

# Layers of Land

The Palimpsest Concept in Relation to Landscape Architecture

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# Abstract

This paper researches how the palimpsest concept is used in relation to landscape, and how it can function as a tool within landscape architecture. Palimpsest originally refers to old parchment handwritings, where new text has been applied on top of effaced, but still discernable, earlier writing. Superimposition of information is the core of the palimpsest concept, used within a range of scientific as well as cultural fields. The purpose of this paper is to find how a landscape palimpsest can be distinguished among the many different layers of landscape, such as historical or cultural, and to examine the potential use of the concept in theory and practice of the landscape architecture field. The study is conducted as a literature survey, examining the use of the palimpsest concept within academic works related to landscape. Examples of use of the palimpsest concept within archaeology, urban morphology, cultural geography, architecture and landscape architecture are analyzed in their respective context, based on their relation to landscape layers and potential use for landscape architects. The results indicate a range of uses within different disciplines. For landscape architects, the concept is concluded useful primarily as a method of landscape analysis and as a design approach. Using the palimpsest concept as a means to both verbalize in theory and implement in practice the diverse layers of landscape, has potential to enhance the inherent values of a site in analysis and design.

# Sammandrag

I denna uppsats undersöks hur begreppet palimpsest används i förhållande till landskap, samt hur det kan användas som ett verktyg inom landskapsarkitekturen. Palimpsest syftar ursprungligen på antika handskrifter på pergament, där gammal text som skrapats bort och skrivits över fortfarande går att utläsa. Överlagring av information är kärnan i palimpsestbegreppet, som idag används inom såväl en rad vetenskapliga discipliner som kulturfältet. Syftet med uppsatsen är att utröna vad som utskiljer en landskapspalimpsest bland landskapets olika lager, såsom historiska och kulturella, samt att utreda hur palimpsestbegreppet kan fungera som ett verktyg inom landskapsarkitekturens teori och praktik. Genom litteraturstudier undersöks användningen av palimpsestbegreppet i en rad discipliner kopplade till landskap, såsom arkeologi, stadsmorfologi, kulturgeografi, arkitektur och landskapsarkitektur. Exempel på användning av palimpsestbegreppet analyseras i respektive kontext utifrån sin förhållning till olika landskapslager och sin potentiella nytta för landskapsarkitekturen. Undersökningen visar på en bredd av användningar inom olika discipliner. För landskapsarkitekturen framträder två huvudsakliga användningssätt; dels som en metod för att analysera landskap med hänsyn till dess olika lager; dels som ett förhållningssätt till gestaltning, där landskapets befintliga lager blir en utgångspunkt för förändringar och tillägg. Användning av palimpsestbegreppet som ett sätt att verbalisera landskapets lager i teori och konkretisera dem i praktik har potential att framhäva och förstärka platsers inneboende värde i analys och gestaltning.





# Introduction

I emphasize that the built environment is a sort of palimpsest, a document in which one layer of writing has been scraped off, and another one applied. An acute, mindful explorer who holds up the palimpsest to the light sees something of the earlier message, and a careful, confident explorer of the built environment soon sees all sorts of traces of past generations. (Stilgoe 1999, p.6)

Put your foot down, wherever you are, and let the sole rest on the uppermost layer of the Earth's crust. Underneath you, the ground holds stratum after stratum of geological sediments. The ground also holds the remains of human life and activity, stored as artifacts in the soil, structures on the surface or as the very shape of the land itself that human will and force have altered. Today, we know these intertwined layers of natural formations and cultural traces in our physical surroundings as the *landscape*. Whether it is natural, rural or urban, human perception always guides our understanding of landscape. We experience the landscape through our senses, and interpret it through our culture and the knowledge of our time. The more aware and informed we are about how landscapes develop, the more they can tell us about the natural and cultural forces acting over time to form their present character.

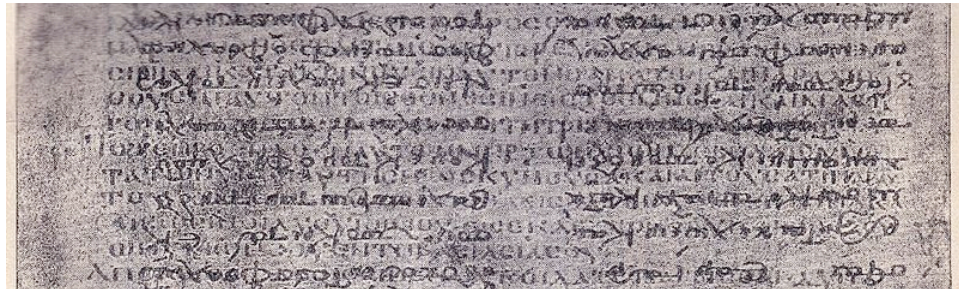
To communicate ideas about landscapes, we may employ different concepts that in merely one word have the power to convey a set of ideas or implications. This paper is dedicated to the exploration of one such concept, known as *palimpsest*. In a landscape context, the palimpsest concept is used to describe a succession of layers, over time altering and adding to the landscape strata. It is used as a concept or metaphor to describe the over-written layers of information that we may discern from the landscape, such as old city plans still visible in the street grid, or the hills of closed landfills turned into lush parkland slopes.

The palimpsest concept has been employed in an architectural context since the 1980's, where it was first introduced by the American architect Peter Eisenman (Krinke 2001). It is discussed in connection to brownfield renewal projects in Western Europe and North America, with contemporary examples such as the reclamation of derelict industrial land in the Rhur area of Germany, and the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island in New York (Krinke 2001). The palimpsest concept is also associated with the theories of the recently emerged landscape urbanism movement, where it is considered a strategy for practical work. It is clear that the palimpsest concept is related to projects of contemporary significance, and that it reoccurs within landscape-related discourses.

