

Asking the right questions

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ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

A CONVERSATION
WITH...

Alejandro Aravena

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Villa Verde Housing, September 18th 2013, Constitución, Chile
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Zurich Oerlikon, October 2013. Alejandro Aravena has just finished giving his guest lecture at ONA, the converted industrial building now occupied by the ETH Zurich Department of Architecture. We are sitting around a conference table kindly provided by the Chair of Professor Marc Angélil.

transRedaktion (tr): Alejandro Aravena, with ELEMENTAL you often defy the norms of accepted architectural practice. You build half a house, which inhabitants can then complete according to their needs. This radical approach seems to surrender the professional architect's prerogative concerning the overall formal outcome of a project.

Alejandro Aravena (aa): A quick clarification is necessary. What we are trying to do is half of a 'good' house instead of a small one. Introducing the notion of 'good' makes a significant difference because it requires a qualification of the term 'good' from the outset as well as identifying which half of the house is actually designed. So our approach shifts both the framing of the question and the synthesis of the answer. Let me give you a practical example to illustrate what I mean. When you only have enough money for purchasing either a hot-water boiler or a bathtub, you buy the bathtub. You can still use it with cold water until you have enough money to buy the boiler.

tr: Yes, we see your point. Do you think that ELEMENTAL's emphasis on social housing differs from other more conventional, 'normal' forms of architectural practice in Chile?

aa: I don't think our practice is different because we don't see our work as professional charity, so to speak, but rather as a professional challenge that aims to

expand the field of architecture. We differ from most architectural firms in that we have a board of directors. This is because ELEMENTAL is not an NGO but rather a for-profit company owned by COPEC¹, the Catholic University², and ourselves³. When we founded the office, the board offered us a single investment of working capital, telling us that our operation needed to become profitable – the financial figures needed to change from red to blue⁴ in order for us to be sustainable. To achieve this goal, we were forced to answer the critical question «what do we sell?». Is it that good taste is a scarce resource that people will pay for, or do we as architects offer something else?

To answer this question required a fundamental innovation in design thinking, which entails the creation of architectural form that tackles non-architectural issues. Giving people a house is not just about providing physical shelter; it is also a tool for overcoming poverty. That is, the process has many more outcomes than just the formal architectural design. For instance, we have made documentary films accompanying our projects which help people understand the process, offers free knowledge to the public, and stimulates discussions at the political level. Maybe the ultimate way to explain this in non-architectural terms is that we try to add value to things. So I don't know, is that normal? (pauses)

tr: Well, you do use terms such as innovation and added value in a way that is not typical in the discipline of architecture. In fact, you use one phrase that is usually avoided because of its negative connotations: for-profit.

aa: We consider economics as a means, not a goal in itself. It's one of the many

languages you have to speak to get your projects built. We want to understand the logic of economics so that within that set of constraints we can produce and add as much value as possible, knowing that what we are doing as architects is improving the quality of our built environment as well as the lives of our clients.

tr: Speaking as students, we have observed that thinking about economics is often neglected in university design studios. In your opinion, does something have to change in architectural education?

aa: The approach should definitely not be centered on economics per se. I would restate the question at a more abstract level, namely in terms of learning to think with constraints. It is often assumed that education must be liberated from constraints so that mind and spirit can develop freely. In my opinion the responsibility of education is just the contrary: the more rules, the more freedom. But this notion is based on my cumulative experience in the field, not on a principle or a theory. (pauses)

I'll give an example of what I mean regarding what you typically learn at school, what you do in reality, and what you can do in the space between. ELEMENTAL began when I met Andres Iacobelli at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, a brilliant engineer repeatedly asking such crucial questions. ELEMENTAL was still an academic initiative, so we needed an umbrella organization to get started. Andres offered to create such an organization as a public policy center at the Catholic University, and it proved to be the most convenient for them to hire him as a professor at the school of architecture. The first final review to which he was invited was in a studio on public schools in the



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poor periphery of Santiago; so, in principle, a perfect way of how architecture should deal with ‹real› issues! During the course of the review, the students proposed rather ‹cool› designs with let's say, 8 m² per pupil, which in theory is an ideal standard for a good education. Andres asked: «Did you talk to a school administrator?»
«No,» they said.
«Well, if you did, you would have known that the government subsidy allows to build only 4 m² per pupil.»

