"DOWNLOAD HERE" AS A VIRTUAL PERFORMANCE IN POLICY MOBILITIES AND TRANSNATIONAL URBAN HOUSING MODELS.
THE CASE OF ELEMENTAL AND INCREMENTAL HOUSING

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ABSTRACT – Transnational urban housing models, as knowledge–practice devices, facilitate the learning, mediation and translation of policy agendas, ideas and practices. Through their circulation, they frame seemingly replicable ideas as well as imaginaries about ideal uses of residential space, which often overlook the conflicts inherent in the production of space. The mobilisation of these imaginaries is mediated and facilitated through a variety of informational infrastructures, both in person and, increasingly, virtually through digital platforms. Building upon recent debates that call for attention to policy mobilities produced through digital means, this paper examines how a set of compact, shareable and comprehensible digital materials, interventions and performances produce and reproduce the learning, mediation and circulation of specific policy models. In particular, through semi-structured interviews and critical discourse analysis of secondary materials, this paper uses the case of four incremental housing prototypes developed by ELEMENTAL – an international architecture firm based in Santiago, Chile, whose director was awarded the 2016 Pritzker Architecture Prize – to demonstrate how expressions such as "open source", "free to download" and "download here" constitute affective, symbolic and performative practices and resources shaping the learning, mediation and circulation of incremental housing public policies.

Keywords: Transnational urban models; policy mobility; virtual performances; incremental housing; urban-housing policy; digital policymaking.

RESUMO – "*DOWNLOAD HERE*" COMO PERFORMANCE VIRTUAL NAS MOBILIDADES DE POLÍTICAS E MODELOS TRANSNACIONAIS URBANO – HABITACIONAIS. O CASO DA ELEMENTAL E DA HABITAÇÃO INCREMENTAL. Os modelos urbanos-habitacionais transnacionais, enquanto dispositivos de conhecimento–prática, facilitam a aprendizagem, a mediação e a tradução de agendas políticas, ideias e práticas. Através da sua circulação, enquadram ideias aparentemente replicáveis, bem como imaginários sobre usos ideais do espaço residencial, que frequentemente ignoram os conflitos inerentes aos processos de produção do espaço. A mobilização destes imaginários é mediada e facilitada por uma variedade de infraestruturas informacionais, tanto presenciais como, de forma crescente, virtuais, através de plataformas digitais. Em consonância com debates recentes que apelam à atenção para as mobilidades de políticas produzidas por meios digitais, este artigo examina de que forma um conjunto de materiais digitais compactos, partilháveis e compreensíveis, bem como intervenções e representações, produzem e reproduzem a aprendizagem, a mediação e a circulação de modelos políticos específicos. Em particular, através de entrevistas semiestruturadas e de uma análise crítica do discurso de materiais secundários, este artigo utiliza o caso de quatro protótipos de habitação incremental desenvolvidos pela ELEMENTAL – uma firma internacional de arquitetura sediada em Santiago do Chile, cujo diretor foi galardoado com o Prémio *Pritzker* de Arquitetura em 2016 – para demonstrar de que modo expressões como "código aberto", "*download* gratuito" e "descarregue aqui" constituem práticas e recursos afetivos, simbólicos e performativos que moldam a aprendizagem, a mediação e a circulação de políticas públicas de habitação incremental.

Palavras-chave: Modelos urbanos transnacionais; mobilidade das políticas; performances virtuais; habitação incremental; política urbano-habitacional; formulação digital de políticas.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The digital turn in urban studies and geography highlights the need to examine how urban knowledge is mobilised and circulated.
- Urban models circulate through diverse informational infrastructures, including digital platforms, where virtual performances help shape public and political agendas and position transnational actors.
- The incremental housing model exemplifies how open-source strategies enable the virtual circulation of knowledge, while concealing the conflicts inherent in habitat production.

1. INTRODUCTION

The advent of the digital age has transformed the way we understand the world, influencing its interpretation and breaking down knowledge barriers. This digital turn has also reshaped learning processes (Ash *et al.*, 2018), enabling individuals to assimilate and process information in an apparently independent manner (Rapoport, 2015). The new forms that knowledge takes and the ways it is accessed bring both advantages and complexities, reflected in disputes among various actors, both intra- and extra-institutional, over the discourses and narratives that shape residential habitats. The narrative act is etymologically linked to the process of sharing knowledge (Valese & Natta, 2020). This knowledge, which lies at the core of the international mobilization of ideas (McFarlane, 2011), accompanies urban models, which are constructed and mediated through various virtual devices, such as digital platforms, images, videos and websites. They are examples of what McCann (2008) termed "informational infrastructures". In this context, transnational urban models, understood as knowledge-practice devices, are mobilized, facilitating the circulation of particular policy agendas, ideas and practices. Through their movement, they transmit seemingly replicable ideas (Temenos *et al.*, 2019) as well as exportable imaginaries of ideal residential space uses. However, they often omit the inherent conflicts in the production of such spaces.

Considering this, several questions emerge: How do these multiple virtual possibilities shape the content and form of urban narratives? What strategies do different actors involved in residential urban space production adopt to ensure their discourses permeate public opinion and their ideas are amplified? What effects does this "mobile artifact" have on the production and reception of knowledge? To explore possible answers, this article derived from an ongoing doctoral dissertation on the production of urban knowledge proposes the hypothesis that global transfer agents (McCann & Mahieus, 2021), in their role as experts, adopt "virtual narrative performances" to persuade audiences and extend the reach of certain methodologies that reflect a (partial) way of understanding and addressing an urban phenomenon. These performances materialize in actions aimed at influencing urban-housing policy but primarily serve to position the emitting agent. They achieve this through the development of toolkits that package and facilitate the travel of knowledge, simplifying prototypes and omitting the conflicts inherent in social housing production to promote a particular experience as a "best practice," relying on the "art of simplification" (Montero, 2017).

Under this premise, the paper examines the milestone of making four incremental housing prototypes – developed by the Chile-based architecture firm ELEMENTAL, founded and led by architect Alejandro Aravena – available for free download, as a media-driven initiative framed within the context of the international recognition granted by the 2016 Pritzker Architecture Prize. The firm, established in 2000, emerged within the context of housing prototype experimentation linked to the new social housing policy launched in Chile during the early 2000s. Alongside its academic work at Harvard University in the United States and at the Pontificia Universidad Católica in Chile, ELEMENTAL explored possibilities for housing expansion within the institutional framework set by the Chilean Ministry of Housing and Urban Development.

The objective is to discursively analyse how the virtual performance of "download here" operates in relation to these prototypes, conceived as "mobile artifacts" and design formulas for the expansion of social housing. It also considers their potential future adaptation, which is rooted in the "open source" narrative, as a performance that enabled the dissemination of Aravena's incremental

housing prototypes-developed by ELEMENTAL-and his approach to building "a good half-house"(Aravena & Iacobelli, 2012).

The study is based on an empirical case situated within Chilean housing policy, focusing on the role that "digital" narrative performance plays in the learning, mediation and potential circulation of one of the types of incremental models, understood as a model of urban-housing improvement. The article begins by engaging with theoretical arguments grounded in policy mobilities, the digital turn, and informational infrastructures, which provide a framework for understanding the flow of knowledge and housing models that shape urban and housing policy-making processes. The article then moves to a contextual section through a retrospective analysis of the configuration of the pilot project for the Quinta Monroy housing complex (2003–2004), the seminal prototype of incremental housing developed by Aravena released in 2016. This latter event is analysed through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Dijk, 1997; Foucault, 1970) which enables the identification of underlying narratives in such interventions and the understanding of power strategies that impose ideas in the construction of the urban realm. The analysis focused on identifying discursive strategies such as nominalization, presupposition, or metaphor, with the aim of demonstrating how the selected texts contribute to the construction of ideological meanings capable of circulating in an underlying manner. The selected bodies of text serve as the unit of analysis to examine the discursive structures that facilitate the validation of expert know-how (emitter) in the field of social housing through the virtual performance of "free download" (amplification medium). Additionally, they help identify the key concepts that manage to permeate other expert entities (receiver) with the potential for replicating the discourse on the incremental model in residential habitat production.

In addition to this analysis, it is proposed a historical-situational approach is outlined to understand the socio-institutional context surrounding the trajectory of the prototype. This involves the analysis of secondary sources and primary sources in the form of ten semi-structured interviews with key actors, from the three institutional levels involved: the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development of Chile, the Regional Secretariat of Housing and Urban Development of the Tarapacá region, the Housing and Urbanization Services of the Tarapacá region - where the Quinta Monroy project is located, as well as professionals involved in the ELEMENTAL firm.

