ALEJANDRO ARAVENA • 2019 LAUREATE

Recipient of the 20th Annual Urban Land Institute J.C. Nichols Prize for Visionaries in Urban Development
ULI J.C. Nichols Prize for Visionaries in Urban Development

ULI and the Nichols Family established the ULI J.C. Nichols Prize for Visionaries in Urban Development to recognize an individual, or a person representing an institution, whose career demonstrates a commitment to the highest standards of responsible development. The $100,000 prize honors the legacy of Kansas City, Missouri, developer Jesse Clyde Nichols (1880–1950), a founding ULI member who is widely regarded as one of America’s most influential entrepreneurs in land use during the first half of the 20th century.
Alejandro Aravena received a degree in architecture from Universidad Católica de Chile in 1992. In 1991, still as a student, he participated at the Venice Prize of the Fifth International Architecture Exhibition of la Biennale di Venezia. In 1993, he studied history and theory at the Università Iuav di Venezia and engraving at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Venezia.

He established Alejandro Aravena Architects in 1994. From 2000 to 2005, he was a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, where the path to the founding of ELEMENTAL began.

ELEMENTAL is a “do tank” (rather than a think tank) founded in 2001, led by Aravena, with partners Gonzalo Arteaga, Juan Cerda, Victor Oddó, and Diego Torres. The studio works on projects of public interest and social impact, including housing, public space, infrastructure, and transportation.

Aravena taught at Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia in 2005. He has held the ELEMENTAL Copec Chair at Universidad Católica de Chile since 2006.
Aravena was a member of the Pritzker Architecture Prize jury (2009–2015). He was named Honorary RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) International Fellow (2009) and board member of the LSE Cities program of the London School of Economics (2011). He is also a Regional Advisory Board member of the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, board member of the LafargeHolcim Foundation, and founding member of the Chilean Public Policies Society. He led the Helsinki Design Lab for SITRA (Finnish Government Innovation Fund) to design a national strategy toward carbon neutrality.

He was one of the 100 people who contributed to the Rio+20 global summit on sustainable development in 2012 and participated in conferences worldwide, including a Pritzker Laureates’ Conversation in the United Nations headquarters in New York City, titled “Challenges Ahead for the Built Environment” (2016), and a TEDGlobal talk in Rio de Janeiro, titled “My Architectural Philosophy? Bring the Community into the Process” (2014). He was named one of the 20 “new heroes of the world” by Monocle magazine in 2010 and one of the 26 creative geniuses of 2016 by the New York Times.


ELEMENTAL’s work has been exhibited at venues ranging from the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 2010 (Small Scale, Big Change) to the Venice Architecture Biennale (2008, 2012, 2018), among others. A solo retrospective of ELEMENTAL’s work was held at the Louisiana Art Museum in Denmark in winter 2018–2019. ELEMENTAL’s work is also part of the permanent collection of Centre Pompidou in Paris. ELEMENTAL curated the 15th Venice Biennale in 2016.

Among the awards ELEMENTAL has received are the Silver Lion at the Venice Biennale in 2008, the Index Award in 2011 in Copenhagen, the Design of the Year for the Angelini Innovation Center in 2015 in London, and the Gothenburg Sustainability Award in 2017 (first time awarded to an architect). In 2016, Aravena was awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize.
In a recent interview with *Urban Land*, Aravena reflected on the power of architecture to improve people’s quality of life and the necessity of taking design risks to provide the most effective solutions.

**What drew you to architecture as a way not just to improve the cityscape, but improve people’s lives?**

I graduated from Universidad Católica de Chile in 1992, and for eight years I was practicing in a rather conventional way. Then in 2000, I was invited to teach at Harvard, and it was there that I discovered I had been considering the wrong questions [in terms of how to influence people's lives through architecture]. So I switched my focus to broader questions of interest to the community in general, and to addressing those questions with my knowledge of architecture. I asked myself, can I contribute with my specific knowledge to nonspecific issues like poverty, resentment, anger, violence, insecurity? When you change the questions you are addressing, you have to adapt your answers and use your training for something different than what you were doing so far.

