Half-happy architecture

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We thought and discussed a lot before writing this text. Few weeks ago, we witnessed the Pritzker awarding ceremony of Alejandro Aravena and we were puzzled by the use and the abuse of the buzz-concept of "social architect". After that then, we followed the opening speech of the 2016 Venice Biennale where the rhetoric of the social turn has been displaced, literally, on top of a metal scale staring to the frontier of the yet to come experimentation of formalist architecture with a social look.

The two events are not to be taken as connected, but rather treated as discrete. So despite the several hesitations we had in planning it, this text gives us the opportunity to develop some reflections around the implications and the reasons for not simplifying the struggle of those architects who are trying to produce relevant work in the frame of the current global challenges. Taking a distance from the critique of Alejandro Aravena as a person with good social skills (as argued by many critics) and his media-friendly "starchitect" role, we aim at focusing on the space produced by his firm and its overall aesthetic. We wish to rise two specific points hoping to contribute to a critical view on the current architectural debate and its capacity of "reporting from the front".

The first is a concise critique of the idea of a *good-half-house* coined by Elemental (Aravena's studio) for the Quinta Monroy project, contesting its real contribution to the idea of good quality architecture for the poor. For us, the contribution made by Aravena is more a good

economic strategy but not necessarily a good mode of spatial production and — certainly — not a revolution. Offering some insight into the neoliberal public policies of social housing in Chile, the first part of this text reflects on the apparent radicalism of Aravena's gesture and the problematic nature of the "social" term in such practice.

The second is related to the pragmatic, social formalism that seems at the centre of the Biennale's red carpet, with some new names on the list and the permanence of the usual suspects, although with a social touch. *Reporting from the front* seems to well fit Nietzsche's interpretation of architecture as «the aesthetic objectivation of the will to power» impulsed by the architect's «ecstasy of the great will», apparently presenting itself as an edifice that offers an interpretation of social architecture as an unfinished problem that requires both political and aesthetic indetermination.

After all, the two events and Aravena's global fame are for us an excuse to ask a simple question: is it possible to produce more social justice in the entrenched and pervasive neoliberal present?

