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Layered Landscapes

A Problematic Theme in Historic Landscape Research

Johannes Renes

Abstract
Within the larger theme of landscape biographies, a number of smaller themes have been explored. One of these is the metaphor of historical layers in landscapes. At first, vertical time-layers were distinguished literally by geologists and archaeologists mapping stratified sediments and buried landscapes. But one can also come across artefacts and spatial structures from different periods in a horizontal direction, making it possible to speak of horizontal layers. A third type is often described as palimpsest, when older traces shimmer through a landscape that is dominated by the relics of later developments. In practice, traces from different periods do not just lie beside or on top of each other, but are also actively given new roles, values and meanings. Examples of ‘intellectual layers’ are neo-styles in architecture, but also reuse of heritage. Finally, even historic objects that seem unchanged through the centuries can have ‘layers of meanings’ as a result of changing functions and meanings through time. It is argued that a more sophisticated use of the metaphor of historical layers leads to less simplification and therefore to improvements in heritage planning.

Keywords: landscape biography, landscape layers, Rome, the Netherlands, planning

Introduction
In Dutch landscape studies, the biography of landscape has become a popular theme during the last decade, being used as a basic ingredient for many local studies as well as a large research programme (Kolen, 2005; Bloemers et al., 2010). However, the landscape biography is not a hermetic theory, but rather an inspiring metaphor, used as an umbrella for a number of ideas that have changed the ways we look at the history of as well as the actual dealing with landscapes (see the introductory chapter of this volume). The core of this set of ideas is the vision of landscape as
an object that is handed over again and again from one generation of users to the next, in the process undergoing not only physical changes, but also changes in value and meaning. This idea is originally inspired by literature on the ‘biography of things’/biography of objects (Kopytoff, 1986). The anthropologist Igor Kopytoff described how an object could build up its own life history by the way it was handed over from one owner to the other and during that process lose and gain ever new stories and meanings. An African religious object can become a holiday souvenir for a European tourist and can end up as a valued heritage object in a museum. This idea has since been adopted and adapted by, among others, landscape archaeologists (Gosden & Marshall, 1999; Kolen, 2005; Roymans, 1995; Roymans et al., 2009).

This vision of landscape means that the emphasis shifts from the physical landscape itself to its users, bringing landscape studies closer to the social sciences. It also means more attention to long-term change, which was particularly new for an archaeological discipline that used to be dominated by period specialists. The stronger emphasis on the users of the landscape through time has led to an increased emphasis on the use of the past in past societies (originally developed by Bradley, 2002). And, last but not least, it has led to a redefining of the old archaeological theme of historic layers in the landscape. In the present chapter I want to elaborate on this last theme.

The concept of a layered landscape was originally developed during the 19th century by geologists and archaeologists, who used it to describe the stratigraphy of sediments and buried landscapes (Renfrew & Bahn, 1991, p. 28). In this case, layers can be taken literally as sediments from different periods lying on top of each other. By dating the layers, the archaeologist can reconstruct a time sequence. In many other cases, however, layers are a metaphor to describe the complexity of a landscape. By distinguishing layers, the researcher brings structure in the complex (historic) landscape. The usual way to operationalize this idea of historical layers consists of the mapping of landscape relics from different periods (Fig. 3.1; see for example Stabbetorp et al., 2007). This, however, is a rather simplified vision. In this chapter I will try to show some of the complexities of the idea of historic layers, partly based on work by Kolen and others on the biography of landscape (Hidding et al., 2001). I will do that first of all by exploring the city of Rome. In the second part of this chapter, I will try to apply these different types of layers on the rural landscape. In the last section, I will say a few words about the use of these concepts in landscape planning and management.
Rome

The city of Rome represents a perfect example for showing different aspects of historical layers. As a starting point, the 'eternal city' offers a large concentration of visible objects from many periods. Figure 17.1 shows

Figure 17.1  The Forum of Augustus, with the pillars that remain from the Temple of Mars Ultor, founded by Augustus