The layers of history and cultural significance that we can discern from a landscape inform our understanding of a site. The concept of palimpsest has potential to be a tool to describe and design landscape, based on the notion of layers of site-inherent values in the land. However, in my understanding, there is no coherent definition of what constitutes a *landscape palimpsest*. I believe the palimpsest concept, with so many complex connections to the features of landscape and its layers, has got greater potential for the field of landscape architecture than what is being exercised at present. Hence, this paper is dedicated to further examine and analyze the use of the palimpsest concept in relation to landscape, in order to possibly grant it a stronger position within the vocabulary and toolbox of the field.

## Origin and Range of the Palimpsest Concept

Oxford Dictionaries define the essential meaning of the term *palimpsest* as something that has been “reused or altered but still bear visible traces of its earlier form”. The word is derived from the Greek *palimpsēstos*, formed of *palin*, meaning “again”, and *psēstos*, meaning “rubbed smooth”. It originated in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century to describe a manuscript or piece of writing material on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing (Oxford Dictionaries, *palimpsest*, 2010). Encyclopedia Britannica states that the primary purpose of this old practice was to reuse parchment for economic reasons. Through means of modern technology, it is possible to discern the old texts on some of these manuscripts, revealing multiple layers of superimposed information where the underlying text is said to be “in palimpsest” (Encyclopedia Britannica, *palimpsest*, 2011). I will continue to refer to such a handwritten document as an original palimpsest throughout this paper.



*Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus is a palimpsest of a Greek Bible manuscript from the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, overwritten in the 12<sup>th</sup> century with treatises of Ephrem the Syrian, a Christian saint. The manuscript is located at the French National Library in Paris. (Wikipedia 2011)*

### Features of the Original Palimpsest

There are certain typical characteristics that I identify in the handwritten manuscripts of the original palimpsests. Whether or not they guide the use of the concept within other fields, I consider them essential to the meaning and metaphor of palimpsests as a universal concept.

In an original palimpsest, the older scraped-off layers are never completely destroyed before a new layer of information is applied. The superimposition of layers is the key idea of the palimpsest of writing, providing discernable information “in palimpsest” on the document. Also, the new layer does not have to be related to the old layers in content or context. The slate is wiped and the additional information applied as on a blank sheet. Finally, the act of scraping and over-writing is always actively performed by a human hand. Other changes to the information or state of the document, such as additions to the text or gradual wearing, are not regarded part of the palimpsest even if they alter or fade the text.

### Extended Use of the Palimpsest Concept

Brief research of the concept shows that the term palimpsest today appears within a diverse range of scientific fields. Besides landscape-related work, I find it used in relation to such disparate subjects as cell structures in the brain, forensic

investigation methods and urban renewal projects. It can describe situations where historical layers are visible simultaneously, layers of information are superimposed, or existing layers inform the organization of new structures. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2010) gives palimpsest the extended definition of “something having usually diverse layers or aspects apparent beneath the surface”, leaving a broad range of possible applications for the term. I also find the palimpsest concept used within literature theory, and as a concept employed and explored within various works of the cultural field, such as musical compositions and written novels.

## Purpose and Aim of Study

With this study I aim to examine how the palimpsest concept is being used in relation to landscape, in order to clarify its potential as a tool for theoretical and practical work within the field of landscape architecture. The primary motivation is my understanding that the palimpsest is a largely unexplored topic from a theoretical landscape architecture perspective, despite its relevance to the field. The main questions guiding the research are:

- How is the palimpsest concept being used in relation to landscape?
- How can landscape palimpsests be distinguished from the diverse layers of landscape in general?
- How can the palimpsest concept be used as a tool within landscape architecture?

The discussion and conclusions of this paper will form a part of the theoretical framework associated with the landscape architecture discourse. The aim is for this paper to be relevant for Swedish and international theorists, practitioners and students. This study is conducted in line with The International Federation of Landscape Architects' (IFLA) statement, that one of the primary tasks of landscape architects globally is “developing new or improved theories, policy and methods for landscape planning, design and management at local, regional, national and multinational levels” (IFLA 2003).

## Limitations

This study is concerned with the use of the palimpsest concept in published, professional and academic landscape-related work. I do not investigate how individual practitioners understand or use the concept personally, or how everyday people may understand a landscape palimpsest. I look at the concept as part of the vocabulary related to the landscape architecture discourse, and do not research consequences the practical use of palimpsests in landscape architecture may have from for example social or preservative perspectives. In order to successfully study consequences of palimpsest as a strategy in practical work, I consider it necessary to first establish an understanding of what palimpsest means from a landscape architecture perspective. Hence, that is the focus of this project.

The material researched for this study has an international range, as I have found the palimpsest concept more commonly employed internationally than in

Swedish publications. Furthermore, I do not consider it necessary to distinguish between Swedish and international material when it comes to concepts, regardless of writing language, used to express ideas about landscape.

## Methods of Gathering and Assessing Material

The research for this paper was conducted as a literature survey. Initially, the study was meant to focus on the use of the palimpsest concept exclusively within landscape architecture. However, it quickly became evident that the term is used primarily in an academic context and more extensively employed by geologists, archaeologists, historians, geographers and others who map and characterize the physical landscape and human relations to it, than by landscape architects. Hence, I broadened the range of source material to include work from other disciplines related to landscape and relevant to the field of landscape architecture. Books, magazines, scientific papers and websites served as sources of information analyzed as a base for discussion and conclusions. This method was chosen to get an overview of the use of the palimpsest concept, answering to the aim of assessing overall use within relevant fields rather than in-depth dissection of individual examples.