So the students were being trained to make fantastic responses with a set of constraints that has nothing to do with reality. Here within the safe confines of academia, one need never consult an excel budget sheet or face all the municipal bureaucracy associated with such a project; one need only adhere to the program as set by the professor. In other words, students are sheltered from constraints as dictated by reality.

Marc Angéilil (ma): May I join the discussion?

aa: Yes please! So, I was talking about the challenges of academia... I studied architecture from 1985 to 1990 during the final years of the Pinochet era. If you were not connected to the university at that time it meant you were brain-dead. Professional practice was mediocre and simplistic and academia kept the standard of the architecture. Twenty years later, the situation is just the opposite. Today, the schools create fake problems that have nothing to do with the inconvenient, ‹uncool› problems of reality.

I experienced this especially in the US education system when I was teaching at Harvard. I was invited to a review where I did not understand a single word said by

both students and faculty. The student work was dealing with some kind of linear infrastructural connector segregating multi-modal flows, which to me sounded rather remote. I then asked the students to explain their projects as if they were talking to their grandparents on the telephone. It turned out that the project was something as basic as a bridge over a highway that connected to a ferry terminal in Manhattan!

ma: What year was that?

aa: It was in 2000.

ma: I had a similar experience with the disconnect between education and reality that you are addressing. I began teaching at Harvard in 1981 at the height of postmodernism, when everyone at the Graduate School of Design was talking about such historical figures as Andrea Palladio, Vincenzo Scamozzi, or Giulio Romano, to mention just a few. Well versed in architecture history, students and faculty knew each Renaissance villa by heart. I, on the other hand, came from the entirely different educational culture of the ETH with its modernist inclination, emphasis on functionality, and fondness for clarity of construction. In this context, mass housing was the prime assignment of design studios. As a young professor at Harvard, I was not a part of the game at first since I had a different vocabulary and different interests than those of my colleagues.

What I began to realize is that this school is brilliant at creating new terminologies and codes that then become the norm, norms disseminated around the world and given particular significance because they are branded at Harvard. Yet, the moment a normative vocabulary is established, another one is created to replace it. And the game goes on in endless rounds of

inventing new discursive standards. The strength of the US system is that it has been able to constantly re-invent the terms of the discipline, ad absurdum.

aa: With this in mind, is it not possible to speak about design problems in straightforward terms instead of convoluted terminologies? Being fair to Harvard, one must concede that it attracts the lion's share of brilliant and talented people. Yet, one must acknowledge the intellectual value of being able to solve problems such as designing a bridge over a highway to a ferry terminal in view of real parameters of cost, structural performance, and social impact, rather than obscuring the task in quasi-theoretical babble.

That said, I am aware that reality is full of mediocre practices, but the profession cannot turn away from the multitude of questions before us that require new approaches in design. To this end, I believe the answers to such questions are to be found in the space between the constraints of reality and those circumscribing invention.

1 Chilean Oil Company (Compañía de Petróleos de Chile).
2 Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.
3 The five architects that are partners.
4 The Spanish idiom ‹red to blue› denotes going from negative to positive.

ELEMENTAL, established in 2006, is a partnership of five architects – Alejandro Aravena, Gonzalo Arteaga, Juan Ignacio Cerda, Diego Torres and Víctor Oddó – associated with Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile and Chilean Oil Company, COPEC, whose strength is the innovation and quality in projects with public interest and social impact. Since first starting as an academic initiative in 2001, their work has been widely exhibited including MoMa (New York, 2010), MA Gallery (Tokyo, 2011), is now part of the Pompidou collection (Paris) and has been awarded prizes such as the Silver Lion at the XI Venice Biennale (2008), the Index Award in Denmark (2011) as well as the first place in the Tehran Stock Exchange Building Competition (2012).

Alejandro Aravena, born 1967, is an architect that graduated from the Universidad Católica in 1992. After additional studies of history, theory and engraving in Venice, Italy, he established his practice in 1994. From 2000 to 2005 he was visiting professor at Harvard Graduate School of Design. He is currently member of the advisory boards of the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, the London School of Economics and the Holcim Foundation. Since 2009, he is a member of the Pritzker Prize Jury and, since 2006, executive director of ELEMENTAL.

The interview was conducted and recorded by Janina Flückiger, Julia Hemmerling, Stéphanie Savio and Matthew Tovstiga in Zurich, October 2013.