Once this contextual section is complete, the analysis of virtual narrative performance is conducted using CDA based on three data sets: a) speech of Alejandro Aravena upon receiving the 2016 Pritzker Architecture Prize, aimed at identifying the discursive elements that position and validate him within the expert circuit; b) press coverage of the milestone of releasing housing prototypes for free download, focused on detecting the concepts that transcend discourse and reinforce the narrative of social housing; and c) the toolkit available on website of ELEMENTAL (elementalchile.cl), to examine the design mechanisms and narrative surrounding incremental housing. From these elements, the concepts and ideas mobilized are drawn and analysed for their impact on specialized media, as well as their capacity to establish a discourse on social housing production. The paper concludes that digital platforms and resources, as informational infrastructures, accelerate policy mobility through persuasive performances that frame projects as universally replicable models – accessible with a simple "download here".

2. POLICY MOBILITY, THE DIGITAL TURN, AND THE ROLE OF INFORMATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE FLOW OF KNOW-HOW

One intellectual approach to examine the ways in which policy models and political actors move across different locales, shaping – and simultaneously being shaped by – the contexts through which they travel is that of policy mobilities. This approach seeks to understand how urban policies, conceived as constellations of ideas, actors, resources, techniques, and their mobilizations, actively contribute to the production of "the urban" (Temenos *et al.*, 2019). In this sense, policy mobilities studies argue for a relational, processual and socio-constructivist approach to theorizing public policymaking processes (McCann, 2011; McCann & Ward, 2012; Peck & Theodore, 2010). Central to policy mobilities studies is the notion that policies are not mechanically transferred between locations; rather, they are socially constructed, reconfigured and adapted as they move (McCann & Ward, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2010).

Within this framework, the concept of informational infrastructures plays a key role in understanding the socio-constructivist and power-laden nature involved in the learning, mediation

and ultimately translation of public policies elsewhere. Here, according to the definitional statement by McCann (2008, p. 899), informational infrastructures refer to the range of individuals, institutions, organizations, and technologies responsible for interpreting, structuring, packaging, and representing information about best policy practices. He argued that "their function is not merely informative, but deeply political". Its use within the framework of this article seeks to uncover the following question: How do informational infrastructures shape the learning and construction of urban and housing public policies? In this regard, informational infrastructures – often materialising as events such as award ceremonies that confer international recognition – create learning opportunities aimed at disseminating imaginaries about residential space formation. These are packaged as "best practice" knowledge that brings people, places, and scales into closer proximity (Andersson & Cook, 2019). Likewise, such events are shaped by institutional as well as geographical dynamics. These events play a key role in defining what is considered exemplary practice and in promoting certain initiatives as replicable and effective. According to McCann (2004) professional organizations grant legitimacy to certain models and cities through reports, awards, and decisions on conference locations. As Ward *et al.* (2025) note, the policy mobilities literature highlights the crucial role that informational infrastructures play in the shaping of urban public policies. These infrastructures significantly influence the trajectories through which policies circulate and are assembled. Moreover, they contribute to the process of policy circulation by providing what Wood (2014) describes as a somewhat "depoliticised" space – one that supports information flows and enables those engaging with them to consider innovations beyond their usual frames of reference. In the context of the research presented here, this concept reinforces the role of informational infrastructures as virtual and digital devices that shape the circulation of policies and ideas within seemingly neutral and seductive spaces.

In addition to informational infrastructures, the article also examines the role of agents who exercise agency in the utilisation of these infrastructures. McCann (2011, p. 114) identified three types of "urban policy transfer agents" educators and trainers, professional organizations, and supralocal policy entities, as well as the media. Moreover, they are "global transfer agents" (McCann & Mahieus, 2021) or part of the Global Intelligence Corps (Olds, 2001; Rapoport, 2015; Rimmer, 2002) composed of elite firms seeking prestigious projects (Ward, 2005). Their strength lies in persuasion (Allen, 2003; Rapoport, 2015), which differs from seduction in that it operates on a relatively symmetrical plane. Along with various objects, such as presentations and reports, and spaces like conferences and guided tours, these infrastructures thus influence which policy mobilities can materialize more easily.

The link between policy mobility, the digital turn, and digital infrastructure, as proposed by Ward (2024) offers new approaches to understanding the relationship between these three domains, aiming to enhance the analysis of policy circulation phenomena that may occur in digital environments. In this regard, Ward proposes three intersections: policy mobility *of* the digital, policy mobility *produced by* the digital, and policy mobility *through* the digital. The latter is one of the intersections this article seeks to contribute to by illustrating it with an empirical case. Expanding on the reach of the digital in these contexts, virtual performances facilitated by informational infrastructures enhance the potential circulation and replicability of discourses on urban and housing policies.

The "digital turn" (Ash *et al.*, 2018) is restructuring the policymaking process and the virtual acts both as an object and as a subject, permeating the production and experience of space. The networks define what is considered "knowledge". Technological devices such as maps, photographs, videos, and websites-materialize policy mobility (McCann, 2008). In this sense, the use of digital tools reinforces the circulation of experiences considered successful. As Valese and Natta (2020) points out, the use of digital images acts as a device that conveys an imaginary of what is aspired to. Building on this idea, Wood (2020) highlights those tools such as YouTube videos, which disseminate experiences of urban interventions, function as part of the tracking process through an object (videos, images, etc.), representing a form of interaction with the urban. Finally, McFarlane(2011) reminds us that learning and teaching are central to the international circulation of ideas, resembling a "sales" process. Thus, the global exhibition of projects serves branding or public relations objectives, transcending the tangible, carrying them in virtual spaces and shaping the debate agenda around urban and housing policies.

2.1. Virtual performance: mobile models and the potential to create place

Virtual performance is conceived as a practice that releases prototypes and configures places through the integration of technology and human cognition (Fischer, 2009). This act, beyond its physical dimension, is enhanced by its representation on digital platforms, turning technological media into performative spaces in themselves (Auslander, 2008). In urban planning, this interaction often manifests through documents, discourses, and environments that facilitate experiential learning, driven by the power of audiovisual and conceptual resources (McFarlane, 2011). These tools function as performative technologies that generate and facilitate the circulation of urban policies (McCann, 2008; (Ward, 2006). Moreover, these technologies, as enablers of knowledge mobility, can also contribute to the creation of affective atmospheres that accompany this movement. Authors such as McKenzie (2017) argue that these technologies have an affective power, whose emotionality fosters manipulation that supports the direction in which certain policies are mobilised. These formulas are understood as "interfaces" between digitalization and urbanism, reconfiguring the city through data and models (Marvin *et al.*, 2015). Thus, so-called "design formulas" are conceived as mobile devices-created for replication in different contexts-that encode apparently replicable elements (Temenos *et al.*, 2019). Far from being isolated infrastructures, that is, structures that do not create connections and are generated in an endogamous manner, they are understood as relational entities that emerge from multiple interactions (Easterling, 2021), designing both action and interaction (Agamben, 2011). Their circulation is based on narratives that transform abstract ideas into concrete realities (Rapoport, 2015), allowing performance to act as a mediator and tell a coherent story of how to inhabit space.

2.2. The downloadable digital prototype: a "conflict-free" narrated history

The narrative dimension, inseparable from the digital environment (Valese & Natta, 2020), acts as a political mechanism (Ortiz, 2023) that legitimizes certain visions of the city and justifies spatial interventions. To understand these narratives, Sandercock (2003) suggests examining the position of extra-institutional actors, whose perspectives challenge the neutrality of urban histories. Replicable policies emerge by stripping them of their local complexity and converting them into generic solutions (Peck & Theodore, 2010), appealing to global values such as sustainability or inclusion (McCann & Ward, 2011), and employing narrative codes and mobilizing their affective power to evoke empathy and persuade policymakers (McKenzie, 2017; Montero, 2018). Replicability is reinforced through persuasive virtual representations, as the so-called "cappuccino" images (Rapoport, 2015, p. 321) who describes scenes that conceal conflicts and diversity, promoting decontextualized prototypes. Thus, narration highlights certain elements while silencing others (González, 2011; Peck, 2011), revealing the political weight behind storytelling. Digital mediation transforms urban imagination by relying on data that articulate cognitive capacities, objects, and technologies (Valese & Natta, 2020). The case of ELEMENTAL, driven by the Pritzker Architecture Prize, exemplifies the adoption of open-source strategies to disseminate prototypes. Angelidou (2015) indicates that these dynamic leverages collaborative logic to mobilize "smart" models. ELEMENTAL and Aravena reinforce such values through a performance that promotes accessible urban imaginaries. Narration is not neutral; it is a political instrument that articulates urban interests and aspirations.

