

It's time to rethink the entire role and language of architecture



As architects, we are living at a time of shifting paradigms. In the past, the scale of our designs grew large, but how many people were we really engaging with? Today, we understand better the sheer complexity of the issues at play when we design and plan buildings, neighbourhoods and even entire cities – and this demands a new, more open approach.

It's why I'm so interested in how architects and urban planners engage with other fields – economics, security, the environment and so on. Our challenge must be to go beyond architecture and speak the languages of these other disciplines, before translating our discussions into formal design proposals. One of the biggest problems is bad information – well, architects have a responsibility to engage in broad conversations that ensure we are properly informed about all the parameters of a given project. Our ultimate focus is still on form, but what informs this has expanded dramatically.

I believe the next step must be to create "open systems": physical conditions in cities that allow all forces at play to have an input. We are entering a new game – one which I hope to shed more light on through next year's [Architecture Biennale in Venice](#).

The battle for a better built environment is a collective effort that requires everybody's force and knowledge. As curator of [Reporting From The Front](#), I want to reverse the idea that the Biennale only deals with issues that are of interest to other architects. We have begun by identifying problems that every citizen can not only understand but actually has a say in: immigration, water, land capacity, waste and so on. And we've seen an immediate, positive response from people who don't normally get involved with architecture – across both the developed and developing worlds.



Alejandro Aravena discusses his entry for the 2012 Biennale



To improve the quality of the built environment (and thus people's quality of life),

 battles need to be won and frontiers need to be expanded. More and more people in

the world are searching for a decent place to live, yet the conditions to achieve this



are becoming tougher by the hour. Any attempt to go beyond business as usual

encounters huge resistance in the inertia of reality. Any effort to tackle relevant

issues has to overcome the increasing complexity of the world.

Unlike military wars where nobody wins and there is a prevailing sense of defeat, however, on the frontlines of the built environment there is a sense of vitality, because architecture is about looking at reality in a proposal key. We should never forget that design can be a very powerful tool in mobilising people to act. Iconic architecture captures people's desires, and we certainly won't improve our cities by dumbing everything down to the same level. But we must pay attention to the circumstances – the shocking or the dramatic is not always the right response.

We want to learn from architectures that, despite (or perhaps because of) a scarcity of means, intensify what is available instead of complaining about what is missing. We want to understand what design tools are needed to subvert the forces that privilege individual gain over collective benefit; to highlight cases that resist reductionism and oversimplification, and do not give up on architecture's mission to penetrate the mystery of the human condition. We will present numerous examples where organised communities and empowered citizens, sometimes without any formal design training, have been able to improve their own built environment.

There are new actors in this story – not least those property developers who use buildings to chase huge profits. But we are interested in how architecture can introduce a broader notion of gain: design as added value instead of an extra cost; architecture as a shortcut towards equality. We want to see cases where architecture did, is, and will make a difference in winning those battles and expanding those frontiers. Design ideas that, by balancing intelligence and intuition, are able to escape the status quo.

Major changes in cities happen over a timescale much longer than that of the typical political administration, and citizens are the core authors who can guarantee these changes. We hope that Reporting From The Front will be not just the chronicle of a passive witness, but a testimony of people who "walk the talk" – showing what it is like to improve their quality of life while working in the margins, under tough circumstances, facing pressing challenges.

We seek to balance hope with rigour: the battle for a better built environment is neither a tantrum nor a romantic crusade. It is nothing more – but also nothing less – than the disciplined construction of the spaces in which life takes place.

Alejandro Aravena is director of the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale, and executive director of [Elemental](#). [Urban Age](#) is a worldwide investigation into the future of cities, organised by [LSE Cities](#) and Deutsche Bank's [Alfred Herrhausen Society](#). Its [10-year anniversary debates](#) are held in conjunction with [Guardian Cities](#)