

Analysis Alejandro Aravena: What his Pritzker win says about architecture's top prize



Alejandro Aravena's 2004 Medical School Building for the Catholic University in Santiago, Chile. (Roland Halbe)

By **Christopher Hawthorne and Carolina A. Miranda** · Contact Reporters

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Alejandro Aravena, a 48-year-old architect based in Santiago, Chile, on Wednesday was named the winner of the Pritzker Prize, the top honor in the field. Carolina A. Miranda, who reported on the work of Aravena and other Chilean architects of his generation for *The Times* last year, joined *Times* architecture critic Christopher Hawthorne to discuss Aravena's win and what it means.

Hawthorne: So Alejandro Aravena, at 48, gets the Pritzker. Ancient by Hollywood standards but by architectural ones practically a baby. How surprised are you -- not by the choice but by the timing?

Miranda: I think Aravena had a fair degree of international acclaim going into this. He's taught at Harvard. He's done a TED talk. He's been out on the forefront on the issue of social housing -- a focus that has gotten him a lot of attention within the worlds of architecture and urban planning. And he served on the Pritzker jury for about half a dozen years, a position that took him all over the world, exposing him to a world of

thinkers and media.

But the Chile part of the equation will definitely throw people for a loop. Chile is on the way nowhere (unless you're flying from Johannesburg to Tahiti). And because of its small size (population 18 million, smaller than greater Los Angeles) it is often overlooked by the machinery of global culture.

What about you? What struck you about this win? And what it says about the Pritzker?

Hawthorne: To what degree can institutions like the Pritzker be self-aware? I'm fascinated by the Aravena pick from this point of view. The Pritzker has faced rising criticism in recent years for symbolizing a rather old-fashioned definition of architectural practice, to put it mildly. With a few (but only a few) exceptions, it's honored men at the expense of women; individuals at the expense of pairs or collectives; architects who work for wealthy, establishment clients at the expense of those working for the poor or disenfranchised; and north over south. It's basically been the Great Man Theory of architecture as represented by a fancy bronze medallion and a check for \$100,000. Choosing Aravena is a departure in terms of the last two categories, but of course not the first two. A modest move in a different direction, let's say. The Pritzker press release says he "epitomizes the revival of a more socially engaged architect."

His built work, in terms of form-making, is bold and photogenic. It's definitely classic Pritzker material in that sense; it will play well on newspaper and Web pages this week. So it's a choice that's hardly as surprising as last year's Turner Prize in the art world, which went to a collective, *Assemble*, rather than an individual artist -- and a collective that is in the business of making architecture more than making art.

And here's where the age-and-experience question comes into play. If we assume the Pritzker is feeling the pressure of some of that criticism about its choices, and wants to start looking further afield, it's going to have to consider younger architects, because this shift in the profession's priorities is showing itself in built work mostly among architects under 50. There's definitely something to be said for honoring architects later in their careers, because architecture is such a slow profession and takes so long to master. The number of truly great buildings by architects in their 20s and 30s (and even 40s) is just really, really small. But increasingly it seems the Pritzker has to do one or the other: try to adapt to a shifting definition of architecture or stick with the career-achievement model.

Does it seem too cynical to read the prize that way? I guess I'd be less inclined to do so if it weren't for Aravena's very recent departure from the jury.

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Miranda: Not *too* cynical! I do think Aravena is a compelling Pritzker candidate: The scope of his work in the south of Chile is ambitious and important because it represents an architect who is thinking holistically about environment, not just buildings. But it would have been better for him if the jury had put at least a

year's worth of breathing room between his service on the Pritzker and his selection for the award.

This doesn't help dispel any questions of clubbiness when it comes to the Pritzker. And all of it comes close on the heels of the [Denise Scott Brown situation](#), from 2013, when a group of women at Harvard sought to have her retroactively included in the Pritzker awarded to her husband and partner, [Robert Venturi](#), in 1991.

When it comes to the women, Chicago architect [Jeanne Gang](#)'s name comes up regularly as a possible contender for the Pritzker. And you've very casually mentioned the possibility of New York architect [Annabelle Selldorf](#), since granting the award to someone like her would signify a turn away from awarding bold form-making and more to the thoughtful regeneration of existing spaces -- such as her re-do of the Neue Galerie in New York or the Clark Art Institute in Massachusetts.

If you would have been on the jury, which architect or type of architecture would you be lobbying to have recognized?

Hawthorne: Selldorf is a really interesting test case because her work is largely interior: Rather than doing big, eye-catching ground-up projects she's working in completely different vein, coaxing older buildings back to life or remaking them for new uses. I'd love to see one of the forgotten architects of the 1980s get real consideration while they're still alive (since the jury can consider only living architects), somebody like James Wines or Gunnar Birkerts. William Rawn's work interests me for its smart regionalism, as does Marlon Blackwell's.

