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 gleamingly 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.

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, programmatic opportunism, and social possibility that offers a window on the potential of an architecture formed in the interstices of building classifications and processes of city-making. The cultures that congealed around the building became an essential incubator of Korean pop music, which in its contemporary manifestation as K-Pop has now perhaps become "South Korea's greatest export."[2] In conventional architectural terms, there is nothing of particular interest in the building. But like an urban black hole, invisible in itself, the Nakwon absorbs the energy and content of the city that surrounds it, compressing and recombining it into a potent new substance – an urban alloy we might call "nakwonium".

The case of the Nakwon Building offers an example of a contemporary urban vernacular that, while architecturally deracinated, is nonetheless a compelling transposition into a stacked configuration of the dense, vivid streets that fill the urban cores of 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 its manifestation of a built element enmeshed in the broader urban ecology, Nakwon invites us to consider the opportunities and strategies available to architectural intelligence operating within tight constraints but in pursuit of a stimulating and distinctive urban 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.[3]

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.[4]

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,[5] it represents an approach to a problem that maximises options, minimising and delaying decisions that 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 occupations 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 a prime exemplar of the neutral. A hybrid conjunction of automotive infrastructure, shopping mall, entertainment venue, apartment tower, and subterranean market, Nakwon refuses to conform to the building types and functional categories – the "paradigm" in Barthes' terminology – usually employed in producing and interpreting the built environment. Its symbolic invisibility makes no claims or reproaches upon its surroundings; it defers all expectations of its contents. Its robust concrete frame facilitates all manner of occupations that may play out over the building's lifespan. In its unfolding of its "neutrality principle", it illuminates a discussion of the FAR game played by architects operating in the Korea's dense urban territories, potentially offering a fruitful strategy to evade the dilemmas of this situation.

A number of influential studies appearing this century have recognised the neutral as a resource in interpreting the landscapes of East Asian market-based urbanisms. The most sustained and influential among them have been the various studies of Tokyo's urban landscape conducted by students and researchers at Professor Yoshiharu Tsukamoto's lab at the Tokyo Institute of Technology, who have elaborated a rich and intricate territory of built forms, hybrid programs, complex behaviours, and inventive propositions that are grounded in a focus on the everyday and contingent phenomena of the metropolis. The most celebrated of these studies, *Made in Tokyo*, presents itself as a guidebook to a collection of "nameless and strange" buildings erected as pragmatic, economically efficient responses to immediate imperatives of need and constraint, resulting in constructions "without a speck of fat."[6] Furthermore, urban density and commercial pressure generates unforeseen opportunities for unusual conjunctions of program emerging as a byproduct of the building's primary purpose, such as a driving school atop a supermarket roof, or an expressway that doubles as a department store. Tsukamoto's hypothesis is that the formal characteristics of such buildings, and the programs and uses that they support, offer a clearer lens with which to resolve the specific patterns and qualities of the city they occupy than the "A-grade" works of self-conscious architects.

Bearing the same spirit of urban exploration in search of the strange amidst the ordinary, but with an intent more explanatory than interpretive, the Tokyo-based architect Yasutaka Yoshimura has documented the impact of building and planning codes upon the forms of buildings, graphically tracing the hidden legal determinants of the envelopes and constraints that shape the everyday built environment of the metropolis.[7] These rules, seemingly rational in their formulation and impartial in their application, can generate extraordinarily aberrant constructions. For example, one provision of the law governing solar access limits the duration that neighbouring properties can be shadowed. Since shadows cast from higher points move faster across the ground than those cast from points lower down, in conditions of high density and inflated land values the law can sometimes impel the allocation of more built volume at greater heights, resulting in top-heavy and structurally audacious cantilevering constructions.

The insight that these various documentations of Tokyo reveal is that the diversity, flexibility, and surprise of its built environment emerges precisely as a result of the blind, impartial operation of legal constraints and economic logics, regardless of the presence or otherwise of conscious architectural intention. Complexity and vitality are born from simple means, apprehended via a neutral perspective that flattens distinctions between "high" architecture and ordinary buildings. The promulgation of this perspective has stimulated the development of a set of positions in the local architectural discourse that is deeply cognisant of, and responsive to, the characteristics of Tokyo, exemplified by the work of Atelier Bow-wow, the practice that Tsukamoto runs with his partner Momoyo Kaijima.

