

MARCELO LÓPEZ-DINARDI – Folk Politics at the 15th Venice Architecture Biennale

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In the summer of 2015, Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena was appointed director of the Biennale Architettura 2016, a position that comes with the responsibility of curating the exhibitions at both the Arsenale building and the La Biennale pavilion in the Venetian Giardini. [1] Though media accounts tend to simplify this title to “curator,” to *direct* and to *curate* are markedly different things, and this edition of the Venice Biennale was mainly a *directed* one. It is a biennale that declares a path and gathers a set of protagonists to perform that mandate. It is a showcase that reaffirms a position rather than creates a new critical one—one that might incite layered or open-ended interpretations and appropriations. Rather than follow Rem Koolhaas’s 2014 edition, asking the invited participants for the National Pavilions to produce original and investigative projects, it instead preferred a more traditional model, extending an open invitation framed by a brief statement. This event assigned a role to architects from across the globe—that of the battlefield journalist, evident in the title *Reporting from the Front*—and more closely resembled an architectural guilt convention than an active space for advancing ideas on the pressing issues that affect and produce contemporary architecture, or the networks within which this architecture takes place.

[1] “Alejandro Aravena Appointed Director of the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale,” *ArchDaily*, July 18, 2015, [link](#).

In this sense, the exhibition is more affirmation than exploration, suffused with a familiar political-left attitude—a kind of “folk politics,” as it has been termed—that proposes architectural “solutionism,” localist projects, and ethical positions. What results is a display of seemingly sensible work that reveals genuine alternatives. But more often than not, the work altogether avoids confronting the complexities of architectural production as a project with the aim of larger, global, long-term political transformations. Certainly, Aravena’s intention is to advance a discussion about architecture’s role in our contemporary world by putting together work that is highly political—architecture is always political in its figuration of territories, spaces, and relations that enable or disallow forms of public engagement. Yet the exhibition is too concerned with buildings as high-quality products, an interest driven mostly by the commodification of architectural work itself. This results in missed opportunities for the field of architecture’s collective capacities to help promote a

political attitude, to rethink the mechanisms, formats, political economies, and media that are needed to challenge the real complexities that we faced in a highly unstable neoliberal regime. If we are to imagine that architects are indeed “reporting from the front,” then it is critical to know where that front line is.

In their book *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have defined folk politics as “a collective and historically constructed common sense that has become out of joint with the actual mechanisms of power,” in which the political strategies that undergird that common sense are “drained of their effectiveness.” [2] This concept offers a useful lens through which to read the Biennale’s curatorial statement, the space of the exhibition, and some of the work it included; it also asks us to reflect on a larger tendency of architectural production. While Srnicek and Williams operate within a highly political world to produce work, architects struggle to embrace the complexity of the political context in which they work and to use architecture as a means to disambiguate and even dismantle these political trappings. Architects cannot escape their role as active political subjects, even if the field is not always inclined to do so. This is not because of a lack of ambition but perhaps because we have yet to formulate the channels, platforms, and modes to produce such works and open such dialogues.

The 2016 Venice Biennale Architettura is full of this folk political common sense, and one feels the incapacity of the buildings and ideas displayed by Aravena to enact large-scale political transformation, or to animate a larger project for a politically active architecture. A building, even one of the highest quality, cannot do this on its own. Srnicek and Williams argue that “against the abstraction and inhumanity of capitalism, folk politics aims to bring politics down to the ‘human scale’ by emphasizing temporal, spatial, and conceptual immediacy.” This statement describes a political position that is responsive rather than inventive, that focuses on temporary direct actions instead of long-term ambitions, that prefers the small scale of apparent authenticity and tradition—the past as a familiar representation of the natural and communal—over an unknown future. If we transpose this political sensibility to architecture, to Aravena’s exhibition (in its format and in many of the projects), we see an architecture of the human scale, of direct responsiveness, an architecture that relies on traditional tropes that humanize and naturalize the work but that looks fundamentally backward, an architecture of craft and technique. There is no long-term project for architecture in sight. High-quality and socially conscious buildings have little capacity to transform the entangled structures that shape architecture, and they might even perpetuate the marginal position of architectural work in effecting these changes.