At Harvard, I was competing for students with Rem Koolhaas, Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron, and other well-known architects, and I thought, what can I say in this context that others are not talking about? And scarcity of means was something I did know about. In Chile, you are working with so little resources and with people outside the developed world. So I decided to focus on that issue [maximizing the impact of designs created with minimal resources].

**You have often talked about the power of synthesis to overcome seemingly insurmountable problems. Why do you believe so firmly in this approach?**

The more complex the question, the more the need for synthesis. The challenge is to keep the original complexity, all the dimensions, but provide an answer that is simple and synthetic. I believe that when you create a design proposal, you should factor in all the dimensions at once, and what you are designing addresses all the forces—economic, political, social, environmental—that inform a building or a place. You have to establish priorities, but all the dimensions are present in the proposal.
You have said that if something is unique, it can't be repeated, and as a result, its value is limited. Please tell us more about this.

Sometimes there is a case to be made for uniqueness, such as when a community is waiting for a symbol, a gesture, that touches the people's imagination. In those circumstances, our role is to deliver products that are finished, that are unique. Other times, our role is to trigger an ongoing process that evolves through a life of its own, and that is the value of what is delivered. The challenge is to understand when each approach is appropriate. In some cases, if you do something that cannot be replicated, then you are not understanding the real question behind the challenge. It's a matter of knowing what solution best addresses the situation, and that solution may be a process that is replicable and adaptable.

You have also said that architects are authors, not consultants, and as a result, they should take risks with their proposals and be willing to reject the status quo. Could you elaborate?

A consultant gathers information and understands the forces at play and the constraints, but the responsibility for deciding what to do is with the party who hired the consultant. As an architect, you gather information and understand the forces of constraint, but you then take a risk with a proposal for what needs to be done. That is the difference between a consultant and an author. Reason and rationality are part of the proposal, but intuition plays the biggest role in synthesizing a challenge into a usable solution for the client. The equation that informs a project is compelled by concrete factors such as deadlines, budget, and regulations, but sometimes there is fear or skepticism, and those things belong in the equation along with expectations. It's very important to use intuition to integrate all those forces into the equation. If you do that right, you can see the energy in the room change, because all the forces affecting a project have been recognized.

When we [at ELEMENTAL] decided to work in social housing, we risked our reputation to do it. But despite the risk of failing, the community [disaster-ravaged Constitución, Chile] was so desperate for a solution that the potential for common good was high. We said, “It makes sense. Let's go for it.” And we had to learn to live with the “good enough.” Maybe a great project would be fantastic, but in order to go from paper to reality, sometimes you have to live with the good enough so it gets done. Good enough is better than nothing.
Affordable housing is a challenge for cities around the globe. ELEMENTAL's incremental housing approach in Chile is an intriguing solution. What sparked this idea, and do you think it could be replicated in other places?

We are living in the era of cities. They are magnets for people, resources, ideas, and money. The problem is the three “s” menace—scale, speed, and scarcity of means—that challenges our ability to accommodate all the people coming to cities. By 2030, there will be 5 billion people living in cities worldwide, 2 billion of whom will be living in poverty. This means that housing needs to be built for 1 million people per week using only $10,000 per family [an average amount based on the housing budgets of developed and developing countries]. This was the starting point for our social housing projects. And, at the time, the amount per family in Chile was even less: it was $7,500 per family, with which we had to buy land, provide infrastructure, and build a house. So, we focused on what we could do that would affect the most people and what we could do that families cannot do on their own.

We decided to address scarcity of means with “incrementality”—by doing what is most strategic and then allowing the families to complete their homes over time. Through this incremental approach, we have added people's own resources to what is provided by markets and governments. And incrementality allows for a more custom-made solution than what is possible using a more centralized approach. It also became apparent that families develop a sense of pride in completing their own houses. We provide the structure, and then families begin to add, some for the first time in their lives, an expression of themselves. And that leads to taking care of the home over time, keeping it beautiful over time, and maintaining the common spaces. We have used the problem of scarcity to provide a solution to monotony and a way to achieve economies of scale. With incremental housing, we have introduced a new form that becomes a process of urban space customization.
The first Nichols laureate was former Charleston, South Carolina, mayor Joseph Riley. He talked about the importance of making cities great places for all residents so they would feel a sense of pride and belonging.

