

The Raw and the Cooked: Past, Present, and Future in Quinta Monroy, Iquique, Chile

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Residents having made this contribution to the catalogue and exhibition possible by participating in interviews and allowing photographic documentation of their housing spaces:

Guillermina Carvajal
Héctor Castro
Mollo Challapa
Wilma Fichella
Berenice Gallardo
César, Nadia, and Catherine from Galvarino Street
Yesenia Martinez
Celia und Antonio Mollo
Alejandra Monroy
Ana Muñoz
Mabel Araya Nunez
Margarita Pino
Juan Soto

The Quinta Monroy project was initiated by Alejandro Aravena¹ in 2003 as a demonstration of an architect's ability to engage in real challenges within a framework of very serious constraints. Inscribed within a government initiative for the lowest income families, the program within which the project was to be developed aimed at delivering a basic and expandable home for very low-income families. US\$7,200 per dwelling was the government handout destined to lead the poor into a path of incremental prosperity.² An enlightened design fuelled by the exercise of rigor was thus required, given that this tightly set game admitted no possible redundancies.

The initiative was christened the “Elemental” project.³ Like a logo, this cunning term spans across languages, but, more interestingly, it also embodies an idea of excellence related to the attainment of the essential rather than the more limited scope of the “minimal.” In terms of a more general discourse, the challenge of an elemental habitat suggested a realignment of the discipline with real concerns, thus taking on board once more a host of provocative questions related to the needs of “ordinary” people aired by the modern movement many decades ago. Furthermore, in order to fully demonstrate the premise of quality architecture, the design process had to be comprehensively conducted through all the trials of a real project. As a matter of fact, Elemental did manage to reinsert social housing within academia and in the minds of young practitioners. (Some 45,000 houses per year are currently built in Chile of which a third falls within the range of social housing.)

Quinta Monroy's Elemental housing typology combines two superimposed homes, each of them capable of doubling up the original floor area to 72 m², without loss of amenities. The prevailing building materials are reinforced concrete and exposed concrete blocks. The simple and robust structure is designed to withstand earthquakes according to the local building regulations and the seismic condition of the area.⁴

Four years later, many inhabitants refer to the original scheme as “wonderful” and “marvelous,” demonstrating a level of esteem rarely lavished upon an architectural scheme, an assessment that compels our enquiry into the genesis of this experience, the cast of actors who made it possible, and the particular set

of circumstances that brought it about. Four years is not enough time in relation to the buildings' life expectancy, which has to be measured in decades, and yet it is enough time for some of the most decisive trials of architecture, such its first reception, to be fully tested.

Past, Present, and Future: Time and the Housing Project

Given the particular goals set for the project by their authors, the issue of time is better appraised at two levels: firstly, as an unfolding of events with a particular emphasis on the articulation between the given and the unexpected in the way it is embodied in the rapport between the host building fabric and the building accretions realized by each family; and secondly, as a measure of the value that may be lost or accrued by each house as an effect of its financial performance within the housing market. We will examine how each one of these aspects bears upon the project's “performance.”

As regards the unfolding of events, Quinta Monroy's story can be rendered in five distinctive periods: Phase 1 “Pre-Elemental” is represented by the former settlement which had been riddled with security problems, a labyrinthine and informal cluster covering the prospective building site. Located within the inner city, this settlement provided basic shelter for approximately one hundred families whose incomes ranged from about US\$20 to US\$100 a month.⁵

Triggered by the Elemental initiative, Phase 2 “Removal” began in December 2003 with the temporary resettlement of the inhabitants into the neighboring township of Alto Hospicio⁶ (and also, in several cases, into alternative rental accommodations within Iquique), with the purpose of clearing the site for construction. Its critical point was the dismantling of the township, and the transport of the salvaged materials.⁷

By December 2004, “Foundation” (as opposed to a mere inauguration) initiated Phase 3 with the deliverance of the properties to all prospective owners. It is noteworthy to mention that this is the point where the interest of architectural media usually vanishes, propagating as a result images of prime, unused dwellings, as if the

story ended exactly at the point where it actually enters its critical path. At this juncture Quinta Monroy changed names, becoming the Violeta Parra Condominium. It was here that participation in building started, with the inhabitants expanding their dwellings according to previously defined areas. At the collective level, the enclosure of each cluster was then implemented, and in some cases the issue of outdoor paving was addressed.⁸

Within this itinerary, Phase 4 “Now” in October 2008 represents almost four years of intense life. Even though this short time is comparable to the infancy of a settlement, the wear and tear of buildings and communities becomes manifest at this stage: urban consolidation, some loss of innocence, and the uncertainty related to collective destinies can already be gauged as has become clear in our visits and interviews.