The Pritzker Prize
Few weeks ago, the Hyatt Foundation awarded the Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena, co-founder and principal partner of the do-thank Elemental, the Pritzker Prize acknowledging his contribution to the architecture discipline. 48 years-old and in the middle of a skyrocketing professional trajectory, the world-renewed prize arrives just after Aravena has been asked to curate the 15th Venice Architecture Biennale. Apparently, 2016 is Aravena's *annus mirabilis*. The prize sparkled conflictive reactions on the web and in the press, boosting his "stararchitectculturism" (a just invented neologism that mixes the starchitect with the culturist, attempting to represent Aravena's mediatic image of an ever-young, good-looking architect, alternative to the mainstream but still conventional, successful and "planetary" in its effect) while allowing his detractors to comment on his work.
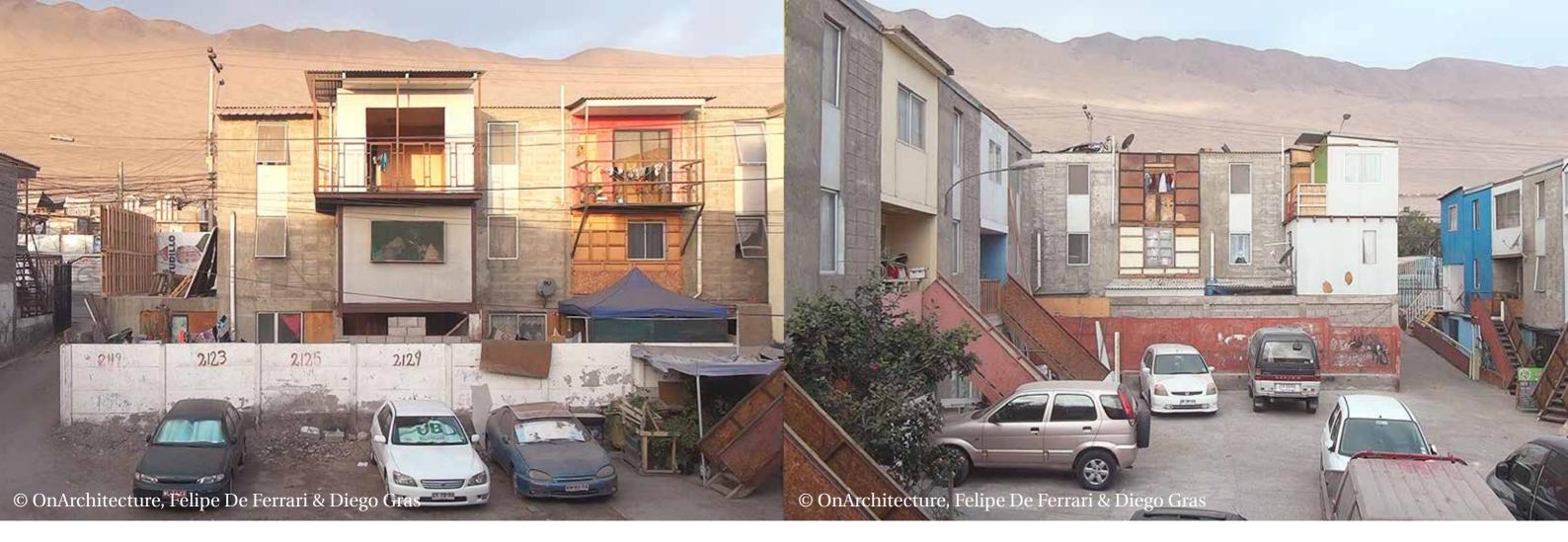
According to the adjudication comments, the prize was assigned to him because «Alejandro Aravena has pioneered a collaborative practice that produces powerful works of architecture and also addresses key challenges of the XXI century. His built work gives economic opportunity to the less privileged, mitigates the effects of natural disasters, reduces energy consumption, and provides welcoming public space. Innovative and inspiring, he shows how architecture at its best can improve people's lives». It results disturbing to think that in the understanding of the Hyatt Foundation, the kind of social housing developed by Elemental is "architecture at its best". What is interesting, therefore, is the opportunity given by the award to use the arguments of this elitist institution for the production of a deeper discussion on the real contribution that architecture can offer to global crises, discussing the idea of a "shortcut to inequality", as Aravena says.

The Pritzker prize motivation seems to stress the transformative potential of a renewed architecture, the need for an explicit social agenda. Can it be considered a game-changer declaration? It is difficult not to agree with a particular attention to architecture, calling for its multiple agencies outside of pure formalism and exclusionary rhetoric. Considering the global failure of neoliberal ideologies, policies and cultures in developing a better social life, the role of architecture in this process cannot be underestimated, especially because it is precisely through spatial production that capital reproduces itself, and it is through the profitable aims of the construction industry that architecture has been reduced to a solely elemental condition, rather than an exploration capable of producing "architecture at its best". Profit, not quality, is the aim of neoliberalism, which is why the way in which Aravena develops social housing is just perfect: half houses obtained with public funding to activate cycles of capital accumulation and urbanize so to prepare the field for soon-to-come, better profitable real estate developments. Without touching the Chilean neoliberal rule (harsh as the Atacama desert), Aravena has invented a neoliberal method to produce social architecture, which has been broadly accepted and praised.

Aravena and the new starchitect's pursuit

Alejandro Aravena is a concrete architect, a man of reality and action, a good swimmer in neoliberal waters. Those who studied architecture in Chile, and those who got acquainted with his manifesto and the work of Elemental (his do-tank), know perfectly that his architectural ideology is based on simple equations, and geared on actions that are possible with the available, often limited, resources. In his book *Los Hechos de la Arquitectura* written with Fernando Perez Oyarzún and José Quintanilla, a title that surely shows pragmatism (*facts*) and a materialist attitude, his posture on architecture is evident: analyze, resolve and build.