To find material, I used Swedish library databases, Google Books and Ebrary in search of available books, and the online databases Google Scholar, Web of Knowledge and Scopus to find articles and scientific papers. I also retrieved source material by reviewing the bibliographies of articles relevant to my topic, and some material was suggested and handed to me by teachers from the Department of Urban and Rural Development where this paper was produced.

In databases, I used combinations of the search words *palimpsest*, *landscape*, *architecture* and *urban*; concepts that are relevant to the context of this study and that I expected to render useful hits. When sorting the range of hits I excluded those that were concerned purely with a narrow scope of landscape related disciplines, such as glacial geology, where the content did not seem relevant to the interpretation and development of landscape sites today. Questions I asked when assessing the quality and relevance of hits were:

- Who is the author?
- From what perspective is this text written?
- What is the scientific scope?
- How is this topic relevant to the field of landscape architecture?

From the first round of relevant hits, I narrowed the scope down to focus on examples from a number of fields I considered to give a representative overview of the range of the palimpsest concept in relation to landscape. The disciplines included archaeology, urban morphology, cultural geography, architecture and landscape architecture. In the selected material, I traced the palimpsest concept expressed in text, whether it appeared in passing or as a developed thought, then analyzed in what context and with what perspective it was being used. Questions I asked during the analysis were:

- In what context is the palimpsest concept used?

- What is stated or implied in the text as being the meaning of the term palimpsest?
- What knowledge or insight does this text provide regarding the potential of the palimpsest concept from a landscape architect perspective?

Included in the result section are examples where I found that the use of the palimpsest concept could add to the understanding of its significance and potential, as ultimately viewed from a landscape architecture perspective.

## Significant Concepts

### Landscape

This paper employs the European Landscape Convention's definition of the term *landscape* as "an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors" (European Council 2000). This definition is central to the discussion of topics related to ideas of landscape, because it recognizes landscape as being not just physical land created and re-shaped over time, but land as understood by humans in their time.

### Landscape Architecture

Landscape Architects conduct research and advise on planning, design and stewardship of the outdoor environment and spaces, both within and beyond the built environment, and its conservation and sustainability of development (IFLA 2003).

The IFLA definition of *landscape architecture* expresses the broad scope of the profession, mirroring in turn the complex connections the landscape concept has to the natural and built environment and to the society. The definition of landscape architecture is important to this study in order to determine the range of questions relevant to discuss from a landscape architecture perspective.

### Layers

The ground level in our cities and landscapes is no superficial, two-dimensional given. It has a material depth, determined by the amalgam of its geological layers. It is subject to the natural dynamic in which land, water and wind affect one another. Human occupation and urbanization are accompanied by digging away or by leveling up sites, by pollution, by erosion etc. The ground level has a three-dimensional relief, [...] it has a physical and historical layeredness, an economic value and a cultural significance. (Palmboom 2010, p.44)

*Layer* is a generic term that can be used in a diversity of contexts. As exemplified by the Palmboom quote, a range of different layers can be applied to landscape as a physical and a cultural concept. Based on my research and the aspects being presented and discussed in this paper, I identify the following kinds of layers as immediately relevant to the concept of landscape in this study:

**Physical layers**, where *layer* is defined by Oxford Dictionaries as "a sheet, quantity, or thickness of material, typically one of several, covering a surface or body" (Oxford Dictionaries, *layer*, 2010). This could be a geological strata

making up the physical ground, as well as superimposed physical remains of cultural activity, such as new city buildings laid out along an old street pattern.

**Layers of meaning**, that building on ideas of Bailey (2006) and Schein (1997) are used in this paper to describe social discourses, personal memories and the like, that adds up to the individual or communal understanding and significance of an item, idea, site or movement. These intangible layers could be the diverse range of interests and opinions held by groups of people affected by a particular landscape project. It could also be the different memories and associations a certain site evokes in its visitors, depending on their individual experiences and connections to the place.

**Layers of time**, where *time* is defined by Oxford Dictionaries as “the indefinite continued progress of existence and events in the past, present, and future regarded as a whole” (Oxford Dictionaries, *time*, 2010). Through time, we define chronological sequences that measure the duration of events. Layers of time represent the fourth dimension of landscape and impose progress and change to all other landscape layers, depending on the processes that govern them.

**Historical layers**, used in this paper to describe the chronology of events of past times, represented through remains in the physical layers of land. It refers primarily to the distinguishable layers of human activity remaining in landscape, such as city development through the ages.

**Cultural or social layers**, used in this paper to describe the different layers of ideas and meaning that are present in a society, either co-existing at a certain point in history or changing through the course of time. The cultural or social layers will, over time, also be manifested in the historical and physical layers of landscape, shaped in accordance with ideas of a certain time.

## Results and Reflections

In my research I find the palimpsest concept used within a range of landscape-related fields, all with different perspectives on land and its layers. The following set of examples represents perspectives where landscape is treated like a record of the past, a cultural construction of the present, and a starting point for new development. For each individual case, the use of the palimpsest concept is first described and exemplified within its context, and then analyzed. I also make some reflections on the potential significance of the result to the field of landscape architecture, which will be developed further in the discussion section of this paper.

### Palimpsest and Archaeology

Archaeologists study immense time spans of distant past, preceding the emergence of written language. To the archaeologist, the landscape holds in its physical layers the remains of our prehistoric human history. Through the excavation, mapping and scientific examination of artifacts and material traces of human culture, keys to understanding the past are derived from the land (Nationalencyklopedin, *arkeologi*, 2011).

