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Animitas in the Araucanía: Mourning and Tragedies Crystallized in the Public Space

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Abstract. The *animita* is installed in the public space unrelated to any formal or institutional regulation, it is incorporated into the citizen's traffic at the specific place where a tragedy has occurred; or where a violent or accidental death has occurred (murders or children murders, suicides, accidents to pedestrians, delinquents or travellers). The blood spilled together with candles lighted by the mourners, demarcates the point of orientation for the soul of the deceased and it will be the place where a new *animita*, (temple house), or whatever the constructive imaginary on a small scale permits. It is there where life and death give way to the ineffable; where the deceased becomes a Popular Saint through favours granted, and, thanks to them, he or she will be able to atone for his or her sins and conclude their mission, abruptly truncated in life. The *animitas* are incorporated into the urban or rural architectural scene, presenting themselves as areas for devotion and indirectly as a reminder of the fragility of life. Because they're part of communal heritage and take place as social warrens, they represent a challenge for the architectural planning of the city and its road connectivity networks. The tension between the practices of the mortuary rite of the past and the present warns us about the challenges to think and reflect on the new intelligent city, which must dialogue in a respectful and sustainable way with its secular manifestations and its roots in cultural identity in southern Chile.

1. Introduction

“Pain has nothing to do with pain. Desperation has nothing to do with desperation. The words we use to designate those things are flawed. There are no names in the mute zone. There, according to an image of use, vitiated awaits the death of his new lovers” [1].

The *animita* appears built on sidewalks, bridges, roadside, on hills and in any place where the tragedy has been made present in a violent or unjust way. The architecture of these cenotaphs in the public space corresponds in its great majority to projections of the Christian religious architectural aesthetics: cross, temple, church, and grotto, gravestones together with small houses and constructions that commemorate the memory of the deceased either for his trade or passion in life. The volume or dimension of its structure are not established in official or normative patterns, but rather correspond to the creative effort and affective bond of the bereaved or relative to the deceased person. Despite this, the dimensions are usually scaled back, strategically adapted to the place in order to be visible to the passer-by of the city.

Popular belief gives the soul of the deceased a singular power: the possibility of granting favors or miracles to his devotees, who thank him in inscriptions on small plates for the favor granted. The



amount of “plaques” of gratitude gives the *animitas* its power or effectiveness as bearer of supplications and petitions to the extraterrestrial world.

2. Symbolic Relevance

The *animita* is incorporated to the public space in a disruptive way. In its announcement of death and recent tragedy, it alters the place, revealing a sacred aura that, by the intrinsic respect towards the kingdom of the soul, cannot be altered or questioned in its corporeality as an architectural body.



Figure 1. *Animitas* incorporated in the public space

Blood is converted into a symbol when it is spilled, a representation of the brutal and unjust presence of death. The firing squad, cruelty, absurd violence, car crashes, murders, and every kind of tragic death, upsets the blood, the body and the soul. The last breath indicates the place, the site where the soul is caught in earthly distress, crying and denouncing the loss of life in a state of perpetual latency, penitent, waiting to redeem its pain through the mercy of its earthly-world faithful. In a first moment, the blood transcends accompanied by the sacred fire of the candles that indicate the recent loss. These candles are located in the place that will be the guide of the soul tied to its new condition of spirit in pain: “The loss, the remains, the fragments of a suffering body and not prepared to die, both the *animita* and the bereaved hold (chain) to that site. The remains are the witnesses of the last breath and the thread of light that was frozen in the blood” [2]. Popular belief holds that death must be accepted, for the soul to undertake a new stage; normally, it detaches itself from the body in a serene manner, freed from anguish, but when that does not occur and death is associated with pain, sorrow and distress become tied to the place of departure as long as the sins of the penitent soul remain unpurged, “the stranded soul rounds the site of the remains, wanders also around its blood, residues of its real and symbolic attachment to life. These cry out for justice and as involuntary offerings of expiation, they ask to be respected, appealing to natural shock in the face of the loss” [3].

The new condition after death establishes the rite of the *animitas*, that mute zone that reveals all meaning of life in the face of sudden death. The ineffable becomes present and transcends the need for the rite of death, a fainting that seeks beyond the doctrinal and normative barriers of the Christian faith and looks for answers through the crystallized desires of a pagan cult deeply rooted in Latin American culture.