3. HOUSING POLICIES IN CHILE: FROM QUANTITY TO QUALITY

According to estimates from the 1992 population census, at the beginning of the 1990s, the quantitative housing deficit exceeded 900,000 units, representing approximately 29% of the total housing stock (Ministerio de Vivienda y Urbanismo, 2024). This gap was primarily due to restrictions imposed by the military dictatorship since 1973 on the development of informal settlements, which led to the phenomenon of "allegados" (cohabiting relatives), considered one of the most pressing housing issues at the time (Ministerio de Vivienda y Urbanismo / División Técnica de Estudio y Fomento Habitacional, 1993). According to the National Socioeconomic Characterization Survey (CASEN), 42.4% of households were affected by "allegamiento", meaning they housed another household or family unit. Faced with this situation and the risk that a new wave of informal settlements could provoke political and economic instability, the "Concertación por la Democracia" government, which took office in 1990 after the end of the military dictatorship, launched new housing plans aimed

at providing solutions to as many beneficiaries as possible in a short period. One of the key innovations of this period was the Progressive Housing Program (PVP), specifically targeted at "allegados" and homeless individuals. Thanks to the PVP and other initiatives by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (MINVU), by the early 1990s, the country's annual housing production surpassed the formation of new households. This led to "a significant reduction in both the quantitative and qualitative housing deficit in the following decades" (Greene, 2004, p.13).

Although Chile's housing provision model was considered successful in the Latin American context due to its ability to reduce the quantitative deficit, it generated new vulnerabilities in later decades due to rapid urban and housing deterioration. Issues such as urban segregation, lack of infrastructure and services, and the peripheral location of housing developments resulted in severe deficits in social and urban integration. This highlighted the urgent need to evaluate and intervene in the existing housing stock, particularly in the units built in the 1980s and early 1990s. As a result, institutional efforts began shifting the urban-housing policy focus from quantity to quality, demonstrating that while the quantitative deficit persisted, it had been institutionally controlled, whereas the rapid deterioration of homes and their urban environments remained a critical issue. As part of these wider ambitions, two key programs emerged in the 1990s: "Chile Barrio" and the Debt-Free Dynamic Social Housing Program (VSDSD) (Hidalgo Dattwyler *et al.*, 2019; Raposo, 1999; Rodríguez & Sungranyes, 2005).

The Chile Barrio Program (1997-2005) focused on relocating informal settlements (campamentos), one of Chile's greatest urban and housing challenges after the return to democracy in 1990. Its objective was to "contribute to overcoming poverty among residents of precarious settlements by providing alternatives to significantly improve their housing conditions, habitat quality, and opportunities for social and labour integration" (Dirección de Presupuestos, 2007). This program aimed to improve housing and settlement environments, ensuring access to basic services such as potable water, sanitation, and electricity, enhancing access to urban infrastructure and services, and guaranteeing legal security over housing ownership. Chile Barrio coordinated interventions across multiple sectors, incorporating elements such as community facilities, job creation, and improvements in health and education, with a stronger emphasis on beneficiary participation (Greene, 2004. p. 18). Unlike other urban programs led by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (MINVU), "Chile Barrio" stood out for its strong territorial focus, aiming to trigger comprehensive improvements in families' quality of life.

The housing component of the Chile Barrio Program was supported by the VSDSD, which continued the model of the PVP. This program included a subsidy for housing project locations and guaranteed access to goods and services. Its primary goal was to provide housing for the most vulnerable sectors, those unable to access credit, through a state subsidy complemented by family savings, allowing them to acquire homes designed for incremental expansion according to household needs. Both programs worked in a coordinated manner to relocate "campamento" residents. For example, as part of a pilot program launched in 1997, both Chile Barrio and VSDSD worked together to intervene in 20 informal settlements across the country. Within this political and institutional framework, the Quinta Monroy social housing project in Iquique was developed, designed by Alejandro Aravena and his firm ELEMENTAL. This project was conceived as a pilot experiment to test incremental housing under institutional constraints, aligning with the "planned incrementality" typology (Greene & González, 2012). From 2006 onwards, Chile's urban-housing policy – having established a narrative shift toward existing housing stock – introduced the "Urban and Housing Policy for Quality Improvement and Social Integration" (Ministerio de Vivienda y Urbanismo, 2009). This policy marked the beginning of a new era in urban and housing policies, prioritizing participatory processes in residential project development, better locations, and improved access to urban goods and services to reduce the inequities inherited from the "successful quantitative policy of previous decades".

Currently, Chile's housing deficit stands at 7.9% of households (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia, 2022). Meanwhile, the qualitative deficit accounts for approximately 20% of the total housing stock. The focus on housing quality led to the creation of additional urban and housing programs aimed at helping families improve their homes and built environments. These initiatives have contributed to institutional knowledge on urban-housing quality strategies, which have transcended national borders and influenced global housing policies.

3.1. Incrementality in housing as a transnational urban model and its institutionalization as a methodology

Incrementality in housing is conceived as a housing design strategy, primarily framed within the social production of habitat, which gained relevance in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s (Turner, 1978). At that time, Turner research advocated for self-construction as an essential strategy for progressive housing in low-income neighbourhoods across Latin America. Beyond recognizing the self-construction methodologies of informal settlements, Turner was the first to highlight the importance of inhabitants in defining their living spaces. He adapted his ideas for the developed world, shifting the focus from self-construction as a value to housing as a social activity (Boyars & Turner, 1976). In this context, he emphasized that housing is not a finished product but an evolving process dependent on each user, ultimately shaping spaces based on their experiences, needs, and lifestyles-contrasting with standardized housing regulations (Naranjo, 2022).

In Europe, incrementality also emerged, particularly in post-war contexts. A key reference is (Habraken, 1972), whose proposal distinguished between the support structure (fixed element) and separable units (flexible elements) to enable progressive housing adaptation over time. The Latin American tradition of habitat construction has been crucial in consolidating incremental housing. Initiatives such as "Operation PREVI" (Experimental Housing Project) in Lima, Peru, set fundamental precedents. Similarly, in Chile, institutionalized experiences of Progressive Housing emerged, with significant contributions from architects like Fernando Castillo Velasco, including the self-built neighbourhood of La Reina (Santiago, 1965) and the Andalucía Community (1990), an example of progressive architecture.

Chilean architect and urban planner Joan Mac Donald was instrumental in institutionalizing incrementality in Chile during the 1980s and 1990s. A pioneer in Progressive Housing studies, she acted as the ideologue and coordinator of Chile's first governmental housing and urban planning program following the return to democracy in 1990. To build many homes with minimal resources, it was concluded that houses needed to be capable of expansion (Palmer & Vergara, 1990). This approach allowed more families to be accommodated with the same investment. It was a crucial political decision that radically transformed Chile's affordable housing landscape.

In essence, incrementality is an integrated strategy that seeks an evolutionary and lasting housing typology, balancing industrialized construction for structural elements with individual appropriation in shaping living spaces (Rangel, 2016). According to Greene and González (2012), Chile's incremental housing experience is broad and diverse, classified into three traditional types: i) Informal Construction, self-built homes without state support, later regularized by programs like the Neighbourhood Improvement Program (PMB). ii) Planned Incremental Housing, where the government provides basic units to low-income groups, allowing for expansion, as seen in programs like the Progressive Housing Program (PVP). iii) Unplanned Incremental Housing, involving self-construction after receiving a basic unit, such as the Basic Housing Program (PVB) in Chile, the largest-scale intervention for low-income groups in the 1980s, is a key example.

Planned Incremental Housing involves delivering a basic unit or "core structure" to families, allowing for progressive self-built expansion based on their needs and resources. This classification frames the case study of this research. The first project in which Alejandro Aravena tackled the challenge of incrementality was the 103-unit Quinta Monroy complex in Iquique in 2001. While its aesthetic and construction quality have been debated two decades after its inauguration, it is important to recognize that "this is the manifestation of an idea, not a masterpiece" (McGuirk, 2014). For his part, Naranjo (2022), argues that Quinta Monroy represents an approach that reclaims architecture as a tool, moving away from its comfort as an autonomous discipline to make it more human. He highlights that the project should be seen as a demonstration of self-construction's potential rather than a threat of deterioration. Incrementality, as a mobile urban housing model, has developed as a design strategy for expanding social housing. It should be understood as an architectural assemblage that, while providing a partially controlled structural framework, does not impose a fixed image. Rather than seeking a uniform solution, its goal is to reflect the diversity and complexity of the inhabited city.

4.   THE EXPERT AGENT: ELEMENTAL AND "INNOVATION" AS A MESSAGE

As part of the new management model, design process, and the innovation-driven approach being pursued, external expert agents were introduced into the institutional framework. Their involvement was intended to provide visibility and establish key milestones in the "new" way of designing social housing from Chile. At that time, Alejandro Aravena, the architect responsible for the architectural design of the project, had not yet gained the international recognition he would achieve in later years. His participation as an external expert agent in the design of Quinta Monroy was facilitated through his personal network, developed during his time as a student and academic at Harvard University (USA) and the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. In this regard, the National Director of the Chile Barrio Program at the time stated:

> I received an Outlook email (...) from the Ministry saying that the architect Alejandro Aravena, who nobody knew at the time, (...) would be presenting a proposal called "Densification Without Overcrowding" in the Ministry's auditorium. (Director of the Chile Barrio Program, personal communication, February 3, 2023)

This is certainly an example of informational infrastructure, where such a proposal caught the interest of those coordinating the Pilot Program, leading to the direct commissioning of Quinta Monroy as an initiative to promote innovation:" (...) Innovations cannot simply be submitted as proposals; rather, they must be processes in which the State facilitates the conditions for the prototype's implementation. Scaling must then take place through regular channels." (Director of the Chile Barrio Program, personal communication, February 3, 2023).