The feeling one gets while reading the book is that architecture is more a solution to a problem than an expression of a cultural and social mode of inhabiting space and cities, or a cultural manifestation of people, or a technological exploration. Having said this, perhaps Aravena is offering the discipline a fantastic continuation of the engineering aspirations that Le Corbusier embodied in the beginning of the XX century, aligning an ethical shift of architecture with its potential to heal and cure the difficulties encountered on the "frontiers". Just like Le Corbusier, Aravena is responding to a call of his time. During the post-war crisis, a new *man* was arising so a new type of architecture was needed: modern architecture fitted perfectly in an international project to provide appropriate housing for a new society. In a way, the scope of Aravena is pretty much the same: a failed capitalist world requires urgent solutions for those who don't possess capital. Social housing, Aravena demonstrates, can be a good way to include the less privileged in the banking system, by providing land tenure and promoting entrepreneurialism at a small scale. Therefore, social housing is becoming a pathway to debt, which results vital for the reproduction of the capitalist landscape. If so, the Pritzker Prize allows us to think on what stage of post-modernity we live in, if any. Perhaps, following the economic trends analysed by Thomas Piketty, we find ourselves in a stage that is similar to that at the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX: although not only in terms of inequali-

ty and economy, but also from the point of view of other disciplines such as architecture. It is thus possible to claim that architecture is experiencing an homologation with the current economic trend, in the sense that inequality has invaded its mode of practice. As a consequence, it could be soon realistic to think that there exist two architectures: one for the poor and one for the others, as it was evident in late XIX century Chile, where the city for the civilized (oligarchy) was differentiated by the city for the barbaric (urban poor).

Aravena's masculine motto of doing, acting, not wasting time and architectural intelligence, alignes perfectly with an activist gesture (here used in the sense of holding the entire process, from design to production, into his own hands), focused on making and doing on behalf of the "common good," in the "public interest", or to achieve "social impact", however ambiguously these goals may be defined in different contexts.

Returning to the award, the fact that Aravena «practices architecture as an artful endeavor in private commissions and designs for the public realm and epitomizes the revival of a more socially engaged architect» may sound a bit disturbing to those architects that are actually socially engaged, or that practice an embedded, action-oriented and tranformative architecture. One that while suggesting solutions, research and new approaches, is able to target the root of a problem, rather than just a symptom. Calling Aravena "the anti-star architect par excellence", as recently done in an article by Eleonora Carraro, seems mistleadig at most. Aravena's gestures, postures and aestetic seem pretty much representing a new frontier of archistarism (another neologism): the adoption of social agendas and dooingoodism, normalised and domesticated in the neoliberal discource by abandoning and neutralising the radical critical originality. The radical change related to this radical critique that involves overcoming not only the lived experiences of alienation, objectification, and self-hatred, but also the more fundamental systems of oppression respon-

sible for those experiences, is left and abandoned and pakaged for being consumed in exibitions and ceremionies.

We would have been more at ease if the Pritzker Prize statement had been something like: *for his capacity to convince everyone that providing a half-house for low-income communities is a democratic idea*, or *for his capacity to demonstrate that social housing too can be a business in the neoliberal rule*, or even *for his amazing buildings developed for the Universidad Católica*. Please do not take us wrong. It is nice that Aravena won the price and it is important that architecture is paying more attention to the real challenges and responsibilities of shaping the spaces in which people live. But this has a price and a "dark side".

Where is the other half of the house?
In Argentina, during an interview, Aravena admitted that he approaches architecture as a profitable activity, which is not a problem *per se*, but it is undoubtely a slap in the face of all the architects who work with communities, marginalities, humanitarian agencies or simply in their neighbourhoods offering their professional advice in pro-bono activities.

Some questions then emerge. How can a socially engaged architect fix his goals in the profit rather than in the people? How can building and life quality be reconciled in an architectural work? How can doing good be complicit with the system that produces the inequality it aims at curing? How can Elemental be truly devoted to social causes, given that it belongs to the Angelini's, a company that owns questionable businesses such as Empresas Copec and Forestal Arauco?

In *Less is Enough* Aureli suggests what is proper to the conduct of the contemporary architect: whereas architects and designers today often concern themselves with a social agenda, «they rarely — Aureli laments — look at their own existence, which is what really constitutes the main source of their production». They would do better, and be more effectively political, were they to focus on their own lives as formal projects, rather than concerning themselves with an architecture of good intentions.