The *animitas*, temple, grotto, or hermitage, is located in the place of death generating in it the projection of a religious cult, which “for popular Catholicism as for the Aymara, Mapuche and Quechua beliefs, there is an anima that survives death. In the case of the indigenous people who lived in the north and south of our country, the subject of the dead was also linked to the cult of the ancestors” [4]. The *animita* is built from undocumented memory, which is carried out by the devotees and the history of Latin American secularization. Lautaro Ojeda, in his doctoral research on *animitas*, maintains that: “The appearance of this practice was the result of a long process of cultural

hybridization between pre-Hispanic cultures and European colonizing cultures, and it would find its peak in the consolidation of Latin American republics” [5]. Therefore, to understand this process of cultural hybridization, it is fundamental to establish the difference between the cultural, religious and formal antecedents, and the consolidation and syncretic formalization of this practice considering “the extirpation of idolatries that began in 142 A. C. This process of acculturation was structured on the basis of an ideological amputation, where the Christian religion acted on conquered civilizations from a perspective of socio-cultural superiority” [5]. The predominance of one over the other in this field does not disarticulate the popular manifestation of the cult of the *animitas*, since, as Lautaro Ojeda points out, the Chilean-Argentine independence and republican period, between 1810 and 1925, was a moment of consolidation and syncretic formalization of this practice, which is currently perceived as an eccentric, marginal, and pagan social practice rejected or ignored by Christianity in Chile. However, this rite persists and endures to this day, proliferating in a sustained manner in the marginal sectors of cities, where municipal regulation fails to establish a reflective projective criteria according to its function as a regulatory and vigilant entity of interventions in the public space.

3. *Animitas* in the Araucanía Region

The construction of an *animita* observed in the Araucanía region through the artistic project “*Para Hablar con los muertos; animitas en la Araucanía*” (Alex Mellado Larraín, 2010) (To Talk with the dead; *Animitas* in the Araucanía) gives account of a series of archetypal structures registered photographically and projected in a second moment in an artistic proposal of paintings installed in the Municipal Cemetery of Temuco in 2010. This project highlighted that in Araucanía there is a predominant assimilation of the funerary and religious aesthetics of Catholicism, from which emerged constructive structures that project small churches, chapels or caves, which, aesthetically, reflect the need to bring the body and soul of the deceased closer to the protection of the traditional faith by means of the virgin as an universal Mother, who welcomes and cares for sorrowful souls. On the other hand, the ample presence of the church-house in the region also allows us to find signs and symbols of the house of worship; the home that gathers firmly the unity of a Christian-Evangelical world, which translates by means of the sacred word or presence of the open Bible at the door of the Home-Temple, its faith. Together with the foregoing, a series of *animitas* are also documented that do not follow the Christian religious archetype as the articulatory axis of its design, but rather, are constructed as an anti-normative and heroic object in the sense of erecting the aesthetic as an offering that commemorates the life and passion of the deceased in life. Thus, we find in the region, for example, *animitas* erected from toys, tires, or even bicycles, which constitute objects of veneration that remain in the place built from the will and creativity of the relatives who employ these objects according to the identity of the deceased. The idea of an object that loses its function and economic value as an earthly transaction, elevates it to an extra-material category, incorporating the immaterial irradiation protected from its own sacred omnipresence in everyday life. This may explain why *animitas* that interfere in the construction of new roads or new road connections, are quickly reinstalled in a nearby space as a sign of respect and fear.



Figure 2. *Animita* grotto

We can also find a type of *animita* that manifests the work done by the deceased in life: “buses, taxis, motorcycle helmets or curator, and that stand out for the affinity they show with the version that the traditional paradigm has with work. Man is ‘condemned’ to earn his bread with the sweat of his forehead, but this pain is not pain if what he does is by his vocation. This adds meaning to existence. The community respects those jobs that are poorly paid but are chosen for taste and gift. When a job has meaning, part of our identity is expressed and played through it. Even any activity that is carried out with ‘passion’ grows like a creeper around the soul and its traces remain like residues in the soul” [6]. We also find in Araucanía a few *animitas* formulated only with a cross, which are presented silently in their precariousness of materials and dimensions in front of the vastness and inclemency of the landscape and climate of southern Chile.



