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Project: Quinta Monroy Social Housing
Architect: Elemental
Location: Iquique, 2005



Housing projects haven't always been Chile's strong suit, but in the case of Quinta Monroy Social Housing in Iquique, which has replaced a tent city with permanent structures, a little public investment looks to be going a long way.

Quinta Monroy is a recent housing project by Elemental—a “doing tank” (the think tank’s more active cousin, it seems) led by Alejandro Aravena that stands for an urban social mix and opposes gentrification. In an innovative proposal on social housing, Elemental sought to consolidate and renovate a shantytown located in the core of the northern city Iquique.

As part of a new program by the Chilean Ministry of Housing and Urbanism, owners receive \$7,500 in state financial assistance for an approximately 320-square-foot house built on the same lot where they used to live, and then expand the house through additions and renovations.

Quinta Monroy doesn't force poorer people out of downtown urban areas. The scheme developed by the architects creates a spacious but high-density complex that keeps the city center within reach of low-income residents. It was planned as a series of three-story blocks composed of ground-level units and two-story, second-floor duplexes, all of them directly accessible from the street. As a medium-sized development inserted into an existing neighborhood, it's already well integrated into the city's flow.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Quinta Monroy is the inclusion of the residents into the design process and subsequent construction—a feat rarely attempted or accomplished. The construction was designed for a set group of around 100 families and the residents participated in a series of workshops, allowing them to choose whether they would live upstairs or downstairs, select what they wanted most from the four public courtyards, and suggest how to build the future additions—while still ensuring the integrity of the complex. ■