

Chaitén: Land of Volcanoes
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CHAITÉN: LAND OF VOLCANOES

Posted on March 7, 2024 by Gabriel Sastre



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This essay traces both a coastline and timeline of northwestern Patagonia, which is part of a highly dynamic environmental region. Indigenous peoples who traversed its coast for millennia were witnesses to glacial retreat, dramatic sea level rise, and repeated volcanic eruptions amongst other landscape and climate changes. Permanent settlement of the área near the Chaitén volcano in Chilean Patagonia began only a century ago, when settlers from other áreas (including Osorno, the Chiloe islands, and Argentina) built homes and developed a local culture based on industries that included fishing, boat making, basket making, textiles, livestock, and bee-keeping in a remote but thriving town.

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In May 2008, the Chaitén volcano erupted,

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prompting one of the largest evacuations in modern Chilean history. Within two days, the human populations of Chaitén and nearby Futaleufú were relocated and dispersed in distant cities with little time to plan and no clear knowledge of the length of time they would be displaced. Farm animals, pets, family mementos, and the familiar landscapes of home were lost over the three years of exile that elapsed before resettlement was permitted. Even if it did not cause large-scale loss of human life, the eruption was still a deeply disruptive and traumatic event for residents.

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In the process of surveying a new site for

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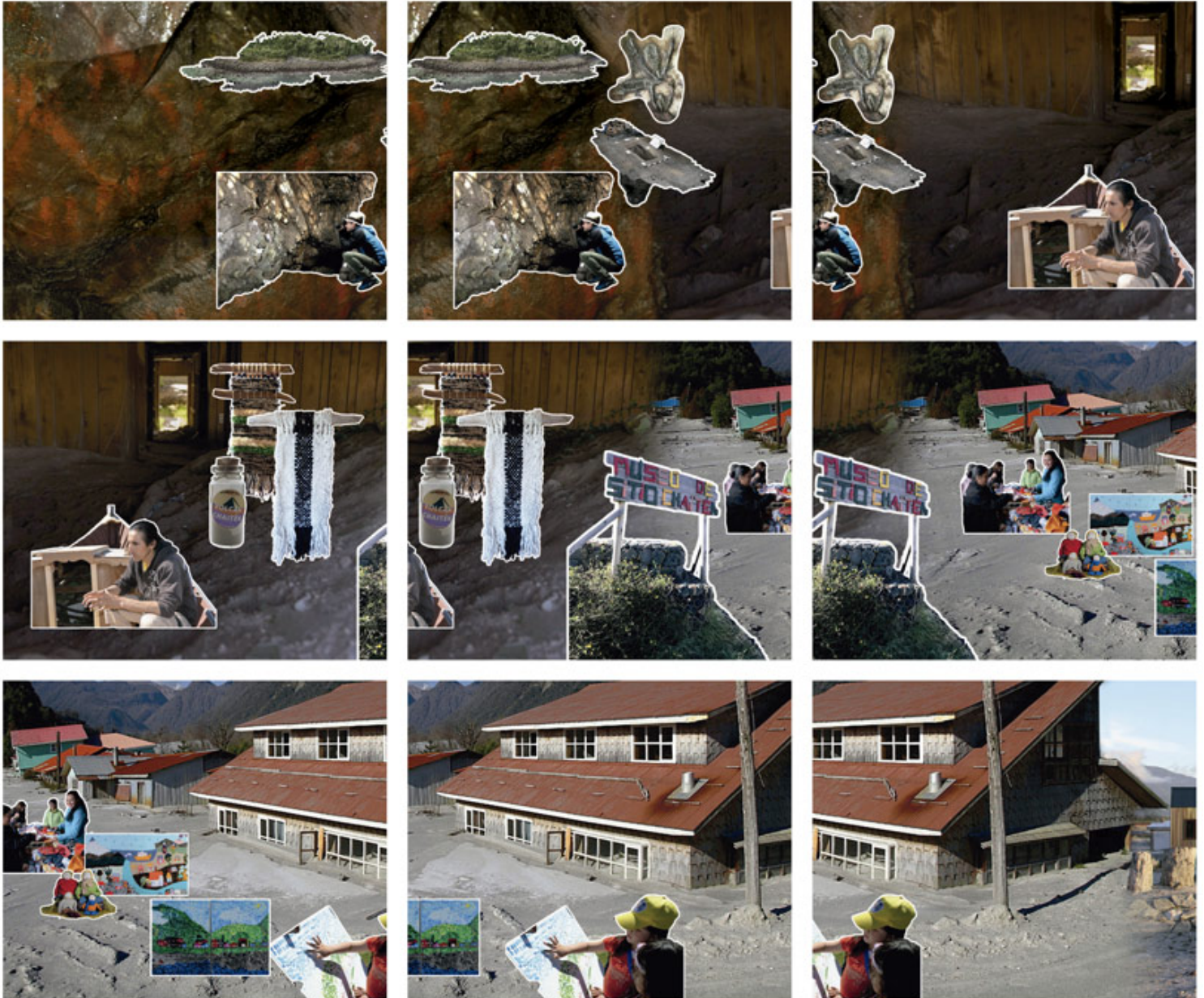
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the town of Chaitén, a cave complex filled with prehistoric rock art and shell middens was encountered in a distinctive landscape monument called the Vilcún. While the proposed new location for the town was rejected by townspeople, who fought to rebuild on the site of the old town, the cultural heritage represented by the Vilcún rock art caves and the geological heritage represented by the volcanic landscape are now contributing to the ongoing rebirth of the town.

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A new interpretive center in Chaitén was built in the midst of houses ruined by the eruption. Together, they are designed to serve as a nexus for community memory, tourism information, science communication and education, and art as part of a development strategy based on local heritage and educational outreach. This offers opportunities for academic and technical programs

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for local youth that did not exist prior and also conveys future risks and community resilience, through both material and textual media. This is part of a vibrant creative explosion inadvertently prompted by the volcanic eruption. Once the site of disaster, Chaitén is now a site of regeneration.



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