4.1.   The design of the incremental housing prototype as an experiment

At Harvard University, Aravena developed an incremental housing prototype, inspired by debates on social housing design in Chile in the early 2000s. Together with other academics from the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, he founded ELEMENTAL, an architecture firm dedicated to improving social conditions by working in infrastructure, public spaces, and housing. The firm carries out experimental projects aimed at serving marginalized communities in countries such as Chile and Mexico. The firm is based on the following premises: a) testing projects at a collective scale, rather than just at the unit level. b) building full-scale prototypes to counter scepticism about academic work, c) accepting market rules to facilitate project replication, d) involving communities in defining housing needs.

Regarding this approach, one of the partners of Aravena at ELEMENTAL noted: "(...) There was a mix of opinions and observations regarding social housing (...) and Alejandro realized there was great value in designing housing for the poorest (...)" (Team member at ELEMENTAL, personal communication, March 28, 2023).

Aravena summarized his philosophy as follows: "Creating elemental architecture is an intellectual merit issue (...) quality over professional charity" (Aravena & Iacobelli, 2012, p. 32).
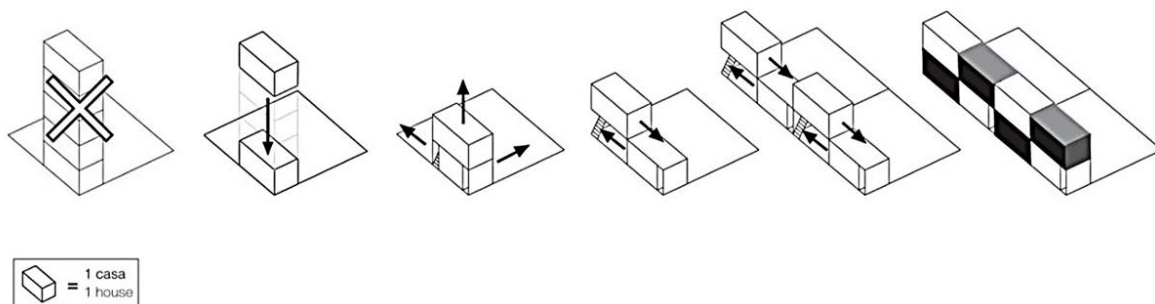

Fig. 1 – Diagram "Parallel Building."
Fig. 1 – Diagrama "Parallel Building."
Source: Aravena & Iacobelli, (2012)

4.2. From design to implementation

Quinta Monroy, located in central Iquique (Tarapacá region), covered 0.5 hectares occupied for 30 years by around 100 families. Its privileged location near services increased land costs (three times the usual price for social housing). However, avoiding relocation to the periphery was a priority (Aravena *et al.*, 2013): "Quinta Monroy (…) had precarious architecture but was very interesting, (…) two-story houses had already been built (…) it was like a shantytown (…)" (Director of the Chile Barrio Program, personal communication, February 3, 2023).

The Ministry of Housing and Urbanism (MINVU) required the following conditions for the project:

> Rehousing all 103 families on the same land; adhering to the VSDSD program, with a base unit of 36m², expandable over time and ensuring community participation and good location: There were 103 families (…) with existing designs (…) either we built detached houses and only 30 families could stay (…) or we built higher-density structures that exceeded funding standards. (Director of the Chile Barrio Program, personal communication, February 3, 2023)

Fig. 2 – Quinta Monroy prior to the housing project developed by ELEMENTAL. Colour figure available online.
Fig. 2 – Quinta Monroy antes do projeto desenvolvido pela ELEMENTAL. Figura a cores disponível online.
Source: Aravena & Iacobelli. (2012)

To meet these requirements, ELEMENTAL applied the incremental housing model, opting for higher density to lower land costs and allow for future home expansions (fig. 3).

Fig. 3 – Quinta Monroy. Colour figure available online.
Fig. 3 – Quinta Monroy. Figura a cores disponível online.
Source: The Architectural Review

4.3. Seeking replicability of the Quinta Monroy incremental housing as a "model"

At the end of 2004, the Quinta Monroy housing complex was inaugurated. From that moment, ELEMENTAL itself took on the challenge of scaling the model and making it replicable in other cities across Chile, allowing it to be tested in diverse geographies, topographies, climates, and communities.

An international competition was organized in collaboration with the Harvard Graduate School of Design and the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard University to design and build seven housing complexes across Chile (Conicyt, 2003). Funded by Chile´s Innovation and Technology Transfer Fund (FONDEF / CONICYT), with support from the School of Architecture and Engineering at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, alongside a network of private organizations and companies, the competition secured $500,000 USD to begin developing the winning prototypes in seven locations nationwide. The competition marked a key milestone for the replicability of the model, functioning as a "rhetorical device" to extend the strategy beyond Chilean and even Latin American architectural circuits. The presence of renowned international figures on the jury elevated the model, transforming it into a narrative tool that, told the story of innovation in social housing. This positioned Quinta Monroy as a key reference in international debates on architectural design and social housing.

This recognition and the growing prestige of the Quinta Monroy project, supported by a private-sector network, enabled its international positioning-from Harvard´s Graduate School of Design to the Rockefeller Foundation, as well as within Chile´s national network, with backing from the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. For these institutions, it was symbolically important to showcase how public-private partnerships were engaging in social housing provision, framing it as a profitable market niche. In this regard, scholars such as Yen (2021) argue that social housing designed by starchitects could become a new market for architects seeking to enhance their recognition while applying a façade of social consciousness to their brand. Thus, behind the strategy of replicability lies not only a design methodology but also a paradigm shifts in how housing is produced within a neoliberalized state and policy framework. For Boano and Perucich (2016), Aravena's project is merely a reproduction of the neoliberal status quo, reinforcing the architect-as-savior narrative, where design is framed as the solution to social problems.

4.4. Paradoxes in the design of Quinta Monroy and the evolution of the housing complex 20 years after its construction

According to a team member at ELEMENTAL, the FONDEF/CONICYT competition successfully explored the development of projects that prioritized collective and large-scale approaches: "(...) One of the successes that we believe in, which we later reinforced through design, was introducing the collective space between the private (which was the housing itself) and the public space, these courtyards, like micro-condominiums." (Team member at ELEMENTAL, personal communication, March 28, 2023).

However, criteria related to local relevance were overlooked. Regarding this, a professional architect from SERVIU (Servicio de Vivienda y Urbanización) in Iquique, warns:

> One aspect that was not considered is that, in the city of Iquique, being a free-trade zone (...), it is very easy to own a vehicle. So, it must be chaotic for people to park their cars inside the complex, which must be quite problematic. (Personal communication, February 14, 2023).

Another informant recalls: "Regulatory exceptions were made regarding the minimum parking requirements within the complex (...)". Millones Segovia (2017), points out that although "half-houses" were intended to allow families to complete them according to their needs, challenges arose due to the lack of a multidimensional approach and the integration of multiple stakeholders. Additionally, while it was expected that organizing homes around collective courtyards would foster harmonious coexistence, in practice: "(...) The courtyards now contain parked cars, some abandoned, competing for play space (...)." (Resident of Quinta Monroy, personal communication, March 20, 2023; fig. 4).

Cociña & Boano (2013) question whether, instead of decommodifying housing, Aravena's proposal reinforces neoliberal structures and class inequality. Yen (2021), warns that the absence of a political discussion around housing perpetuates the neoliberal ideology, shifting housing responsibility to the market. Thus, property ownership is presented as the ideal solution, yet without

addressing the state's obligations, ultimately legitimizing the scarcity of public funding (Boano & Perucich, 2016).

Fig. 4 – Contrast of the initial situation of the Quinta Monroy project at the time of its inauguration in 2003 (left) versus the current situation in 2016 (right). Colour figure available online.

Fig. 4 – Contraste da situação inicial do projeto Quinta Monroy aquando da sua inauguração em 2003 (esquerda) versus a situação em 2016 (direita). Figura a cores disponível online.

Source: https://www.archdaily.com/10775/quinta-monroy-elemental/50102de228ba0d4222000ff5-quinta-monroy-elemental-image?next_project=no and Millones Segovia (2017, p.70)

The Quinta Monroy experience demonstrated the effectiveness of a model that involved the initial delivery of a basic house, with the possibility of expanding the built area over time. This initiative became a reference for innovation and influenced various subsequent projects within the sector in Chile. One of the paradigmatic cases following Quinta Monroy in Chile was the housing complex for families known as "La Toma de Peñalolén" in Santiago. Like Quinta Monroy, this project was part of the so-called "new housing policy," which emphasized good location, quality public spaces, and housing value appreciation through future expansion (fig. 5). In addition to projects of ELEMENTAL, Chile has relevant experiences that preceded or consolidated incrementality. Among them are the initiatives of Fernando Castillo Velasco, such as the self-built neighborhood of La Reina (Santiago, 1965) and, notably, the Comunidad Andalucía (1990). These proposals illustrate the integration of community participation with progressive housing growth, enhancing quality of life and social cohesion. The influence of incrementality extends beyond Chilean borders, as evidenced by emblematic Latin American experiences.