Archaeology professor Geoff Bailey elaborates on the palimpsest concept in a paper on time perspectives in archaeology. He presents five different kinds of palimpsests, describing how the distribution of remains in landscape can be described from a spatial and temporal perspective: true palimpsests, accumulative palimpsests, spatial palimpsests, temporal palimpsests and palimpsests of meaning (Bailey 2006). I summarize his reasoning in the following definitions:

**A true palimpsest** is a site where all previous layers of information have been erased, and only the very last layer remains discernable. A true palimpsest can be of varying scale, from a re-shaped item to the demolition and re-creation of entire city districts.

**An accumulative palimpsest** consists of remains from different historical layers superimposed on a site, more or less altered and blurred over time. Because of the superimposition, there is usually a significant loss of material in accumulative palimpsests.

**A spatial palimpsest** consists of remains from different historical layers spread out over a larger area, though not necessarily effacing each other. It is essentially similar to the accumulative palimpsest, in practice distinguished depending on the scale of observation.

**A temporal palimpsest** is comprised of similar objects and features associated with a single deposit or site. The individual layers are defined by their temporal organization, and the sequence in which they were added to the site is the main significance of this palimpsest.

**A palimpsest of meaning** is the succession of meanings acquired by an individual object, site, theory or the like, through the different modes of use and associations connected to it, gradually changing through time until its final abandonment or current use.

Bailey presents a range of different palimpsests, distinguished by the kind of layer that is being considered, and the mode of gradual superimposition, alteration or over-writing of the land. Some of the palimpsests are comprised of physical remains. These are distinguished depending on how the information is distributed either spatially, if it is superimposed or spread out over a larger area, or temporally, if the timely order of the layers is central to the palimpsest. In such physical palimpsests, Bailey also counts the geological processes, having great impact on how archeological artifacts are being dispersed and preserved over long time spans, as part of the palimpsest of a site alongside cultural artifacts: "The erosion of soil from a hill slope and its re-deposition in a sedimentary basin is another example of this type of spatial palimpsest" (Bailey 2006, p. 207).

Bailey describes the scale of space and time as essential factors when reading the landscape as a palimpsests from an archaeological perspective. Depending on what time span and area is being studied, the features of the palimpsest may appear coarser or finer, down to the finest level of individual events, thoughts and actions. Depending on the time resolution different processes and artifacts in landscape might become apparent or obscured.

The palimpsest of meaning is the only palimpsest where intangible layers dominate the definition. A palimpsest of meaning does not have to be a tangible object in Baileys definition, but can as well be a social movement or idea.



## **Analysis: Palimpsest as a Method of Landscape Analysis and Characterization**

From Bailey's reasoning, I understand the palimpsest concept within archaeology to be used as a precise tool to analyze and characterize landscape sites.

Depending on how the information, in this case primarily remains of human cultures, is organized spatially and temporally in the landscape, different palimpsest labels can be applied to a site. In his definitions, Bailey has developed and refined the metaphor of the original palimpsest to suit the needs of archaeological research.

I find Bailey's idea of a true palimpsest contradictory to the Encyclopedia Britannica definition of the original palimpsest, where the underlying information is "in palimpsest" of the whole. The encyclopedia definition gives that if there is no underlying information to work out, there cannot be a palimpsest. It is clear that the palimpsests concept in relation to landscape has a wider interpretation than the original palimpsest.

Through the five detailed palimpsests that Bailey describes, it seems that every landscape site of archaeological significance can be said to be a palimpsest of one sort or another. His definitions cover both natural and cultural physical layers, layers of time and layers of meaning in different sub-palimpsests. Landscape architects may not necessarily benefit from such detailed definitions of multiple palimpsests as Bailey presents. There is a risk of the sub-divided concept getting too specific and narrow to be a widely applicable concept useful to describe and communicate landscape ideas.

## **Palimpsest and Urban Morphology**

Through the history of urban landscape, successive layers of cultural development have made their marks on the land and are ultimately manifested in the morphology of the current city. I find the palimpsest concept used to describe and interpret the gradual over-writing of land use and built structure in the urban context. It occurs in relation to urban development in general, presented here by examples from Matthew Carmona, Steve Tiesdell, Tim Heath and Taner Oc, British scholars in the field of planning and urban design. It is also frequently found when discussing the development and cultural history of specific cities or regions, exemplified by Hans Bjarke and Barbro Santillo Frizell, professors in urban design and planning, and classical archaeology and ancient history respectively.

### **Over-writings of the City**

Discussing elements of urban morphology, such as building structures, plot patterns and cadastral patterns, Carmona et al. explain how different structural elements of the city are prone to have different endurance over time, and be more or less resilient to change. The term palimpsest is defined in this context as describing "processes of landscape change, where current uses over-write, but do not completely erase, the marks of prior use" (Carmona et al. 2010, pp. 80-81). The authors make the example of new roads being cut through the street pattern of older areas in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leaving fragmented townscapes behind. In this way, fragments and "ghosts" of patterns from successive eras are visible in the

ground plan of settlements (Carmona et al 2010, p.80). Specific examples of this principle are the original Roman street pattern still apparent in the plan of the city center of Florence, Italy, and the Piazza Navona in Rome whose form is derived from an ancient Roman stadium formerly located on the site (Carmona et al. 2010, p.80).

### The Long Life of a Street



*Via Tiburtina stretches from central Rome to the city of Tivoli, displaying a palimpsest of historical layers along its route. Here, an old excavation site meets modern construction work in the distance (Bjur & Santillo Frizell 2009, cover). Photo: Åke E:son Lindman.*

In a cross-disciplinary study initiated at the Swedish Institute in Rome, the ancient Roman street Via Tiburtina serves as a rich example of social and morphological development through history. Bjur and Santillo Frizell label the approach *urban landscape archaeology* in the edited publication of articles on the study. They state that the intention is to “tackle Rome as a palimpsest,” in order to pin down how space, movement and artifacts have changed in the city over time and how they relate to the present landscape (Bjur & Santillo Frizell 2009, p.12).