What is out of discussion here is Aravena's capacity of producing good architecture. From this point of view, we could mention the Anacleto Angelini Centre in San Joaquin and the Medical Faculty of the Universidad Católica, both remarkable projects that Aravena should be praised for, whose characteristics have been widely documented by specialized media. Nevertheless, the "social" label given to his architecture, and his particular approach to the problem of social housing, deserve an urgent discussion.

The problematic contradiction starts with the concept. First of all, the idea of offering "half house" to low-income communities results somehow insulting, because it implies that the finished project will depend on their individual (entrepreneurial) capacity to get the funds to build the other half. Where is the architect, and where is architecture in the other half of the house? What can be seen today, thirteen years after the completion of the Quinta Monroy project, are cheap construction techniques collated in what finally results as an expensive shelter. Adaptation, self-construction and community innovation are certainly central issues, but approaching them by leaving half of the house unbuilt can easily lead to the aestheticization of poverty and the subsequent processes of marginalization.

Jeremy Till acutely reflects on the intricate tension between scarcity and austerity, where «the political ideology of austerity is challenged by the real condition of scarcity. [...] Although austerity and scarcity are inevitably intertwined — the regimes of austerity induce real scarcities — austerity is not the same as scarcity. Austerity is the outcome of the ideologies of neo-liberalism, whereas scarcity is a higher-level condition that both drives those ideologies and also threatens them. Scarcity is the motor of capitalism: scarcity of supply regulates the market; too much stuff diminishes desire and competition».

In conditions of austerity, as Till maintains, «we are left trying to do the same thing but with less and, in contradiction to Mies, less really is less». Scarcity, on the other hand, puts us in a different condition: whether real or constructed, in fact, it can inspire us to widen the field of architectural practice and operate more creatively with what we are given. We should then ask ourselves: is Aravena's half-house the outcome of a condition of austerity, or of scarcity?

Let's be clear about this: Elemental's solution is as far from challenging the architecture discipline as it is from representing an innovation in the history of social housing. It would seem that the simplicity and synthesis of Aravena's idea has obviated that previous social housing attempts in Chile, and elsewhere, were able to provide their inhabitants with living dignity. If scarcity is constructed, and if the lack of affordable houses for the low-income Chilean population is a real problem, how can giving less — more precisely half — housing space sound like an extraordinary idea? And more so once we consider that

forty years ago, with a GDP that was ten times as lower as the present one - Chilean social housing used to have European standards. While today», the social housing projects by Elemental force low-income communities to live in half-designed, weak architectural proposals.

It is worth recalling that the autonomy of incrementalism in housing production is largely indebted to the work of whom in the 1960s highlighted the level of freedom and the emancipatory value of self organisation and self building. Namely John Turner (1972) uncovered the effectiveness of self organisation practices in the peri-urban *barriadas* of Lima and the extensive range of tactics and innovations that urban poor had to offer. Informality and poverty were started to be seen as a site of potentiality to learn from, rather than a mere problem to solve.

In 2004, Chilean urbanists Ana Sugranyes and Alfredo Rodriguez warned against the rising problem generated by social housing, as

Los con techo (Those with a roof) were being excluded from the urban fabric. Since the end of the dictatorship in 1990, the Chilean State had promoted a fast and quantitative approach to the lack of housing for low-income communities, resulting in deficient architectures with low urban standards and no concern for the social production of their spaces. Quality was sacrificed for the sake of quantity; urgency destroyed the good city. As a consquence, ghettoisation became the rule, and it is arguable that the projects by Elemental are challenging such perverse logic, a part from reducing the scale of the problem.

Aravena is a really good architect, and choosing him for the Pritzker Prize might be even interpreted as a public recognition of the remarkable trajectories of many good Chilean architects, such as Emilio Duhart, Juan Martinez, Juan Borchers, Alberto Cruz, Borja Huidobro, Mathias Klotz or Smijlan Radic. Nevertheless, awarding his social housing projects can create a dangerous precedent.