Phase 5 “Post-Elemental” is just an anticipation of how things may develop: it can only represent provisional guesses as based upon comparative assessments and intuition.

As discussed above, the chronicle of events overlaps with the requirements of incremental building. Like some social housing practices⁹ in Quinta Monroy,¹⁰ the project embodies a strategy of “progressive” housing, whereby a foundational core sets the scene for substantial contributions to be provided on an ad hoc basis by each owner. Thus time weaves links between the known (initial scheme, well-understood sets of relationships, orchestrated decisions) and the unknown (multiple initiatives, unpredictable timing, individual tactics). Within this predicament, a half-full vessel waits for the other half—of which little is known at the outset. The known waiting for the unknown, the formal for the informal, the professionally driven for the spontaneous, the project (as contrived through an intellectual process) for the performative building action that follows from individual needs and multiple imaginations.

“If money is just enough for half a house, the question is which half shall be built?” enquires the author, concluding that “one should build that half of a house that a family—left to its own means—will never be able to achieve.” As a result of this predicament, the structure provided by Elemental is focused

upon resolving the most taxing problems of house building, whilst supplying a frame for individual action.

Finally, the consideration of time also matters from an economic perspective, because home ownership usually represents the greatest accumulation of capital ever amassed by most families, capital which—unlike the process of devaluation common to cars and other possessions—has to accrue value so as to enable these families to join the ranks of a mobile middle class. This is seen from the Elemental perspective as fundamental to the pursuit of social equity.

If these are indeed substantive considerations, how is the Elemental scheme performing? And what can its assessment be at this juncture?

The transit from Phase 1 “Pre-Elemental” to Phase 3 “Foundation” spans the evolution of Quinta Monroy from shantytown to condominium:¹¹ it encapsulates social, administrative, and spatial aspects. Socially, it represents a shift from a stigmatized neighborhood into an emergent (lower) middle class one. Administratively, the originally unified—albeit labyrinthine—settlement is split by the project into four discreet units, each one lodged in an independent court, a decision which now appears to be fundamental to the fate of the families.¹²

“It is our concern to guarantee that the Elemental housing groups shall not require collective maintenance fees; it is for this reason that we have avoided typologies based on communal devices such as communal stairs or corridors,” states the architect, adding that “. . . groupings of 20 to 30 families are ideal from the point of view of administration since higher numbers are more prone to conflicts as the neighbors lose touch with one another.”¹³ Direct access to each house from the collective space sorts out the first issue, whilst the second one is mastered through the subdivision of the one-hundred-family compound into manageable collective units.

At a social level, unlike former housing policies where it was the state itself who assigned urban domiciles to the families who registered in social housing programs, the client interacted with the design team throughout the development process in the Quinta

