotaur, Theseus (who represented the Greek mythical hero) engaged in a dance which imitated the meandering of a labyrinth. He writes, "The connection between this image and the Trojan games described by Virgil in the 'Aeneid' has often been observed, as have the possible relationships between these ritual dances and the rituals of the foundation of cities in Roman times, which made the city secure; the ritual was so important, in fact, that it had to be re-enacted periodically."<sup>13</sup>

A ritual is an established form of conducting a religious or other rite or any practice or behavior repeated in a prescribed manner. Religion can be considered a form of understanding the unknown developed by means of a set of beliefs (we might consider these boundaries) which attempts to explain through worship the true meaning of the universe or the ideal. Both ritual and religion offer a way of understanding something, a shared assumption which attempts to explain the truth of a phenomena. Ritual and religion are forms of paradigms created to explain, in an understandable way, the truth of invisible things.

Religion and philosophy have similar goals in that they both attempt to explain the unknown. Since Daedalus maintained a great influence on his society's rituals, he may have been seen as in a position to influence or at least compete with the philosophy of the time. Unfortunately, since Daedalus was considered by the classical Greeks to be simply an uneducated craftsman, this degree of influence may have been somewhat unsettling to some. Perez-Gomez believes that Daedalus can be seen as an architect-craftsman of ambiguous character. He writes,

He [Daedalus] opened the statue's eyes to reveal the divinity of the gods, but he also concealed a monster within a labyrinth and a deceptive woman in a machine of leather and wood. The craftsman creates form and beauty, but also illusions. In giving form and meaning to matter, art is also in danger of falsifying the divine truth. This ambiguity, which is a part of the human condition, is as prevalent now as it was then. In order to perform his fundamentally demiurgic function, still a 'poiesis', Daedalus was possessed of 'metis', an intelligence from which it is impossible to disassociate manual dexterity, which in fact is manifested only through the act of 'creation'.<sup>14</sup>

In classical Greek society, Daedalus was seen as a demiurge, a subordinate god who fashions the sensible world in the light of external ideas. Daedalus fashioned his daidala (machines) through manufacturing or fabrication. He manufactured the labyrinth as a means of demonstrating, in an understandable way, the chaotic warnings of the monster. However, it is possible to fabricate or manufacture a lie, fiction or illusion of truth. This may be why, in some Gnostic systems, the demiurge was seen as an inferior, not absolutely intelligent, deity who was the creator of the material world and was frequently identified with the creator God of the Old Testament.<sup>15</sup>

Certainly, Daedalus, maintained an important and persuasive position in society for he had the skills necessary for creating buildings. Yet during this time philosophers such as Plato showed concern that such mere craftsmen like Daedalus did not have the education necessary for understanding the ramifications of their creations. In other words they may not have had the education necessary to interpret and contain the messages presented by the monster as represented by the Minotaur. Vitruvius the Roman architect believed that the solution lay with an educated craftsman, the architect, who understood both the theory and practice.

The analogies of Daedalus and the Labyrinth still influence architecture today. One of the most common analogies is to equate the labyrinth to the idea of the thesaurus both of which are structured like a meander. Such meanders work like a net where every point is connected to every other point. Marco Frascari points out that meanders are full Minotaur-like monsters. He states, “These Minotaur, monsters conceived by inconceivable unions, demonstrate the possibilities of union between different kinds of realities. They are not abnormalities but rather they are extraordinary phenomena that indicate the way to how to design for architecture.”<sup>16</sup> Architects today are not only keeping the rain off our heads and the wolves from the door but still battle the spirits as represented by the Minotaur.

11 Frontisi-Ducroux, Dedale, Françoise, (Paris, France: 1975), p.90.

22 Perez-Gomez, op. cit., p. 49.

33 Lethaby, W.R., *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*, (London, England: The Architectural Press Ltd., 1974), p. 1.

44 Ibid., p. 2

55 Kostof, Spiro, *A History of Architecture*, (New York, New York: Oxford University Press. 1985), p. 21.

66 The word 'monument' comes from the Latin *monumentum*, which means to remind, and the suffix *-ment*, which denotes an action, resulting state or product.

77 Frontisi-Ducroux, Dedale, Françoise, (Paris, France:1975), p. 90.

88 Perez-Gomez, Alberto, 'The Myth of Daedalus', A.A. Files #10, p.50.

99 Ibid., p. 51.

1010 The compact edition of the Oxford English dictionary, (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 1843.

1111 For additional information on this subject see: Frascari, Marco, *Monsters of Architecture*, (Savage, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, Publishers, Inc., 1991).

1212 Perez-Gomez, op. cit., p. 52.

1313 Ibid., p. 52.

1414 Ibid., p. 52.

1515 Grove, Philip H., *Webster's Third International Dictionary*, (Chicago, Illinois: Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1971), p. 599.

1616 Frascari, Marco., *Monsters of Architecture*, (Savage, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, Inc., 1991), p.108