A utilitarian approach to social architecture for neoliberal goals
What Aravena has done is a) convincing the inhabitants of its houses that capital accumulation is more important than dignity and quality of space, and b) reducing architecture to a kit of construction techniques barely organized in a plot. And precisely this is the most concerning contradiction of the scheme by Elemental, as it looks more like a proposal by Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto than a project deserving the most influential award for architects. Aravena has understood the rules of neoliberalism from an economic perspective, and has let them colonize his designs and social practice. As in other realms of society, a chrematistic interpretation of human activity prevails over other scopes, and under the excuse of being realistic, architecture suffers its deterioration as a discipline while undermining its own relevance.

Of course, more than to Aravena's spatial solutions for low-income communities, the problem has to be brought back to the system as a whole. What the Chilean architect does is indeed innovative within the shrunk boundaries of neoliberal public policies, but within the boundaries of dignity it is scarce, mediocre and pitiful. His proposal forces people into believing that what is available is good enough, and his awarding of the Pritzker can be read as a dangerous (and powerful) attempt to consolidate such approach. Why should the poor receive a half-house instead of a proper one? Why in some developing countries like Chile are social housing projects worse than in the sixties?

It may seem that the good intention is fine. But the problem is that a focus on problem-solving and "design action" displaces necessary considerations on how, for what purpose and in what specific system of power relations a given problem is constituted. Why have people USD300 monthly income? Why doesn't the State provide affordable houses? What are the locational conditions? Hence, as Rittel and Webber famously said: «the formulation of the wicked problem is the problem». This redirects our attention to the way in which problems are framed, rather than to the way in which they are solved. Following Rittel and Webber, we can therefore ask: why should the aim of an architect be the accomodation of architecture to some deficient public policy in social housing, instead of demanding a change in the field in order to increase the possibilities of developing a real good architecture for the poor? As architects, we should abandon the good-enough solution and gather our forces to develop real good proposal for XXI century architecture.

This challenge recalls something that Patrick Schumacher said along the discussions triggered by this year's Pritzker Prize, when he claimed that «I would not object to this year's choice half as much if this safe and comforting validation of humanitarian concern was not part of a wider trend in contemporary architecture that in my view signals an unfortunate confusion, bad conscience, lack of confidence, vitality and courage about the discipline's own unique contribution to the world». Perhaps Schumacher has no authority to discuss about social housing or whatever moral issue triggered by the Pritzker Prize, but we surely agree with him denouncing the architects' lack of confidence

on their capacity to articulate complexity in order to work collaboratively in the production of great spaces for everyone: not half-houses, but fantastic examples of architecture, with no social last name or conditions. And in order to do so, architects must organize themselves and struggle for their right not to be sentenced to design "good half-houses for low-income communities", but just good houses! And then good houses that can become excellent examples for architectural history. As slaves of the capital and neoliberal ideology, architecture cannot advance much more than what Aravena has already done. That's the limit of dignity under the neoliberal rule for social housing, which we need to break for the sake of both architecture, its inhabitants and our self-confidence as practitioners. That's why the work of Aravena is more a pathway for starchitects to get social, rather than for people to get access to good architecture. The current state of Quinta Monroy exemplifies the failure of the "half-house" model as a mode for the production of architecture. Rather than bringing a revolution about, Elemental has adapted neoliberal means to social

projects with public funding: saying that Alejandro Aravena is a revolutionary architect is therefore a stab in the heart of real revolutionary architects, who have challenged and transformed the discipline instead of adapting it to an existent reality.

What's more, the incremental housing scheme was first developed by Edwin Haramoto in 1987 and then practiced by Fernando Castillo Velasco in 1992 for the Comunidad Andalucía project in Santiago's downtown, with much better architectural outcomes than in Quinta Monroy.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this Pritzker award is having moved the discussion on social architecture at a wider disciplinary scale. But then, why should the architecture for the poor be different from the architecture for the rich? Is there another kind of human in one house or the other? Why should a State deliver a differential spatial outcome depending on acquisitive power?

And now…reporting from the front

The widespreading practice of social architecture, together with a new attention/care for the environment, the public realm and the common good, is certainly a signal assumption of accountability for serious problems, but it is also a comforting manner to fold in the face of criticism of the exploitation patterns produced by the present state of things. However, as soon as those attitudes, gestures, and "political positions" (as Giancarlo de Carlo would have called them) will be exhibited in the Corderie, they will lose their political efficacy and become autonomous architectural concerns with their emphasis on space, form and geometry. The inclusion of social oriented formalism (of different souces) displayed for the compsumption by the socially conscious public of the Biennale is a risky process, that signals the ongoing disengagement of a critical attitude and the forging of a new alliance with the corporate and managerial agenda of liberalism.