During the 9th century the site was occupied by a monastery and the temple became the church of St Basilio. The monks were succeeded by Knights Hospitallers (12th century) and in 1568 by Dominican nuns. Their church of Santa Maria Annunziata, that still contained parts of the old temple, was demolished in 1926 (http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/Santa_Maria_Annunziata_ai_Monti; 21-3-2012). The Forum was excavated as a preparation for the festivities of the 2000th anniversary of Augustus' birth in 1937 (the line shows the ground level as depicted by Giovanni Antonio Dosio in 1569; see Karmon, 2011, p. 30). On top of the old ruins, later buildings can be seen.
how the town is built through time, with every period building upon the remains from earlier periods. The result is a number of vertical layers. The deeper one digs, the older the remains that can be found. In parts of Rome, particularly around the Forum, remains from the Classical periods have been made visible by excavation, partly during the Renaissance (Karmon, 2011), partly in the early years of the 19th century (Moatti, 1993, pp. 90-91) or later. Here, present-day tourists walk on the Classical street level, many metres below the medieval level.

But one stumbles not only on different time periods when one digs holes in the town. It is also on a stroll through the town that one meets objects from almost every phase in the town’s history (see for example Hotzan, 1994, p. 168).
In this respect, one could speak of horizontal layers that originated when the town grew and shrank. The relics from different phases are not spread evenly over the town. Figure 17.2 compares different periods in Roman history, on the basis of the 1551 map by Leonardo Bufalino. Shown are the oldest town (within the so-called Servian walls from the 4th century BC), Imperial Rome (within the Aurelian Wall, 270-282) and the medieval and early modern town (Scarre, 1995; Insolera, 1980; Djament-Tran, 2011). By overlaying these structures, we can sketch five main historical-geographical stories.

I Only a narrow zone of the hills, on which the oldest parts of the town were located, was part of the medieval and early modern urban area. This part of the town has been continuously inhabited since prehistory.

II During the heyday of the Roman Empire, the town had extended in all directions, but particularly onto the Campus Martius, the low-lying land near the river Tiber. During the Middle Ages most of the population of Rome lived in this area. This part of the town shows a continuous occupation for some two thousand years.

III Only in the northwest did the medieval town extend outside of the Classical town. The reason is that here, on the grave of the apostle Peter, the central church of Roman Christianity stood, surrounded by a small town quarter that was extended during the 16th century.

IV and V Finally, most of the hills were only very thinly populated during the medieval and early modern periods. These parts of the town showed the rural landscape with ruins that were so often pictured and described by early modern painters and travellers. The open spaces were filled up with new buildings during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, resulting in the landscape – so well known to tourists – of Classical ruins surrounded by recent architecture.

The diagram within the map shows how each of the town quarters shows traces from a different combination of periods, but it also shows that some parts of the town have been continuously inhabited for thousands of years. Here, the traces from different periods are difficult to distinguish. A typical example is shown in figure 17.3, based on archaeological research in the so-called Crypta Balbi town quarter. This series of four reconstructions shows how a small part of the Classical town is gradually being transformed into a medieval urban landscape. A continuous process of reuse and reinterpretation leaves some structures intact but changes most others. Old layers fade away, but often stay recognisable, as palimpsests (see figure 17.3).
Figure 17.3a-d  The Crypta Balbi area during the Roman Empire, in the 5th-6th century AD, the 10th-11th and the 14th century AD
From: Manacorda, 2003
But there is more. Perhaps more than in any other European city, the local elites of Rome continuously referred to earlier periods, in particular to the period of the Roman Empire. One of the early publications on the biography of landscape speaks of ‘intellectual layers’ (Hidding et al., 2001). The connections of the Roman Catholic church hierarchy with the ancient Roman Empire formed the foundation of the claims for Rome as the capital of Christendom. A number of Renaissance popes visualized their relation to the Classical emperors by designing straight roads that connected the main churches with some of the focal points of Classical Rome. One of these popes, Sixtus V, built a new straight road to connect the Colosseum with his own bishop’s church of St John Lateran (Insolera, 1980). The Colosseum was originally built as a recreational facility for the local population, who could watch circus acts and the occasional killing of animals, criminals and Christians. This last part of its history gave it a religious meaning during later centuries. In fact, the building survived partly because of the references to martyrs. Memorial stones provide information on restorations by the popes Clemens X (1675), Benedict XIV (1750) and Pius IX (1852).

