

ART & DESIGN

Pritzker Prize for Architecture Is Awarded to Alejandro Aravena of Chile

By **ROBIN POGREBIN** JAN. 13, 2016

A Chilean architect who has focused his career on building low-cost social housing and reconstructing cities after natural disasters has been named the winner of architecture's highest prize, the Pritzker.

The architect, Alejandro Aravena, the first Pritzker laureate from Chile, received the honor at a time when his fellow architects have been recognized for designing distinctive buildings with regional materials. They include Pedro Alonso and Hugo Palmarola, who in 2014 won the Silver Lion award at the Venice Architecture Biennale, and Smiljan Radic, who that same year designed the annual pavilion at the Serpentine Gallery in London.

Mr. Aravena's work "gives economic opportunity to the less privileged, mitigates the effects of natural disasters, reduces energy consumption, and provides welcoming public space," Tom Pritzker, chairman and president of the Hyatt Foundation, which sponsors the prize, said in a statement. "Innovative and inspiring, he shows how architecture at its best can improve people's lives."

Indeed, Mr. Aravena, 48, in an interview, described his architecture as being fueled more by public service than by aesthetic design. While many architects aim to create iconic buildings, Mr. Aravena said he was mostly concerned with a project's underlying purpose.

“Sometimes the solution to the forces at play is an economic building; sometimes you need to focus people’s imagination with architecture,” he said, adding that the challenge is “to analyze in a coldblooded way what particular equation is required.”

He added: “The success, in conventional terms, is less guaranteed — you have less control over the project. But that’s thinking in artistic terms, if you consider your building a piece of art.”

Though not a “starchitect,” Mr. Aravena has gained prominence in the profession: He’s this year’s director of the Venice Architecture Biennale and a former member of the Pritzker jury. He also gave a TED talk in 2014.

Mr. Aravena’s Santiago-based firm, Elemental, has spearheaded a participatory design-build process it calls “half of a good house,” which allows residents to complete the work themselves later and play an active role in raising their own standard of living.

“We transform the lack of resources into a principle of incrementality,” Mr. Aravena said. “Let’s do now what is more difficult. Let families take care of the rest through their own means.”

The firm developed this approach in northern Chile in 2003, building housing for 100 families with just \$7,500 per family in government subsidies to cover the land and construction. For inspiration, Mr. Aravena drew on favelas and slums, building small housing units that can be easily expanded, while working closely with local residents.

He applied this same strategy in 2010, when, after Chile’s earthquake and tsunami, Elemental was given 100 days to come up with a master plan for the city of Constitución — including infrastructure, public space and buildings — by working with the population on solutions.

“We asked the community to identify not the answer, but what was the question,” Mr. Aravena said. This, it turned out, was how to manage rainfall, so the firm designed a forest that could help prevent flooding.

Elemental has also completed its share of public buildings, including several

for Mr. Aravena's alma mater, the Universidad Católica de Chile.

His office building for the health care company Novartis in Shanghai is under construction. And Mr. Aravena designed dormitories at St. Edward's University in Austin, Tex.

For the Venice Biennale, Mr. Aravena plans to focus on the challenges ahead in the built environment, such as migration and climate change.

His buildings are often modest and understated. They do not necessarily command attention or grab headlines.

"He understands materials and construction," the Pritzker jury said in its citation, "but also the importance of poetry and the power of architecture to communicate on many levels."

Mr. Aravena's unorthodox approach started with his unconventional introduction to the profession in the late 1980s, the final years of Augusto Pinochet's repressive dictatorship, when information was limited.

Mr. Aravena said that he began by "looking at pictures of buildings that were supposed to be important," and then went to Italy with a sketchbook and measuring tape "to learn from the buildings themselves."

"By drawing, you build the buildings again," he said. "Measuring — you're in front of a blank page again."

Mr. Aravena graduated in 1992 and two years later established his own practice.

In 2000, as a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, Mr. Aravena examined how to redefine quality in social architecture, which made him realize, "we had to create a company to go beyond the academic realm."

A year later, Mr. Aravena and Andrés Iacobelli — a transport engineer who has since gone his own way — started Elemental, a so-called do tank (rather than a think tank), with the mandate "Let's make a company that is able to prove that things can be better."

“If we believe we’re good designers, why not try to apply our skills to issues that matter?” Mr. Aravena said. “Social housing is a difficult question and it deserves professional quality, not professional charity.”

While such socially conscious work is often done in the margins of a firm, Mr. Aravena said he considered it the primary focus, worthy of top talent’s attention. “We need the best people in the entire chain of production, from the politicians to the social worker to the designer.” He added: “What we’ve been trying to do is communicate that architecture, instead of an extra cost, is an added value.”

Mr. Aravena’s current partners in Elemental are all his former students: Gonzalo Arteaga, Juan Cerda, Víctor Oddó and Diego Torres. “Architecture is a collective discipline,” he said.

He said he was particularly proud to be working in Chile at a time of critical mass in quality architecture, adding that he “could name maybe 10 architects — and 10 is quite a lot” of whose work he is “envious.”

And Mr. Aravena said he was content to continue working in the relative obscurity of Chile, with its population of about 18 million.

“We’re very O.K. to be here in the corner of the world,” he said. “We can concentrate and produce, and we’re not missing anything.”

With the Pritzker, however, Mr. Aravena is bound to become the subject of more attention.

But winning the prize does not come with pressure to produce, Mr. Aravena said; instead, it gives him the freedom to experiment. “I guess from now on, we don’t have to prove anything to anybody,” he said. “Now we feel more encouraged to enter fields with an even higher risk of failure.”

“Rather than the responsibility or weight that such a prize could mean, I feel now lighter,” he added, “to be able to start running.”

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