Here and Now Seoul:
Ten Memos for our Present Millennium

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In response to "The FAR Game: Constraints Sparking Creativity" theme for this year's Korean Pavilion at the XXX Venice Architectural Biennale, I wish to postulate a counter position on the topic. Urban density has two readings: 'objective' density in the form of data and numbers that quantifies how a city is populated compared to 'subjective' density vis-à-vis how we experience the life of the city. Seoul is relentlessly dense, not in the manner of other cities such as Hong Kong or Manhattan that have today become synonymous with the topic, but in a more heterotopic manner (1) where its density is derived from simultaneous conditions, juxtaposed regulations creating an overloaded networks of what the French philosopher Michel Foucault classifies as "otherness". This essay attempts to indirectly meander through these conditions, through this otherness, highlighting in the process instances where Seoul's dynamic footage is momentarily paused (just like in a YouTube clip) allowing us to observe this new urban density in quasi stop motion mode.

This short essay rather cheekily takes its inspiration from Italo Calvino's "Six memos for the next millennium" (2). Looking back at his work Calvino ponders about five elements (he died before the sixth was written) analyzing the qualities and particularities of his literature. In the same vain, I use this format to share with the reader certain particularities about Seoul, a city that I have come to respect and adore like no other.

Seoul is a series of conditions that coexist to form a city, where architecture surreptitiously becomes a by-product of these conditions. To understand Seoul's architecture, one has to first recognize these conditions; alarmingly hardly any critical texts exist that addresses Seoul's present state. Current readings often fall prey to conventional urban preconceptions, typically western texts that avoid the 'real', i.e. the everyday city. Such bias and status-quo readings can be challenged and destabilized, opening a cultural discourse that superimposes traditional with the contemporary, generating in the process an interpretation that marks Seoul as a unique urban paradigm.

There is no substitute for the "here and now", according to the contemporary Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei (3), who maintains that the 'Here and Now' is the most important element in every kind of art, architecture and design. In this manner the particulars of Seoul define how it operates, how its citizens live and exist within; particulars allow us to articulate the notion of Seoul away from a 'common noun' analysis towards a 'proper noun' study. Seoul's specifics are the basis of my thesis, which revolves around exposing specific situations that are often forgotten, omitted and avoided yet deserve to be respected.

"In architectural terms, architects are right now looking for a pretext as to why certain things cannot happen and are extremely blocked in terms of discovering potential in existing conditions." (4) Inspired by Koolhass' observations, I propose to examine ten typical conditions of Seoul; conditions that are no longer under the control of architects, urbanists and planners, but governed by multiple coexisting agents. 'Here and Now Seoul' seeks to

make sense of the metropolis not through abstract postulations but by focusing on the present reality of the city, the actual urban every day that stares at us in the face, our urban presence.

Golf

Mention golf and immediately we conjure up an image of a serene outdoor environment, players leisurely strolling the fairways amidst an idyllic natural setting of grass meadows and picturesque lakes: an image far removed from the hectic urban man-made environment that the urban settler so commonly seeks to escape. Golf in Seoul does not follow these preconceptions; on the contrary golf in Seoul is very much an urban event where artificial fairways hover precariously above buildings, where the common backdrop of deciduous and evergreen trees is replaced by the chaos of generic city fabric. Everything about "urban golf" is artificial: from the incandescent green AstroTurf to the polyester green protective netting, all elements of physicality have been manipulated to the extent that even distance, a parameter one would imagine as being sacrosanct and exempt from modification, has been domesticated into a virtual distance, where players literally hit a ball onto a screen, a plastic coated curtain, no more than 5 meters away to simulate a 250 yard fairway drive.

