

Elemental: Housing As an Investment Not a Social Expense

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*Elemental*¹ 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 or infrastructure, using the city as a source of equality, here and now. If there is anything everyone in the world today can agree upon, it is that we need to correct the inequalities of our societies. For that, the only sustainable, but long-term, solutions are education and income redistribution. The city, if well-designed, might provide the necessary shortcut. Do Tank is a term invented to describe our modus operandi: the city is a powerful and efficient vehicle to improve the welfare and the opportunities of people who might have been originally excluded from the benefits of development. In *Elemental*, we are trying to make effective and efficient quality of life improvements for the poorer segments of society, through concrete urban projects, privileging those projects that require innovation and research. As Geetam Tiwari from the IIT (Indian Institute of Technology) in Dehli says, questions raised by complex systems (such as cities) tend to require counter-intuitive answers; in order to resolve these questions, time and dedication are needed – and, in general, the resources are insufficient. Hence, if the question cannot be formulated correctly, it becomes difficult to obtain a proper answer; but far more dangerous is the risk that there might be a good answer to the wrong question.

As think tanks (i.e., universities, study centers, foundations), we seek to identify, debate, and concern ourselves with unexplored complex issues of social interest and public scope; specifically, in our case, the realm of the city. And like many other stakeholders in society (i.e., governments, consultants, NGOs), we are interested in making a contribution to the common good by means of concrete

projects: in short, by doing things. This two-fold operation of a Do Tank (operational towards the common good) forces one to accept all the restrictions of a given problem (economical, legal, political, social temporary, etc.) without losing the greater picture of general interest. To put it differently: if the *Do* accepts the restrictions, the *Tank* sets the conditions. The *Do* is in charge of accepting the restrictions and ideas that must be internalized in order to become real; the *Tank* looks after the conditions that this new reality must encompass. Just as it makes no sense in doing something without quality, it makes no sense to imagine something without implementing it. This leads to what one might call a relevant pragmatism, in which from one side, theoretical debates are filtered out, but at the same time, care is taken so that the process of implementation doesn't miss the general purpose of the operations.

Even though the contribution of a Do Tank must come from its capacity of articulating, representing, and validating poorer families' interests, its most distinctive aspect consists in understanding that for implementing an action, one has to be able to read the multiplicity of stakeholders' interests and provide them all with a common language, i.e., that of *works* which are able to synthesize those interests.

What distinguishes a Do Tank from other modes of operating is very specific and reflects upon a profound principle: the funding that enables an autonomy of particular interests, ergo an independent defense of the common good.

In order to contribute professional quality work to urban projects, perhaps even generating public welfare, since 2002, *Elemental* has worked under the wing of the Universidad Católica de Chile, and, since 2006, with the support from the Chilean Oil Company, COPEC.

For Example

In this article we will present an example of our work on a housing project. In order to trigger a qualitative leap-forward, *Elemental* works under the same policy conditions as the rest of the market and within the framework of the current local housing policy, bringing together the best practices in architecture, engineering, and social development. The project makes use of a US\$ 7,500 subsidy (given from the government to the families) which pays for the costs of land, construction, and infrastructure – in the best of cases, this allows for around 30 m² of built space. When the given money is the equivalent to just half of a house, the key question becomes *Which half do we do?* We have chosen to provide the half that a family would unlikely build on its own.

Our point is that social housing should become a public investment, not just a public expense. Hence, we have identified a set of design parameters that allow a housing unit to increase its value over time. Thus far, we have designed and built projects with a middle-income standard unit which gains in value over time. In effect, we have

¹ *Elemental* is a Housing Initiative affiliated to the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile and COPEC, its focus is the design and implementation of urban projects of social interest and public impact.