We adopt this concept, on the one hand in order to read the hidden layers per se and to discuss their contexts, and on the other hand to reflect upon their meaning in sequential urban layers. We wanted to look upon the urbanism as being composed of different more or less distinct layers originating in different times of development or decline. [...] When applying the concept of palimpsest in the context of urbanism, we look upon it as if all texts are present and readable simultaneously, as it were. A kind of double exposure of settlements, spaces of movement, city plans and architecture is what we were driving at, an anachronistic simultaneousness in the urban space. (Bjur and Santillo Frizell 2009, p.12)

The study focuses on the built survivals of various times and spaces, and aims to find if and how these interact. Different layers of information about the Roman past, emerging during different times and still visible in the features and spaces of the built environment, are broken down and examined.

## **Analysis: Palimpsest as a Paradigm for Urban Morphology**

I find the palimpsest definition presented by Carmona et al. to be essentially similar to the original palimpsest. In this context, the landscape is the tablet that changes as the current land use over-writes the faded pattern of the old. The palimpsest concept appears to be used as a paradigm to view the present city structure, acknowledging that layers or “scripts” of earlier uses still remain under the surface. The palimpsest paradigm is like a pair of glasses, making the ghosts of past times rise from the city plan and its embedded information readable.

I find Bjur and Santillo Frizell’s application of the palimpsest concept to Via Tiburtina to be a paradigm similar to Carmona et al. They use it to define the city as made up by “more or less distinct” historical layers, that can be examined side by side with “all texts present and readable simultaneously”. It is a tool to trace the development of landscape, by penetrating through the layout of the present into the layers of the past. In their reasoning, each layer has its own distinct significance printed onto the landscape tablet, and may also affect the layout and content of subsequent layers.

To the landscape architect, the approach of palimpsest as a paradigm may be useful to recognize and define the historical layers of development that have brought the landscape to its present state. It can be a way to break down the visible traces of historical use of a site, when conducting a landscape analysis.

## **Palimpsest and the Cultural Landscape**

Within some disciplines, landscape is not regarded simply as a physical matter. Instead of a stratum of geological layers or a ground plane for development, it may be studied as a social construct. Within the field of cultural geography, professor Richard Schein and professors Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels both use the palimpsest concept, but with contradictory imputations.

### **Landscape as a Social Construction**

Schein (1997) discusses landscape as a social construct in a paper presenting a conceptual framework for interpreting U.S. cultural landscape. He argues that different layers of social discourses make up the contemporary idea of landscape. Individual activities and cultural ideals govern in turn how the physical landscape is managed. Physical landscape, ultimately, is the manifestation of “discourse materialized” (Schein 1997, p.660). Schein uses the palimpsest concept to emphasize that the landscape is more than just a final product of human activity; it is something we are embedded in and interact with:

It might be more useful to begin by viewing the landscape as a palimpsest rather than cultural strata - an analogy that at least provides the possibility for erasure and overwriting and the co-existence of several different scripts, implying not just different historical eras, but several historical and contemporary actors as well. (Schein 1997, p.662)

To Schein, the landscape is not merely a thing built by humans, a “material palimpsest” as he says, but also a construct of layered social discourses with a diverse range of contributing individuals and movements (Schein 1997, p.662).

## **Landscape as a Symbol**

Cosgrove and Daniels, editors of a publication on the subject, discuss the iconography of landscape, dealing with its meaning over time in a changing historical setting. They use the palimpsest concept as an example of definite writing, as opposed to the features of computer technology in the late 1980's.

From such a postmodern perspective landscape seems less like a palimpsest whose "real" or "authentic" meanings can somehow be recovered with the right techniques, theories or ideologies, than a flickering text displayed on the word-processor screen whose meaning can be created, extended, altered, elaborated and finally obliterated by the merest touch of a button (Cosgrove & Daniels 1988, p.8).

## **Analysis: Palimpsest as a Metaphor for Landscape Process**

Connecting to the ideas of different landscape layers, I understand the individual actions and cultural ideals that Schein discusses as representing layers of meaning in landscape. In this context, the palimpsest concept brings the notion of process-oriented landscape development, where many active writers simultaneously add new layers of information, new "scripts", to landscape both as a social construct and ultimately a physical phenomenon. It is described as opposite to the idea of a cultural strata, by Schein implied to symbolize a static landscape with fixed layers. Here, I find Schein's reasoning to touch upon one of the characteristics inherent in the original concept of palimpsest; the presence of a human hand to create or re-create the imprints on the landscape tablet, whether intangible or physical. It is continuous human action and interpretation that creates the palimpsest of cultural landscape over time. This implies that landscape is not only a palimpsest of chronologically overlaid historical natural and cultural eras. It is a record where every layer of information is a palimpsest in itself, holding the great simultaneous diversity of individual and cultural meaning present at a certain time. I find the palimpsest concept used as a metaphor, acknowledging the significance of direct and indirect human involvement in the shaping of landscape, and emphasizing the non-static qualities inherent both in physical land and social ideas of landscape.

In opposition to Schein, Cosgrove and Daniels use the palimpsest concept as a metaphor for the static, with a "real" or "authentic" meaning inherent, waiting to be discovered. In their reasoning, the underlying message is depicted as the significance of the palimpsest, rather than its layered nature. They use the palimpsest concept in the sense of the original palimpsest, where the layers are already fixed and there is a definite message hidden beneath the surface.

