There are two things you should know about

**ALEJANDRO**

Almost the first thing Aravena does is make clear just how at odds he is with the theme of this year’s biennale, *Architecture Beyond Building*, which manifested itself in a stream of solipsistic art pieces by some of the biggest names in the profession. “We have to translate ideas into facts. That’s what we do. I mean, that’s our power. It’s why we get paid,” says Aravena, sounding exasperated without raising his voice.

“Architects wanted to have a certain artistic freedom, and the price we paid as a discipline was irrelevance,” he continues. “You want to shock people to disguise the fact that you are irrelevant.”

This particular morning, Aravena has just found out that he’s won the Silver Lion, the biennale’s accolade for the most promising young architect in the main exhibition. “It’s fantastic,” he says. “On the other hand, I...”

**ARAVENTA.** First, he has built more than a thousand houses for Chile’s poor, with several thousand more under way; second, the CEO of COPEC, the Chilean oil company, sits on the board of his architecture practice. In a strange way, neither of those facts is less impressive than the other. Aravena’s practice, Elemental, has to be one of the most unusual in the world; an equal partnership between an architect, an oil company and a university. He likes to call it a “do tank”, but not for a lack of thinking. The 45-year-old has come up with a design that could revolutionize social housing in the developing world. The “do” is meant to signify that Elemental is no mere talking shop. Its ethos is to implement what it can, whatever the circumstances – and the circumstances of housing the poor in Latin American cities are pretty onerous.

The first time we meet is in a rain-washed Venice, during the architecture biennale last September. Aravena, who has a wolverine quality with his grey eyes and bristling hair, is soft-spoken and deeply, deeply earnest.
feel kind of uncomfortable because I do not think architecture is beyond building." On the contrary, Aravena believes that architects need to serve society. Channelling one of his early influences, architect and Harvard professor Hashim Sarkis, Aravena says: "The biggest challenge today is to try to engage non-architectural issues - meaning poverty, less segregation in cities, less violence - with our specific knowledge - which is to design and do projects." Although some may balk at the high-minded rhetoric, he sees architects as the only profession able to synthesise the different kinds of expertise that go into tackling these issues.

Aravena didn’t always have such faith. Shortly after graduating in the early 1990s, following a succession of "shitty clients — restaurants, bars, shops", he got so disillusioned that he quit architecture and opened a bar. "I lived by night, waking up at 3am and going to bed at 6am," he says. When he eventually decided to resume his career, he got lucky. A sculptor asked him to design her house, and this was when he learned the lesson that perhaps makes him so intolerant of what’s on offer at the biennale. "I wanted to have that kind of freedom," he recalls, "so I said, 'Don't pay me, but allow me to do whatever I want.' I think I was rigorous enough, but it was still a completely stupid thing."

What he now calls his "first" building was the mathematics faculty at his alma mater, the Universidad Católica de Santiago. It won some prizes, kickstarting a relationship with the university that has since yielded several buildings, including Aravena's most recognisable, the so-called Slavonian Towers for the digital research department (icon 8 202). But it was when he was invited to teach at Harvard, in 2000, that Aravena decided to set up Elemental. There he'd met his business partner, Andrés Iacobelli, a transport engineer studying public policy. Together, they wanted to do something about the state of social housing in Chile.

"We didn't know how, it could have been a book, an exhibition - but engineers are very clear about that," he says, referring to Iacobelli. "He said, 'Look, if we think we have a point, we have to prove our point following the same rules as everyone else: not less than 200 houses at a time, with the budget that public policy offers.' And because they were 'ignorant', they looked for partners. The fact that they bagged not just the university but COPEC, the second biggest company in Chile, suggests what a persuasive character Aravena is.

Elemental's contribution to the canon of social housing came from an almost impossible question. In 2003 Aravena was asked to house 100 families in Illapel, a city in northern Chile, with just £2,000 per family in government subsidies to buy the land and build the houses. "We tested every single known typology available on the market," he says. "None of them solved the question." The families had enough money to buy the city-centre site or build the houses, but not both. "That's why social housing is two hours away in the peripheries," says Aravena. "That's the drama of Latin America."

A standard answer might have been to build high-rises, but that wouldn't have allowed the families to expand. Aravena decided that since they only had enough money to build half a house for each family, that was exactly what they would do. "When you have money for half a house, the question is which half do we do?" he explains, before launching into what sounds like a PowerPoint presentation about budgets per square metre that he has refined to simplicity over countless recitals. "Let's do the half that the family would never be able to do on its own. Namely, the structure, roof, kitchen and bathroom."