Choosing somebody known less for buildings and more for landscape or public-space design could be fascinating, as could honoring a collective or somebody who works on conceptual projects, like the late Lebbeus Woods. Maya Lin's post-Vietnam Memorial career is underexplored. Giancarlo Mazzanti and some other Colombian architects have done remarkable work. Or somebody even further afield -- somebody who would make even architecture insiders scratch their heads. (Somebody in the middle of nowhere. Somebody with a great practice and a terrible publicist.) I think a lot of us are dismayed that instead of the starchitecture model really crumbling, as it appeared ready to after 2008, we're simply getting new stars to replace the old ones.

That's one interesting way to gauge this pick: Is Aravena so different from [Rem Koolhaas](#), [Renzo Piano](#), et al, or is he just a younger, fresher model?

And how do you think the choice might play among Aravena's Chilean contemporaries? There are probably some who will see it at least in part as recognition for this whole emerging group. Not just Aravena but Smiljan Radic, Mathias Klotz, even Cristian Undurraga, though he's a bit older.

Miranda: For many people in Chile, there will be great excitement over the award. It will be read as an

important success for the country's well-developed pedagogical system -- especially at the Catholic University, which has produced the overwhelming majority of Chile's notable architects, including Aravena.

But these architects are wary of being grouped together by nationality because it doesn't begin to get at the nuances of their work. Radic is a devoted aesthete who has some singular ideas about form and material (hello, boulders!). Klotz is inspired by Modernism. Undurraga has been key to rethinking some of the country's most important public spaces.

To be sure, Aravena's award won't come without nitpicking over individual designs. I saw a number of his buildings early last year and I was wowed by some of them. His bold and brutal [Innovation Center](#) at the Catholic University's San Joaquin campus (completed in 2014) has these surprising, airy interiors. The [Mathematics School](#) (1999), also at the university, is a re-do and unification of two preexisting buildings -- and is reflective of the ways in which the architect is sensitive to what has been built while still making a statement.

I also visited two of his social housing projects -- in [Santiago](#) and [Constitución](#) -- and they definitely hold up: Half-houses, to which the inhabitants have added in whimsical and surprising ways. These are infinitely more pleasant places to live than the grim, Modernist blocks that generally make up social housing in Chile.

Granted, as with any architect, there are duds too. His [Siamese Tower](#) (Torres Siamesas) has had serious issues with ventilation since it opened it in 2005. And overall, the building strikes me as trying to bear the weight of too many ideas: Postmodern, late Modern, in conflicting materials. I was a little surprised to see it mentioned in the Pritzker's jury citation.

Overall, I imagine that for the Pritzker committee, Aravena represents an important combination of socially driven work as well as intriguing design -- a nice follow-up to the [Shigeru Ban](#) award from two years ago.

Hawthorne: Aravena himself expresses some ambivalence about being grouped together with those other Chilean architects. He does talk about how that generation, coming of age after the dictatorship and working in a country at a certain remove from the rest of contemporary architecture, both challenged and supported one another. At the same time, he's not shy about pointing out that he had fewer connections than some of his contemporaries, fewer friends and relatives who could afford to commission a beach house when he was starting out.

And it's interesting that you mention the duds, because Aravena at 48 has relatively few buildings to his credit. With this choice, as with Ban, the jury is moving the goal posts a bit, emphasizing the humanitarian aspects of the winner's architecture as much as its consistent quality. And betting on future prospects more than holding up a finished body of work. Ban certainly has some duds.

What I find really striking is the extent to which some of the well-known architecture awards are beginning to blur together. It used to be that the [AIA Gold Medal](#), the Pritzker and the [Curry Stone prize](#) (founded in 2008) each had distinct priorities and preferences. Now the AIA and the Pritzker are looking more toward the humanitarian design movement that has been the Curry Stone's focus from the start, while Curry Stone is getting more prominent and stealing some of the spotlight from the other two. Now it's only the [Driehaus Prize](#) from Notre Dame, dedicated to honoring "a living architect whose work embodies the highest ideals of traditional and classical architecture in contemporary society," that stands on its own, for better or worse. It's emerged as a sort of protest prize, an alternative to what its founders see as the glitz and trendiness of the architecture typically celebrated by the Pritzker jury.

Oh, and on the other end of the spectrum -- not blurring with the Pritzker in the slightest -- is a new initiative from the Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York called "[Taking Buildings Down](#)." It's not a prize but an ideas competition, basically; to enter, you nominate a building to be demolished or a part of the city to be removed. As the guidelines put it, "Taking Buildings Down asks [for] proposals for the production of voids; the demolition of buildings, structures and infrastructures; or the subtraction of objects and/or matter as a creative act. Removal is all that is allowed." It has a really interesting jury too, including Selldorf and Jeff Byles, who wrote an excellent book on the history of demolition called "Rubble." The competition seems very much organized in opposition to super-celebratory spectacles like the Pritzker or tributes to perma-classicism like the Driehaus, and makes a point of saying it wants to stand apart from "a design culture focused on the superlative."

So all congratulations to Aravena, but I'm going to keep an eye on "Taking Buildings Down" as well.

christopher.hawthorne@latimes.com

carolina.miranda@latimes.com

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