Seoul is a very different metropolis from Tokyo, but the salient characteristics of density, scale, rapid building turnover, concentrated functional mixes and commercial pressures found in Tokyo apply here with even greater force.[8] In this context, in order to survive, architects are compelled to navigate the narrow straights between the Scylla of the property market and the Charybdis of the building law. This wedge of opportunity, while narrow, has nonetheless afforded Korean architects a sliver of freedom within which to present a diverse range of architectural concerns and strategies. The public realm of the street may be inveigled into the planning envelope through pathways and apertures carved into its volume, such as Archium's Persona building or Bang by Min's Interrobang building. Materials may be deployed to articulate the patterning of the building's interior organisation on its skin, such as Boundless' Tetris House, or conversely to imprint, chameleon-like, the textures drawn from the surroundings onto its epidermis, as with L'Eau Design's Tropism of Wild Flower building. Smaller units may be artfully aggregated within the bounds imposed by the constraints, such as UTAA's Sugar Lump House or Poly.m.ur's Eleven Hills, using repetition to bring a modicum of rhythm and order into the jumbled cityscape. In these varied responses, architects conduct specific forays into the realms of program, morphology, tectonics, and ornament, collectively developing a repertoire of tactics to deploy at the frontline of architectural engagement with Seoul's market-driven metropolitan condition.

Can we detect the outlines of a specifically Korean approach in the sum of these responses? My sense is that while each is a thoughtful response to a given situation, they currently remain a collection of idiolects each straining to be heard and understood amid the general din of the metropolis. Each aims to say something or show something about Seoul or about architecture in general, but in a private language. The internal compulsion toward individualistic expression in architecture, although personally satisfying, may ultimately be even more disempowering than the externally imposed cage of market imperatives and building regulations.

In transcending the dilemmas of this situation, (to outplay this paradigm), I suggest that it is the principle of the neutral, embodied by the Nakwon building, that offers a promising path forward, one that evades both the nostalgia of the vernacular and the automatism of the generic, suggesting an approach towards developing an architectural language engaging directly with Seoul's urban environment and its complex ecologies. The task requires shedding architecture's aesthetic and social elitism, recapturing its curiosity and its openness to the life and contingency of the metropolis. If successful however, it would represent the ultimate victory in the FAR game: an apparent capitulation, but one that in a Trojan Horse manoeuvre ultimately implants an architecture that both not only expresses the city, but embodies it. An architecture that says, shows, and truly is, Seoul.

(2131 words)

Photo File List - included with submission

Nakwon01_WORRALL_lores.JPG

Nakwon02_WORRALL_lores.JPG

Nakwon03_WORRALL_lores.JPG

Nakwon04_WORRALL_lores.JPG

Nakwon05_WORRALL_lores.JPG

Nakwon06_WORRALL_lores.JPG

Nakwon07_WORRALL_lores.JPG

Nakwon08_WORRALL_lores.JPG

Nakwon09_WORRALL_lores.JPG

Nakwon10_WORRALL_lores.JPG

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Australian architect, scholar and critic; currently Associate Professor of Architecture and Urban Design at the University of Adelaide. His work, pursued through a mix of scholarly research, critical writing, and design practice, is broadly concerned with the construction of alternative modernities, particularly as seen through the lens of the East Asian metropolis. Widely published and translated, he has contributed to major institutions of architectural culture and education globally, including OMA Rotterdam; V&A Museum London; MAK Vienna; Strelka Institute Moscow; University of Tokyo; Venice Architecture Biennale; and MoMA New York. He resides in Adelaide and Tokyo.
(96 words)

Endnotes

[1] Jae-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.

[2] Krista Mahr, ”South Korea’s Greatest Export: How K-Pop’s Rocking the World,” *Time*, March 7, 2012. Accessed April 7, 2016.

[3] Bart Reuser, *Seoulutions* (Amsterdam: NEXT architects, 2012).

[4] Park Cheol-soo, *Apartment* (Seoul: MATI, 2013)

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

[6] Momoyo Kaijima, Junzo Kuroda, Yoshiharu Tsukamoto. *Made in Tokyo.* (Tokyo: Kajima Publishing, 2001), 9-12.

[7] Yasutaka Yoshimura, *Super Legal Buildings* (Tokyo: Shokokusha, 2006).

[8] Sung Hong Kim, “Megacity Network,” in *Contemporary Korean Architecture: Megacity Network*, eds. Kim Sung Hong and Peter Schmal. (Berlin: Jovis, 2007), 43-59.