- 1 The scheme was developed by Alejandro Aravena, Andrés Iacobelli, Alfonso Montero, Tomás Cortese, and Emilio de la Cerda.
- 2 Meanwhile, the government has again increased, by approx. 75 percent, these resources earmarked for new housing plans. The sum that had to be raised by each family from their personal savings in the beginning amounted to US\$300.
- 3 The conception of Elemental dates back to the year 2000 when three Chilean professionals—Alejandro Aravena, Andrés Iacobelli, and Pablo Allard—became acquainted at Harvard University, the former as a visiting professor and the latter two as PhD students.
- 4 Together with the Pacific Rim countries, Chile is periodically shaken by earthquakes.
- 5 As indicated in Alejandro Aravena’s statement about the scheme.
- 6 Alto Hospicio is a rapidly expanding dormitory town located in the desert plateau some 600 meters above Iquique at a distance of 10 kilometers. It is actually the home to 72,521 inhabitants. At the time Quinta Monroy was being built, Alto Hospicio was poorly equipped, badly connected, and had a very low reputation; things have improved since then, though Alto Hospicio still makes a less desirable destination than inner-city locations such as Quinta Monroy.
- 7 Tomás Cortese, a site practitioner, helped organize all aspects related to the removal and the communal discussions concerning the distribution of the families in the new scheme: a fully detailed account of these experiences is detailed in his Master’s thesis entitled “In transit, transformación social y material en Iquique 2002–2005” (Tesis Proyectual para optar al grado de Magister en Arquitectura, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile 2005). Alto Hospicio was a rapidly developing dormitory town in the outskirts of Iquique attracting massive schemes for low-cost housing.
- 8 “We had to enclose the courts at any cost: now that we have done it, we have to regularize the situation as our court becomes a condominium,” says one of the inhabitants in Las Palmas court.
- 9 The progressive house is just one program destined to supply a core facility around which to build a home: at the time the estimate was for approximately 30 m² core and 70 m² finished building.
- 10 Here we use the original name—rather than the official present name—since the former is still recognized in Iquique as an urban destination.
- 11 This is one actual source of conflict since the law requires condominiums to declare their administration. According to one of the interviewees, as soon as people realized that there was the prospect of a condominium, “the committee spirit simply vanished.”
- 12 It appears as if most residents wanted to eliminate passages through the compound given their problematic experience with drug dealers who had profited from the freely available passage afforded by the structure of the original Quinta Monroy settlement.
- 13 Alejandro Aravena in interview with the authors.

Monroy project. This direct rapport guaranteed the maintenance of well-established family bonds within the new neighborhoods, as the families who so wished could move to neighboring properties, thus retaining the advantages of the extended family system.¹⁴

At the present juncture, it looks as if Quinta Monroy has no future as a unified condominium complex. Full autonomy is being actively sought by each of its communities: strategic decisions mastered at the level of urban morphology have thus shaped collective destinies. Hence, while the inhabitants of the southeast court (designated Las Palmas) fronting on to Pedro Prado Street eschew interaction in “trying to keep their life as private as possible,”¹⁵ around the corner in the southwest court (designated Machak Inti or “new sun”), which fronts on to Galvarino Gallardo Street, the outlook is exactly the opposite, with talk about collective action becoming topical. Ironically, the former court evinces the most building activity, whereas the latter has little to show in this respect. Certain social and cultural factors account for these discrepancies; in particular, the proactive energy of the Aymara community¹⁶—representatives of a racially discriminated aboriginal group—accounts for much of the communal identity that characterizes their court. In the same vein, it may just be possible that the comparatively higher living standard of the Las Palmas court has led its inhabitants on to more individualistic life projects, a situation that also breeds resentment: “The Aymara community created their own country . . . they should be better integrated,” complains one resident in Las Palmas court, highlighting the complexity of social relationships, while others simply express their admiration for their neighbors’ organizational achievements.

Phase 4 “Now” confirms many of the architect’s forecasts: the strategy for severe and repetitive blocks have effectively managed to harness the diversity of expressions and materials supplied by self-help building. Much like a well-resolved collage, these unexpected assemblies do actually cast new urban identities. This is noteworthy given Iquique’s exuberant urban character which is overwhelmed with low-scale building activity. It becomes even more interesting once it is considered how the local urban culture seems to ignore distinctions between fronts and backs; neither does it seem

to endorse conventional standards of urban décor, such as the concealment of messiness from the public gaze. Furthermore, the absence of lasting interventions imbues the city of Iquique with the quality of an encampment, adding to the fact that it is located in the absolute desert—a kind of a no-man’s-land—with a certain (provisional) ethos of the mining settlement that surely pervades local culture. Despite these contradictory trends, Quinta Monroy holds its ground soberly, continuing to retain its unified image.

Unequal Futures?