Aravena's dictum and praxis is a simple new social project of architecture somehow referred to the multivariate forms of socially relevant architectural practices categorized by Bryan Bell and Katie Wakeford in *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism*, where design activism is defined as a combination of social responsibility and market pragmatism carried out in the interests of the common good while also being good for business. The professional activist uses his/her skills and expertise to discover the communities' design problems and then develops innovative ways to solve them. Such interpretation of the "social" is as much about creating new, ethically surcharged markets for professional services as it is about social responsibility, in a sort of seamlessly fused narrative arguing that a long history of professional disconnection has prevented many potential clients from recognizing how their lives could be improved by "good design". Sounds familiar?
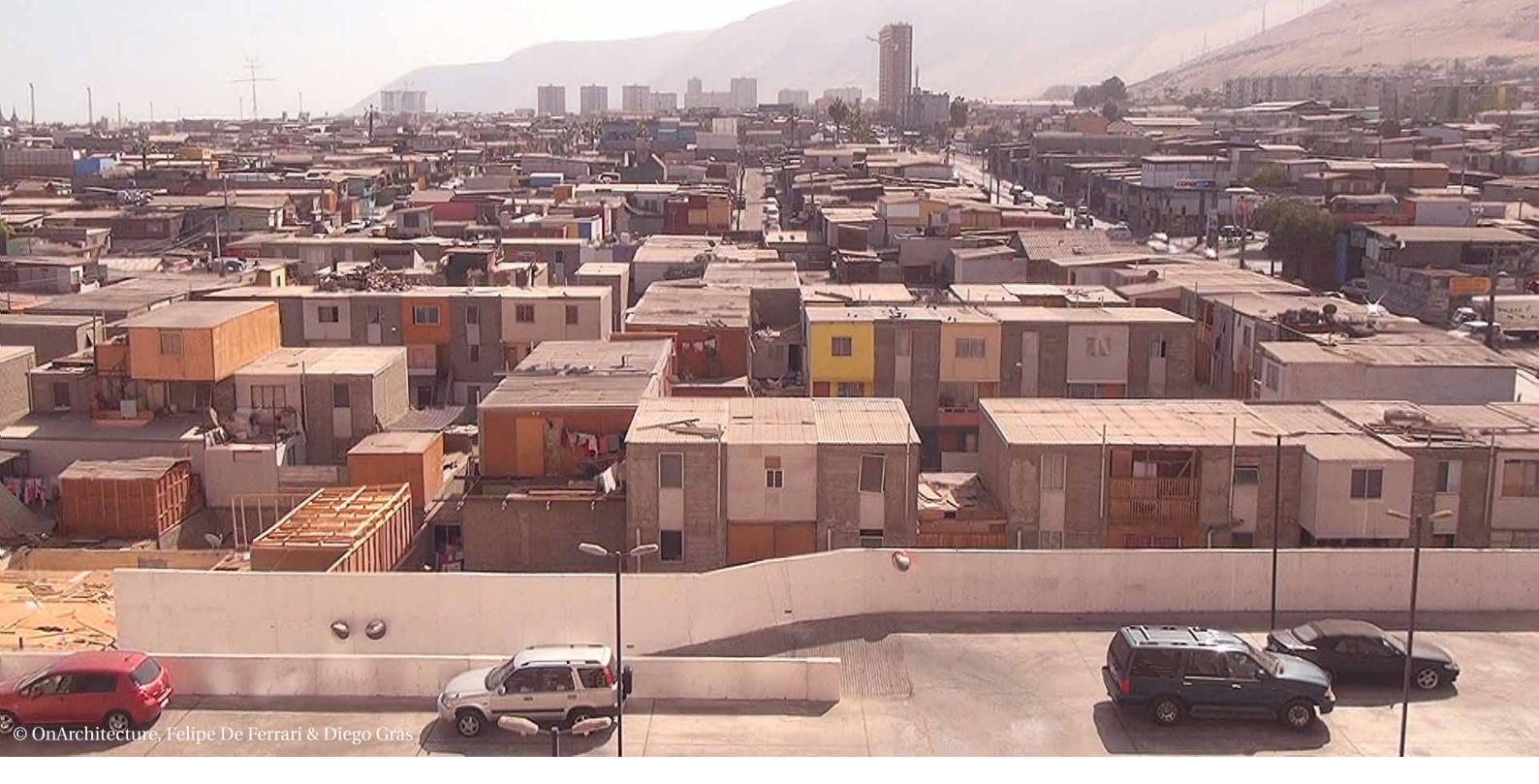
Rather then representing the anti-stararchitecturism, Aravena's program signals the complete separation of architecture from radical thoughts as it simply materialises a formalist autonomy narrowing architecture and design mission to an acritical acceptance of the status quo, dressed with social intentions. It does become a legitimizing dispositive for the neoliberal production of architecture and space: categorically excluding the questions of the political, the social and the economic from the purview of the designers; diminishing ambitions and critical power by diverting attention to pragmatism and urgent need to act; and sacrificing theory for action in what Eric Swyngedouw defines a «new cynicism that has abandoned all attempts to develop a socially responsible practice».

