

Bringing the Human Back to Center:

Connecting students to place & each other through the collaborative creation of a labyrinth on campus

Mary P. Donahue, Professor of Art & Art 422/Graphic Design Practicum class - Jennifer Boyer, Shania Macomber, Christopher Wright Chadron State College, Chadron, Nebraska



Photo: Karla Powell

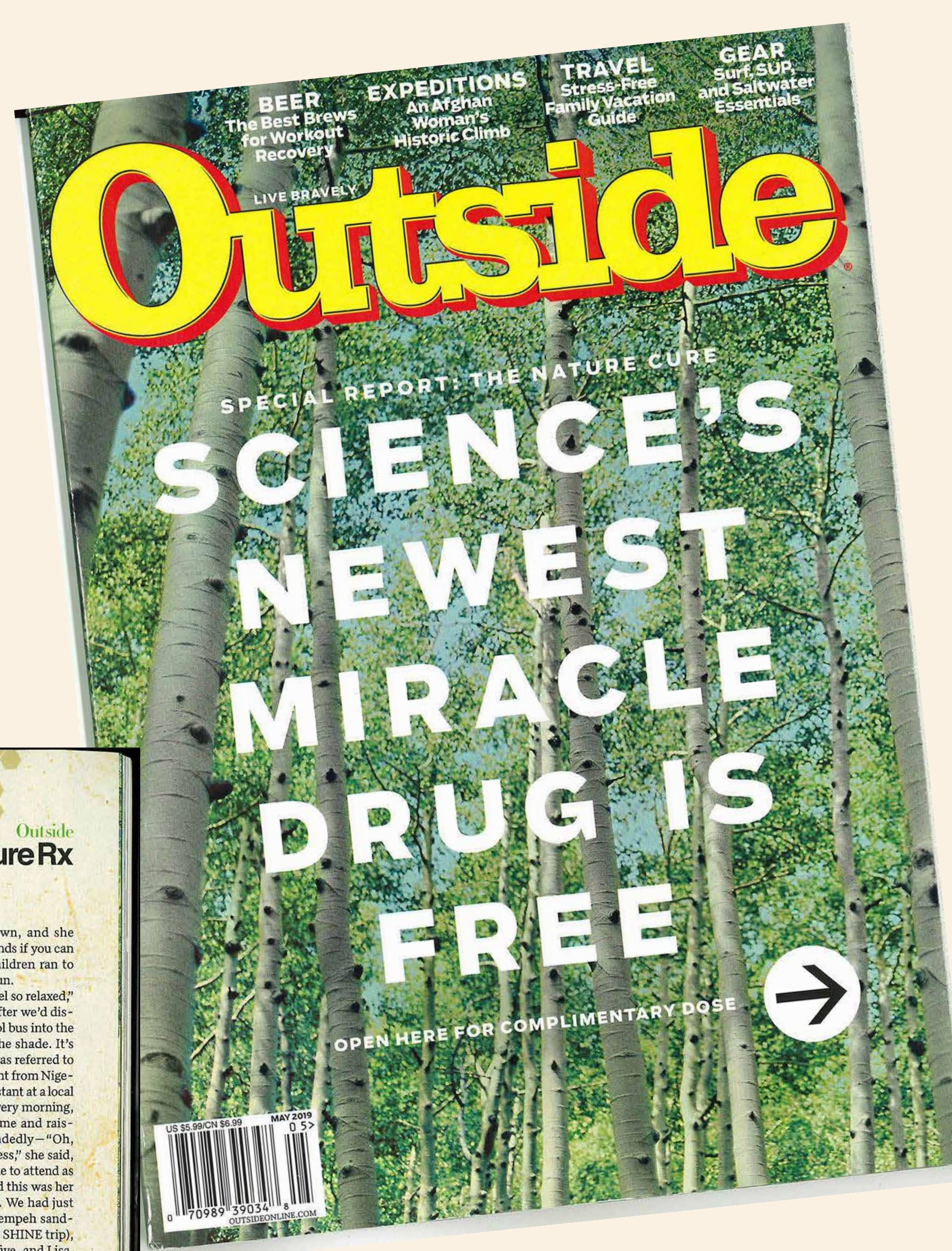
Watercolor sketch by Christopher Wright

Abstract:

Could a quiet walk in nature be a balm for anxiety-ridden college students? A way to center themselves and their intense emotions? According to a 2018 report from the American College Health Association, more than 60% of college students said they had experienced "overwhelming anxiety" in the past year while over 40% said they felt so depressed they had difficulty functioning. Has the constant use of and "connection" to digital devices disconnected us from what it means to be human? And has this obsession with electronic media affected human health? A May 2019 article in *Outside* magazine, "Ask Your Doctor if Nature is Right for You," details a new movement where doctors prescribe nature and outdoor activity as a prescription for our modern-day ills.

The concepts of labyrinths have a long human connection beginning with carvings dating to the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods. They were found in Greek mythology and popular in the Roman Empire. A more developed form of the labyrinth occurred in medieval times, the most famous being at Chartres Cathedral and is still in use today. In North America, Native American medicine wheels and Robert Smithson's 1973 earthwork, *Spiral Jetty*, echo this idea.

Our collaborative campus project proposes building a labyrinth on a hill above campus in an abandoned water cistern used for the town's water in the early 1900s. The project will involve students from across disciplines starting with design students who will help with conceptual and initial design of the site. They will also contribute work in signage and collateral materials and help with the physical aspects of building the labyrinth along with students in art appreciation, sculpture, ceramics, science, communications and public relations and other classes. The project will also become a job site for the annual campus-wide volunteer day.



LABYRINTH PROJECT

- create on higher ed campus
- Start with your intention who is it for?
- redefine purpose, energy, purpose?
- redefine, re-imagine, re-define, re-define
- connecting to nature
- connecting to community
- Life span of labyrinth
- Sketches, drawings, beed, corner down first
- think of entrance
- valley in process of transition
- Scalpers
- individual soap
- Flaying ribbon to create temporary labyrinths
- use in art
- Pop up labyrinths
- packaging on large piece of canvas

Beginnings:

As an art and design professor, I have noticed the changes in students over the years as their lives become more digital. And frenzied and anxiety-ridden. The multi-tasking, the overwhelming amount of stimuli, the distractions have affected all of us in negative ways. I have also watched the students when we take trips outside the classroom and out in nature. I have watched them delight in skipping rocks on Yellowstone Lake. I watched them get lost in walking the sand and rock of the Spiral Jetty in Utah. I have watched them concentrate on the path of a labyrinth on Museum Hill in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

This project started as a discussion among campus members brought together by Teaching & Learning Center Instructional Tech & Design Specialist, Elizabeth Ledbetter. Our art/design professor, 3-D/sculpture professor, instructional technology and design specialist, campus horticulturist/grounds supervisor, public services librarian and community members who are artists and clergy members gathered as small informal groups to view selected parts of *Labyrinths in Higher Education* via Verditas, a non-profit organization that inspires transformation through the labyrinth experience. <https://www.verditas.org/higher-ed>

