

The Nakwon Principle

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In the district of Jongno in downtown Seoul, standing adjacent to Tapgol Park, the garlanded site at which in 1919 repressed stirrings for an independent modern Korea were first publicly expressed (and brutally suppressed), is a building as remarkable as it is inconspicuous: the Nakwon building.¹ Anonymous and unassuming, neither shinily new nor moulderingly old, from the middle distance the building seems to be just another ordinary boxy residential structure rising fifteen stories or so among the eclectic collage of the Jongno cityscape. On closer approach however, the first of its peculiarities becomes apparent: it appears not to touch the ground. The roads leading towards the building do not run past it, they rather are absorbed into it. Approaching cars and pedestrians enter a long, dark colonnaded undercroft, echoing with engines and tasting of exhaust, before encountering an intersection, complete with traffic lights, positioned directly where the base of the building should have been.

This buried intersection is merely the beginning of the architectural rabbit hole that the Nakwon encloses. The trafficked ground level is but one layer of its strata. Above your head, propped on innumerable columns, rises the bulk of Nakwon's many levels; furthermore the Nakwon is also there beneath your feet, burrowing down into the ground. An elevator lobby, incongruously positioned at the intersection, invites exploration. Press the up button, and you emerge into an seemingly endless emporium of musical instruments. Corridors stretch away into the distance, lined with glass fronted shops selling anything and everything musical: guitars, violins, drum-kits, clarinets, cellos, amplifiers, keyboards, accordions, even grand pianos. Snatched riffs and looping refrains lace the air. Ascending further, this extraordinary acoustic bazaar repeats itself over several more floors, before abruptly terminating in a courtyard-like roof terrace offering an arthouse cinema and an open-air astroturf auditorium for live music performance, above which rises another dozen floors or so of apartments – a world of bicycles, washing lines and pot-plants, occupied by a diverse population of Seoulites of all ages. Press the down button, and the elevator will plunge you into the aromatic dungeon of an underground wet market, selling pots and pans, dried fish and kimchee, noodles and shoes and cooking oil. Shopkeepers eye you warily while old men hunch unconcerned over bowls of rice. A gaggle of pianos crowd a forgotten corner, lost enroute from warehouse to shop floor above.

Like an urban black hole, invisible in itself, the Nakwon absorbs the energy and matter that surrounds it, compressing and recombining it into a new substance: an urban alloy, we might call "nakwonium".

This remarkable collection of people and things, activities and cultures, is enclosed within an

improbable formation of Seoul's built matter. Built in 1967 by a public agency at a time when the population of Seoul was expanding at an unprecedented pace, the Nakwon reveals a combination of economic rationality, opportunistic agility, and social possibility that sheds light on the potential of an architecture formed in the margins and interstices of the machinery of city building. In straightforwardly architectural terms, there is nothing of particular interest in the Nakwon building. But in its manifestation of a vivid and functioning urban assemblage, Nakwon invites us to consider the capacities and opportunities available to architectural intelligence operating within tight constraints but animated by visions of an enriched urban landscape.

The case of the Nakwon Building illuminates a number of aspects of the formation of the built environment in Seoul. It is an example of a contemporary urban vernacular that, while architecturally deracinated, is nonetheless redolent of the dense, vivid streets of the East Asian metropolises. A neutral container comes to be filled with extraordinary life, in the way that a rich ecology of sea creatures may colonise a discarded soup tin on the seafloor. Although an artificial entity, the tin will over time embed itself in the sand, orient itself to the tides and current, and sponsor an ecology of living creatures, seamlessly becoming a part of its natural environment.

In thinking about the architectural implications of this, it is useful to distinguish between three kinds of environmental indifference or "blankness" within the built environment: the *vernacular*; the *generic*; and the *neutral*. The vernacular is the habitual, pragmatic, unselfconscious response to needs and conditions with local labour and materials, resulting in buildings that, while individually distinct and even unique, are effectively indistinguishable from their context. It is characteristic of small-scale enterprises and traditional social patterns. This corresponds to the general run of buildings that might be found on a typical block chosen at random in downtown Seoul.²

The generic is the formulaic response to a need identified as belonging to particular type or category of problems, all of which can be addressed with a formula. It results from the conscious application of rationality to develop a general solution to a class of problems, which is then applied whenever the problem occurs. The formula itself may be carefully designed, but its instantiation in any specific site or situation is automatic and perfunctory. Suited to conditions of mass production and collective control, the generic is exemplified in the relentless repetition of high-rise apartment buildings that dominate the suburbs of Seoul.³

The neutral refers to a response to a site and need that avoids or refuses identification, classification, or a specific content – in other words, a stable meaning. Defined by Barthes as that which outplays or "baffles" the paradigm,⁴ it represents an approach to a problem that maximises options, minimising and delaying decisions that tie down, define and constrain. Often emerging in conditions of rapid change and uncertainty, the neutral implies flexibility and favours improvisation. Neutral forms are characterised by an openness to circumstance and contingency; are available for diverse inhabitations and inhabitations. For this reason, buildings in this category tend to consist of infrastructural grids arranged in irregular shapes

responding to the vagaries of site and opportunity. They are bare and unornamented, abstaining from acts of symbolic figuration, calmly absorbing and accommodating the life of the city, like blank paper receiving and sustaining the words of the novelist.

According to this schema, the Nakwon building constitutes an exemplar of the neutral. In its unfolding of this quality it illuminates a discussion of the FAR game that is being played by architects in the Korea's dense urban landscapes, and lends it a particular aspect relevant to a distinctively Korean character.

(Contextualise discussion with reference to study of Asian metropolitan vernaculars in Tokyo, etc. Specific references here include Atelier Bow-wow's reading of Tokyo's "B-grade" architecture in *Made in Tokyo* as a resource for architectural and urban invention; and Yasutaka Yoshimura's *Superlegal Buildings*.)

(Relate the FAR Game premise back to the discussion of neutrality in Nakwon.)

(Conclude with the suggestion of the specificity of this relation).

¹Jae-Young Lee, Ma-Rie Kim, and Chae-shin Yoon, "A Study on the Social Value accumulated in the Architectural Form

- In case of Nakwon Building," *Journal of the Korean Housing Association* 26(3), (2015): 55–64.

²Bart Reuser, *Seoulutions* (Amsterdam: NEXT architects, 2012).

³Park Cheol-soo, *Apartment* (Seoul: MATI, 2013)

⁴Roland Barthes, *The Neutral* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 6.