Fig. 5 – Casas Chubi. Housing Complex for Families from the Former Peñalolén Settlement. Architect: Víctor Gubbins. Original Housing and Expanded Housing. Colour figure available online.

Fig. 5 – Casas Chubi. Conjunto Habitacional para Famílias do Antigo Assentamento Peñalolén. Arquiteto: Victor Gubbins. Habitação Original e Habitação Ampliada. Figura a cores disponível online.

Source: https://tici11bricenov.wordpress.com/2011/03/16/casas-chubi/

Between 2004 and 2008, various projects emerged based on ELEMENTAL's principles, including two in Renca, one in Lo Barnechea, and others through collaborations with Fundación Techo, which later developed independent models. The internationalization of ELEMENTAL's approach materialized through the Monterrey project in Mexico, carried out in 2007, marking ELEMENTAL's first international collaboration in this field:

> Monterrey, among the typologies we developed, is ultimately the closest to Quinta Monroy. In the case of Monterrey, the construction cost was $20,000 per house in a context where houses typically cost $50,000. Later, upon completion, the value adjusted to match market rates based on location in the Mexican context. (Team member at ELEMENTAL, personal communication, March 28, 2023)

In 2009, the Chilean forestry company ARAUCO commissioned ELEMENTAL to develop a housing project (fig. 6) as part of an employee assistance plan, facilitating access to permanent housing. The firm designed housing typologies under the program that succeeded the Dynamic Debt-Free Social Housing Program, known as the Solidarity Housing Fund I (financing homes up to $26,000) and Solidarity Housing Fund II (homes up to $40,000). The design was donated by the company as a form of subsidy (Aravena *et al.*, 2013).
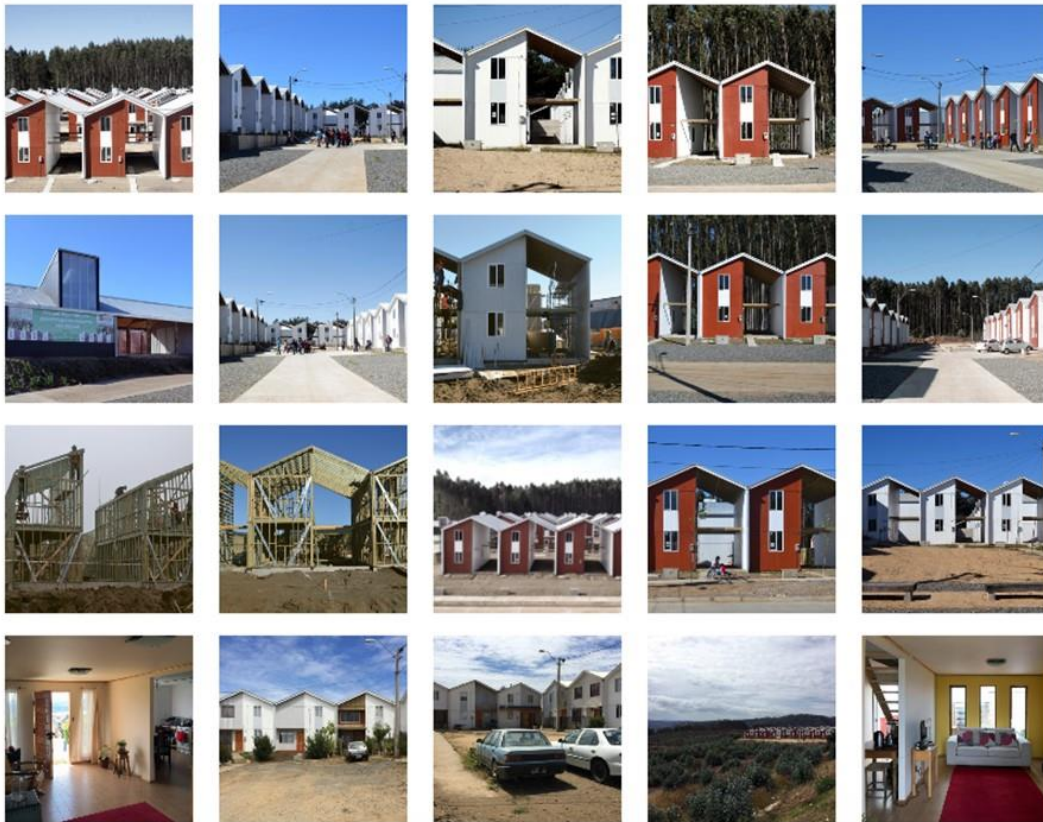

Fig. 6 – Villa Verde Project, ELEMENTAL – Forestal Arauco, Maule Region, Chile. Colour figure available online.
Fig. 6 – Villa Verde Projeto, ELEMENTAL – Forestal Arauco, Região de Maule, Chile. Figura a cores disponível online.
Source: https://www.archdaily.com/447381/villa-verde-housing-elemental

4.5. The Pritzker architecture prize and the free download

In 2016, Alejandro Aravena was awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize, marking a turning point in his career. While the prize recognizes a broad body of work developed by an architect, one of the key reasons for awarding him the honor was his role in addressing a problem that, until then, seemed distant from the world of star architects: social housing.

In the award announcement by the Hyatt Foundation, the following statement was highlighted:

"(Alejandro Aravena) practices architecture as an artistic endeavor in private commissions and public designs and embodies the revival of a more socially engaged architect" (Pritzker Prize, 2016)

Aravena's status as a Pritzker Architecture Prize laureate was considered by many to be a significant milestone for the future of architecture in relation to social responsibility (Yen, 2021). However, it can also be interpreted as a moment that, while recognizing his work in social housing design and its challenges, places it within a mainstream architectural circuit that risks overlooking the structural conflicts inherent in one of the fundamental pillars of well-being: housing.

During the award ceremony, Aravena announced the free virtual release of the blueprints for four incremental housing prototypes from his firm's website. These prototypes (fig.7), developed by ELEMENTAL, included: Villa Verde (Chile), Lo Barnechea (Chile), Quinta Monroy (Chile) and Monterrey (Mexico).

The objective of this release, according to ELEMENTAL, was a "gesture" to showcase their work and project narrative:

> Uploading the housing typologies goes hand in hand with the award that Alejandro received, the Pritzker (…) not as an act of responsibility, nor as a way of giving back for the prize. It was more about: how do we take advantage of the media momentum? And say: these typologies were built, they were developed by a real estate company, they were built by a construction firm, subsidized in some cases (…). (Team member at ELEMENTAL, personal communication, March 28, 2023)

This performance allows for the construction of narratives and mental maps of good and bad policies, cities, and neighbourhoods, while simultaneously disseminating and popularising the findings of the experts and organisations. In this regard, the Pritzker Architecture Prize garnered significant media attention, as the free download strategy was framed within the concept of open-source architecture. In theory, free access to these prototypes would enable users to replicate the models and improve them through an adaptive process.

5.   CASE ANALYSIS: THE VIRTUAL NARRATIVE PERFORMANCE

The analysis of the free download milestone, as a virtual narrative performance and the central object of study in this research, was carried out with an emphasis on three sets of data: i) Alejandro Aravena's speech upon receiving the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2016, to identify the discursive elements that position and validate him within the expert circuit, ii) the download toolkit presented on his firm website to analyse the architectural design devices and their narrative, and iii) press articles covering the milestone of releasing housing prototypes for free download, to identify the flow of ideas amplified by the media and any new ideas emerging from the reinterpretation of the performative action (table I).

Table I – Summary of Analysis Elements by Type of Agent and Data Corpus.

Quadro I – Resumo dos Elementos de Análise por Tipo de Agente e Corpus de Dados.

Data Body	Agent Role	Analysis Elements
Alejandro Aravena's Speech	Emitter	Discursive strategies of persuasion and validation
Housing Prototype Download Toolkit	Mediation Device	Conceptual strategy, design devices, and their narrative
Press Releases on Prototype Release	Receiver	Flow of received and amplified ideas and concepts

5.1.   The discourse[i]: "some of our projects require a level of dedication and innovation that neither the market nor governments are willing or prepared to support"

The analysis of Data Corpus 1 reveals, in summary, the recurrent use of discursive strategies aimed at legitimizing positioning and validation as an expert who mediates between two forces that seem not to engage in dialogue: the state and the market. There is a predominant use of metaphors of tension between private and public agents, reinforcing a narrative of urgency and the justification of

exceptional measures under which he has operated throughout his career, mainly in public housing matters. This reinforces the idea of experimentation, which has remained present since the initial design of the Quinta Monroy pilot project (2000-2004) in collaboration with academic networks at Harvard University in the United States and the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile.