For the Biennale’s publicity, Aravena selected a Bruce Chatwin photograph of the German archaeologist Maria Reiche studying the Nazca lines in Peru from atop a ladder—implying that sight and perspectival remove are two distinct qualities of an architect. So through its visual rhetoric, Aravena’s project, despite its proclaimed intent to promote architecture’s social and political capacities, repeats the figure of the architect (or archaeologist) as a modernist subject looking down from above, relying on past traditions instead of uncertain futures, and evading complexity in favor of immediate emotional gratification. The biennale’s banner image, perhaps inadvertently, asserts

[2] Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London and New York: Verso, 2015), 10, [link](#).



Banner and image selected for the graphic identity of the 15th International Architecture Exhibition at La Biennale di Venezia. Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia and Bruce Chatwin/Trevillion Images.

positions of privilege, in this case, the photographer, observer, and trained expert. However, architecture is not like the Nazca Lines. It is not an ancient indecipherable work that requires interpretation by a single figure, as implied by Aravena's deployment of Chatwin's photograph; architecture is a complex, live practice entangled with unstable realities that are produced and reproduced in the construction of territories, spaces, and environments.

Aravena is not unaware of this: "Given the complexity and variety of challenges that architecture has to respond to," he writes, his biennale "will be about listening to those that were able to gain some perspective and consequently are in the position to share some knowledge and experiences with those of us standing on the ground." [3] He invites those who have experienced complexities to illuminate those who remain unexposed to them—that is, the majority who are apparently not fighting any battle. What is most problematic here is the claim that architecture's role is to *respond* to "complexities and challenges," assumed to be exterior to the field—the principle that architecture is responsive or reactive rather than situated at the *core* of these complexities. Architecture itself—its design processes and labor, its materials, its construc-

[3] Alejandro Aravena, "Introduction," Biennale Architettura 2016: *Reporting from the Front*, [link](#).

tion, its use, its maintenance, its clients, its cost, its aesthetics, its location, its motivations and ideologies—are all part of the complexities Aravena is asking participants to respond to. As Srnicek and Williams assert, “In terms of temporal immediacy, contemporary folk politics typically remains reactive (responding to actions initiated by corporations or governments, rather than initiating actions).” [4] Architecture is not the isolated product of careful material and spatial consideration. It is complexity. Architecture initiates actions, and it maps and constructs the ground. It provokes change but doesn’t do so by just responding to an invitation to react.

[4] Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*, 11.

Political rhetoric abounds in Aravena’s curatorial statement—written in the first person plural, yet signed by Aravena alone. Who is the “we” of this text? Does the individual up on the ladder speak for the discourse? Aravena continues:

THE FORCES THAT SHAPE THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT ARE NOT NECESSARILY AMICABLE EITHER: THE GREED AND IMPATIENCE OF CAPITAL OR THE SINGLE MINDEDNESS AND CONSERVATISM OF THE BUREAUCRACY TEND TO PRODUCE BANAL, MEDIOCRE, AND DULL BUILT ENVIRONMENTS. THESE ARE THE FRONTLINES FROM WHICH WE WOULD LIKE DIFFERENT PRACTITIONERS TO REPORT FROM, SHARING SUCCESS STORIES AND EXEMPLARY CASES WHERE ARCHITECTURE DID, IS, AND WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE.” [5]

[5] Aravena, “Introduction,” [link](#).

This passage confirms Aravena’s view that architecture is an aesthetic and performative product that is affected by mistakenly understood “external forces” and that its mission is to achieve control over the design and construction of buildings in a world where the majority of buildings are not designed by architects. It also suggests that the ones on the “ground” will listen to those on the “fronts,” those who understand that the “always menacing scarcity of means, the ruthless constraints, the lack of time and urgencies of all kinds are a constant threat that explain why we so often fall short in *delivering quality*.” [6]

[6] Aravena, “Introduction,” [link](#). Emphasis Added.

