

Alejandro Aravena

The Pritzker Prize-winning Chilean architect reflects on innovation, social responsibility, and the limits of control.

Last year, you released low-cost, flexible social housing designs as open-source plans, free to all. Why? It's a manual—for design, for working for communities, for beginning a discussion about policy. We wanted to prove the market wrong, and argue that within the same set of rules, things could be better. We all want a better world.

Do you think in a world in which robotics and open-source plans become more widely implemented, the authorship of architecture will become less relevant? If you have an object, it has an author. I guess architecture represents the last scale at which such a notion of authorship is recognized. Beyond it, for instance, who is the author of a highway? I'm more interested in the number of forces at play. The more forces, the less the notion of authorship is recognizable.

When you control too much, things begin to lose power. Consider a sketchbook: In it, lines do not meet. You complete the idea with your own perception. That's why a sketch is more powerful than a rendering or a model, or even the realized object. It's like

surfing—you are not controlling the waves. The power is much bigger than you.

In 2014 your firm, ELEMENTAL, created the Innovation Center on the campus of the Universidad Católica de Chile. The structure is intended as a meeting place where researchers, academics, and business leaders can converge to exchange ideas. Can you share how you approached it? In the presentations to the university's board, I remember saying that one of the biggest threats to an innovation center is obsolescence. We're not looking for trendiness or contemporariness. We are looking for timelessness. But how do you design a timeless building? It's pretentious to approach it that way. You focus on the kinds of forces that influence the form of the building.

What kinds of forces? Gravity. You can't live without it, it's been there since the beginning, and it will be there forever. Pay attention to forces like that. If you want a glass tower with a structure inside that you will then wrap a scheme around, the weight of that building will be 17,000 tons. Having been given that amount of matter is something that should not be hidden. It should be celebrated. It's a powerful thing. A sculptor would kill to get 17,000 tons. So we decided to take that force and agree with it. You feel the weight because of the way the floors are



“Build good cities and you will get a better man. For that to happen, there are three conditions: the right rule of law, the right financing plan, and good design.”

grouped. That's our approach: Try to figure out the question before going into the answer.

That philosophy is evident in your work that addresses issues of poverty and social inequity. It's a must. If you don't do it that way, you're not a valid counterpart. If you don't understand project constraints and policy, if you don't speak the language of the people—you must use discipline to remove the superfluous. >



The Ocho Quebradas House (top left and left), which Aravena has worked on since 2013, is an ongoing experiment in primitive living. “What you’re questioning is, ‘What do I really need?’” he says. The 2014 Innovation

Center—Anacleto Angelini (above) is one of several buildings the architect has designed for his alma mater, the Universidad Católica de Chile. The Villa Verde Housing project (below) was completed in 2016.

When we consider social housing, even though it’s a political, economic, and social question, our way into the conversation is through design.

But we hate to be labeled as social architects. We’ve never for one second claimed that we’re better people than other individuals. We think we’re good designers, and this is our way to enter the discussion.

So is it fair to say that a consideration for basic human needs drives your approach? The question of social consciousness is just a consequence of the balance between pertinence and creativity. If you’re facing your questions, it’s no wonder that you’ll have to be innovative. You have to invent new things. If you’re rigorous, there’s not one single project that doesn’t require innovation. For us, we’re conscious that we have the privilege of having more requests than we can handle. We are a small office. We choose a project according

to the level of innovation required, because we like to go into builds that we have no idea about. Whether it’s housing or a park, you have to start from outside of yourself.

How does your firm organize its time and focus? It used to be one third social housing, one third city design, and one third building. City design appeared after the earthquake of 2010—we were requested to rebuild the city of Constitución in 100 days. Prior to that, we’d done parts of public space, infrastructure, or housing, but never everything together in such a short period of time. The question became how to integrate the state, the market, and the people. It was a problem beyond urbanism, because there was a social threat of having a problem that couldn’t be managed—the anger, the violence. There were riots, people attacking other people and looting shops. Even though it started as a natural disaster, the social consequences were much bigger. We used the city as a way to channel those forces and negotiate benefits for everybody.



What are your thoughts on pre-fab? The more efficient you are with the building process, the more you create an unemployment issue. Let’s say you go to a lumberman and offer a very efficient building system. They want to be more inefficient, because they want to employ more people. The more inefficient you are, the more socially efficient you are. So by building, you create a social benefit of having people employed. This is part of the equation that requires choice on a case-by-case basis.

Do residential commissions figure into your practice? Not as much. We have limited time, and we are prepared to go into builds where there’s so much more at stake. There’s also more risk. Say you’re going to do social housing, where you have to do everything with \$7,000 per family. If for some reason you succeed, the consequences can be huge. It’s a question of how you’re deciding to spend your heartbeats. ■