The key concepts inferred from his discourse include: the emphasis on architecture as a transformative discipline capable of improving people's quality of life through innovative projects; efficiency in resource utilization and cost-effectiveness in housing design; and the importance of collaborative and collective work. In a context where the market and governments do not always support disruptive solutions, Aravena underscores the need for innovation and creativity. He positions architecture as a public good and housing as the product of participatory processes that grant dignity. Furthermore, he highlights open source as a collaborative strategy, assuming a continuous improvement of the initial incremental model proposed.

5.2. Download toolkit[ii]: "32.4 megabytes: compact, shareable, comprehensible"

The second data corpus corresponds to the toolkit made available for free download from the ELEMENTAL website immediately after Aravena was awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2016. Through this, the aim is to analyse design strategies and underlying narratives. This toolkit consists of information on four incremental housing projects developed by the ELEMENTAL office between 2003 and 2013. Each package, compressed in ".rar" format for download, was named ABC Vivienda – Incremental – Housing and contains a set of documents: 1) navigation letter, 2) blueprints, 3) document summarizing project characteristics, such as the number of housing units, location, etc.

1) Navigation Letter: the document explains the housing shortage crisis and places the ability of people to build their own homes at the center of the solution, alongside the capacities of governments and the market. This idea is framed as a "collaboration" between different stakeholders. In Table II, the elements that construct the discourse reflected in the roadmap letter are succinctly highlighted, demonstrating the simplification of the message and the provision of elements designed to make the components of the housing prototype comprehensible and replicable, such as the use of OpenSource as a mechanism to integrate key agents in solving the problem (see table II). Additionally, the document explicitly outlines the rules for designing effective incremental housing as a response to resource scarcity.

Table II – Discursive Synthesis of the Navigation Letter as Part of the Downloadable Toolkit.

Quadro II – Síntese Discursiva da Carta de Navegação como Parte do Kit de Ferramentas para Download.

Key Concept in the Toolkit		Citation within the Toolkit
Opensource	Central positioning of the OpenSource concept as a strategy to channel the resolution of the housing problem by bringing together the elements/agents involved in the "Housing Provision" issue.	*"Given the magnitude of the housing shortage problem, we cannot solve the challenge without incorporating people's own construction capacity as a resource, alongside the capacities of governments and the market. That is why we have conceived an OPEN SYSTEM capable of channeling all the forces at play. In this way, people will be part of the solution and not the problem" (ELEMENTAL, 2016).*
Incrementality	Incrementality is assumed as the solution to the resource scarcity in housing provision.	*"To address scarcity, we propose a principle of INCREMENTALITY."*
Good location	Provision of a "design key" formula for housing, highlighting location, housing density, structural design strategy, customization of incremental growth, and establishing a maximum family limit to ensure, hypothetically, the success of the project in community agreements.	*"GOOD LOCATION: Projects should be dense enough to afford well-located and valuable land. Harmonious growth over time" (…) "The first half of the house should be strategically built (…) so that expansion happens because of the design, not despite it". (…) "Urban design: (…) limit of 25 families, to maintain social agreements".*
Middle-class DNA	It highlights the social aspirations of organized groups seeking a housing solution. It places the social ascent of the middle class at the centre, portraying housing that is capable of accommodating all transformations in family composition, which are reflected in the design.	*Pre-build the structure for the final growth stage (middle-class standard), not just the initial phase.* *MIDDLE-CLASS DNA (…) The final design should allow at least 72 m² (4 bedrooms, 8m wide structure), with space for closets or a double bed, bathrooms located away from the entrance (…).*

The use of this discursive strategy accentuates the need to present a universal housing solution through a "recipe" approach. The concepts of "public knowledge" and "open source" are emphasized to highlight the accessibility and democratization of information being made available.

Although the discourse is framed as a design strategy recipe, it is reaffirmed that these designs are part of specific projects and must be adapted to their respective contexts. The authors claim that these are proven designs, models based on experience and demonstrated success.

2) Blueprints: For each project, a set of files is provided, including floor plans, technical specifications, and an urban site plan. Each blueprint is accompanied by the following disclaimer:

> The plan drawings in this document were created for a specific location and according to the regulations in effect at the time of their development. ELEMENTAL authorizes the use of these blueprints as a guide for the development of housing projects, provided that qualified professionals modify and adapt these designs to the construction and regulatory conditions of each location. ELEMENTAL assumes NO responsibility for the built projects and DOES NOT grant the right to use the ELEMENTAL brand in their dissemination, commercialization, or any related product. (©2016 ELEMENTAL Some Rights Reserved)

The ELEMENTAL website, as part of the design of the virtual performance, and the elements that the component and from which this information was obtained, only provided access to the four housing prototype downloads, with no additional publicly available information. The interface contained just two options: "Download Here" button, and "Contact Center" button. Below, an overview of the information availability on the ELEMENTAL website is presented, along with the ways users could interact with it (figs. 7-11).
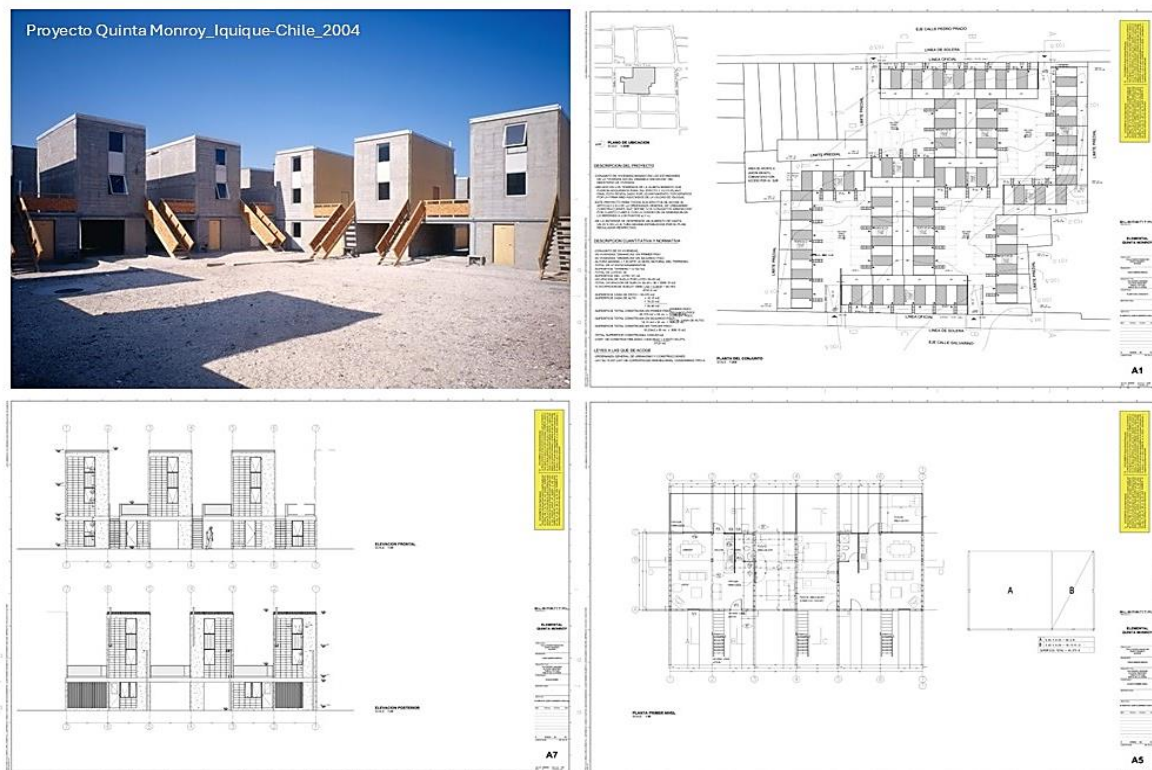

Fig. 7 – Schemathic information available for download from the ELEMENTAL website. ABC Incremental Housing folder: blueprint summary. Quinta Monroy Project.

Fig. 7 – Informação esquemática disponível para download no site da ELEMENTAL. Pasta ABC Incremental Housing: resumo dos planos. Figura a cores disponível online.