But how much scarcity is produced by architecture itself? How many so-called constraints are actually the veiled inequities of financial metrics and distribution of resources? Why are current social urgencies not evidence of systematic and structural problems to be challenged rather than temporal-local conditions to be ameliorated for the sake of institutional and corporate status quo? Parametric-obsessed neoliberals will almost certainly turn their nose up at this biennale’s embrace of what they might term “do-gooder architecture.” But is this biennale even about doing good, if we follow Aravena’s claim that architecture’s role in contested territories should be to “deliver” high-quality buildings? This rhetoric hews closely to the asset-based attitudes of corporate business culture, and this “high-quality” architecture risks losing all political agency by draping itself in an ethical veil while failing to engage with conflict.

The main exhibitions directed by Aravena, which contain work from architects by his invitation, consist mainly of full-scale building mock-ups or building construction techniques, or drawings, models, and videos of buildings elsewhere. They also include a few investigative projects that, rather than

show the “success” high-quality architecture in the form of buildings, intend to think through architecture’s capacities, its tools, and its resources—in order to formulate alternative ways of relating architecture to the so-called external forces that it engages.

Among the best of these latter projects is the work of Forensic Architecture, a London-based practice working at the intersection of architecture, digital technologies, and human rights. The work exhibited in the biennale includes maps, news videos, 3-D animations, and drawings, but none of them are there to render a new building. They are primarily reconstructions of past events. [7] Forensic Architecture’s work produces evidence by using architectural damage to determine the location and spaces of drones, land missiles, or other attacks on conflicted territories (the case presented at the biennale involves a US military drone strike over an urban area in Pakistan where civilians were killed). [8] The documents produced in each investigation are intended to serve as evidence for human rights prosecutors at the International Criminal Court and the United Nations General Assembly. This work has a clear political engagement that considers some of the urgencies and challenges acknowledged by Aravena embracing them in order to produce a scalable effect, not a folk political impulse.

[7] Forensic Architecture, *Reporting from the Front*, [link](#).

[8] Refer to Forensic Architecture, [link](#).

The *West Village-Basis Yard* project by Liu Jiakun in Chengdu, China, takes a completely different format. [9] The project, a massive multiplex built urban block, is presented by an immersive model that virtually inhabits the site of the Chengdu structure. *West Village* is one of few projects that portrays China in Venice, and it is a refreshing step away from the voluptuous formal hubris and indulgent parametricism often used to represent China in the global architectural media. The *West Village* project consists of heavily mixed-programming, from sporting fields to shops to cultural areas, and more traditional spaces like bamboo courtyards and tea houses, all within open areas intended for local appropriation. The project, although not a radical intervention, proposes an alternative reading of architecture as an open and powerful infrastructural device. It makes an interesting case for building at such a monumental scale—it is focused on being an infrastructure, with its many ports and outlets that question the easy folk political mode of action.

[9] Jiakun Architects, *West Village-Basis Yard*, [link](#).

Another representation from China exhibited in the Arsenale came from Amateur Architecture Studio. The exhibition showcased a material sampling of a project in a village in Fuyang, Hangzhou. The studio’s material collage drew from existing tiles, stones, and other local materials not only to create a “new” project with recent construction techniques and technologies but also to produce a continuity between learned local techniques, past traditions, and the future. The work portrays a marked tendency among certain projects presented at the biennale: local materials, techniques, and high craft over unexpected experimental futures. Though clearly aligned with the folk political attitude, this project also aims to challenge tradition and convention by re-signifying material—it aims for architectural transformation, yet it faces the even greater and more difficult pressure of reconfiguring symbols in a highly symbolic culture.