Churches

At first sight Seoul churches might recall a post-modern pastiche but on closer inspection they reveal a highly complex and articulated hybrid typology. According to various search engines, Seoul has more than 48,000 churches; it is simply impossible to navigate the city without encountering a church. Then you have the scale, literally from macro to micro with every possible in-between permutation. All these characteristics barely scratch the surface of the real complexities behind Seoul churches, which can only be understood through a direct example. The Bell Tower: the ubiquitous symbol of any self-respecting church, which over the centuries has acted as both a landmark and performed the key function of announcing the commencement of service proceedings. In Seoul, bells have long stopped ringing, leaving the towers prone to potentially becoming a redundant symbolic gesture. Rather than accept this superfluous predicament, the Seoul church reinvents the tower as a vertical car-park, an ingenious solution to stack cars and at the same time keep traditional memories alive.

Apartments

Apartments never work alone; they work in formations composing clusters much like coral colonies on the seabed. One perceives that their design follows a series of strict parameters, yet there is an underlying tone of Orwellian control. Invariably they are surrounded by ample public space, but on closer inspection one can recognize an eerie *Truman Show* shell hovering above. Repetition generates a form of ubiquitous urbanity, a form of camouflage by numbers, where the notion of dwelling becomes an undistinguished occurrence; endless apartment blocks colliding to create a sense of anonymous dwelling. For centuries traditional Korean architecture developed in close relation to the both the topography of the land and the climate of the region. Seoul's apartment generated context has condensed the whole development of a city (Gangnam) into 50 years of unadulterated development, a physical representation of Korea's meteoric economic rise from a developing nation to a top-

ten world economy. Apartments represent commodity, their design follows the convenience of the resident (customer) marginalizing the wider notion of community.

Modern Archaeology
Acknowledging the past, especially discussing past architecture is not an exercise in nostalgia but a way to seek a cultural continuity. There is no other building in Seoul that embodies the plight of Modern Architecture more than Sewoon Sangga; a unique building which has become an urban fossil in its present life. Sewoon Sangga is not a conventional building but closer to a form of micro urbanism which via a flexible array of overlapping structural grids (reinforced concrete frame) creates matrix of possibilities. Seen from this perspective, form and the building's appearance become secondary and redundant compared to its articulated programme layout. Sewoon Sangga is the materialization of an urban section; where road, circulation, building services, public domain and commercial space merge into a cohesive complex. Sewoon Sangga stands as the antithesis to much of the present polymorphous architecture currently being developed in Seoul and around the globe, where its structural neutrality, rather than flamboyant formalism, has developed into its most significant urban asset; it has become a programmatic chameleon able to blend and change its architectural chromosomes to suit any possible function.

Plastic Architecture
Lightweight structures, undetectable using conventional architectural radars, have developed in symbiosis with the topography of the land, managing to convert urban residual spaces into an important, somehow forgotten, architectural typology. The formalism of the greenhouses is rooted into the topography of the land and their settlements possess an intricate complexity. They represent a typology of building, based on a fixed structural and material methods, which allow numerous functions and forms of architecture to develop being extremely malleable to both programme and site. Plastic architecture is invisible, not to the human eye, but invisible to human consciousness. Both their physiognomy and temporal state equate in our minds to an immaterial architecture. Yet, the galvanized steel frame and multipurpose polyethylene sheeting are very "real" materials. Greenhouses were elaborated to turn in-arable land into arable land. By trapping solar radiation they enabled plants to grow all year round, protecting the crops from both weather and animals. They house vegetables, flowers, fruits and often employ sophisticated hydroponic growing systems. Such mundane architecture is often transformed in Seoul into various diverse scenarios, ranging from the benign family house conversions to the more sinister dog kennels.

Wedding Halls
Nuptial vows are big business in Seoul, a business that over the years has developed into a specific industry with its own architectural language. Marriage is not only a social institution but also an enterprise that has an impact on the city. It is typical to find several large halls inside one Wedding Hall, in the manner of a Russian matryoshka doll; each hall representing a different style: Hellenic for a more conservative couple, Modern for the contemporary twosome and Fantasy for all the dreamers out there. Each comes with their associated studios, specific interiors and respective colour pallets, bouquet arrangements, sound tracks, aromas, materials, lighting atmospheres, menus and seating layouts. Seoul's wedding halls today are saturated in multiple layers of fantasy and opulence, to the extent that the Bavarian castle typology, Neuschwanstein Castle being the preferred type, has become a

common occurrence within the city. The idea that the beginning of a new life is associated with a Cinderella fairytale image has given rise to a Las Vegas form of architecture the city had never witnessed before.

