

# Housing Alternatives Under a Commodified System: Alejandro Aravena and the Shortcomings of Social Architecture

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## **Abstract**

This paper was originally written for Eugene McCann, Geography 362W *Geography of Urban Built Environments*. The assignment asked students to explore some aspect of urbanization locally or globally and research how it has been influenced or influences wider social, political, economic, cultural, or environmental processes. The paper uses APA citation style.

## **Introduction**

Robert Moses' controversial urban renewal projects are a retrospective lesson of the social ills which emerged from autocratic blueprint planning (Chronopoulos, 2014). In the pursuit of "curing" urban blight, slum clearance provided a blank slate for private developers—displacing the poor and marginalized residents of the city. Today, slums and housing precarity continue to persist under the capitalist mode of production and the "progressive" architect/planner again, arrives to offer a new solution. Chilean architect, Alejandro Aravena's vision for slum revitalization involves bringing the residents into the development process while using scarcely available public funds to create social housing on the basis of market logic (Boano & Perucich, 2016). Aravena's project uses the notion of home ownership by creating "half a house," where low income residents can buy the essentials of a home and over time, build out the remaining half to make it their own (Greenspan, 2016).

Aravena's 2016 Pritzker Prize win—the most prestigious award in the field of architecture—was a surprise to many, as he was an outlier within a laureate group filled with celebrity architects ("starchitects"). Many saw this win as cultural shift toward a social architecture—a practice based on social or moral responsibility (Moore, 2016). The idea of a social architecture implies the existence of underlying problems which it attempts to solve. Slum living and

housing unaffordability have become major problems in many cities around the world, but can these issues be solved through the design-oriented mind of the architect? While Aravena's ambitions certainly have a benevolent appearance, the reality of his project is simply a reproduction of the commodified housing status quo. Under the façade of the architect-activist, social architecture under late capitalism employs only a surface level aesthetic fix, void of any real or radical solutions to the housing crisis and instead, reproduces the neoliberal ideals of the home as an economic asset.

### **The Commodification of Housing**

Housing under capitalism must be approached as a problem of political economy because “the housing system is always the outcome of struggles between different groups and classes” (Madden & Marcuse, 2016, p. 2). In today's capitalist society—favouring neoliberal policies and an increasingly financialized system—housing has become less of a social right and more of an asset for investment. Harvey (2007) defines neoliberalism as, “a theory of political economic practice that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free market and free trade” (p. 2). The commodified housing system is both a result of the ideological and economic shift towards free market economies and the privatization of government sectors (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). For Aalbers & Christophers (2014), the housing situation is inextricably linked to the fetishization of the capitalist ideology. Private property, market economies, and wealth accumulation have changed the economic state of many post-war countries, largely in part to the facilitation and promotion of home-ownership in the USA (Aalbers & Christophers, 2014). Indeed, the hallmarks of late capitalist or neoliberal ideologies go against the main principles of a de-commodified housing system, where the social wellbeing of the people—especially the marginalized—are placed behind of the priorities of economic growth.

The argument against the commodification of housing is rooted in the idea that the access to a home must be a human right, necessary for fostering ontological security and a healthy integration with society (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). Housing under the capitalist mode of production presents itself as a reflection of class struggles, especially for low income residents of the city who see housing precarity as a source of anxiety rather than a tool for capital accumulation (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). For Harvey (2008), the transformation of urban landscapes through “creative destruction” implicates a privileged class taking advantage of housing precarity for their own profits and the global effects of urbanization and increasing concentrations of surplus capital have opened new markets for financialization. With profit and accumulation dictating the urban process, the pursuit of private property overcomes the considerations for the

basic right to housing—the existence of slums is an indicator of a successful working market economy (Madden & Marcuse, 2016).

Madden & Marcuse (2016) argue that a true solution to the housing question cannot exist under the framework of capitalism by drawing upon Friedrich Engels' critique of the bourgeois housing solution. The bourgeoisie's solution to housing involved attempting to raise the proletariat to the same levels as themselves through simply improving their housing conditions (Engels, 1872/1975). However, what the bourgeoisie chose to ignore was the overarching systemic effects that capitalism had over the working class, which continued to create and reproduce their existing struggles (Engels, 1872/1975). It is in the best interest of bourgeois socialists—or in more contemporary terms, effective altruists—to distance themselves from radical change because the improvements made while following the laws of the system will both reproduce the conditions which make them successful, while also creating a moral bubble where they can exist outside of the perpetuations of working class suffering (Engels, 1872/1975; Snow, 2015).

