

**Is Chilean architecture so exceptional? With this question we open the debate section of ARQ magazine, where two columnists give us answers from different positions, expanding the debate from its ends. And while the arguments here presented are strong, we hope this discussion can continue beyond this magazine.**

KEYWORDS · Chilean architecture, schools, studio, market, discourse

## **Chile and the future of its architecture**

### **Between teaching and attitude**

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Responding to the question “can we call Chilean architecture from the last years exceptional?” days after Alejandro Aravena was awarded the Pritzker Prize is relatively simple. Yes, Chilean architecture is exceptional and the international recognition of Aravena is added to that which many contemporary Chilean architects of his generation have obtained in the last years.

Having said this there is a more complex question to answer: “why is Chilean architecture exceptional?”

In the following lines I will attempt to outline the principal aspects that might help to respond to this question, separating the argument into two parts. The first explores the internal conditions of the discipline and the second refers to the external conditions that have had a positive impact on the architecture of the country.

#### **INTERNAL CONDITIONS**

Chilean architecture is exceptional because there are good architecture schools in the country that are centred on studio teaching. It is not a peculiarity that the studio is the core of an architecture school. The peculiarity is that in Chile studio professors are architects with important professional practices, who experiment and investigate in a concrete manner and transfer their knowledge first hand to the students. This generates an academic climate that is in continuous tension and renovation, constantly being fed, allowing for its validity and avant-garde condition. With the structuring and binding force of the studio, theoretical, technical and representation classes are utilitarian and operative in its development. The studio is therefore characterised by having a very pragmatic, concrete and decisive charge, distinguishing it from other well-known international schools in which the project lingers within a speculative and theoretical plane.

It must be said that the exercising architects, faculty of the schools in the country, are important exponents of the political and institutional world. Considering the oldest schools in Chile we can see that this condition is transversal and characteristic since the length of the second half of the twentieth century.



## Chile without exceptions

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Could there be exceptional houses? Impossible. Buildings? Neither. Squares? Even less so. The elephant man, the hairy witch, hermaphrodites, the walking skeleton and other curious characters that appeared on nineteenth century freak shows, were they monsters? Not in the least. Shortly after the adoption of the term “monster” to describe visible formal deformations of the body, and anatomical and zoological anomalies, the authors of the study, scientists Saint-Hilaire father and son, realized that “there are no exceptions to the laws of nature, only exceptions to the laws of naturalists.” Although taxonomical maps have been more associated with the natural sciences than architecture, it is equally appropriate to affirm that there are no exceptional architectural projects, only discourses in which they can be seen as out of the ordinary.

Since houses don’t speak, buildings don’t talk, and squares cannot write, it is within the realm of the discourse that a project can be considered as exceptional. In general it is said that object A is an exception to the discourse B when the characteristics of A don’t adhere to those prescribed by B. For example, if the discourse specifies the righteous use of public space, the heterotopias are exceptional because, for instance, while children soar kites into the sky in one sector of a park, another might be the setting of a carnal commotion in the bushes. In a similar way, if we look at the discourse of private property, under determined legal institutions the *okupa* strategies function on the border between illegal occupation and eviction. This is because, in principle, discourses are bounteous, but you can never be sure.

Yet, only in principle. Discourses don’t thrive when sowed in the air, but through ideologies that they serve compliantly. In Chile, as in most of the western hemisphere, in twenty or so years of unbridled neocapitalism this has been consolidated without social or political hindrance. For example, how many times have we heard the motto “it aims towards the right direction”? Clear enough. The right direction is that which is promoted by neocapitalist teachings. This is far removed from policies where ownership of property was a right, and

Architect-professor-rector, architect-professor-mayor, architect-professor-ministry adviser, architect-professor-consultant, architect-professor-chairperson... we could keep drawing lists but the idea is clear.

In Chile the exponents of the cultural and professional world in fact articulate political forces with economic interests, research, the most demanding practise as well as classroom teaching. This is not commonly seen!

#### **EXTERNAL CONDITIONS**

The external conditions of the discipline are many; therefore I will try to articulate an argument that links some of the principal ones.

Much has been written about the remoteness of Chile, its cultural isolation during the dictatorship –which saved it from the plague of '80s postmodernism– as well as of its landscape and geography. What in my opinion has been less appreciated is the radicalism and open-mindedness with which the future has been projected. This attitude is reflected in the realm of architecture as well as that of the market, economy, politics and in the ways in which these arrive to and are consolidated with particular radicalism in Chile.

Terrible and constant natural disasters that affect the country and its population wipe out its history, its cities and its memory. When facing tragedy the best reaction is to look forward and to think about the future. In Chile the new is more valuable than the old, patrimony is not conserved but intervened, modernized and actualized for its projection towards the future. This openness has generated an infinite number of opportunities for architects that face commissions and clients that, open-mindedly, invite them to constantly experiment with and imagine the future.

Time and time again, architects rigorously observe the reality to generate radical responses that are attentive and specific and that can be justified when facing the architectural problem, not constrained by a determined trend or current style.

Both the internal, profound debate between paradigms and teaching, and the attitude shown towards the future, are the conditions that can be said to define the exceptionality of architecture in Chile. **ARQ**

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instead, is closer to the promotion of the hygienic, exquisite and sophisticated forms of notorious architecture. Wrapped, of course, in a string of words dressed as exotic or rebellious, cool or trivial, traditional or multicultural. Words.

Or costumes. Architectural works are goods; even the greatest expense of a person's life, in which an enormous number of working hours is exchanged for a roof. As those goods are part of the economic context, their consumption should rise to the cost implied. It is therefore a commercial operation, whether real estate or signature. The means may change but the ends are alike. It will be the promise of a life with a gym and a swimming pool or a eulogistic review in an acclaimed architecture magazine. In one case there will be financial solidity and hundreds of built square meters; in another, a sprinkling of meditations and a unique way of life as if it were contagious. In the business section or in the promotional interviews. Philodendrons or prairies. Battering the context or at par with the landscape. The pages of *Las Últimas Noticias* or the ones of the *Financial Times*. Different faces of the same thing, a deceiving spectrum of mercantile tricks.

Seen in this way, there may be many discourses along with the corresponding exceptions. Through the naked eye they would appear different, and even opposing. It's just that they aren't. Fascinating, isn't it? In the long run they're just one: a commercial discourse. And so, does Chilean architecture present any exception? Naturally, no. **ARQ**

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