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the references to the classical Empire became part of the legitimation for the new state of Italy and for its leaders, including of course Benito Mussolini. The Fascist Mussolini government (1922-1943) acted in the tradition of the popes by claiming to be the real successor and inheritor of the Roman Empire. The fascist dictator followed the footsteps of pope Sixtus V by building (in fact following a 19th-century plan) the Via dell’Impero that led from the Colosseum to his own headquarters at the Piazza Venezia (Painter, 2005, 22; Bosworth, 2011); after the Second World War the road was renamed as Via dei Fori Imperiali, connecting with the ancient Roman Empire instead of Mussolini’s planned new empire. Another example is Mussolini’s new urban extension of Rome for the planned 1942 world exhibition, the Esposizione Universale Roma (EUR)-quarter (Notaro, 2000). The typical architecture and the abundant use of travertine referred to classical Rome. The icon for the EUR is the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiano, also known as the Palazzo della Civiltà del Lavoro (fig. 17.4), that refers directly to the Colosseum. This is a highly symbolic landscape.

Lastly, objects that have survived the centuries, even when they remained physically unchanged, did change their meaning over time (see for example Boholm, 1997). As Schama (1995, pp. 6-7) states: ‘Landscape [...] is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock’. The temple of Hadrian was transformed into apartment blocks, other temples
Figure 17.4 The Palazzo della Civiltà Italiano in the EUR quarter

Photo: J. Renes
became medieval churches and the Mausoleum of Hadrianus became a 3rd-century fortress (later named Castel Sant’Angelo) and is now a museum. Apart from that, many of the buildings that seem to have survived without much modification have in fact more complex histories, as 19th-century enthusiasts often stripped them of medieval and post-medieval additions and reduced them to skeletons of ‘original’ material, thereby erasing fifteen centuries of history.

The Dutch Rural Landscape

So, the temporality of urban landscape can be characterized in terms of different types of layers. The same is true for rural landscapes, as can be illustrated by the rural landscape of the Netherlands. Figure 17.5 shows a number of archaeological excavations, located within the complex physical layers of the Dutch coastal landscape. It is a typical example of physical layers or stratigraphy, as they are particularly important in archaeological research in the delta-region. The layers are the result of changing environments, of periods of sedimentation and erosion.

Figure 17.5  Vertical layers in the Dutch coastal landscape

After: Louwe Kooijmans, 1980
Many such layered landscapes are known. The layers can be the result of processes on a yearly basis, like tree-rings, but in many cases they are more irregular, like the ones shown here. These profiles show successive periods of maritime influence that brought sedimentation of silt, as well as quiet periods, in which peatlands could develop.

The same types of layers can result from cultural processes. In general, periods of growth and prosperity leave more traces in the landscape than periods of stagnation or decline. In periods of growth, investments are made into land reclamation and the building of new houses and factories. Most lakes in Holland were drained in the prosperous period of the first half of the 17th century; after the drop in agrarian price levels around 1650, almost no new lakes were drained for two centuries. In periods of stagnation, older structures are reused (and thereby altered, meaning that these periods can also be recognized; see Ronnes, this volume).

When we look at the Netherlands, the idea of vertical layers is typical for the lower part of the country, in which the rural landscape shows a complex history of sedimentation and erosion. The cross-section in figure 17.6 shows three different groups of landscapes. Firstly, landscapes of sedimentation are gradually built up. The main example can be found in the landscapes of the

Figure 17.6  A cross-section through the Dutch landscape

After Beukers, 2009, p. 75
delta, where rivers and the sea periodically flood the land and leave layers of silt. Other examples of landscapes that were built up over time can be found in peat bogs and in man-made so-called plaggen layers that result from manure mixed with sods that are brought on the arable (Spek, 1992). Secondly, we see landscapes of accumulation. Erosion material ends up in valleys, where it may form layers again, but the archaeological material is mixed up. Thirdly, we find landscapes in which the surface changed only little during the centuries or even millennia. Here, every new phase in history reuses and transforms the older structures, in this way creating inextricable and dynamic palimpsests.

