

Palimpsest

A palimpsest is a conceptual model of a place as a multilayered structure that emphasizes the coexistence of multiple visions and impacts of different cultures on the landscape. Originally the term referred to a type of medieval manuscript in which new text was written over previous text that had been partly erased, palimpsest has become a widespread metaphor for cultural landscapes coincidentally with the rise of interest in the symbolic properties of landscape, semiotics, and representation.

Origins of the Term

The term *palimpsest* originates from the Greek *palin* (‘‘again’’) and *psaio* (‘‘I scrape’’). The notion became a useful metaphor in the humanities and in fiction more than a century ago. It was used by scholars in humanities disciplines to depict the layering of different texts on one piece of parchment, in which subsequent layers do not erase all the traces of their predecessors. It was stressed that the earlier layers of the palimpsest did not disappear and remained visible through the more recent layers, so that one can recognize the previous layers of the text. This approach was used in architecture and urban history to describe the coexistence of material elements that originated in different historical periods in a building or urban site.

This vision was close to early-20th-century research on cultural landscape, since Carl Sauer emphasized the role of temporal change of the landscape. This notion was followed by Derwent Whittlesey's writings on sequent occupance in the 1920s. Time passed before the vision of a landscape as multilayered came into usage in geography. The first geographer to call a landscape a palimpsest was Donald Meinig, who used the term in 1979 in the preface to his edited book *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*. What Meinig meant was that the making of the landscape is a temporal process and the landscape itself reflects some of its past properties. The historical model of landscape as a palimpsest includes the genesis of its various elements’’ an approach that shows that some of them remain in place for long periods of time, some have changed, some have been forgotten, others have been reinvented, and, finally, some have been totally destroyed and new elements have emerged in their place.

Symbolic Landscape as a Palimpsest

As the symbolic properties of the cultural landscape were stressed in the ‘‘new cultural geography’’ and emphasis was put on human interpretations and representations of a landscape, the metaphor of place as a palimpsest became popular. The emphasis in this approach was on differences in the landscape as it is ‘‘read’’ by social groups and individuals, differentiated by identity, occupation, lifestyles, experience, imaginative power, and emotional factors. A palimpsest indicates that the landscape consists of different fragments of the text, which can conflict with one another. This interpretation of the term turns reading of the landscape into a process of multivocal communication and the text into an ‘‘intertext.’’ The *intertext*, in semiotics, is a structure of mutual references of multiple meanings; the same is true of the palimpsest in geography.

Semiotic model of a Palimpsest

To study the relations between various layers of place as a palimpsest, the semiotic model is needed if the landscape itself is to be regarded as a text. The concept of mythogeography, which appeared in Russia in the early 2000s, suggests such a model; here, place is seen as a complex of

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an endless number of coexisting semiological systems. Each of these systems is one of the layers of the palimpsest, and each layer is regarded as a context, not a narrative, because it is organized around one dominant idea. Such contexts may be the geographical description of a place, place perceptions and imaginations, images and metaphors of a place, and so on. Semiotics helps analyze these layers as spatial myths, and the process of their formation is one of semiosis. The essence of this approach is in the endless interpretation of place, during which the new senses of a place emerge.

criticisms of the model

The model of place as a palimpsest originated in historical and cultural geography and can be described as one of several ways to describe cultural changes in a landscape. The theory of spatial diffusion is a "dynamic" alternative to the palimpsest, as the vision of a place as a sum of elements with different times of origin. Another criticism is that palimpsests represent landscapes as passive entities, only as reflections of human interpretations and perceptions. The semiological model is useful to stress the role of the landscape itself in the formation of new layers of the palimpsest.

The model of place as a palimpsest may be used in tourist destination management, marketing of territories, regional promotion, and other activities in which the construction of new images of space and place is needed.

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Further Readings

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