How do you apply this philosophy in your work?

I could not agree more. In more and more cities, wealth and quality of life are concentrated among a few, and this is what causes conflicts. Inequality is a daily experience in cities. It’s what you experience when you live in a neighborhood with no opportunities, and then you commute to the parts of the city where everything is better—public space, transportation, buildings, and access to jobs, health care, and education. And then you go home to where none of those things are part of your everyday experience. It comes down to “why them and not me?”

Cities can actually provide a shortcut to equality by improving the quality of life for all residents through what is available for free. Great public space is a powerful equalizer in that everyone can enjoy the best parks, river shores, or promenades. For people who cannot afford to take holidays, imagine how it feels to be able to spend time in the nicest, greenest area of a city. Access to high-quality public space can help counterbalance what you cannot afford because you don’t have the best education or the best job.

Of all your work, is there one project that best exemplifies your belief in the power of architecture to shape people’s lives?

That is like choosing among your children: you can’t prefer one over the other. I would say we have been applying the same concept over and over, just in different ways with different projects. Our entire body of work is based on overcoming scarcity of means and time by using design to channel people’s own capacities. We have learned to respond with what is absolutely essential, to take out the superfluous, yet provide a response that considers not just people’s needs, but also their desires [to make places their own].

With social housing, it was only a few weeks before what we had built started becoming middle-class housing. That happened not because of us, nor the state, nor the markets, but because of the families themselves. This has happened over and over. And we are applying what we have learned to a discussion with the minister of housing [in Chile] on how to develop an emergency typology to accommodate refugees. The name of our firm, ELEMENTAL, means something that cannot be further reduced. By being forced by scarcity to concentrate on what is irreducible, we are opening the potential of the concept [channeling people’s capacities for design customization] being valid in many circumstances, in many places.
ULI has more than 45,000 members around the globe representing all aspects of the industry. What advice do you have for our members?

In the built environment, one of the biggest challenges is that we [industry professionals] tend to be very conservative in terms of willingness to be the first to do something. The incentives tend to benefit the second movers. That is why we do not innovate and instead continue to respond to new questions with old answers. If you identify a new need or a new challenge and you succeed with a new solution, others will copy you. City building is not like other industries, where you can patent your ideas, so everyone waits for the someone to make the first move so they can copy the idea if it works.

At ELEMENTAL, we believe there is a need to fight the cliché and to move first. And instead of obtaining copyrights for our designs, we have “copy lefts,” which means that from our website, you can download designs for free—take them, use them. So, my message would be this: all of us who are working in the built environment should make the first move that changes a situation. Fight the cliché, step out of the herd, and be bold.

—Trisha Riggs is ULI senior vice president of communications.
ULI J.C. NICHOLS PRIZE LAUREATES: 2000 to 2019

These highly talented, dedicated individuals have applied their skills in urban development, planning, design, teaching, art, and governing to create the best outcomes for cities around the globe. Perhaps even more important, these visionaries have inspired others with their passion to make a positive, long-lasting impact.

2019  Alejandro Aravena, architect and educator
2018  Theaster Gates, artist and urban planner
2017  Robin Chase, Zipcar cofounder and transportation entrepreneur
2016  Dr. Cheong Koon Hean, chief executive officer, Singapore Housing & Development Board
2015  Lord Richard Rogers, founder, Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners
2014  Dr. Judith Rodin, president, Rockefeller Foundation
2013  J. Ronald Terwilliger, chairman emeritus, Trammell Crow Residential
2012  Peter Walker, partner, PWP Landscape Architecture
2011  His Highness the Aga Khan
2010  Richard M. Daley, former mayor, Chicago, Illinois
2009  Amanda M. Burden, former commissioner, New York City Planning Commission
2008  F. Barton Harvey III, former chairman and chief executive officer, Enterprise Community Partners
2007  Sir Stuart Lipton, partner, Lipton Rogers LLP
2006  Peter Calthorpe, founder and principal, Calthorpe Associates
2005  Albert B. Ratner, co-chairman emeritus, Forest City Enterprises
2004  Richard D. Baron, chairman and chief executive officer, McCormack Baron Salazar
2003  The late Vincent Scully, former architecture professor, Yale University
2002  Gerald D. Hines, founder and chairman, Hines
2001  The late Daniel Patrick Moynihan, U.S. senator (D-New York)
2000  Joseph P. Riley Jr., former mayor, Charleston, South Carolina
MICHAEL SPIES
Jury Chair
Senior Managing Director, Innovation; India and New Markets; Chair of Investment Committee
Tishman Speyer
New York, New York