As housing precarity and unaffordability become normalized, a world where the right to housing exist starts to become an unattainable goal. However, movements which fight for a structural change in the economic system can be the most effective in fighting against the profit driven ambitions of the capitalist class (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). True resistance against the status quo involves dismantling the root cause of housing as an investment—de-commodifying the housing system to remove the for-profit private property hegemony, ending corporate real estate subsidies, and holding the state accountable for providing good public housing for those who need it (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). In the case of Aravena's social housing project, his architectural approach to housing holds no radical change and instead reproduces this status quo.

### **Alejandro Aravena's Half a House**

The essence of the Half a House project lies in the physical construction of the house. The lack of state subsidies, the high cost of land, and the low income of the residents created a situation where only half a house was able to be built with the budget given (Zilliacus, 2016). Beside the finished half of the house is an empty, roofed frame where the residents can install walls, add furniture and other housing amenities over time. Here, low income residents can have the same homeownership goals as regular market housing owners because all the essentials of a home (i.e. bathroom, bedrooms, kitchen) are given as a foundation for the expansion of the house. These housing designs are made possible through a partnership between the architect, the state, and the private sector. While the state provides more of a utility contribution, the subsidies were still not enough to build full houses for the people, partly due to the fact that there was community

resistance against traditional high-rise social housing (Greenspan, 2016; Long, 2015).

Aravena's incremental design approach to Chile's social housing crisis is an attempt at solving a housing problem for the poor in a neoliberal economy where the income divide continues to grow (Marinovic & Baek, 2016). He emphasizes the democratization of the design process by bringing in the local community to participate in the planning of new social housing developments. His reasoning for this type of advocacy planning lies in the efficiency of the process—having the community involved ensures that the right questions are being asked so that the right solutions can be developed (Hurley, 2019). However, due to the funding and resource limitations, the extent of this community engagement can only explore solutions that are possible under a neoliberal framework.

The reformation of Chile's housing policy in the 1970s and 1980s were in line with the neoliberal shifts of the global north. Eviction programs and private development ensured housing for the upper-middle class while lower income residents were denied access, further increasing the wealth divide (Marinovic & Baek, 2016). While Chile slowed down their social housing programs and informal housing grew in the urban context, a partnership with the private sector needed to be established in order to successfully create housing for the marginalized (Marinovic & Baek, 2016). Rather than attempting to create a true alternative to de-commodified housing, neoliberal approaches to subsidized housing instead reproduces the structures which perpetuate class and income inequality because the actors who control the means to housing still maintain their positions in the class hierarchy (Varas & Boano, 2013).

That is not to say Aravena's approach to provide housing for the marginalized is a failed effort. The people living in these social housing projects have stated that they were proud of their strong sense of community and improved standard of living (Marinovic & Baek, 2016; Valencia, 2016). However, the increased media attention amplified by Aravena's recent Pritzker win may set a precedent for governments around the world. The state's further separation from civic duty becomes normalized, and the language surrounding public housing shifts responsibility onto the private sector or the individual designer.

### **A New Precedent for Social Housing**

The idea that complex global problems can be solved through architecture and design is not a new theme. Epitomized by Le Corbusier's attempt to modernize the industrial city, the hubris of the starchitect places an unbalanced emphasis on aesthetics and reputation rather than attempting to create real solutions to socioeconomic problems (McLeod, 1983). Aravena's aesthetic fix of Chile's housing problem follows Le Corbusier's top-down approach and fails to confront the ideological structures of neoliberalism where the housing crisis itself is rooted

in (Boano & Perucich, 2016). Aravena's status as a Pritzker Prize laureate carries significant meaning for the future of architecture in relation to social responsibility. As he joins the prestigious names of Hadid, Gehry, Koolhaas, and other prominent architects, his socially conscious projects are thrust into the limelight of celebrity design. McNeill (2009) draws parallels between the celebrity industry and the cult of the individual architect, suggesting that successful contemporary architects share common traits of individual branding, charismatic presence, and a published book. Even before his Pritzker win, Aravena has fit the architect character and has further been able to spread his brand by releasing the plans for the Half a House project for free (Boano & Perucich, 2016; McKnight, 2016).