As various reviewers have already pointed out, the biennale is full of adobe, mud, bricks, bamboo, and wood. In some cases, it is the result of local efforts; in others, it reproduces a sort of paternalist Orientalism (if not invasion), whereby the Western architect conquers foreign territories in its

adoption of foreign techniques. Aravena's portion of the exhibition touches on precarious construction conditions, organic materials, local techniques, unskilled labor, good intentions, and symbolic, optimistic architecture capable of containing beauty and high quality. And yet, by bringing them to the table without truly engaging them, it can still be perceived as a reactionary proposition—the projects purport to fly in the face of the established culture of the corporate status quo while still fully enfolded in its logic. It attempts to put architecture closer to its conflicted scenarios and contested territories, yet it keeps relying on a paradigm in which architecture's goal is limited to produce sensible and well-crafted objects (which on their own are often excellent achievements).

This is not to claim that the production of architecture should ignore these qualitative conditions. But to be inclusive in “responding” to the challenges of our natural and built environment, we have to acknowledge once and for all that what we consider to be the discipline of architecture has to be rethought if we really want to contest the forces that shape it. Architecture needs to recognize and articulate its role in the “non-amicable” challenges Aravena cites in his statement and extend its capacities as active participant in making and reproducing them. As such, this biennale's theme is motivated by the ambitions of an apparent political left while coming from an actual neoliberal right, one that has been disguised with a sense of social inclusion—the trademark of Aravena's ELEMENTAL project. [10]

Architecture has to claim action beyond the “folk political” in order to imagine alternatives that reconfigure the political economies, local and global orders, social forms of engagement, and material and spatial constructions of a future we still need to invent. The Arsenale and La Biennale's Pavilion exhibitions ignore and smooth over the problem of scale and extension that characterizes the production of well-intended architecture. The folk political motif can only carry an impulse, a starting point of contestation (as the authors of *Inventing the Future* assert). We still need a larger project, a political project for architecture capable of reimagining the forces, not external to it, that make architecture.

“Given the nature of global capitalism,” Srnicek and Williams write, “any postcapitalist project will require an ambitious, abstract, mediated, complex, and global approach—one that folk-political approaches are incapable of providing.” [11] We still need to challenge and contest the familiarity of past models and invented traditions. The fifteenth edition of the International Architecture Exhibition brings together remarkable work from across the globe—and one of its successes is its breadth of participants beyond Europe or the United States—but is undermined by an unfortunate lack of complexity. [12] One cannot claim to be at the forefront of anything today while evading the necessary work of critical inquiry into the existing modes of operation, in this case of the field of architecture. [13] An engaged curatorial practice is precisely one critical position from which to do that, but speaking the voice of a socially conscious discourse does not automatically fill an exhibition space. The biennale's failure does not represent the vision of the participants involved, but it leaves the visitor with a bitter taste—also with crystal clear evidence of all the fronts we still need to report from. These fronts are architecture, even if they do not have the shape of a building. These sites are not external to architecture,

[10] Aravena's text is positivistic and optimistic, with ambitions of a breed of “success,” hailed in the pages of the *Economist*—where he has always wanted architecture to be. Aravena has stated in various forums that he is interested in being featured in the *Economist* (or *Time*) magazine rather than specialized architectural publications. It should be noted, however, that there is no article on the biennale or his iconic housing project ELEMENTAL on the *Economist* website. However provocative, and even commendable, Aravena's assertion may seem, it reaffirms his understanding of architecture as a finished product to be discussed with the language and means of a magazine (not acknowledging that architecture exists in many forms beside precious building). Refer to Nancy Levinson, “Alejandro Aravena Pursues a Dual Path: High-Profile Projects and Low-Income Housing,” *Architectural Record*, December 2004, 158, [link](#).

[11] Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*, 12.

[12] Some did not report from a front or respond to Aravena's curatorial statement, like the US Pavilion—commissioned and conceived before Aravena's statement was released. The US Pavilion had an agenda of its own (it presented newly design paper projects by twelve teams of architects for four different sites in the city of Detroit, MI).

[13] As was widely noted at the time, launching a socially conscious architectural event with a panel discussion comprised of only white, white-haired men is unacceptable. Refer to Gabrielle Printz, “On Reporters and Fronts,” *Architext*, August 2, 2016, [link](#).

nor are the non-amicable forces shaping it. Rather, they exist inside our very field, and they need to be contested from within and from beyond.