Figure 3. *Animita*'s identity

It is frequent to find *animitas* in the peripheral ring of the city, where the planned regulation of the new city does not interfere with its architectural rituality, locating itself in a disorganized manner and intervening in the transit of sidewalks, roadsides, cycle roads and streets, re-signifying the public space towards a stage that is also spiritual.

The Araucanía *animita* that stands out from the rest is the tomb of Emilio Inostroza, which presents evidence of popular fervor in the belief that the soul listens and intervenes in the reality of the suffering and underprivileged people of Temuco city. The space is intervened by a hundred plates that position it as a little *animita* of great power in its mission to fulfill favors requested by its devotees.

Patricio Riquelme's research entitled *San Emilio: Santo y bandido* (Saint Emilio: Saint and Bandit), an audiovisual documentary, shows that Emilio Inostroza was a hustler and a low-ranking bandit in the territory of the "frontier", who, aided by a partner, planned a robbery of two elderly people in 1941. According to the files, the assassination was done in cold blood, stabbing both victims to death, and leaving one of them agonizing. The surviving victim would eventually produce clarification of the crime, leading to the capture of Emilio and his accomplice and a life in prison sentence. However, because of a previous unresolved charge, Inostroza was sentenced to a higher degree of punishment, the death penalty, executed on September 8, 1943 in the courtyards of the Temuco prison. The devotees of the *animita* of San Emilio Inostroza point out that he is a miraculous soul due to the injustice committed despite his apparent remorse; his blood, in turn, asks for justice in heaven by the grace of his heavenly aura, interceding between the suffering and the divine power, thus confirming the mythology of the repented bandit, suffering and unjustly condemned. The figure of Emilio Inostroza is, for his devotees, a luminous and neighboring soul, capable of identifying and helping among his faithful those who approach his *animita* to ask for his protection for the perpetration of crimes.



Figure 4. San Emilio Inostroza's *animita*

It is necessary to question the understanding of the cult of *animitas* within the reflexive urban structure of the city, on the understanding that such expressions belong to the heritage and memory of the community and are established within the parameters of a monument (in its etymological definition the word "monument" comes from the verb *monere*: "to inform", "to remember") imbued by its spiritual function:

"It is called 'monument' any device (tomb, statue, post, totem, building, inscription) or artifact deliberately conceived and made by a human community, whatever its nature and dimension (from the family to the nation, from the clan to the tribe, from the community of believers to the city) in order to

remember the living, the organic and emotional memory of its members, of the people, events, beliefs, rites and / or social conventions constituting its identity. The monument is thus characterized by its identifying function. Because of its materiality, it doubles the symbolic function of languages whose volatility is attenuated” [7].

4. Conclusions

The constructive nature, its material and immaterial function, its roots in memory and cultural heritage in the region of Araucanía, allows us to understand the relevance of the *animita* as a research object which operates from an integrative perspective and heritage claims in a new urban scenario that often does not incorporate in their projects the essence and foundation of these spaces marked as sacred. As an example of a deficient analysis and understanding of the relevance of *animitas*, we can observe what took place in 2004 in the process of the construction of the current Central Highway (Metropolitan Region) which included the design of *animitas* with a uniform and standardized structure aesthetically akin to contemporary architecture. The aim of this effort was to restore *animitas* originally erected in road connections no longer viable because of the highway, a project that did not prosper due to ignorance on the part of those responsible for the initiative that did not understand the self-constructive nature and symbolic value of the specific place of installation of the structures.



Figure 5. Standardized *animita* in the Central Highway

The previous example points out the wrong direction with respect to the value that the cult of *animitas* and their incorporation to the city should produce. More studies are necessary to properly comprehend and project this as a patrimonial manifestation recognized by institutions in power in charge of ensuring its protection as material and immaterial inheritance of national and regional importance. It is also necessary to carry out in-depth studies of these manifestations because, in the first place, they reflect rites rooted in regional cultural memory, and, secondly, their presence incites new multidisciplinary approaches that allow its study from different points of view that seek to recover and preserve the patrimonial and collective memory of the community.

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