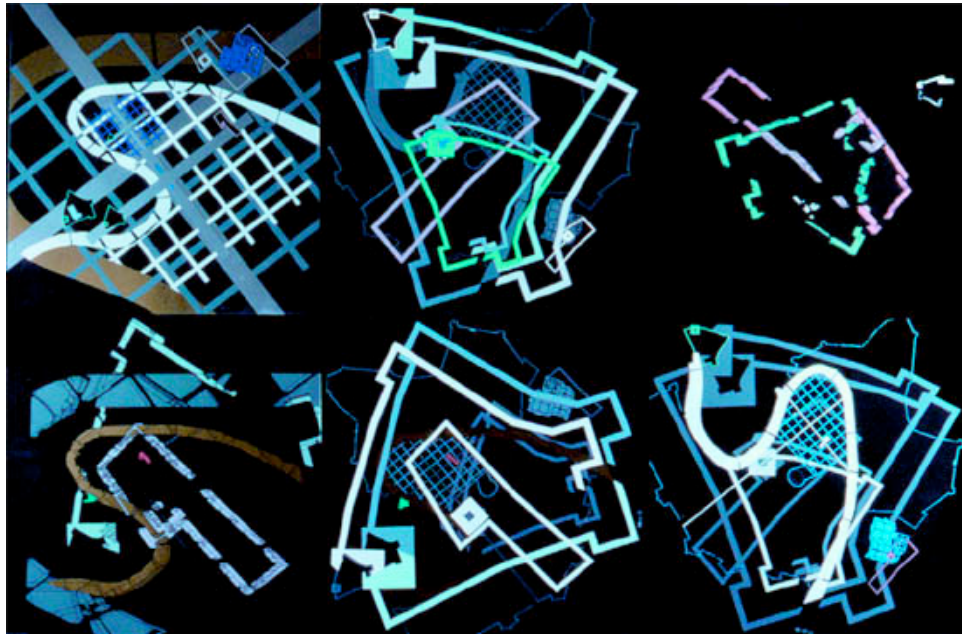
I believe that Cosgrove and Daniels' use of the palimpsest concept can be discarded as a metaphor useful to landscape architects. To employ the palimpsest concept as describing a static landscape with an authentic meaning to it is to omit the basic condition of landscape interpretation, namely that it is relative. Depending on the focus, different types of information can be drawn from the landscape and its layers. The approach of Schein, with the palimpsest concept indicating simultaneous processes and social depth as a characteristic of the development of landscape, has more of an immediate relevance to landscape architecture. By analyzing not only the physical conditions of a site, but also the

social significance and different meaning it may have to the community, the prospects for sustainable projects with a strong local identity may increase.

## Palimpsest and Design

In creative landscape work, both the physical, historical and cultural layers of landscape are taken into consideration in projects that usually serve to alter or add to a specific site. The palimpsest concept is employed in building and landscape architecture, as exemplified by the American architect and theorist Peter Eisenman and brownfield renewal projects. It is also used to describe practical approaches to design within the landscape urbanism discourse, expressed by landscape architect student Hanna Assargård in her master's thesis.

### Eisenman and Post-Modern Architecture



*Moving Arrows, Eros and Other Errors, Romeo + Juliet explores the superimposed qualities of site-specific elements in varying scales, paired with fictional additions in a story of a site. Photo: Eisenman Architects.*

Eisenman was greatly influenced by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida and ideas of deconstructivism that developed during the post-modernism of the 1980's. In his work, Eisenman uses the palimpsest concept as a way of breaking down a site and a design in layers, with both tangible and conceptual significance. In his approach, layers can be site-specific physical and historical ones, but can also consist of fictional additions to a site (Krinke 2001).

Stan Allen (2006) explains that to Eisenman, the site of a project is not a static given, but something that both the designer and the subjective visitor are part in creating. Eisenman was influenced by semantic theories and thought of his architecture as writing; stories where different inscriptions are added through the design process and linger in the final product. The viewer then, is presumed to be able to "read" a building by "decoding the traces and reconstructing the narrative of design procedures" (Allen 2006, p.60). In his unbuilt Verona project,



*Moving Arrows, Eros and Other Errors, Romeo + Juliet*, Eisenman superimposes various physical scales and draws inspiration from different versions of the Romeo and Juliet drama, in order to “uncover the story of a site and retell it with architectural metaphors” (Eisenman 1985, p.118). The setting of the project is real, but the design has a fictional twist. He writes:

The images are revealed in excavations, both symbolic and making real the idea of uncovering a story. Illusion and reality collide, and past, present and future remain in perpetual flux. By treating the site not simply as presence but both a palimpsest and a quarry, containing traces of both memory and immanence, the site can be thought of as non-static. (Eisenman 1985, p.118)

### **City Regeneration and Brownfield Renewal**

In the aftermath of decline and global relocation of industry in Western Europe and North America in the late decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, processes of reclaiming derelict and polluted land have gained increased attention. Krinke elaborates on the significance of the palimpsest concept, as originally introduced by Eisenman, as a source of inspiration and a practical approach applied in several examples of brownfield renewal and landfill development (Krinke 2006). Building on Eisenman’s approach, the palimpsest concept can be “a way to analyze a site and create a project from multiple, shifting vantage points” (Krinke 2001, p.129). It pushes a project beyond mere natural and cultural preservation and into a creative art.