Michael Spies joined Tishman Speyer in 1989 and led the establishment and growth of the company's European business before recently returning to New York. He leads new global innovation initiatives while supervising the Indian operations and early-stage efforts in new markets. He chairs the investment committee and serves on the firm’s management and compensation committees. Before joining Tishman Speyer, he was executive vice president of the Public Development Corporation, which was New York City’s lead economic development agency. Spies is a global governing trustee of the Urban Land Institute, and currently chairs the jury for awarding ULI’s highest honor, the Nichols Prize for Visionaries in Urban Development. He serves on the board of directors for TechnoServe, a global nonprofit organization reducing poverty in the developing world through support of economic development and entrepreneurship. He is a member of the Dean’s Council at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government and is past vice chair of the board of trustees of the American School in London, as well as past chair of the ULI European Charitable Trust. Spies graduated cum laude from Princeton University and from Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government with an MA in city and regional planning.

MAURICE COX
Director of Planning and Development
City of Detroit
Detroit, Michigan

Mayor Mike Duggan selected Maurice Cox from among several national finalists to reorganize and lead the city’s Planning Department in 2015. Cox, an urban designer, architecture educator, and former mayor of Charlottesville, Virginia, left a tenured position with Tulane University in New Orleans to accept the Detroit position. An outspoken advocate of neighborhood development, Cox told a Detroit audience at the Museum of Contemporary Art in early 2019 that he feels a responsibility “to ensure the Detroiters who stuck it out in the hard times now share in the city’s growing prosperity.” Cox has taught at Syracuse University, the University of Virginia, and the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. His experience merging architecture, politics, and design education led to his being named one of “20 Masters of Design” in 2004 by Fast Company business magazine. He was design director of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) from 2007 to 2010 (where he led the NEA’s Your Town Rural Institute), the Governor’s Institute on Community Design, and the Mayors’ Institute on City Design, and oversaw direct design grants to the design community across the United States. In 2013, Cox was named one of the Most Admired Design Educators in America in the annual ranking of Design Intelligence.
A. EUGENE KOHN
Founder and Chairman
Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates
New York, New York

A. Eugene (Gene) Kohn is the founder and chairman of Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates (KPF). In 1976, he cofounded KPF based on a commitment to design excellence, collaboration, and opportunities for young members of the firm to become future leaders. Kohn is respected worldwide for his 60-year-plus architecture career, inspirational leadership, and skill as an engaging public speaker. He is sought as a moderator, juror, and keynote speaker on contemporary architecture, having lectured at numerous universities and professional organizations. In addition to lecturing, Kohn has been teaching at the Harvard Business School for ten years on “The Value of Design” and at the Harvard Graduate School of Design for four years, plus at Columbia for four years. Kohn holds degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, where he received the Theophilus Parsons Chandler Architecture Fellowship, the PennDesign Dean's Medal of Achievement, and the Alumni Award of Merit—the highest university-wide award presented to alumni. He served in the U.S. Navy on active duty for three years and on reserve duty for five years, retiring as a lieutenant commander. His achievements have been recognized with numerous prestigious awards, including the National Building Museum Chairman’s Award, the Wharton Real Estate Center’s Lifetime Achievement Award, and the Ellis Island Medal of Honor. Kohn is a fellow of the American Institute of Architects and a member of several other national Institutes of Architects around the world. He has been a trustee for the University of Pennsylvania and a member of the Wharton Real Estate Center Advisory Board, currently serving as overseer for its School of Design. Kohn is also an emeritus trustee of the National Building Museum and the Urban Land Institute. Kohn is currently chairman of the board of Publicolor, a nonprofit youth development organization using design-based programs to engage at-risk students.

