

MONUMENT

ALEJANDRO ARAVENA, TRIBE
STUDIO, COX RAYNER, IVAN
RIJAVEC, ROSEVEAR ARCHITECTS

98

ISSN 2201-3315 • A C 838320 • 10819120
Printed Post-Approved at 233967 09003



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+ TIMOTHY HILL TALKS TO OWEN AND VOKES ABOUT THE BRISBANE PARADOX AND A NEW SUBURBAN AESTHETIC

The interview:

Being Alejandro Aravena

As director of Alejandro Aravena Arquitectos, one of Chile's foremost practices, Alejandro Aravena is accumulating an enviable portfolio of beautiful institutional and cultural projects. But he also runs Elemental, a 'do-tank' incorporating the country's largest oil company and university, which is revolutionizing public housing across Latin America. Aged 43, he has been awarded the Silver Lion as most promising young architect at the Venice Biennale, is the youngest member of the prestigious Pritzker Prize jury, and cuts a fine figure in a suit. He recently attended extraordinary 2010 Australian Institute of Architects National Conference where he talked with David Neustein.

The model of public housing that you developed in Iquique, Chile, and completed in 2004, has obviously proved extremely successful and adaptable. I wonder if you worry about what you will do next, and if there will even be a next?

We've been wanting to repeat it, to finally recover our professional spending time identifying the question, finding the right answer, arriving at the most synthesized design that is affordable, and that is easiest to build. Iquique is a model for achieving enough density to pay for well-located land, without overcrowding, with the possibility of expansion, at low rise. That can be achieved sometimes with one property on top of the other, like Iquique. It has been achieved sometimes with a different layout, where the infrastructural core is compressed, and then expansions take place between the cores. Depending on the amount of money available, or the particular geographical conditions, the envelope always varies. So, in moving the one-property-on-top-of-the-other model to different geographical scenarios, we can't simply copy the plan and just mass produce it. Just the process of adapting it leads to a new stage.

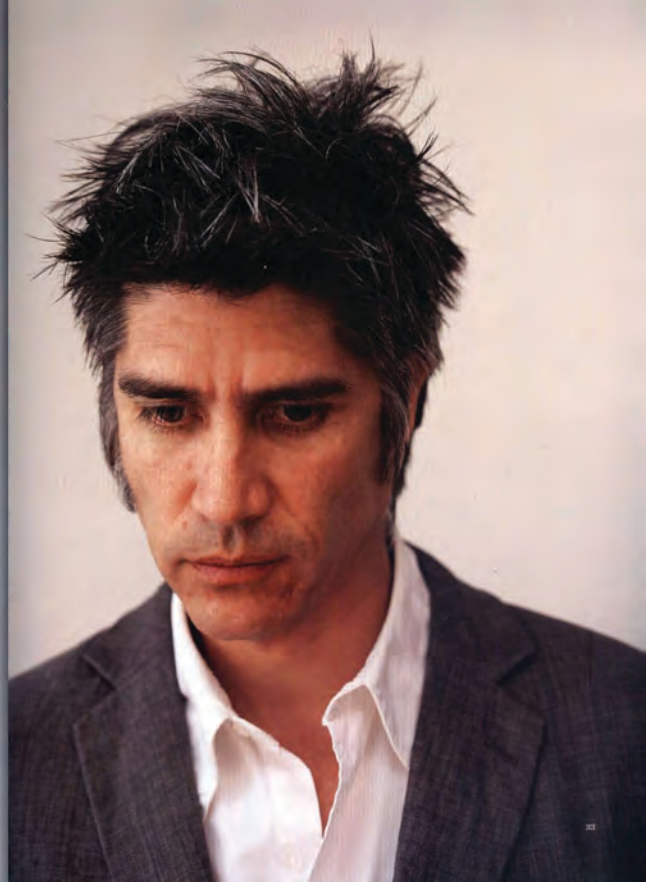
Anyhow, the real next step then has been moving from housing to the city itself. We're now working in public spaces, in transportation and infrastructure. It was good that we decided to move that way a couple of years ago, because we were asked to rebuild one of the cities, Constitución, after the earthquake in February this year. And in a project like that you can't be doing just housing, you're doing everything. To do a city practically from scratch is a new thing for us. I mean, we were trained in infrastructure, and sometimes combine infrastructure with public space, or transportation with

public space. Now we have to combine all of that simultaneously. It's an incredible challenge, it's professionally challenging, extremely difficult, and we are in a hurry.

