n October 5, 2021, a conglomerate of housing committees protested outside the former National Congress Building, before the Constitutional Convention (cc). There was a specific reason: the presentation of the “Popular Agenda for Housing and the City,” coordinated by Representative Gonzalo Winter. This demonstration of organizational and convening power reaffirms, to some extent, the social and political agency of settlement movements – which have had a significant presence in media since October 2019. This is not a novelty, on the contrary, the ‘roofless’ have a long sociopolitical history in our country, a history that has gone through various public and urban policies, housing solutions, planning models, protest and resistance movements, and so on. What is interesting about this massive demonstration before the cc is its contrast when juxtaposed to Alejandro Aravena’s intervention, held only a month before this event.

We could ask, who are the protagonists of the housing problem? There are certainly recognizable actors: politicians, activists, dwellers, architects. Among the crowd, the leaders of different housing committees are accompanied by pobladores. Elisa Loncon and Jaime Bassa – president and vice president of the cc – greet them and then sit down at a table together with some spokespersons and leaders, including Doris González, leader of the Ukamau community. This composition reveals a form of self-organization informed by notions of community and mutual care that result from mobilization strategies, such as land occupation or soup kitchens (Herrera, 2020). “Without mobilization, sometimes radicalized, it would not be possible to go beyond the limits of housing policy,” Doris González (2021) stated. This conviction would shape the Comunidad Ukamau project.

The complex consists of five-floor blocks of 62 m² apartments in Maestranza, a former fiscal land that belonged to the State Railway Company (EFE). González’s words refer to the entire process of acquiring
the land and the state funding, where, she also states, there were problems due to the prejudices that burden social housing projects and popular groups:

[...]

If we follow the ideas on which Fernando Castillo Velasco (2020:14) based projects of this kind, we notice that quality lies in the involvement of the pobladores. This point gains strength within Ukamau, “since it was not about just getting my house and a space for me and my family and forgetting about the rest. We always looked at it from a collective perspective” (González, 2021). This way of understanding oneself as a community and as a collective organization is what leads to formal decisions such as the central courtyard and the horizontal corridors that promote interaction between neighbors. Something reaffirmed by the fact that, at the end of the construction process, Doris González herself passed on her housing quota to another family who needed it more.

We go back to the cc and both interventions: the first held by a renowned architect and the second driven and organized by settlement movements. The difference between the Elemental architect and Ukamau is reflected in the way they operate on the social project, by asking who is in the foreground and in the background in each case. Alejandro Crispiani (2020:37) summarizes Castillo Velasco’s architecture by saying that the practice “needs to transcend individual ethics and be collectively articulated, which is what the community exercises (or should exercise) when building freely [...] all architecture is communal and from there they elaborate their idea of architecture.”

The question of the protagonists is essential because it is at the base of this dichotomy – or, perhaps, not at the base, but it is part of the problem’s personality.

On September 1, 2021, with some notes and a great flipchart – sketches? concept map? – Aravena asks if he can take off his mask. He laughs and indicates that he has not measured nor mastered his presentation. He talks about his solutions and his projects, reiterating, in some way, what has already been said: it is more economics than architecture (Vergara & Boano, 2016:43); the rules and conditions of the market are not questioned. You must “learn to live with what’s good enough,” he says – adding that this kind of projects puts professional “prestige” at risk (Aravena, 2021). The idea of the individual could already be considered a cliché of neoliberalism, but it becomes more interesting when merged with the idea of the starchitect – common at least until the nineties in Chile.
with ‘the golden generation.’ Here, both the pobladores and the practice of building a community are out of focus. The ideas are presented as formulas in TED talks through a business discourse (Vergara & Boano, 2016:41). In the foreground: an architect who asks the “right questions,” mediatized projects at the level of ‘magazine architecture,’ a personal brand of easy promotion.

The Comunidad Ukamau project rejects this and runs in the opposite direction. Its architects have remained in the background and have designated the residents as architects of the project (Castillo & Lawner, 2021). In the foreground: a participatory model, channeled by the tools of architecture. The pobladores are protagonists of their own. ARQ

Notas / Notes

1 In the sense that it is made with the intention of experimenting and presenting itself in the media, of being easily published and distributed, thus building a clear image/brand of the practice or architect. Although it may have negative implications for some people, that is not the intention in this text, rather, it aims to question whether this objective should also be a priority in social housing – or socially charged – projects.

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