Thinking of the site as a palimpsest allows designers to utilize the site’s layers of history to reveal aspects of the site, or even to add a new layer of self-conscious fiction. Using principles of collage and juxtaposition, history is seen not as linear phenomena, but as layers of discrepancies between a past event (history) and present recall (memory). (Krinke 2006, p.128)



*LATZ+PARTNER’s design for the German Landscape Park Duisburg Nord, formerly a coal and steel production plant, represents a contemporary landscape palimpsest. “The existing patterns and fragments formed by industrial use were taken, developed and re – interpreted with a new syntax, existing fragments were interlaced into a new ‘landscape’” (LATZ+PARTNER 2007). Photo: LATZ+PARTNER.*

## **Landscape Urbanism Theory**

*Landscape urbanism* is a discourse emerging in the late 1990's, focusing on urban landscape character and development. It is not a single theory, but consists of a set of ideas presented by architects, landscape architects, urban designers and planners primarily in the United States. Landscape urbanism discards dichotomies between landscape and city and between fixed form and process. Instead, landscape is emphasized as a system of infrastructure and process capable of organizing the components of modern urbanism (Assargård 2011).

Attempting to define a methodology for the landscape urbanism discourse, Assargård (2011) categorizes palimpsest as one of several strategies to employ a layered model within landscape urbanism. She describes layering as a model to structure different components of a site, emphasizing how landscape urbanism suggests a holistic layering of different systems where natural, cultural and historical perspectives all have their place (Assargård 2011).

The strategy Palimpsest mainly addresses the historical and social aspects. The historical layers of a site are guiding for the proposal, hence the historic layers will affect the program and social use of the site. As a consequence, the users could possibly sense the history of a site, which constitute a potential for social sustainability. (Assargård 2001, p.166)

## **Analysis: Palimpsest as a Design Approach**

In creative work, landscape is both considered in its present state and as a vision of what it could become. The designer can recognize the present layers of history and cultural meaning that has developed over time, as potential starting points for further development or inspiration for new design.

In Eisenman's work, I find the multiple layers of information of a site not treated simply as a palimpsest of history visible in the site at hand, but rather something being created both by the designer, in the agglomeration of old and new layers, and by the subject, present to interpret it. The palimpsest is a tool to separate the layers, add new ones, and reassemble them in an order allowing for multiple interpretations. Also in a post-industrial context, the palimpsest appears to be not only the existing layering of a site, but something that is created in the re-making of a site with additions and alterations of the present. In my interpretation, Krinke describes the palimpsest as a conscious approach rather than a given physical condition.

Within landscape urbanism theory, the palimpsest is more of an operational strategy than a method of landscape assessment per se. Given that the site analysis is always the starting point for any landscape design, the main purpose of a palimpsest strategy in this context is to incorporate site-inherent values into a new design or system. In Assargård's words, this is a way to potentially achieve more holistic and socially sustainable designs. Hence, the palimpsest approach might strengthen the layers of meaning associated with a site, by making visible the connection to its history and enhancing its local distinctiveness and identity.



# Discussion and Conclusions

With this study I set out to research the use of the palimpsest concept in relation to landscape. My ambition was to find out how it can be distinguished from the layering of land in general, and how it can be employed from a landscape architecture perspective. The results presented suggest several different approaches to the palimpsest concept in landscape related works, where varying landscape layers are central to different disciplines.

## Static Layers, Moving Land

One of the questions guiding my research was how landscape palimpsests can be distinguished from the general layers of land. I find the idea of layers, on one hand so closely connected to the concept of landscape, to stand in contradiction to the inherent change and process-oriented flow of the non-static entities of landscape. While a physical layer is defined by precise borders between one stratum and another, landscape as a whole moves, jerks and alters, both physically and as a concept within human understanding, for each layer of time added to history. We count time in layers of days, years, eras, but time itself appears to move seamlessly beyond the dimensions of length, width and depth in which the layer definition seems immediately applicable. The concept of palimpsest may be more suitable than layer to express the shifts and flows of landscape. As emphasized by Schein, it also allows for multiple interpretations of land, by the many people who inhabit, interact with and create landscape.

## Landscape as Palimpsest

Which dimensions of landscape that are considered part of a palimpsest seem to depend on the context of use and purpose of the user. In the examples examined in this study, the different authors all make a range of more or less defined categorizations and assumptions regarding the nature of the palimpsest concept, in order for it to suit their respective fields. The features of the original palimpsest are not criteria for the sufficiency of the concept in its context. The palimpsest concept is invented by humans in order to explain or communicate a set of ideas, and its definition is not intrinsic but dependent on a human agenda.

The diversity of uses reduces the immediate potential of the palimpsest concept as a widely applicable landscape term. In all communication, the sender and receiver of information needs to share a common understanding of the meaning of a concept used, in order for it to come across clearly. As for the palimpsest concept, it communicates the idea of several layers of information being present and detectable, but the kind of layers are not given.

The palimpsest layers exemplified in this study range from physical remains of natural and cultural activity added to landscape through history, to the layers of personal and communal memory and meaning associated with an place, item, movement or idea. It seems to me a significant distinction whether a palimpsest is considered to be comprised of physical layers of natural or cultural significance, or of intangible layers of meaning. There is a difference between cultural remains layered in the physical land of a site, and the cultural

significance of a site changing through time. It requires different tools to analyze the history and morphology of physical remains on one hand, and the development of cultural meaning and memory held by the society and its individuals on the other. Likewise, different focuses are required when looking at the present landscape depending on whether natural and cultural physical layers are considered to be equally important parts of the palimpsest, or if it is primarily the layers of information about human activity that are being counted.