Universities
The advent of modernization brought education on an unprecedented scale to Seoul. For a landlocked country with little raw materials, Korea's investment in education has been their key to its vertiginous economic growth. At the top tier of the educational ladder lies the institution of the University, the bare minimum qualification required for any self-respecting job in Korea. Higher education is a competitive business in Seoul, with more than 70 institutions scattered around the metropolis, universities come in all shapes and forms. University buildings in Seoul are never subtle; knowledge has to manifest itself in bold and uncompromising ways and most importantly each establishment has to generate its own (unique) identity, usually in the form of an architectural order or style. The use of architectural styles has become unapologetically fashionable: a lexicon to express an ideal, a mixture between a metaphor for an ideal society and a symbol of divine truth. Fortunately visions are rarely implemented without impurities; hence an interesting array of inconsistencies gives rise to bizarre juxtapositions that never cease to amaze.

Anonymous Architecture
The majority of Seoul is made up of nondescript moments, buildings, places and instances with no special value or merit, a form of urban flotsam, rarely given any consideration. The architect's hand is nowhere to be seen yet the buildings possess their own character, similar to a human face where the layers of existence are directly manifest on the surface: worn, torn and generally worse for wear. Anonymous architecture embodies Seoul's élan, i.e. adapt to survive. Buildings constantly convert and adjust to remain relevant with little attention given to the overall image of the city or to any idea of compatibility with their adjacent neighbours. It is within this vague territory, where the majority of the population of Seoul actually lives, that 'Anonymous Architecture' is quietly assembled. Buildings are converted, transformed and manipulated in every possible manner: balconies become part of the living room, staircases act as outdoor pantries, garages metamorphose into penthouses, roof terraces double-up as allotments and the list goes on.

Artificial Traditional
Traditional Korean architecture is a beautiful paradox between natural and artificial space. Rather than design the positive space you dwell in, so common in western architecture, it is the absence of space that is sculpted and obsessively choreographed to create a series of compressions that leaves you in a constant state of transition. As with most aspects of Korean culture nothing is done aggressively or confrontationally, yet the degree to which we are being manipulated by the land, the buildings and ultimately the space cannot be underestimated. Today traditional architecture in Seoul is still alive; however it appears in other vestiges and is commonly housed in restaurants or as a cladding to a car park, rather than in romantic natural settings. Buildings that appear ancient and rooted to the land are in actual fact no older than five years, consigning the role of the tradition to a form of residual maquillage.

Urban Tattoos
Buildings in Seoul don't have facades; they have screens, surfaces that are at the mercy of signage. Signage, be it commercial, institutional, personal or any other form spreads like weed, aggressively colonizing its host and until ultimately mutating the original species. Like human tattoos, urban tattoos penetrate the skin, but differ in the fact that their message

isn't simply aesthetical, symbolic or depictive. Urban tattoos manifest the building's inner organs, acting as a programmatic x-ray, a form of legal consumer graffiti that allows customers to mentally penetrate the building. The sheer excess of the urban tattoos eventually consumes the buildings, the visual statement being so loud that buildings literally disappear. The city becomes hypnotized by signage into a persistent state of déjà-vu and in the process disables most human orientation faculties. Urban tattoos possess a collective, nearly primitive, aesthetical quality that most cities want to neutralize. Taken singularly they are common and redundant signs, but as a united front they become the foreground of the city.

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1_Foucault, M. "Of other spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" (From: Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité, October, 1984; "Des Espace Autres," March 1967 Translated from the French by Jay Miskowiec)

2_Calvino, I. "Six memos for the next millennium". (Cambridge - Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1988).

3_Ai, W. "Spatial Matters: Art, Architecture and Activism". (London, Tate Publishing, 2014).

4_Koolhass, R. "Conversation with Students" (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1996).