In this last group of landscapes, traces of many different periods are found intermixed. It is such landscapes that the English landscape historian W.G. Hoskins once described as ‘the richest historical record we possess’ (Hoskins, 1977, p. 14). Hoskins also used the metaphor – I already mentioned the term – of the landscape as a palimpsest, that was used earlier by the pioneer of landscape archaeology O.G.S. Crawford and that comes originally from the historian F.W. Maitland (1850-1906; Bowden, 2001; see also Daniels & Cosgrove, 1988, p. 8). The original use of the term ‘palimpsest’ comes from the medieval use of parchment that was expensive and therefore used again and again. Old messages were eradicated and new ones added, as on a modern blackboard, but traces of the old messages remained recognizable. Recently Daniels described the palimpsest, the overwritten manuscript, as ‘the presiding metaphor of deep landscape reading’ (Daniels, in Della Dora et al., 2011, p. 268).

These concepts are certainly relevant for describing the landscape history of the Netherlands. However, they do not solve the bias in Dutch landscape history towards the description of objects and structures and explaining them in terms of anonymous processes. The role of individuals and groups of people is often neglected, as is the role of ideas, images and ideologies. In this respect the concepts of intellectual layers and of layers of meaning can add a broader scope to that research.

It is especially many designed landscapes that refer to earlier periods. Typical examples are many recent urban extensions, shaped as 18th-century small towns, pseudo-medieval castles and middle-class 1920s neighbourhoods (Renes, 2011). In all these cases, the new buildings are designed to deny what they really are: middle-class environments in a globalized world. Instead, they suggest the supposed cosiness and small-scale environments from the times of our ancestors. The most sophisticated examples even suggest the existence of non-linear history: the design for the cluster of second homes in 17th-century style known as Esonstad (the name refers to a mythical medieval lost town), developed in the early 21st century in the northern fringe of the Netherlands, even included a canal that ‘has been abandoned and filled in’.
A much older example is the Beemster, a World Heritage Site. The Beemster is a former lake that was drained between 1608 and 1612. With its size of 7000 hectares, it was a technical masterpiece. The new polder was rigorously planned, with a network of roads and ditches, with villages (of which originally 13 were planned, but only one realized), farms of different sizes and even roadside trees. It is not only protected as a 17th-century Gesamtkunstwerk, but also because of the layout itself. Roads and main ditches make patterns of exact squares, referring to Roman systems of land planning. This Renaissance layout can be connected to the investors, Amsterdam merchants that had become rich in a short period of time and that had now developed aspirations to become part of the cultural elite too.

Finally, the rural landscapes in the Netherlands have also changed their meanings. Many landscapes that are now valued for their ecological or
historic qualities were once the scenes of hard work by struggling people. Lakes that are now used for recreation were a threat to the land of our ancestors. Historic city centres that are now favoured living spaces for young urban professionals were deteriorated only one or two generations ago and were poor, dirty and noisy a century ago. Figure 17.7 shows the Naardermeer (Lake Naarden), a lake that was drained three times during the 17th and 18th centuries and was abandoned again every time for hydrological or military reasons. It received a reputation as a graveyard for investors. Around 1900 the town of Amsterdam proposed using it as a waste disposal area. At that moment, a group of conservationists started opposing the plans, arguing that the lake had important natural values. In 1905 they founded the Society for the Protection of Natural Monuments in the Netherlands (Vereniging tot Behoud van Natuurmonumenten in Nederland), an organization that has now developed into one of the largest landowners in the country. In the following year, the Naardermeer became the first property of the new Society. Nowadays it is the archetypical nature reserve in the Netherlands.

These concepts of layers are all very relevant for landscape research. A presentation of layers on a map gives historical depth to our understanding of landscapes. Such maps are made, for example, within the English Historic Landscape Characterisation project (Rippon, 2004, colour plates D1 and D2). In these maps, each part of the landscape is shown with its main characteristic of land use and formative period. However, the example of Rome also makes clear that a map with the main formative periods misses most of the life histories of landscapes. The example of the Colosseum showed how inadequate it would be to put this building on the map only by virtue of its origin in the 1st century A.D. For two thousand years it has been part of the Roman landscape and during that time it received ever new functions, meanings and stories.

At this point, I want to return to the concept of landscapes that are handed over from one generation to another and, during that process, receive new functions, are often physically transformed and change their meaning. By looking at landscapes in this way, the emphasis is no longer on the origins of landscapes and landscape features, but on their life histories.

