

Palimpsest

1. Definition

Originally, a palimpsest is a paper or parchment which, in times when writing material was scarce, was written on more than once, with a first layer of writing being written over in such a way that older layers are still (partly) legible underneath (see fig. 10). Given the multiple historical layers still more or less visible in many present-day cities, these are often suggestively described in terms of the palimpsest.

Fig. 10: The Archimedes Palimpsest.



Source: <http://archimedespalimpsest.org/>

2. Example

Many contemporary European cities can be regarded as palimpsests in built form: This is true of the city of Essen in Germany's Ruhr region, for instance, in which an underlying medieval layout is still visible in the kidney-shaped form of the inner city and in the course of present-day roads around the city center. Similarly, the palimpsest may be regarded as a suggestive concept to describe the location and shape of streets which still trace a winding way in between buildings long gone, or the presence of churches from centuries ago, churches that might each in turn be seen as palimpsests if they have gone through various phases of enlargement, redesign and modernization.

3. Explanation

The city is a space in which different historical periods are preserved in different layers of the urban fabric, which in turn preserve the memory of previous epochs associated with the built environment. The city can thus be seen as a spatialized form of urban memory materialized in palimpsestic structures. In addition to the built environment, local urban memory, too, can be understood as palimpsestic: Particular neighbourhoods may be characterized by a dense layering of memories, anecdotes, urban legends triggered by established festivities, parades or specific buildings such as long-existing pubs or restaurants, which may be associated with legendary local figures formally or informally memorialized in street names, memorial plaques or drinking songs, poems, or nicknames. Urban sociologist Gerald D. Suttles has introduced the notion of "the cumulative texture of local urban culture" to describe this phenomenon. The layering of immaterial urban memory can also be conceptualized as a palimpsest. In his vastly influential *Arcades Project* (*Das Passagenwerk*, 1927–1940), a 1000-page experimental work on the 19th-century arcades in Paris, which proceeds largely through the juxtaposition of some 3500 quotations from 800 different sources, German philosopher Walter Benjamin developed the related notion

of “superposition”⁵⁰. This is Benjamin’s term for the interpenetration of different layers of time in urban space. Given a certain frame of mind, this simultaneous co-presence of different historical layers can be perceived and understood by an urban observer. Benjamin clearly characterizes this frame of mind as that of the *flâneur*, the disinterested observer of city life who walks the city without an agenda: “Thanks to this phenomenon, anything that ever potentially happened in a space is perceived simultaneously. Space winks at the *flâneur*: ‘Well, whatever may have happened here?’”⁵¹ Thus, superposition refers to both the temporal layering and to the ability to perceive it. This view allows one to conceptualize the importance of an observer’s knowledge of a site’s previous history even if there are no visible traces left, while the notion of the palimpsest suggests that older layers are still visible.

For the urban planner and for anyone trying to understand the historical fabric of the city, superposition can also refer to a conscious approach or even technique. The ability to perceive how an ensemble of modern buildings fits into its historical contexts in terms of the remaining elements of past historical periods, but also in the way it may even cite a pre-war building that might have stood on the same plot – and thus the ability to perceive the continuing presence of the past in the palimpsestic layering of the built environment – is crucial for any planning effort in the same environment.⁵²

4. Applications

The notion of the city as a palimpsest and as a spatialized form of memory in which physical layers of the built environment call to mind immaterial layers of urban memory is highly relevant to the concept of “careful urban renewal” (“behutsame Stadterneuerung”), which, not least through processes of international development cooperation, has spread from Europe to many places in both the Global North and the Global South. Numerous projects in China, for instance, try to maintain the historical urban fabric and external appearance of buildings while technically and functionally retrofitting

them for adaptive re-use with the intention of preserving historical layers of the city. While most strongly associated with European cities, the notion of the palimpsest has long also been used for cities globally, occasionally with a shift in emphasis away from the preservation and legibility of older layers towards their erasure, in the case of excavation or the demolition of later additions to make visible earlier material layers, or when entire neighborhoods are razed to make way for new development.⁵³

Related entries: Metaphor, Polyphony

Further Reading

- Dillon, Sarah. *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory*. New York: Continuum, 2007.
- Gurr, Jens Martin. "Reversing Perspectives: Urban Memory in Built and Literary Post-Industrial Cities." Gurr. *Charting Literary Urban Studies: Texts as Models of and for the City*. New York: Routledge, 2021. 84–109. Link to open access version: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003111009>.
- Gurr, Jens Martin. "Palimpsest." *The Routledge Companion to Literary Urban Studies*. Ed. Lieven Ameel. New York/London: Routledge, 2022. 72–86.
- Suttles, Gerald D. "The Cumulative Texture of Local Urban Culture." *American Journal of Sociology* 90, no. 2 (1984): 283–304.