The rebranding of architecture to fit today's neoliberal paradigms are evident with Aravena's rise to fame. While before, media attention focused heavily on the new contemporary buildings of gentrifying cities, a new category of architecture has emerged onto the scene. But Aravena's work does not truly encapsulate the radical and progressive characteristics of social and structural change. There is no attempt to challenge the very system which caused the problems of commodified and unaffordable housing in the first place. For Boano & Perucich (2016), Aravena's project is simply a reproduction of the neoliberal status quo, and a continuation of the architect-saviour who cures society's issues through design. Like Le Corbusier's attempt at realizing his ambitious mass urbanization plans, Aravena is also creating an architecture for the "modern (poor) individual"—those who exist to suffer under the pressures of the capitalist system (Boano & Perucich, 2016). However, his approach to solving the problem fails to attack the root cause—the commodification of housing. Reinstating the status quo onto social housing—which supposedly should exist outside of the market—only reproduces the problems created by the pitfalls of neoliberalism. While on the surface, homeownership may present itself as an attractive option for low income residents, it takes away from a wider problem of state responsibility and excuses the state from providing sufficient public funding for social housing (Boano & Perucich, 2016; Day, 2018).

This shifting responsibility relies on the charity of the private sector and further accentuates the neoliberal ideals of housing. Madden & Marcuse (2016) argue that the only way to solve the housing question is by reclaiming the idea of the home through de-commodification, shifting power back to the inhabitant, and allowing different housing typologies to exist. While Aravena's approach emphasizes a democratic process, the room for discussion only fits within the narrow limitations of neoliberalism, convincing future tenants that they can sacrifice half a house for the pursuit of capital accumulation (Boano & Perucich, 2016). Aravena mirrors the bourgeois solution to housing by attempting to create a situation where low-income residents can one day become property owners as well. Rather than trying to create a real solution to an ongoing problem,

starchitect-designed social housing could instead become a new market for architects looking to further their recognition and apply the façade of social consciousness onto their brand.

### Conclusion

Does Alejandro Aravena's Pritzker Prize win represent a shift towards a hopeful future for housing or does it embellish a superficial solution? The project's omittance of the politicization of housing and architecture ensures that the neoliberal ideology of the state remains untouched, while shifting the responsibility of the housing crisis onto the market and private sector. As Madden & Marcuse (2016) suggest, the global housing crisis should inherently be a problem of political economy, rooted in class struggles, power, and inequality. As housing becomes increasingly commodified, its accessibility to residents with lower incomes becomes a source of anxiety while wealthy property owners use it to accumulate more wealth.

Chilean cities today suffer the crisis of rapid urbanization and an increasing wealth divide which bars low income residents from the housing supply (Marinovic & Baek, 2016). As an attempt to help fix the ongoing crisis, Alejandro Aravena's Half a House project brought in the community to create a participatory design process. What resulted was the creation of subsidized market housing, where residents could "build out" their unfinished homes in hopes of one day achieving the status of the homeowner. While the altruistic attitudes of the architect have won the hearts of many, his success in the mainstream media could change the discourse surrounding the role of the social architect in a neoliberal world. As an iconic example of contemporary social housing, the market characteristics of the project further popularizes the neoliberal ideals of accumulation and commodification. Furthermore, Aravena's release of free social housing plans further pushes the ideals onto the public, setting a dangerous precedent for creating a pseudo housing alternative under a commodified system with no real change.

Is incremental change a viable option for housing in an increasingly commodified and financialized system? Here, incremental change involves a proactive band-aid fix which co-opts neoliberal market logic, reproducing the system which enables the commodification of housing. One can argue that there is no incremental change happening, rather, it is just a surface level rebranding of a non-solution. However, the response in public and architectural discourse has sung unending praise. If this is considered incremental change for the public, perhaps a more radical form of real change must be fought for, but without the influence of a design "genius." In an effort to modernize the old world, Le Corbusier (1931/1986) concludes his polemic against the status quo with his iconic phrase: "Architecture or Revolution. Revolution can be avoided." (p. 289). Perhaps the latter must be explored.

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