Do you share intelligence with other organisations that handle related problems, for example Architecture for Humanity, or Shigeru Ban's work with disaster relief housing?

We do partner, not with other designers, but with other professions, which is extremely fascinating. I mean, the tsunami expert, for example, who we're working with in Constitución, is from Mars! This guy is maybe 33, 40 years old, yet knows as much as a human being can possibly know about a particular topic, which is fantastic. We commonly have the privilege of getting in contact with people who, say, in the policy-making world, are geniuses. Same with the tsunami expert or the structural engineer or the seismic isolation expert. And we've systematically looked for that knowledge because architecture has the capacity to integrate it naturally and synthesize it in a project.

There's power in putting things down on paper. I think that's the moment that I really feel that there is any relevance in what we do. Stop talking, put it on paper. From that point on, people begin to build on it. The tsunami guy says "OK, in this case I would give this and that width to the protection". Or the guy for transportation will say "Now that you're framing it in this way, I would suggest entering the city this or that way with trucks and buses". So it's a moment of synergy where everything comes together and then is released again, and built on top of a unified purpose. And that's very challenging and rewarding. +





“I think of you as being somebody who finds opportunity in everything, and I was interested to know if you had already discovered some opportunities as a result of the earthquake?”

Yes, absolutely. Very quickly after the disaster we were in a helicopter going to the south. And what you could see from the air is that the country has an agro-industrial landscape of a first-world standard, Chile's infrastructure, highways are of a first-world standard. The forests, or the forest industry is of a first-world standard. The cities, however, are just crap. There you see that we are in the third world, or second-and-a-half world. Chile's urban planning, just to make a very objective start, never considered the possibility of a tsunami, even though we're in a seismic area. I mean, it defies belief that nobody took that into consideration. This is the evidence that our urban standard is not at the level of other things that we have achieved at our country. So the disaster has given us the opportunity to address the urban centre of our cities.

For something that big, there is no effective administrative structure in the country for the type of issues that we're dealing with. The disaster has required us, for example, to rebuild a city. So it's not just about housing, it's housing plus job opportunities, which require roads and connections, and eventually quality of life considerations. To do this we need a level of trans-ministerial coordination that does not currently exist in the structure of the government. And because we are in an emergency situation we might have to get things done without following convention. So aside from introducing tsunami risk into the DNA of the urban form, we have the challenge of adjusting the ministerial structure to address transversal, not just linear questions. Because of disaster we might be able to change.

My business partner Andrés Jacobelli, who is an engineer and public policy expert, has always thought that there is an intrinsic capacity in

“In a project like rebuilding a city, you're not just doing houses, you're doing everything.”

Chile for generating unique knowledge. We're poor enough to be able to think about how to solve problems with almost no means, be it transportation, housing, or whatever, but not so poor that we cannot think about potential and possibilities. So, for example, if you were a rich country and want to improve your public transportation, then you buy subways and metros from Germany, Canada or France. But what if you're not that rich? Why do we import metros from Siemens, Bombardier or Alstom? Because they had the need first. It's not that they're smarter; they just had the problem of solving massive public transportation because they had the density in cities, and because of that they developed subways. Having the problem first enables you potentially to export that knowledge afterwards. We in Chile do have some needs that others do not have. I mean, the first world doesn't have to solve the problem of transportation with no money, and other countries that are too poor just can't. We're on the threshold of having to solve the problem with barely any money, which puts us in the position of potential knowledge exporters. This is exciting. What Finland is doing, for example, with Sitra, their innovation fund, where they are very consciously and expressively saying, “We're facing some problems like aging, or climate change, before others. We're going to invest in creating knowledge to solve that problem slightly ahead of others. But once we do that, we will be able to export that knowledge”.