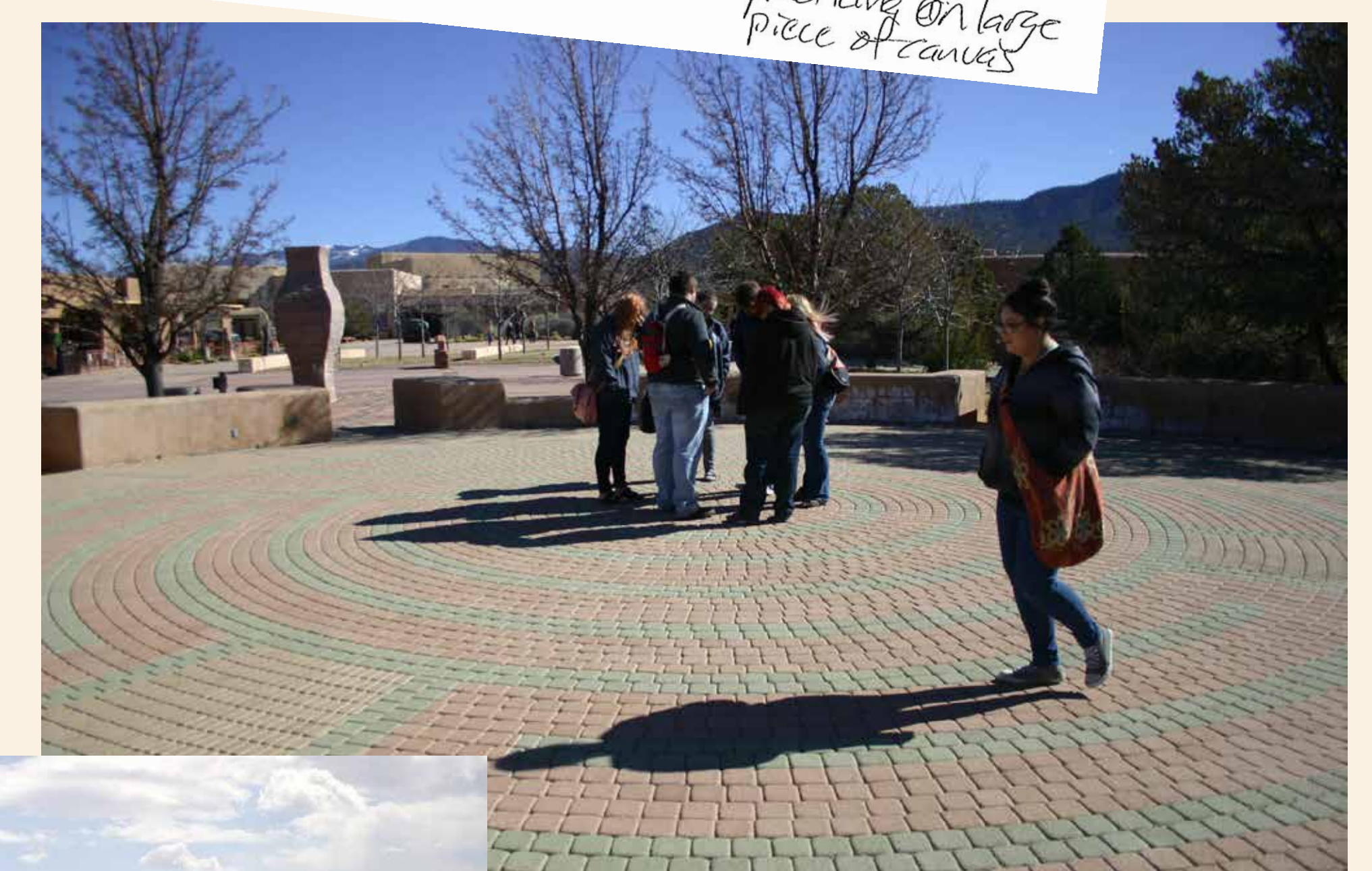
The other place we started from was just that—the place. Our campus is set against part of the geographical features that define where we live—the Pine Ridge escarpments of northwest Nebraska, representing the edge of the High Plains. Within the hills that climb to the ridges on the south edge of campus is a historic cistern that was once used as the water supply for the town of Chadron. It is a circular crater in the hill with the remains of brick support walls on the north rim. The cistern is a short fifteen minute hike from campus and trails through native grasses and yucca plants. From the top of the cistern's walls is a panoramic view of campus and beyond to the Black Hills of South Dakota. Walking down into the cistern, one's focus becomes the circular space and the sky above.



