

Landscapes of care  
the emergence of landscapes of care in unstable territories



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## VISUAL ESSAYS

# **Landscape as Heritage in the province of Chañaral, Atacama region, Chile**

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## **Abstract**

To understand the landscape as heritage is to recognize it in a synthesizing condition, as a complex system of ecological, historical and social legacies. This approach allows an articulation and reading of the territory not as a sum of particularities but rather as a particular system, where the landscape, as a collective construction of society, is not only understood as a material construction, but also as a construction of memory and cultural expressions, which in the Atacama Desert have become evident with a clear mining emphasis, temporally since pre-Columbian times and spatially throughout the transversality, longitudinality and altitudinal levels of the territory.

Key-words: Atacama; desert; landscape ; heritage ; territory.

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The territorial character of the Atacama Region has been shaped by the economic mono-dependence linked to mining processes for decades. It is in this territory where the greatest discoveries of silver and copper mineral deposits were made, with which the economic bases, key productions and international relations of the state were forged, generating and contributing pioneering technologies in Chile and South America, new sources of energy, transportation and communication, transforming the country towards the fourth decade of the 19th century into the first copper producer in the world.

In the province of Chañaral, the cultural heritage is made up of sites linked to mining since pre-Hispanic times, called "World Heritage of Humanity" because they are part of the Andean road system Qhapaq Ñan<sup>1</sup>. Landscapes with industrial infrastructures that illustrate the mining boom period, as well as relict sites made up of few and fragile elements with varied surfaces, vestiges that have no written history, but that reflect the will of the anonymous inhabitants to act and inhabit this territory.

Most of these sites are uninhabited, in some, there are still some miners who work in the clearings left by the times of higher production, in others, caretakers safeguard various pieces of great historical value, among these vestiges are the industrial territories, which are manifested as works in some cases and in others with a certain extension and complexity, they can be identified: mining basins, veins, mining pits, railway networks, productive corridors, camps, extraction, accumulation and management structures, "as they have also been called, territorial structures that testify to the recent industrial past of our society. They are the <<landscapes>> of industry"<sup>2</sup>.

The reading of these elements present in the territory without the landscape they conform leads to an incomplete understanding of the territory that is observed and inhabited, especially in a region where the predominance of the geographical over the built, but not the modified, is present in greater percentage and evidence before our senses in multiple scales; in the words of José Ortega: – "It is evident that the transformations affect, in the European framework, a very humanized space, while in the American one they affect, above all, a virgin natural space". – Indeed, the transformations produced by mining or the search for energy sources occur in places without direct anthropic settlements –without the implication that they are not shocked by their effects– rather, they occur in places made up in great percentage by natural elements.

<sup>1</sup>UNESCO. (2014). Qhapaq Ñan – Sistema vial andino. 2018, de UNESCO Sitio web: <https://whc.unesco.org/es/list/1459>

<sup>2</sup>José Ortega Valcárcel. El patrimonio territorial: El territorio como recurso cultural y económico en Ciudades: Revista del Instituto Universitario de Urbanística de la Universidad de Valladolid (Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid, 1998) 33.

[Fig. 1]

Relict railroad line. 2017





[Fig. 2]  
Memorial site. "Animita", 2017.



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Some of these sites can be seen as we advance from the coast of the Pacific Ocean towards the interior of the desert. This is how vestiges and artifacts linked to the old train that ran along a large part of the Salado River appear, which can still be seen on the road (fig. 1), cut and twisted by the passage of heavy rains have been scattered throughout the basin. While at various points along the road there are "animitas", small constructions that enunciate tragic events and remember the souls of those who have lost their lives on the road, in this area most of them linked to mining (fig. 2).

At present, there are abandoned productive settlements, such as the former railroad town, a station and the Llanta train station (fig. 3), which at an altitude of 1,200 m.a.s.l. still conserves the station, train station, machinery, artifacts, and even houses people who return year after year to celebrate and thank the virgin (fig. 4). There are also historical sites such as "Mina Sebastopol" that are still visited by independent miners looking for the mineral remains left in the territory by decades of exploitation (fig. 5).

As one advances towards the altiplano, more archaeological remains appear in the landscape, ceremonial, productive and transit sites, the so-called "tambos" appear, small shelters, circular or quadrangular in shape, built in a system of stone *pirca*, without mortar as in the case of "Tambo Valle Salado", which at an altitude of 1,720 m.a.s.l. still preserves and it is possible to appreciate its orthogonal enclosures (fig. 6).

There are also large infrastructures such as the sections of the Qhapaq Ñan, which today are threatened by the advance of large mining industries and the lack of concrete protection of the fragile archaeological remains, which in many places are only constituted by the movement and accumulation of rocks (fig. 7). Finally, in the altiplanic zone above 3,300 m.a.s.l., where mining projects are concentrated, where lithium mining projects are concentrated due to the large number of lagoons and salt flats, there are still remains of ruins that once supported the exploitation of borax and other minerals in the territory, as in the case of the "Borax Mines" that still preserve different types of constructions such as walls used as part of the houses, large areas used for industrial work, material storage yards, among other constructions (fig. 8).

Most of these elements still remain and are part of the construction of the landscapes, although as elements in their uniqueness each one can give through different readings testimonies of the past, it is in the territory where it provides and evidences the various forms of organization and development around the exploitation and use of natural resources. It is the landscape that reveals the actions and actors that have built it. In it, the different layers of values and meanings of this mining cultural landscape make it possible to understand it as a system capable of adapting to change and opening new opportunities for local development, perhaps in the future not only from an extractive perspective, but also from a scientific, patrimonial, touristic and artistic perspective, among others.







[Fig. 3]  
Railroad cars in the abandoned mining village "Lanta", 2017.





[Fig. 4]  
Altar of the virgin in the abandoned mining town of "Llanta",  
2018.

[Fig. 5]  
Unloading rail and mineral waste in the historical mine  
"Sebastopol", 2018.







[Fig. 6]  
Archaeological ruin related to the Inca road system in Chile, 2018.

[Fig. 7]  
The Inca road system in Chile. Background: copper mine, 2018.







[Fig. 8]  
Archaeological ruins in lithium extraction salt flat, 2018.