In the case of Elemental, we knew from the beginning that we were dealing with new territory. Once we solved the problem with a unit for US\$810,000 that could gain value over time, producing investment and not expense, we realised that nobody else in the world was doing that. So we're the potential exporter of that knowledge. I mean, can you do the same thing with transportation, with infrastructure, to create the subway of the poor? It might be a bus with a hybrid engine and not a train. All this is a

“What all that recognition does in the end is allow me to put my energy where it's needed, which is working on the project.”

—not necessarily our brief, or the explicit thinking of our country, but that's the opportunity we see in trying to upgrade our standards, simply another existing knowledge that we will be able to export.

Was it Andrés Jacobelli's connections that allowed you to move between your research at Harvard and your housing projects?

I would say that he is the healthiest person I have possibly ever met, because his questions are like breaths of fresh air. I mean, he said, “OK, I like your approach. Why don't we do something together with social housing?” If he was an architect, the question “why don't we do something?” would have meant a symposium, a conference, a book or an exhibition, which is completely ineffective, and would have never even scratched reality. But his “do something” meant let's go and talk to the ministry, and let's build a project, and we will follow every single rule that the market is following. That approach would have never come from an architect.

Another question he asked me was, “Well, Chilean architecture is at a good moment. It's capturing attention everywhere. But if Chilean architects are that good, why is social housing so bad?” It proved over time that he systematically asked the right questions, and the more constraints the questions had, the more I could synthesise answers in a simple way. It was a natural match. So I would say that teaming up with him has allowed me to take the risks that architects and academia normally don't want to take because it might lead you to a result that isn't cool. Architects tend to organise the problem in such a way that you can guarantee a cool answer that other architects then envy and admire, and [Jacobelli], not being an architect, didn't give a shit about what other architects thought.

As somebody who has been awarded the Silver Lion and any number of other titles, people have felt great desire to position you. Has working with Jacobelli protected you?

What all that recognition does in the end is enable me to have fewer meetings and to actually get things done. It allows me to put

my energy where it's needed, which is in working on the project. Simultaneously, by working with Jacobelli, he has such a different way of looking at things that it allows me to step back, look at the big picture and understand that we're not competing against other architects for more jobs. It's about shaping the form of the country. What I'm trying to do is to participate in the discussion and compete with lawyers, politicians, engineers and social policy experts. If it's considered a competition, the real competition is between disciplines, not between architects. I would like to have a say in where the country is moving, or how the built environment is going to change. There are other desires too, but the real struggle and the real debate happens between other disciplines.

Are you worried about starting to believe in your own image?

Yeah. And if you think you're somebody it's very dangerous. It's a strange balance, because you have to transmit confidence to be able to talk to politicians, or to a community, and say that you know what you're going to do with the city. But that is a professional confidence. It is not that you're saying, you know, “I am on a different level”. And I do have knowledge, but I have to go into communities where the people I speak to do not have a clue what a Silver Lion is. And that's very healthy.

Just because you've been recognised doesn't mean that people should believe you in advance. One of the bad things about architecture is that it is too connected to art. I mean, if you work too hard to create an aura around yourself, like some kind of a genius that has to be left alone to be creative, that's the moment where you get lost. Nobody can say to you, “Well, you know, I do not like that plan, change it”. So it's a strange balance, with on the other hand trying to be as influential as possible. I'm not going to be modest about this. If you think that you have a point, and you can make a professional difference, well go for as much influence as possible. It's a responsibility to be influential if you think you have some quality of stuff to offer.