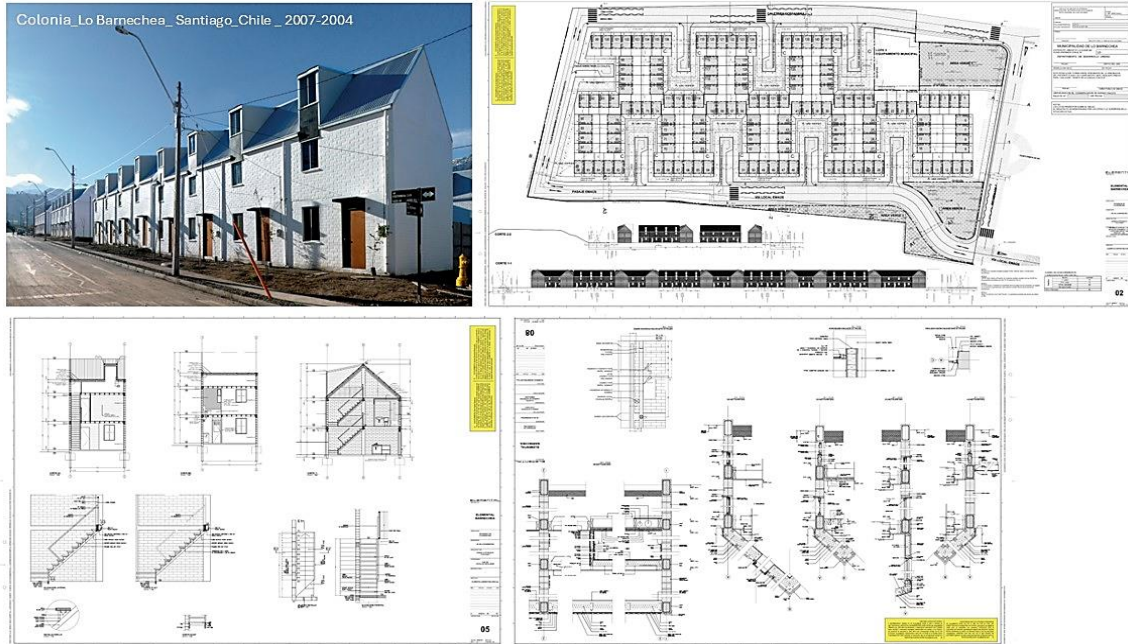Source: *www.elementalchile.cl*

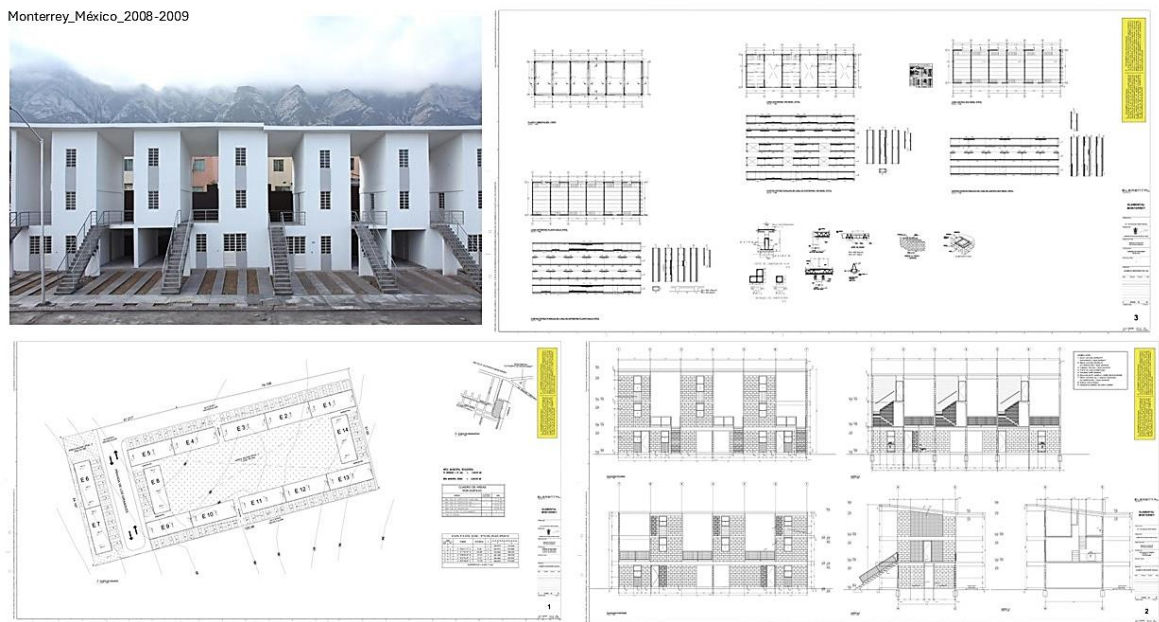Fig. 8 – Schemathic Information available for download from the ELEMENTAL website. ABC Incremental Housing folder: blueprint summary. Lo Barnechea Project.

Fig. 8 – Informação esquemática disponível para download no site da ELEMENTAL. Pasta ABC Incremental Housing: resumo dos planos. Projeto Lo Barnechea. Figura a cores disponível online.

Source: *www.elementalchile.cl*

Fig. 9 – Schemathic Information available for download from the ELEMENTAL website. ABC Incremental Housing folder: blueprint summary. Monterrey Project.

Fig. 9 – Informação esquemática disponível para download no site da ELEMENTAL. Pasta ABC Incremental Housing: resumo dos planos. Projeto Monterrey. Figura a cores disponível online.

Source: *www.elementalchile.cl*

Fig. 10 – Schemathic Information available for download from the ELEMENTAL website. ABC Incremental Housing folder: blueprint summary. Villa Verde Project.

Fig. 10 – Informação esquemática disponível para download no site da ELEMENTAL. Pasta ABC Incremental Housing: resumo dos planos. Projeto Villa Verde. Figura a cores disponível online.

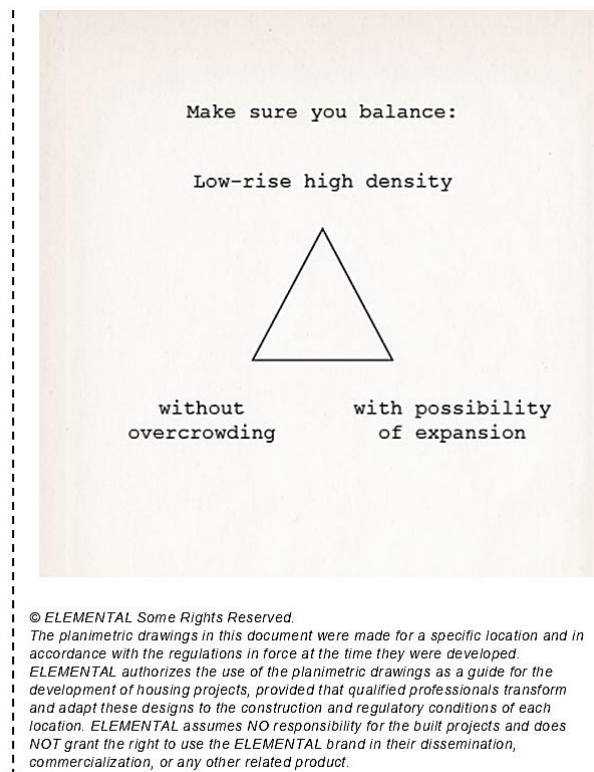Source: *www.elementalchile.cl*

Fig. 11 – Information contained in the ABC Incremental Housing folder: Navigation letter.

Fig. 11 – Informação contidas na pasta ABC Incremental Housing: Carta de navegação.

Source: *www.elementalchile.cl*

5.3. Press notes[iii]: "Aravena, if he hasn't invented it, has at least marked as his own an architectural approach called 'incremental design"

Among the most widely replicated terms, "Design Accessibility" and "Sustainability" had the highest presence in influential media outlets such as ArchDaily and Dezeen, as well as in local Latin American publications like Revista Mandua. Additionally, certain concepts were reinterpreted according to the editorial approach of each media outlet. For example, "Democratization of design" was presented as an innovation in access to architectural tools, like "Incrementality in design", while "Community participation" was highlighted as a replicable model for governments and non-governmental organizations.

The word cloud analysis and data review revealed the prominence of these terms in media discussions, with words like "Design Accessibility", "Community Participation," and "Sustainability" appearing most frequently. Meanwhile, other concepts such as "Innovation," "Democratization," and "Social Architecture" were also relevant but had a lower presence.

Overall, the reception and replicability of these concepts reflect Aravena's influence on expert media discourse. He is positioned as the creator of incremental design across multiple analysed media outlets. However, there is no contextualization regarding the socioeconomic background in which these housing projects were developed. Only some aspects of Chilean housing policy, such as the subsidiarity of social housing, are mentioned.

The "Open-source strategy" is highlighted as an innovation, emphasizing the free availability of the downloads and linking it to the democratization of design.

5.4. Summary of the flow of ideas and concepts: sender – message device – receiver

From the analysis of each data corpus, key concepts were identified that emerged from the sender, Alejandro Aravena – ELEMENTAL, in his discourse and the launch of the free download of prototypes, as well as the message amplified by specialized media outlets.

From this intersection, three key concepts stand out as those that successfully permeated from the sender to the receiver and were amplified for replicability: Open-Source as a Strategy, Democratization of Design, Accessibility and Affordability (See table III for reference.)

Table III – Summary of Concepts and Ideas Present in the Message: Sender (Aravena), Mediation Device, and Receiver (Specialized Media).

Quadro III – Resumo dos Conceitos e Ideias Presentes na Mensagem: Emissor (Aravena), Dispositivo de Mediação e Recetor (Mídia Especializada).