There is no doubt that in the balance the Quinta Monroy experience has been successful. Most houses feature new indoor finishes such as bright floors, lively colors, rendered walls, and also comfortable furniture. These interiors contrast with the exteriors in surprising ways, as pointed out by some neighbors who have stated that “the interiors are spacious even though the houses look small from the outside.”-Furthermore, like a true prototype, the scheme suggests possibilities for future action.¹⁷ Yet the transition into the middle-class housing market, as posited in the hope invested in the scheme’s capacity to accrue value over time, can only be verified over a longer time span.¹⁸

So, at this stage, how can one imagine a “Post-Elemental” phase? The task can only be speculative and seems to touch upon two of the subjects already discussed. It demands verifying as to what degree the tactics destined to accommodate individual accretions have succeeded. In this context, does the scheme guarantee the ultimate image of a middle-class urban condominium? Or rather might its unified and serene aspect degrade over time, leading it on to the more chaotic image of the shanty? Will the inhabitants muster enough technical competence in building? Clearly these questions exceed the scope of the architectural design, and yet they highlight the protagonism endowed by the architects on the idea of the “customized home” within their design rules. “It is easier for us to concentrate on the scheme’s structural aspects rather than defining ornamental or decorative elements for which we are not suitable designers,” states Aravena, clarifying his design option in this respect. It is true that chaotic accretions could result in overcrowding,

but—as pointed out by Aravena—it is just possible that instead of overcrowding their homes, those inhabitants who can afford it may rather choose to sell their dwellings in readiness to seek a larger house elsewhere.

The second question addresses the dissimilar fate experienced by the four condominiums having resulted from the typology of courts. As pointed out above, Las Palmas prospects show signs of being problematic to the extent that some of its residents are currently suing each other in court, whereas Machak Inty exudes a fantastic communal spirit: child care, activity groups for teenagers, and periodical celebrations are some of its communal achievements. How many of these differences can be attributed to social and ethnic reasons, and how many of these may have resulted from the particular inflections created by Quinta Monroy’s urban patterns? And how may these contrasting fates affect the scheme’s future? Even though no straight answers can be delivered, it is useful to look at the particular traits of Quinta Monroy’s collective space in order to fully grasp these issues.

Firstly, it is important to note that the original budget had no provision for external works except for very basic operations such as leveling. This financial shortcoming had some negative effects: due to the inability to shape certain sectors by means of terracing and retaining walls, some ground-floor homes face a half-sunken court as their only mediation with a busy thoroughfare. Elemental just provided for the houses plus a framework for collective spaces, but as soon as the houses were inhabited the construction of communal elements was on its way—prompted by the expectations associated with car ownership, safety considerations, and current trends, which led all communities to fence their courts and, in some cases, to pave them. Certain government subsidies specifically targeted for road paving were negotiated to this effect.

A conflict between the care of cars and the care of individual gardens lurks everywhere where attempts have been made at planting. Paving and fences share very poor material—and design—standards. Except for some limited endeavors, no landscape can be seen as of yet even though the mild desert climate invites outdoor living. These aspects could not be addressed within the restrictive scope of the original budget.

Nevertheless, Quinta Monroy clearly demands attention in this area, where two distinctive trends can already be observed. The Aymaras have clearly embraced the ideal of the square, making their court primarily a social space, whereas other groups have opted for the parking lot. Neither of these uses can be obviated, as they compete for space within the same areas. Could enlightened design, plus space management, supported with fresh funding, attain a desirable equilibrium? Could there be a “Phase II Elemental: The Public Realm”? These are relevant questions. Time will tell.

- 14 The procedure seems to have succeeded in most cases, though a few neighbors complained that their choice had not been respected by the authorities.
- 15 This became evident in our interviews with the inhabitants.
- 16 The Aymaras belong to an ethnic community traditionally based in the small valleys and oases of the higher Andean plateaus and who tend to be related across the Andes to other indigenous groups established in Bolivia. Most of the Aymaras in Quinta Monroy belong to the first generation of urban immigrants.
- 17 This is most probably the case within the Elemental studio, where various projects are currently being developed within comparable budgetary frameworks.
- 18 Currently, Elemental space standards are higher, their house frontages being incremented from 6–7 meters and the targeted floor area being increased to 90 m² in line with middle-class standards.