As Libero Andreotti righty maintains in *Can Architecture be an Emancipatory Project? Dialogues on Architecture and the Left* (one of the most challenging book on the politics of architecture recently published): «the misery of theory, however well deserved, cannot be allowed to turn into cynical dismissal of all form of theorizing. What we need today is not less but more and better theory and this is only possible through long efforts of theoretical labor». He then continues positing that «the greatest need of architecture today […] is for ethically courageous acts that proceed from the recognition of the architect's unavoidable implication in social, political and economic processes towards which one does have a margin of autonomy to engage and if necessary to oppose».

We believe that a real contribution of architecture to low-income communities can only start by eliminating the idea of "social" from the issue of housing. Luis Triveño has claimed that Aravena is the «starchitect of the poor», underlining his capacity to implement «solutions to the global housing crisis that are so creative, speedy, budget-conscious and scalable». Maybe it is better to say that he is the starchitect who learned how to make profit from doing a serious job with low-income communities.

Being critical with Aravena's project is rather difficult and surely problematic. The attention to real problems, to the reality of poor communities and to the challenges that the discipline and the practice of architecture must face in its doing good for the everydaylife of world

population — is all very welcome. But a truly radical theory and critical praxis needs to be vigilant and contrast the neutralization of political messages around justice, space and urbanism. What is needed is to critically reclaim a political emancipatory project of architecture against a technocratic, biopolitical and arrogant one. A project capable of providucing once more the much-too-early abandoned critique of contemporary capitalism and its subsequent production of urban space, without taking the risk of getting trapped in discursive practices that are simply camouflaged as radical, overtly disciplinary and constructed specifically to be expert-oriented.

Maybe what we need today is not an operative but an *inoperative architecture*: one that, similarly to Eyal Weizman political plastic, is capable of mobilizing a differential architectural intelligence by investigating the «abyss of the worst architectural possibilities». This inoperative practice is not the one framed by Justin McGuirk on the

«activist architect [...] who creates the conditions in which it is possible to make a meaningful difference and [...] expanded mode of practice» or the «insurgent architects» defined by Erik Swyngedouw as the sole entitled to claim an emancipatory role and effective agency in co-animating political events. Again, architecture is not present in this remark.

An *inoperative architecture* consists of an ethical shift of deactivating its communicative and informative function, in order to open it to new possible uses, new possibilities. A new political architecture is not about mobilization, organization, civil society and aggregations — at least solely —, but a a contra-hegemonic discussion that is not insurgent nor populist, but a sort of call for a renewed autonomy. It is a *destituent* mode of thinking and practicing architecture and urbanism: an attempt to develop a subversive *ethos* to the dominant ontology of enactment or praxis infused with the arrogant ego of creative power to produce and control spatial realities[1]. Maybe it is not a front to report from. But this is another story to tell.

1.
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