The FAR game and the culture of density in the Republic of Korea.

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The most fundamental statement made by the Korean Pavilion at the 2016 Biennale is that the fronts of architecture that we need to attend today are not only those at the edges of cities, societies, cultures and economies, but also those at their very center. The focus is upon mid-sized buildings in the heart of Seoul and other major Korean cities designed to serve mostly private real estate development interests. The main question asked is how architects respond to regulatory constraints, particularly those that govern the density of occupation of the ground and the density of built volumes in urban areas. Architects are placed under pressure to design buildings as large as allowed by the regulations and to provide the maximum rentable area and the greatest commercial value. The visitor is led to see how they also strive to enhance the quality of space, the quality of life of building occupants, and the environmental performance of buildings. The designs on display offer a greater sense of spaciousness by taking advantage of all regulatory allowances for balcony spaces, open spaces, attics or spaces accessible to the public.

In the exhibition, the primary story is placed against a rich description of background. First, population growth, income growth, and increases in land value are shown to propel increases in urban density – increases in both built area and in population per land area. Second, the growing preference for multifamily homes (While the high-rise apartment is still the most preferable residential type, the lower middle classes do not have many choices except multifamily houses), usually with commercial premises on the lower floors, accounts for the typological focus of much architectural ingenuity. Third, the creative efforts of architects are shown to resonate with the vernacular efforts to maximize usable space, often by building additions and modifications.

Two lessons are suggested. The first is in tune with the traditional understanding of professional responsibility: the architect adds value by serving not only the needs of the client but also the needs of building occupants and the needs of the public as far as the interface of private premises to public space is concerned. The second lesson is that design intelligence can turn constraints into a source of individual and collective creativity, thus leading to distinctive architectural qualities that transcend stylistic diversity. As an example I would mention the creation of street facades that are animated by movement, the provision of cross-views that provide visual release, and the creation of interlocking volumes that provide richness to the everyday experience of habitation. In short, architecture is necessary and possible even at the face of major impersonal forces and crushing pressures arising from market economics.

A larger context is brought to relief by the essays included in the exhibition catalogue. This bears on the ambient spatial culture expressed in the structure of street networks, the disposition and connectivity of major arteries, local main streets and secondary streets; in the admixture of development densities within local areas; in the economic considerations that frame the creation of architecturally more ambitions building envelops; in the conditions that arise at the interface between architecture and urbanism in various locations in Seoul. Density is typically measured by population per land area or by aggregate building area by land area; the reader of the catalogue is likely to comprehend that density functions according to the physical structure of space whose subtle properties are not

captured by the usual numerical indexes. The same population density or building density can have different functional, cognitive and affective consequences depending on the syntax of the street network, on urban design and on the accretion and superimposition of building designs over time. By extension, the Korean Pavilion challenges us to ask how spatial culture, embedded in and arising from the evolution of the urban fabric and the efforts of architects, contributes to culture at large. The question that we are led to reflect upon is not density in the abstract, but density as articulated and as tuned by the particular sensitivities of a culture, traditional or emerging, authored or anonymous, 'high' or 'popular'. What are the relationships between the vitality of Korean cities and the vitality of Korean culture? The Korean Pavilion invites us to engage this question, it does not purport to close it. And this is how it should be.

This brings me to a related issue which is touched only by implication, rather than directly. How should we evaluate the regulations themselves in the light of a study of their implementation? The exhibition foregrounds what regulations can allow. Surely, a second pass through the record of architectural experimentation and innovation might also help clarify what desirable options regulations might disallow. The next question to ask is whether regulations, which are put in place to safeguard or promote public interests and collective benefits, work as intended. In the light of what they permit as well as what they disallow, should regulations be continued as they are or should they be modified? How can architects and urban designers reflect on regulations as a project whose output is not a particular building or place, but a framework for the design of buildings and places with desirable properties and effects?

At a time when we have increasingly sophisticated theories and digital tools for the study of the generators and constraints on built form we can model the ranges of design possibility framed by alternative regulatory parameters more effectively. The systematic evaluation of regulations according to what they make possible or impossible in the light of parametric models of built form is a project of great value. It addresses the interface between two facets of architectural and planning creativity: first, design and planning creativity exercised in a particular place for a particular client; and second, design and planning creativity engaged in the clarification of strategic design choices, the public or collective interests associated with such choices, and the creation of regulatory frameworks that promote desirable paths of evolution. The two design projects, designing regulatory frameworks and designing particular buildings and places are equally essential to sustaining urban social vitality, culture and economy.

To recognize this, is to revive interest in the programmatic agendas of architecture. True, the general societal aims that suggest themselves today are commonplace. First, to address, in our cities, the social inequity that is continuously produced by the internal dynamics of economies and societies as well as by the geo-political dynamics between economies and societies? (Is this an interrogative sentence?) Second, to address the environmental problems that are caused by our technological civilization given the present urgency of managing and reversing man-induced climate change. (Is this a complete sentence? Or just a phrase?) Our responsibility, however, is to interpret these aims in precise ways and to engage in focused, concerted and deliberate efforts so that we can continuously assess what works and what does not work and continuously redefine what is better rather than merely strive for something different.

From this point of view, the Korean Pavilion documents a sense of renewed alertness and empowerment but not an equally clear sense of future direction. As noted earlier, particular modes of architectural practice, exemplified by specific projects, are set against the background of clearly described and quantified forces. This sets the Korean pavilion in the tradition inaugurated ten years ago by the 2006 Biennale curated by Ricky Burdett. There, for the first time at such a grand scale since the 1960s, architects were asked to confront a statistical account of the forces and problems which form the context of designing cities, or designing in cities. Since then, the information technologies industry has sought to persuade us that new and more deliberate modes of practice are possible, based on the increased availability of up to date 'big data', that can capture the statistical regularities of behavior at any chosen scale from populations, through organizations, localities or groups, to individuals (baring the critical question of privacy). However, an awareness of quantities and quantitative relationships can only serve as the background and testbed for posing questions, formulating intensions and proposing strategies. The richer the data the more pressing the need for clarity of thought and aim.

The Korean pavilion clearly calls attention this front also, and invites us to imagine ways forward. Given that the issues raised are not likely to go away, one hopes that the discussion will continue and that advances will become evident. As an outsider I continue to be inspired by the condition that I describe in my own contribution to the catalogue: Korean urbanism, as exemplified in Gangnam, is characterized by an ability to bring together, in many localities, many different scales or urban experience, urban connectivity, and architecture. The plurality of scales results from, and in turns helps sustain a plurality of urban actors (investors, organizations, individuals). In turn, this keeps open the promise of a dense pluralist urban culture which I see as a value in its own right but also as a fundamental prerequisite to a sustainable society and economy. The thirty six projects showcased at the exhibition also represent, in my mind, such rich pluralism. They suggest that underneath the FAR game and underneath the design creativity exhibited by architects seeking to create a greater sense of spaciousness within density, we can discern the exciting vitality of a contemporary culture that defines itself in increasingly evident ways.