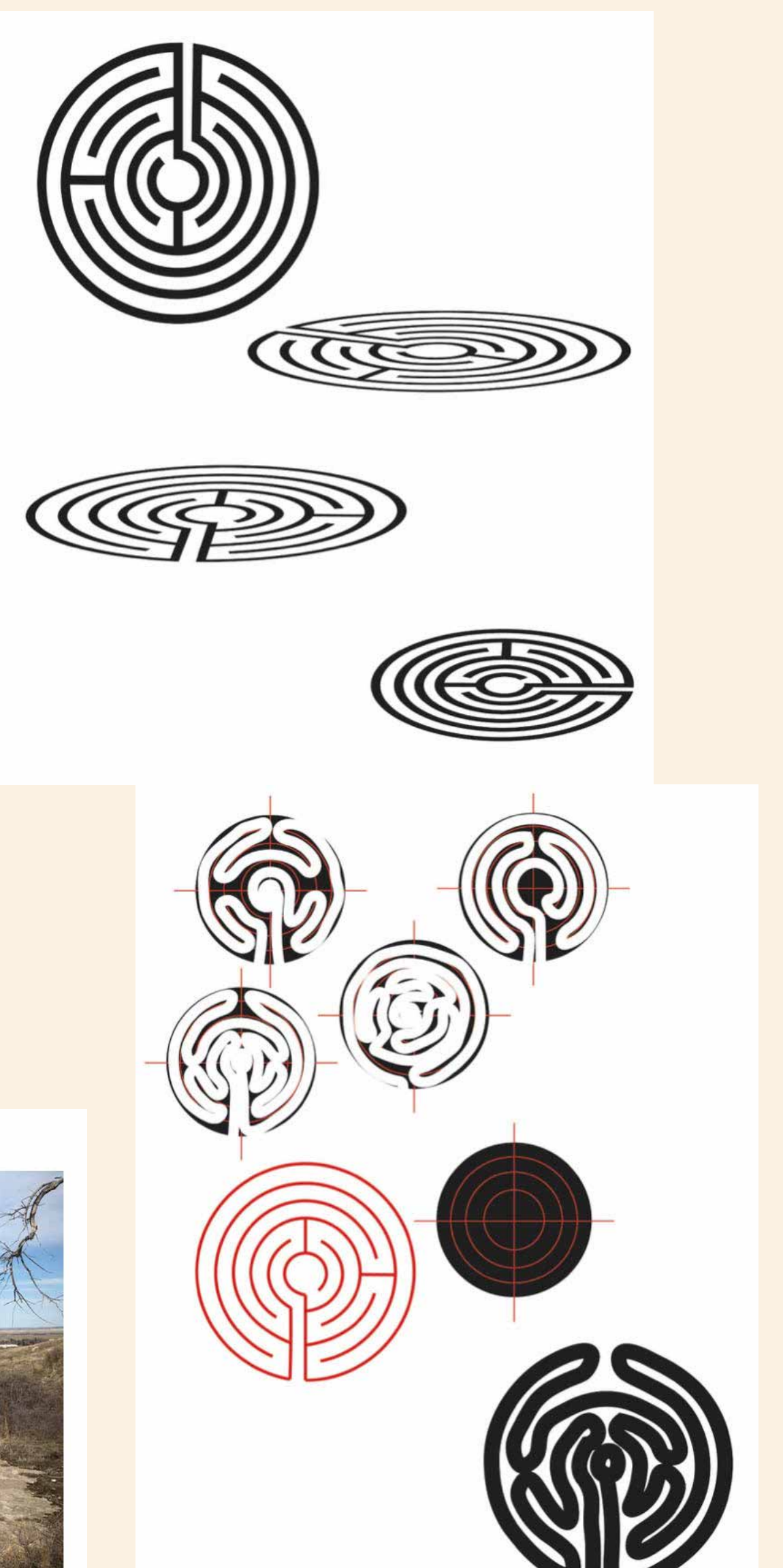
Photo: Cassie Anderson

CSC students walk the Spiral Jetty, Utah.

CSC students skip rocks on Yellowstone Lake, Wyoming.



CSC students walk a labyrinth on Museum Hill, Santa Fe, New Mexico.