Synthesis Ideas – Concepts	Emitting Agent	Mediation Device	Receiving Agent
Open Source Strategy	x	x	x
Design Democratization	x	x	x
Accessibility and Affordability	x		x
Community Empowerment	x		
Appropriation	x		
Power of Innovation: Incrementality	x	x	x
Collaboration	x	x	x
Participation	x	x	x
Free			x
Sustainability			x

Based on the Sankey diagram (fig. 12), represents the flow of key ideas and concepts mobilized from the moment Aravena was awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize to the release of the downloadable prototypes, as amplified by specialized media. Concepts such as "Open-Source Strategy" and "Design Democratization", along with Accessibility and Affordability, are the main ideas transmitted and amplified. The media further expanded three concepts/ideas as reinterpretations of the release milestone and prototypes: "free download," "participation," and "collaboration." These three concepts were reinforced by the "novelty" of the download strategy, as well as by attributes associated with ELEMENTAL and Aravena, such as social and ethical architecture.
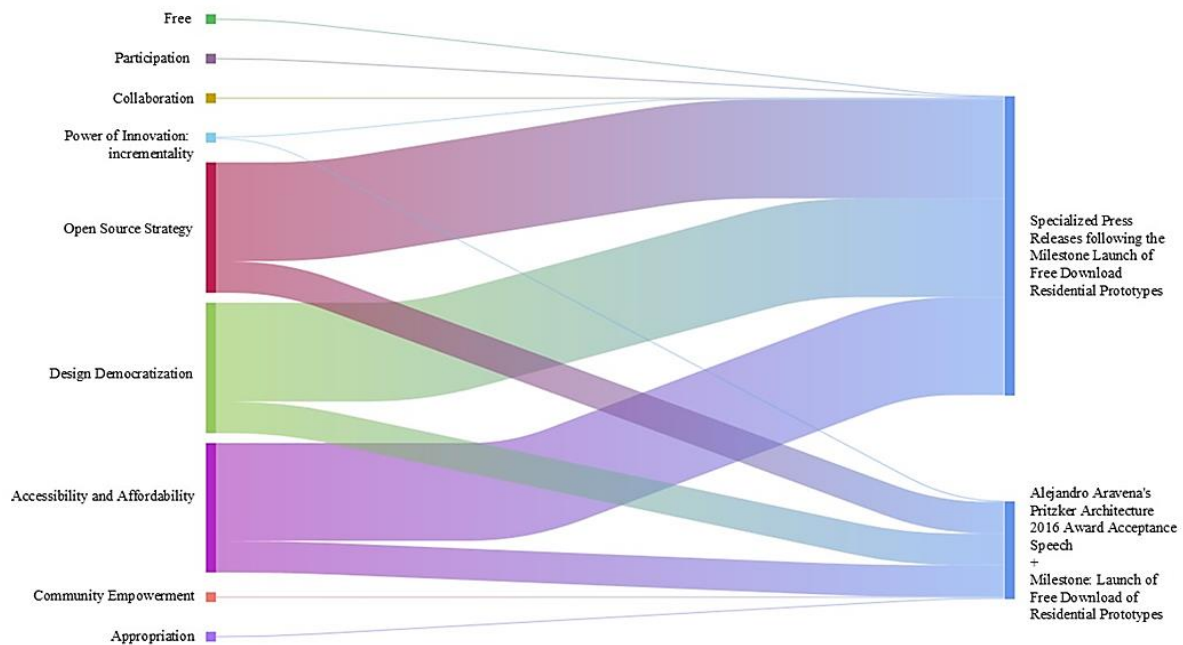
Fig. 12 – Sankey Diagram: Flow of Ideas and Concepts from Sender to Receiver and Their Amplification Capacity for Idea Circulation. Colour figure available online.

Fig. 12 – Diagrama de Sankey: Fluxo de Ideias e Conceitos do Emissor ao Recetor e Sua Capacidade de Amplificação para Circulação de Ideias. Figura a cores disponível online.

Additionally, powerful ideas like "community empowerment" and "appropriation" stemmed from Aravena's initial discourse. However, these ideas did not successfully transfer from the sender (Aravena) to the broader audience. One possible answer to this is that the Chilean housing policy considers the participatory component in housing production as part of the Housing Program that funded part of the Quinta Monroy project. It was not a novelty in housing policy; however, it was for the architecture-specialized ecosystem from the design perspective, as reflected in the press sources consulted for the discourse analysis.

The case study justifies its significance at the intersection of architecture, social innovation, and knowledge distribution models. In this regard, it was essential to detail the historical and social context surrounding the decision to release the prototypes and to contrast ELEMENTAL's stated intentions with the reception and impact on different stakeholders. The methodology was strengthened by source triangulation, combining bibliographic analysis, multimedia resources, and testimonials to gain a deeper understanding of the scope and implications of the discourse around this initiative.

6. CONCLUSION

The case of ELEMENTAL and Alejandro Aravena offers a clear example of how architectural ideas and policy concepts circulate transnationally through processes of appropriation, adaptation, and symbolic reinforcement. Their approach – particularly the dissemination of incremental housing prototypes via open-access platforms – illustrates how digital strategies can elevate an architectural practice into a global reference point. While ELEMENTAL does not track the number of downloads, they report receiving consistent requests from countries within the "tropical belt," where housing needs among vulnerable populations resemble those of Latin America. The availability of these downloadable prototypes facilitates the spread of a conceptual "design recipe," yet often neglects local contextual, managerial, and user-specific complexities. By framing their designs around universal values such as sustainability and democratization, ELEMENTAL's proposals gain ethical appeal while strategically omitting the socio-political conflicts inherent to housing production. As a team member at ELEMENTAL (personal communication, March 28, 2023) points out, these prototypes are positioned as adaptable templates supported by public subsidy, executed by private developers, and inhabited by users capable of completing and customizing their homes. However, such narratives risk oversimplifying complex structural conditions and framing housing as a design issue, rather than

addressing broader institutional and political challenges. This strategic simplification is supported and amplified by digital mediation as informational infrastructure that shapes and accelerates the processes of policy and idea circulation, as well as international awards that provide recognition. The dissemination of "manifestos" and design formulas reinforces ELEMENTAL's image as not only expert practitioners but also as curators of a global housing vision. This process enhances Aravena's standing as a "social architect" and an "ethical innovator," even though incremental housing had long existed in Latin America. Through virtual performances – such as conferences, publications, and freely accessible digital content – the symbolic capital of the Pritzker Architecture Prize is transformed into a tool of persuasion, consolidating Aravena's role as a global agent and narrative authority.

The influence exerted by Aravena and ELEMENTAL, then, operates not only through built projects but through their mediated representation. As Auslander (2008) argues, digital performances do not replace physical reality but intensify its symbolic impact. In this case, the Pritzker Architecture Prize functions not merely as recognition of architectural excellence, but as a catalyst for "narrative mobility," enabling the transnational circulation of ELEMENTAL's housing model regardless of its replicability or traceable impact. The Chilean context further highlights how this transnational recognition intersects with local innovation. The Quinta Monroy project emerged within an institutional setting open to experimentation and external collaboration. By making their prototypes digitally accessible under the "Download Here" strategy, ELEMENTAL not only promoted technical dissemination but also constructed a transnational narrative that legitimized their practice as a global benchmark in social housing. This is certainly an example of the ways in which "the digital" generates or produces policy mobilities.

In this process of mobility, power operates through influence and recognition (Mackenzie, 2017; Montero, 2018), rather than through coercion, aligning with Allen's (2003) notion of "decentralised power." Aravena's authority relies not solely on built outcomes, but on the value attributed to his ideas by a network of actors who reproduce and legitimise his position through discourse.

Ultimately, the ELEMENTAL case underlines the importance of investigating open-source strategies in architecture, not only in terms of access and dissemination but also regarding their discursive and institutional implications. Digital platforms, symbolic awards, and curated narratives function as powerful tools in shaping global housing agendas. Future research should interrogate the extent to which these mediated strategies contribute to real social transformation or whether they risk reinforcing existing inequalities under the guise of ethical innovation.

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[i] Speech delivered by Alejandro Aravena at the Pritzker Architecture Prize award ceremony, April 2016. This speech is analysed in conjunction with the information provided during the press conference held as part of the award ceremony. During the event, Aravena announced the free release of architectural prototypes on his website.

[ii] Toolkit analysed and downloaded from the ELEMENTAL website (www.elementalchile.cl), as available until December 2024. The website has since been modified, with the downloadable prototypes now accessible through the "Downloads" section.

[iii] The press notes correspond to a selection of digital media publications published between January 2016 and January 2017. This period was defined as it had the highest concentration of journalistic articles on the topic. Digital media outlets were chosen using Google's advanced keyword search function. The selected keywords were: "Alejandro Aravena," "Pritzker," and "Free Download," as the aim was to analyse the media milestone of the release. Google Analytics indicated the highest concentration of journalistic articles with these keywords during the specified time.

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