JODIE W. McLEAN
CEO
EDENS
Washington, D.C.

Jodie W. McLean is the chief executive officer of EDENS, one of the nation’s leading private owners, operators, and developers of retail real estate. With a tenure at EDENS exceeding 25 years, she has established herself as a key player in the company’s growth and expansion to its current marketplace leadership, capitalized by blue-chip investors and assets valued at $6.5 billion. McLean is responsible for the company’s strategy to move the portfolio to major urban centers, creating a portfolio of assets that are the center of community life. She was named chief investment officer in 1997, president in 2002, and chief executive officer in 2015. McLean has been responsible for the development, redevelopment, acquisition, and disposition of more than $12 billion in retail assets. She passionately believes that retail should evolve beyond a shopping experience, and advocates for connectivity to the communities surrounding the company’s retail centers. To ensure this, each EDENS development is crafted to serve as an authentic gathering place, including a unique merchandising mix and welcoming design elements, fostering a sense of engagement with its neighbors. A native of Chicago, McLean holds a BS in finance and management from the Moore School of Business, University of South Carolina, and a degree from South Carolina Honors College. She is a trustee and executive board member of the International Council of Shopping Centers and a trustee of Urban Land Institute. She serves on the boards of Cushman & Wakefield, the Real Estate Roundtable, Wofford College, and Extended Stay America, as well as the boards of several other institutions and charities. McLean is a member of the Liberty Fellowship (Aspen Institute) class of 2009.
Leslie Woo is chief development officer leading the transit-oriented development (TOD) program for Metrolinx and Infrastructure Ontario. The goal of the TOD program is to leverage Metrolinx transit land assets to increase transit ridership, improve the customer experience, and create more complete and connected communities. Metrolinx's over $50 billion transit expansion program and existing real estate portfolio are enabling extensive market-driven opportunities for transit stations that integrate multi-use development. In her 11-year-plus career at Metrolinx, Woo has led key strategic initiatives such as the regional transportation plans that led to major capital investment and the development of the transit business case methodology. She continues to be a champion for driving sustainability and supporting women's leadership. Before Metrolinx, Woo worked in the municipal, private, and not-for-profit sectors. She was the key author of the original Greater Golden Horseshoe Growth Plan (2006). Woo has received many accolades, including being named one of Bisnow's 2019 Toronto Power Women in Commercial Real Estate and one of Canada's Top 100 Most Powerful Women in 2017. Woo is a global governing trustee and member of the Americas Executive Committee with the Urban Land Institute, and a retired member of the Ontario Association of Architects. Awarded a fellowship with International Women's Forum, she is a director on the board of Women's College Hospital and of YMCA of Greater Toronto (2009–2017). Woo is the creator of the blog shebuildscities.org, celebrating women city builders around the world. She holds a bachelor of environmental studies, a bachelor of architecture, and a master of planning from the University of Waterloo. She is a recipient of the Renison University College Distinguished Alumna Award. Born in Trinidad, Woo is the mother of two thriving global citizens.
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ABOUT THE URBAN LAND INSTITUTE

The Urban Land Institute is a global, member-driven organization comprising more than 45,000 real estate and urban development professionals dedicated to advancing the Institute’s mission of providing leadership in the responsible use of land and creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide.

ULI’s interdisciplinary membership represents all aspects of the industry, including developers, property owners, investors, architects, urban planners, public officials, real estate brokers, appraisers, attorneys, engineers, financiers, and academics. Established in 1936, the Institute has a presence in the Americas, Europe, and Asia Pacific regions, with members in 81 countries.

The extraordinary impact that ULI makes on land use decision-making is based on its members sharing expertise on a variety of factors affecting the built environment, including urbanization, demographic and population changes, new economic drivers, technology advancements, and environmental concerns.

Peer-to-peer learning is achieved through the knowledge shared by members at thousands of convenings each year that reinforce ULI’s position as a global authority on land use and real estate. In 2018 alone, more than 2,200 events were held in about 330 cities around the world.

Drawing on the work of its members, the Institute recognizes and shares best practices in urban design and development and for the benefit of communities around the globe.

More information is available at uli.org. Follow ULI on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram.
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