Another important distinction is that of the scale of the palimpsest in question. In accordance with Baileys reasoning, I understand scale to be both geographical and temporal, referring to the area and the time span that a palimpsest is considered to consist of. The layers constituting the palimpsest will be understood differently between analyzing a square meter of ground or an entire city district, and starting from the Middle Ages or from the dawn of this century. It is the geographical boundaries of a landscape palimpsest that defines the borders of the “tablet,” and the time-depth considered that decides the resolution in which the layers of time appear to the observer. Depending on scale, I find that a palimpsest can be regarded both as an overall approach, a paradigm, to consider the always-present over-writings of landscape in general, as well as a single site in itself, with a defined and discernable palimpsestic nature.

## **Application of Results Within Landscape Architecture**

In the examples of this study, I’ve found the palimpsest concept used as a method of landscape analysis and characterization, a paradigm for urban morphology, a metaphor for landscape process, and as a design approach. Within these examples, I identify two principal ways of using the palimpsest concept with a direct relevance for landscape architecture work.

### **Palimpsest in Landscape Analysis**

Analyzing the present landscape using the palimpsest concept as a paradigm or metaphor is one overall way where I think the concept can be suitably applied to landscape architecture practice. The landscape can be scrutinized with focus on the historical layers that have created it over time, and that remain discernable in the present landscape. Here, the palimpsest can be both a paradigm to view an entire landscape as in the case of Carmona et al. and Bjur and Santillo Frizell, and a tool to characterize and assess individual landscape sites as used by Bailey. Depending on what kind of landscape layers being analyzed, different aspects of landscape depth may be described.

Palimpsest as a metaphor expressing the multitude of superimposed and co-existing layers of personal and cultural information as used by Schein may also be relevant in relation to landscape analysis. Especially in an urban context, landscape architecture is closely connected to social development, and the contemporary ideas of landscape ultimately affect its physical character. Also, understanding the layers of meaning associated with landscape may be essential in order to create places that people can relate to in a positive way.

In practice, the palimpsest concept may be used among the tools of landscape architects. Acknowledging and utilizing the palimpsest nature of landscape in landscape inventories, mapping of land use, users interviews and other ways in

which landscape is being analyzed, may bring forward the different layers of history and meaning embedded in the land.

### **Palimpsest as a Design Approach**

Employing the palimpsest concept as a design approach is a way to implement the concept in landscape architecture projects. The present landscape layers can serve as a starting point for creative addition and modification by a designer, that ultimately focuses on how the ideas of layers and their values can be implemented in practice. In such an approach, I regard the acknowledgement of layers of historical and cultural information inherent in landscape and valuable to the identity and distinctiveness of a place as essential.

Using palimpsest as a design approach recognizes a creative process typical for landscape architecture, which includes both a site analysis and final design of a project. The initial phases of a practical project may include a landscape analysis where the site is described and assessed through a palimpsest paradigm or metaphor as described above. Regarding landscape as a palimpsest is a perspective that permeates the entire process of a project.

The active use of the palimpsest concept within design seems to me derived from an understanding of the benefits of multiple layers of information displayed in a project. In contrast to the original writers of parchment palimpsests, who did not necessarily care for the underlying message of scraped off text when re-using the scarcely available writing material, the landscape palimpsest is understood to carry historical and cultural significance. It can add to the understanding of a site and the perception of *genius loci*, the spirit of the place, a strive at heart of the profession. In line with Assargård's reasoning, the incorporation of historical and cultural layers in a new design may have potential to enhance the identity and significance of a site, and benefit cultural preservation, morphological resilience and social sustainability over time. Applying a palimpsest design approach may be a way to conduct more holistic landscape work.

## **Review of Research Methods and Results**

I chose to conduct this study as a literature survey, using mainly digital databases to find material that then was analyzed according to a set of guiding questions. I found this an adequate way to collect a broad range of works in which the palimpsest concept is used, in order to get an overview.

In the results section, I present examples of the use of the palimpsest concept sometimes by direct quotation, and sometimes by paraphrasing the author. I attempt to present the context and perspective used by the author in order to clearly show how the use of the concept relates to my guiding questions. Although it is my intention to be objective and clear in my presentation of the work of others, the results are inevitably colored by my understanding of their nature, as my knowledge and frame of reference bids.

The sources span from publications of this very year, to material from the 1980's. The course of time surely affects how specific concepts are being understood within academic discourses, and it is likely that the more recent sources represent the most relevant examples of the use of the palimpsest concept today. Some of the sources are primary in the sense that the authors use the palimpsest concept as part of their own reasoning. Others are secondary in the

sense that they discuss the use of the concept based on others work. In this paper, I consider both kinds equally important in creating and reinforcing a framework for how the palimpsest concept is being used.

Due to the complex character of the topic, distinguishing and characterizing landscape palimpsests from the overall idea of landscape layers is not an easy task. I have not thoroughly mapped or created statistical data on the use of the concept in landscape works in detail, but have focused on a selection of relevant examples. I do not claim to have covered the full range of the landscape discourse in my research, nor thoroughly analyzed all the material found. The results and conclusions presented in this paper are to be considered contributions to the understanding of the palimpsest concept within the landscape architecture discourse, a basis for further studies and inspiration for practical use.

## Suggestions for Further Studies

The scope of this paper has not included practical consequences that use of the palimpsest concept as a tool for landscape planning and design strategy may have for the built environment and its inhabitants. This presents opportunities for further studies.

It would be relevant to investigate if palimpsests in landscape affect how people understand and relate to a place. Could a visible palimpsest deepen the understanding of the history and context of a place to the average person, and can that if so be said to give it a stronger identity? Furthermore, it would be interesting to see how palimpsests could function as a middle ground between complete remake and strict preservation of a site. Could a conscious use of a palimpsest building strategy render more resilient urban environments? Also, the palimpsest concept could be examined in depth in relation to other landscape architect tools, such as different analysis methods, design strategies or information systems such as digital maps and GIS.

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