Beginning the Design Process:

This past spring semester 2020, I brought in my ART 422/Graphic Design Practicum students (Jennifer Boyer, Shania Macomber, and Christopher Wright) on the beginnings of the Design Process for creating a labyrinth on our campus. We began with research—the human history of labyrinths, the use of labyrinths in healing in places like hospitals and in higher education. We discussed the ideas of mental health and stress reduction. I also had them look at land art and earthwork.

JANUARY 2020...We took a field trip to the proposed site, walking there together directly from our classroom. We took photos and measurements of the cistern. We looked at the views and discussed how an entry way might be designed.

FEBRUARY 2020...Our campus landscape planner/horticulturist/grounds supervisor, Lucinda Mays, met with the students in class and discussed how to think about a site and its materials. She talked with them on how to use tissue sketches over photos of the site, create drawing plans and showed examples. She explained how a "Front Elevation Sketch" sells the idea to the client and the "Bird's Eye View Sketch" explains the idea to the client.

Art 422/Graphic Design Practicum Collaborative Semester Project - Spring 2020 CSC Labyrinth Design and Materials

Step 1 - Research

- 1. Research labyrinths in higher education, use of labyrinths in healing or hospitals.
- 2. Research labyrinths in higher education, use of labyrinths in healing or hospitals.
- 3. Research labyrinths in higher education, use of labyrinths in healing or hospitals.
- 4. Research labyrinths in higher education, use of labyrinths in healing or hospitals.

Shania Macomber

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Jennifer Boyer

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Christopher Wright

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CSCLabyrinth Proposal

Why a labyrinth for CSC?

- Location west end of C18
- current site photo?
- your front elevation sketch
- your layout plan
- which labyrinth design right?

Reasons for a labyrinth at CSC

- Research the history of labyrinths in higher education, use of labyrinths in healing or hospitals.
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The process: how do we make it happen?

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Labyrinths on campuses have been used for teaching, service learning, relaxation, faith services, open walls, community building, counseling, and many other uses.

Some universities have used labyrinths for weekly walks to promote reflection and personal and professional growth for faculty, staff, and students. Some have been used to offer walks as a part of a wellness program for stress reduction and self-care. Others have been used in the course curriculum for first year students and transfer students for making a successful academic and social transition. Even building or creating a labyrinth can help students learn how to work together with others.

Our campus landscape planner/horticulturist/grounds supervisor, Lucinda Mays, was able to share a tip from our geology professor, Michael Leite, on a way to measure something in the landscape from Google maps.

<https://www.google.com/maps>

- 1 click on link
- 2 enlarge photo of cistern
- 3 place cursor on place you want to start measuring
- 4 right click
- 5 scroll down to Measure
- 6 click a series of marks
- 7 to finish, click on the first mark - length of line as well as area!

Special thanks to Elizabeth Ledbetter, Lucinda Mays, Karla Powell, and Daniel Binkard/CSC College Relations.

NEXT STEPS... Our in-class meetings for the semester ended abruptly in March. As I tell students with many assignments, this is an experiment. We hope to present these ideas to our administration and the CSC Foundation so we may get permission to move ahead on working at the site. We'll need to figure out how to actually build the labyrinth at this site, what materials might be used and how to fund the materials. But once we can solve these parts of the design problem, the ways the campus and community can benefit from the project are many. We see this as a way to engage students across disciplines and across disciplines. History and literature students can use the labyrinth to explore its use throughout culture and history. Students in art appreciation, art history, and 3-D design/sculpture can relate this to land art and participate in the making of a land art piece with the physical placement of materials and building of the labyrinth. Graphic design students have and will participate in the research, measuring, planning, sketching, and mapping. The design as well as the design of signage and brochures, and other materials. Ceramics and 3-D design/sculpture classes can create earth-friendly sculptural pieces to enhance the site. We also see this as a job site for the annual campus day of volunteering, The Big Event.

We can create a place of art, of history, of wonder, of contemplation, and of peace. A refuge to connect us to nature and to each other in unsettling times.

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University and College Designers Association's
Design Education Summit:
HUMAN CENTERED JUNE 2020

