

Proactive Practice

AIA Seattle

Emerging Professional Travel Scholarship 2019

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The Idea

Most often, architecture begins with an invitation. Architects are selected by clients, who define the parameters and ambitions of the work. We inhabit a world largely built within this model, but:

What happens when architects initiate projects?

We aim to examine instances where architects circumvented the typical approach to making, by instead initiating projects. These radical instances will be treated as case studies and the unique circumstances that allowed them to come into being will be investigated. The case studies selected present a diverse range of scales and approaches:

Addressing a critical gap in the housing market.
Giving life to a conceptual exploration.
Intentional long-term reshaping of a neighborhood.
Creating opportunities when work was slow.
Guiding a community through construction.
Proactive measures to address social housing.

As Seattle transforms itself through rapid growth and densification, how can architects have a say in the way this unfolds? The prosperity and character of our citizens is deeply impacted by the way we as a city choose to build. What can be seen when the current and prospective situation of the people in this city is assessed?

Methodology & Deliverables

Properly telling the story of these case studies first requires research into the contextual specifics of each selection. The character of each place will be examined, along with the assets and challenges of the people who live there and the qualities of the architectural environment. This will build an understanding of the forces that led to each project's creation.

Following this period of research, the travel portion will initiate in order to facilitate conversations and visit built projects. Discussions will be held with the architects and inhabitants about why atypical processes were required, what freedoms they allowed, the inherent challenges of working outside the norm, the viability of continuing the model, and future possibilities. Afterwards, the projects will be visited in order to witness and document the architectural crystallization of each unusual process.

Upon returning, findings and analyses will be compiled into a document for distribution. This document will contain contextual research, transcripts of conversations, descriptions of the unusual processes, and photo documentation of visited projects. Upon the release of this document, a panel discussion with the architects in Seattle that are initiating architecture will be conducted.

With the understanding that these projects are products of unique contexts and the challenges and parameters are not identical to those of Seattle, the hope is that others can find inspiration in the spirit of innovation and resourcefulness displayed by the work herein.



Starter House*

Office of Jonathan Tate (OJT)

New Orleans, LA

Recognizing both an abundance of underutilized lots passed over by normative developments, and the need for houses catering to entry-level home ownership, New Orleans' Office of Jonathan Tate has been conducting research into an opportunistic model of infill housing. Calling the project Starter Home, OJT first identifies oddly-shaped, undeveloped lots with developmental potential, and then generates a schematic design. Then, acting as developer, OJT finances the projects through atypical means, including crowd-investing.

The interest in OJT lies in their thoughtful approach to addressing issues of housing affordability, the ingenuity of their architectural form, and their novel ways of realizing these projects.

As part of the Starter House* initiative, OJT has completed a number of single family speculative infill houses in New Orleans. OJT is currently developing an artist-run hotel based on their crowd-investing method.

“Standard zoning regulations prefer standard architecture expressions; the Starter Home* is free to exploit the eccentricities of its particular site, allowing restrictions to become prospects, and privileging the particular of the generic.”



“I’d like to be very clear about what I’m not interested in, in the project of the ordinary. I’m not interested in how these generic roofs have become the developers tool for covering sprawling floor plans for large suburban single family houses... rather I’m curious about the leftover results, the formal qualities, when they are mashed up, misaligned, and result in awkward forms...”

Jennifer Bonner

Boston, MA

Jennifer Bonner is the director of MALL, an office that uses experimentation as a model for practice. Typically, she begins with a question in her conceptual work and explores this through writing, lecturing, exhibiting, and representation with the ultimate goal of building this exploration at 1:1. Jennifer’s inquiry of representation methods through installations and graphics is a practice in itself: until she’s built something, architecture is only representation. With one foot in academia (a professor at Harvard) and another in practice, she is offered the freedom to “misbehave, ask the wrong questions” and develop creatively sourced ideas to a place at which they can (hopefully) be tested.

The interest in Jennifer Bonner lies in her expansion of what architecture can be. An interest in the ordinary lead Jennifer to an exploration of banal roof types that she documented in her exhibition “Domestic Hats”. The ordinary, in this example, becomes the “contractor’s canon” of basic roof typologies, and she suggests that we have overlooked the many spatial possibilities that roof shapes can offer. The culmination of this conceptual exploration resulted in the self-development of her own spec-home, “Haus Gables” in Atlanta, GA. This house reworks past spacial ideas while asking questions about faux materials seen throughout the south.

We propose to visit Jennifer in Boston to learn more about her process, her ideas moving forward (sandwich architecture as office towers), what drives her to take a conceptual idea all the way to 1:1 scale, and if she can do it twice.



Amsterdam Tower

Javier Sanchez (JSa)

La Condesa, Mexico City, Mexico

Javier Sanchez has dedicated much of his energy towards bettering the neighborhood of La Condesa in Mexico City. His practice, JSa, is equal parts architecture office and development company. These two wings serve each other to build housing that re-engages with the public realm. Much of Mexico City's typical development withdraws from the street level, creating a built culture of "exclusion, fear, and barriers" (Belogolovsky). JSa's intent is to re-articulate La Condesa into an environment with greater porosity, connection, and safety. Often, JSa selects sites adjacent to their existing projects, intensifying the effect of their efforts.

JSa's relevance to this research lies in the unique way they have harnessed the strength that comes from integrating architecture and development. JSa has the ability to redefine the character of a city at the neighborhood scale through self-developed interventions.

Two projects that exemplify this approach are on adjoining lots on Amsterdam Street. Decades in the making, these projects increase neighborhood porosity and architectural variation within La Condesa.