This isn't the first time someone has suggested part-building houses for the poor: in São Paulo, for instance, concrete frames have been provided for residents to insert their own homes. "What is unique about..."
Aravena is that what he's doing is elegant, it has a certain dignity," says Ricky Burdett, director of the Urban Age conference.

The houses were synapsed with gaps into which the families could insert extra rooms as necessary, any way they wanted. Within a year, Elemental's unexciting concrete structures had evolved into a characterful neighbourhood of varied hues and window styles, in which the houses would clearly gain value over time rather than deteriorate like so many other public housing projects - it's social housing as an investment rather than an expense. The solution to the Iquique problem was so efficient and pragmatic that variations are now being implemented in 13 other sites in Chile and Mexico. In fact, it's easy to imagine the model working in any developing country.

After nearly an hour of conversation, what is most telling about Aravena is that he has hardly talked about architecture at all. He hasn't once mentioned aesthetics or facades or any of the other ways by which architects exercise some form of creative control. Almost all of his references are to economists, like Rakesh Mohan, the deputy governor of the central bank of India, whom Aravena calls "a genius". There is a certain logic to this. Architecture is becoming more and more about numbers. By 2050 an extra 2 billion people will move into cities, and it was Mohan who pointed out that we have to build the equivalent of a one-million-person city a week between now and then to house them. Faced with that prospect, the future doesn't need big budget high-concept stargarchs so much as it does economically literate pragmatists like Aravena. He may yet become the poster boy of a socially minded architecture facing the unique problems of the 21st century.

Two weeks after Venice, we meet again in London, where Aravena is presenting the Iquique project to a housing conference at the RIBA. Proud as ever, he only gets half way through in the time, but he has the audience in his pocket. This is a roomful of architects who like to think that 200 inhabitants per hectare is "high density". The Iquique project houses 700 people per hectare, and Aravena has since designed prototypes that accommodate 1600 and even 900 people per hectare. I suggest that he is one of a group of architects, including the Venezuelan practice Urban Think Tank and the San Diego-based Teddy Cruz, who are the conscience of their profession. But he's too modest to agree. "I am not a particularly good person," he says. "I work in a question that is difficult and give built answers."

Today, Chile is producing the most interesting architects in South America. Yet, without diminishing the formal and material inventiveness of compatriots such as Smiljan Radic and Matthias Klotz, the country has been a different kind of crucible for Aravena. "I really appreciate to be trained in an environment of scarcity," he says. "Sometimes it's a very efficient filter against what's not strictly necessary. There's not enough money, not enough time to answer with tools that are not exactly the ones you need for that question." This country of extremes - extreme poverty, extreme earthquakes, extreme deserts - has, in effect, stripped him down to the toughest pragmatist, almost to a mathematician.

While the Elemental housing projects continue, Aravena now has a whole other strand of more opulent, international projects. This transition from the loan to the far left, with the requisite culture shock, when he was asked to design a dormitory for St Edward's University in Austin, Texas. Instead of poor families he was dealing with donors and trustees, and they wanted a building in keeping with their oddly Bavarian-style 1910 campus. In his first encounter with an overtly aesthetic agenda, and desperate to avoid pastiche, Aravena produced "something we didn't know we could design."

The dormitory, which opens this month, is an opening gambit. Next, is Aravena's house for the infamous Ordes 100 scheme, a vanity project in Inner Mongolia that has been a windfall for young architects the world over. Due next year, it reveals a more relaxed architect, playing with form and texture. He is also designing a children's workshop for the Vitra Campus, next to early works by Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid. It looks like a chopped roof that's fallen off the back of a lorry. These are a far cry from the "dry, neutral, silent" support-structure architecture, "the very not-cool language" of Elemental's housing. Aravena recalls that for years architecture magazines didn't publish his work. "At the time, datacapes and participatory designs were trendy and architects' interventions looked very casual," he says. "It was not our case."

That word "casual" is revealing. There is nothing casual about being asked to relocate a town that has just been destroyed by a volcano, as Chaitén in Patagonia was in May. There are 5000 people to house, and Elemental is the go-to practice for that kind of problem. Working with Arup, Aravena is planning a new town from scratch. It's projects such as these, for people with needs, that are Aravena's real contribution. As his international reputation grows, let's hope that he doesn't get distracted from this kind of work, because it reminds us that architecture is not just a cultural act but a social one.