**Landscape Layers in Planning**

What is the relevance of all this for planning? In my opinion many projects would profit from the awareness of the complexities of the history of the landscape. In restoration of buildings or gardens, it has become almost a standard procedure to keep different time periods visible in the new layout
(see for example De Jong & Scheepmaker, 1996). However, in landscape planning, this is still rare. Admittedly, there exists a ‘layer approach’ that is popular in Dutch planning, but this distinguishes functional layers (a Braudel-like division into a slowly changing substratum, faster changing networks and even more dynamic occupation patterns) rather than historical layers (Van Schaick & Klaassen, 2011).

Often, however, the idea of historical layers and of complexity is missing altogether in planning. Recently, I was asked to reflect on a planning procedure for a polder that was planned to be, as it was called, given back to nature. This land was reclaimed from the tidal inlet of the river Scheldt in 1904 and was thought of by ecologists as well as by the official archaeological prospection maps as being without heritage values. One day of research made clear that this place had an extremely complex history, resulting in a number of vertical layers (Renes, 2009). Under the present polder, the traces of a short-lived 16th-century polder were hidden. Below that, the traces of a 10th-century fenland reclamation, drowned during the 15th century, were still close to the surface. Deeper down, Neolithic and Mesolithic people lived in a sandy region and their traces are well preserved by the later layers of fen and silt. So, what seems to be a young landscape is in fact a landscape with a complex structure of time layers in a vertical sequence. In the course of time this landscape not only changed in a physical sense, it also received new meanings. Around the most recent reclamation, in 1904, the meaning changed from a useless wetland with a history of struggle and abandonment, to a newly reclaimed land with agricultural and recreational values (the investors used the new polder for hunting). Nowadays ecologists describe the area as an agricultural wasteland that has to make way for an abundant bird life, whereas many others speak of some of the best agricultural land in the country and describe the polder as beautiful.

In other projects, more historical insights are present. In the Netherlands, during the last decade the use of heritage in planning has become very popular. In new town quarters, the integration of historical buildings, landscape structures and references to archaeological finds are used to invest the rather placeless new towns with stories to tell and sites to visit (Renes, 2011). However, in the use of heritage, often one historical period is selected. Although this is understandable from the point of view of a planner, who is often interested in transparency and clarity instead of complexity, this leads to a much simplified historical narrative.

An example is a place called Ypenburg, a new town quarter of The Hague that was built on the site of a former airfield. The airfield is part of the
collective memory as a place where heavy fighting took place on 10 May 1940 against the German attack on the seat of government and the royal family. The fighting offered time for the royal family and parts of the government to flee the country. In the new town, parts of the airfield building have been preserved and the main axis of the area refers to the old runway. Still, of the long history of this place (see for example Jongste & Houkes, 2008), only one time period has been used.

More sophisticated is the Leidsche Rijn new building estate in my hometown of Utrecht. Here, archaeologists focused heavily on the Roman period. However, the medieval landscape was not completely forgotten, and recently the early medieval course of the river Rhine has been reconstructed under the advertising name of Viking Rhine. This is all the work of experts. The local population had another idea of heritage. They still remembered the period when this landscape was dominated by horticulture. It was that history they wanted to visualize in the new town quarter. In the end a number of glasshouses and chimneys that had belonged to glasshouses were integrated in the plan. So, at least three different time periods are still recognizable in the area. In fact, a fourth time period is represented by one of the neighbourhoods in the new town, where houses are being built in the style from the 1920s: granny’s age.

**Conclusion**

So, to conclude, in this chapter we distinguished five types of historical layers.

1. The best-known, archaeological and geological, theme of vertical layers of traces from different periods lying on top of each other.
2. The geographical concept of horizontal layers, referring to spatial developments.
3. The palimpsest, as a result of continuous change on the same surface level.
4. Intellectual layers, when later generations revive and reinterpret older periods, for example in neo-styles, but also more creative references as in some works of art.
5. And finally, layers of meaning, when objects that may change only slightly in physical terms nevertheless receive ever new meanings, such as a dolmen that started as a burial chamber, later became a landmark, a stone quarry, a proof of the age of the landscape and is now an iconic heritage object.
Now, in conclusion, the use of heritage in landscape planning is one thing. But to do justice to the complexity of historic landscapes is something different. It is a challenge to find compromises between planners, who aim at making the landscape more transparent and who therefore simplify, and researchers, who tend to make things ever more complex. The concept of historical layers, as I tried to explain and problematize in this chapter, may be a tool in bringing structure into complex landscapes.

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