"We are trying to create new readings of the city. We know that cities are mainly made up of housing. It is the main ingredient. Yet, housing is private and you can't really open it to the city. So within the boundaries of our own projects I have been trying to create small urban systems that are more open than typical projects."



“ I used to have my old studio here on this land, which I own and I had no work at the time. I thought – if I rent this space out, all I could get would be \$2,000 USD per month. That’s not enough for me to live. So I researched what would be the maximum height that I could build here, which is eight stories, and I decided to propose a project that could attract other businesses.”

Tower 41

Alberto Kalach

Mexico City, Mexico

Alberto Kalach believes architecture is a craft learned by practicing. This belief combines with an acute awareness of historical context, creating buildings that feel both inside and outside of time. Kalach takes a primitive but sophisticated approach to his practice, reducing drawing sets to as few sheets as possible with very few movements in a building that could introduce complexity and undue cost. By focusing on geometry, architectural expression is carried by the structure

During a period when Kalach was out of work, he decided to approach a developer with a design to replace his small office next to Chapultepec Park with a large tower. Here he could keep his office, and lease out the other floors.

Tower 41 is a simple building with 2 unfinished concrete walls, which carry all of the loads, orient the views of the building, and block eastern and western sun. Rather than cling to the few leasable square feet left of level 1 after providing circulation and a lobby, the floor was instead left open as an unenclosed garden. Quality tenant spaces are open and naturally ventilated, with expansive views of the park and shared access to a rooftop garden.

The hope is to learn from this unique, architect-initiated tower development where quality of experience and connection to place were prioritized.



“Most of the architects in Monterrey constantly think about when a client is going to pay for a building. We have to stop looking at architecture that way. Clients who cannot pay us with money find different ways to pay us – maybe by helping to fabricate certain components of the building... This helps us complete our work. We are interested in this idea because we see architecture as a shared learning process”

Ermita Guadalupe

S-AR

Monterrey, Mexico

S-AR is a collaborative practice that extends the participation in the design and construction process to the inhabitants of the buildings in an empowering way. Monterrey is the center Mexico's prominent steel industry with strong cement and glass sectors. S-AR became interested in the way people of Mexico self-construct their homes, often patching together waste from these industries in whatever way they can. Construction workers, some which they meet through close relationships on the job site, are typically unable to develop the credit necessary to own their own homes. Noticing this, S-AR developed a pocket book of 13 house designs with a great amount of flexibility to use different materials from local industries. S-AR provides skilled people with the information they need to harness their potential and build their own homes. This model became a non-profit called Comunidad Vivex.

The relevance of S-AR stems from a perceptive and conscientious understanding of the place they live and S-AR's sensitive response to their community's needs. A combination of for-profit work, self-developed projects, and a unique non-profit model allows them to cleverly address humanitarian issues while simultaneously producing a strong body of research and exploratory work.

Comunidad Vivex has 7 projects either finished or in construction in Monterrey. Ermita Guadalupe is a community center for a parish located on the slopes of the Cerro del Topochico. After a conversation with the architects, we would like to visit the project of their recommendation based on accessibility. While the hope is to visit Ermita Guadalupe, all of Comunidad Vivex's projects combine simple construction methods with delicate sensibilities.



“Elemental is a Do Tank. Our field of action is the city. Elemental seeks an approach to urban life in contexts of scarce resources, whether in the housing field, public space, transportation, using the city as a source of equality, here and now.”

Constitución

Elemental

Constitución, Chile

Since 2004, Alejandro Aravena’s Elemental has earned global recognition for their social housing innovations and disaster response across Chile. Aravena’s involvement with social housing began when he, along with transportation engineer, Andrés Iacobelli, and urban designer, Pablo Allard, recognized a deficiency in the quality of Chile’s social housing. They approached MINVU, the Ministry of Housing and Urbanism of Chile, and presented their findings along with strategies for systemic improvements. MINVU invited them to test their ideas on the new housing policy the ministry was preparing to launch.

Elemental’s relevance to the research stems from this inception. A direct engagement with institutions to highlight systemic social housing issues led to the betterment of thousands of Chileans. Of equal importance is present-day Elemental’s internal structure. The firm is co-owned by three parties: Aravena and his group of architects, the Universidad Católica de Santiago, and the largest natural gas company in Chile, COPEC. These partnerships allow Elemental to tap into critical financial and academic resources, extending the reach of their efforts.

Elemental’s recent influence can be seen in Constitución, a small coastal city battered by an 8.8 earthquake and tsunami that killed over 350 people. Elemental responded rapidly, collaborating with a forestry company, the government, and the city’s public to formulate a options: rebuild as things were with the addition of a seawall, or plant a public forest along the waterfront and relocate the displaced to a flood-proof area. The people of Constitución elected for the second, and Elemental has since built a housing project, a seaside promenade, and a cultural center in the city. Constitución is Elemental’s most ambitious and refined effort yet.



Itinerary + Budget

This budget takes into account the increased costs required for two people to travel together. Trips outside of the United States will be grouped together for cost efficiency. When possible, relevant lectures and seminars will be attended in chosen cities.

Starter House*

Contact: Coleman Coker

SEA>NOLA (round trip)	\$650
2 nights	\$250

Jennifer Bonner

Contact: Sean Morgan

SEA>BOS (round trip)	\$530
2 nights	\$300

ConjuntoAmsterdam + Tower 41

Contact: Javier Sanchez

SEA>MEX (one way)	\$390
4 nights	\$240

Ermita Guadalupe

Contact: Javier Sanchez

MEX>MTY (round trip)	\$110
2 nights	\$60

Constitución

Contact: TBD

MEX>Chile (one way)	\$1100
4 nights	\$240

Chile >SEA (one way)	\$1300
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Total	\$5170
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