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Alejandro Aravena: the shape of things to come

The Chilean architect's project to create affordable homes has won him the Pritzker prize – and the job of directing this year's Venice Architecture Biennale. Could his holistic method provide a model for our cities?

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In 2003, in Iquique, Chile, 100 families were rehoused with the help of the architectural practice Elemental. The available budget was $7,500 a home, including the cost of land, an amount that would have paid for 30 square metres of living space, which is less than the minimum set for studio flats in the British government's current space standards. Elemental decided to spend the money on what they called "half a good house", rather than a whole bad house, which meant providing a structure with the basics of plumbing and shelter, which residents could then expand using their own labour and skill. As they had been living illegally on the site for 30 years, putting up their own informal dwellings, it was something they knew how to do. The structures also went up three levels, rather than the single storey more usual for such homes, which meant that they used the relatively expensive land effectively.

The project, says Elemental's leader Alejandro Aravena, put into practice his belief that "architects design nouns – windows, ceilings, floors – but these nouns come from verbs which are life itself. Looking, eating, meeting. We should be looking at both nouns and verbs." The Iquique project, he says, was ultimately less about providing the noun of shelter than "giving tools to escape poverty".

What Aravena hoped for happened, and the architects' plain concrete cuboids rapidly became augmented by infill of multiple colours, materials and window types that reflected the different skills and moods of the inhabitants, and the different means available to them. It was a beautiful idea successfully realised and became celebrated around the world. It was Exhibit A in the case for Aravena winning architecture's top prize, the Pritzker, this year, at the relatively young age of 48. "The role of the architect," said the citation, "is now being challenged to serve greater social and humanitarian needs, and Alejandro Aravena has clearly, generously and fully responded to this challenge." When receiving the prize at the United Nations in New York last week Aravena said that, to meet the rate at which cities are growing across the world "we would have to build one new city for a population of one million people, with $10,000 per family. And if we don't solve this equation, it is not that people will stop coming to cities – they are going to keep coming – but they will live in awful conditions."

Aravena is also director of this year's Venice Architecture Biennale, opening at the end of May. Under the title *Reporting from the Front*, it promises to "offer a new viewpoint". Since "life ranges from basic physical needs to the most intangible dimensions of the human condition", says the official blurb, architecture has "to tackle many fronts: from guaranteeing very concrete, down-to-earth living standards to interpreting and fulfilling human desires, from respecting the single individual to taking care of the common good, from efficiently hosting daily activities to expanding the frontiers of civilization".

For years the Pritzker was best known for validating the reputations of iconic architects – Koolhaas, Hadid, Gehry, Foster – while occasionally turning the spotlight on local heroes working on crafted updates of regional traditions, such as Sverre Fehn in Norway and Glenn Murcutt in Australia. Their choice, and the biennale's, therefore looks like an endorsement of a new approach.

Not everyone engaged in providing shelter for the most needy is impressed, however. David Sanderson, who has worked with aid and development agencies for 25 years, and now has a chair in architecture at the University of New South Wales, believes that not-for-profit agencies – he highlights Care and the Norwegian Refugee Council – make a far more significant difference to more people in more places than celebrated architects. The half-a-house idea, he says, is not so new, but an update on the older idea of Sites and Services programmes, whereby basic infrastructure is provided so that people on low incomes can build their own homes. "The good stuff is often boring to look at," he says, and fears that the Venice Biennale will show projects that are "pretty", but marginal to solving real problems.

Good work is about process, he says, for example understanding the economics and politics of a given situation before proposing solutions, but most architects are over-obsessed with products, the magical, photogenic objects that symbolise help as much as providing it. He accuses them of a "saviour complex" whereby they want to descend on miserable lives and lift them up. The distinction between process and product sounds like Aravena's between verb and noun, but it's clear that Sanderson applies at least some of his doubts to the Chilean. Another in the business points out that, in the 13 years since Iquique, Aravena has completed 2,500 homes. Given the vastness of the problems he identifies, this is not a significant number.

The suspicion is that the Pritzker judges haven't changed all that much, and are backing an iconic-humanitarian architect, a flipside to the starchitects they previously promoted rather than a radical alternative, a poster boy more than the people doing the most useful work. Certainly Aravena has some of the trappings of a starchitect: a high media profile, a globetrotting, lecture-giving lifestyle, a carefully cultivated look, a bizarre hairstyle (think desert roadkill) that seems to get spikier and more top-heavy with every transcontinental flight.

Aravena himself questions why his model has not been more extensively applied. "It's still a failure. The mainstream has not been affected. Why not? We ask ourselves these questions every day." He adds that "sometimes notions of efficiency are counterintuitive", in other words that conventional methods of costing and financing don't give a value to such things as the social benefits that come with his approach.

He is also proposing, especially with the biennale, a more general idea of the role of the architect. It is not just about providing the most effective responses in desperate situations but, whatever the project, raising the quality of the environment. "You live in places and that's a fact. Someone has to give form to those places. And a mediocre environment can be as deadly as not facing basic human needs. But as soon as you want to go beyond business as usual there are different forces and different logics, not always amicable. Even if you go a millimetre outside." The "front line" of the title is any situation in which an architect is struggling to extract some kind of public good from their brief. A significant part of Aravena's output is in fact the usual fare of successful practices, such as office and university buildings.

But the most significant project, as the one most likely to justify the Pritzker committee's hope

that Aravena is offering new ways forward, is his role in the reconstruction of the Chilean city of Constitución after the earthquake and tsunami of 2010. Here, with other consultancies such as the engineers Arup, Elemental worked with local people to find out their concerns, and did such things as investigate the budgets of government departments and agencies involved, to see how they could be effectively combined.

The result is a forest, now being created, to attenuate the effects of future floods and tsunamis and, rather than the heavy concrete wall that might be a more conventional solution, will be "a geographical response to geographical events". It would also create a public park in a city that has only 2.2 square metres of open space per person (London, for example, has over 30). Other actions include the use of waste heat from the paper mill that is the city's biggest business, to heat new public buildings. Aravena's role has been diplomatic and political as much as architectural, except that he defines "synthesis" as architecture's greatest power, and synthesis, he says, is his main contribution to the complexities of Constitución.

Pablo Allard, who as national urban reconstruction coordinator helped lead Chile's recovery after the disaster, is convinced. He declares an interest, as a friend and former business partner of Aravena's, before arguing that he is "a real innovator", who created "bridges of trust" between parties who could have been mutually suspicious - citizens, government, business. His "holistic" and "participatory" approach, says Allard, is now being followed by other cities.

Some scepticism is in order, as to whether the Pritzker committee have suddenly become experts in the vastly complicated business of humanitarian architecture and whether there might be a large dose of gesture and symbolism in their actions. Their decision is arguably premature, given that Constitución is still a work in progress. But, if Elemental's work fulfils the promise of using synthesis and participation to make the city more hospitable than it was before the disaster, it genuinely will be an essential model for the colossal urban challenges that the world faces.

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