

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

John Peponis

My involvement with the Korean Pavilion for the 2016 Venice Biennale follows from my collaboration, over many years, with Professor Kim Sung Hong who was a leading member of my research team when he studied towards the doctoral thesis that he submitted to the Georgia Institute of Technology in 1995. In the last ten years our discussions were mostly about urban morphology and urban life, given his studies of Seoul, the history of its planning, its growth, and its architecture. Thus, when he invited me to work with his team as councilor, after his appointment as curator for the Korean Pavilion, I felt that this unique honor was also an opportunity to bring into focus many years of dialogue. The theme of the pavilion was already set: 'the FAR game'.

In December 2015 Professor Kim spent a few days in Athens, Greece, to discuss the pavilion agenda in some detail. Conversations addressed the relationship between the 'FAR game' and the larger issues associated with the culture and the socio-economic dynamics of Korean cities as they become increasingly dense. Two requirements were crystallized: first, the necessity to come up with a subtitle that places the emphasis on architectural creativity, given regulatory restrictions and real estate development pressures; second, the importance of inviting essays and commissioning complementary exhibits that would address the larger culture of density from various perspectives. The aim was to embrace, as much as possible, the whole triangle of relationships between architecture, culture, and development dynamics. As the aims of the pavilion became increasingly clear, with continuous inputs from the curatorial team in Seoul, so our attention shifted to the issues that had to be addressed by the design of the exhibition. The two aims we most discussed were linked to the extremities of the span of anticipated visitor attention. First, the curatorial team had to ensure that a visitor who only stays in the pavilion for a very brief period of time, perhaps no more than a minute or two, should get a clear primary message. Second, the curatorial team had to embrace the difficult task of finding a common diagrammatic and quantitative language for the description of all 36 buildings at the core of the exhibition. The first aim would be satisfied by juxtaposing, for every site, the 3d models of the theoretical solid allowed by zoning and regulation law to 3d models of the final architecture of buildings. The second aim, finding a common language, was fundamental not merely to the clarity and visual integrity of the exhibition but also to the more reflective task of identifying important similarities and differences between buildings, over and above the design idioms of individual architects. This was a research task: the comparative language was a precondition for the exploration of different typological themes. After much subsequent work, the 36 buildings could be systematically arranged in the abstract design space defined by planimetric, sectional and volumetric design strategies deployed by architects.

After December 2015 my communications with the curatorial team addressed specific questions, helping to make sure that the chain of decisions enhanced the programmatic agenda. On visiting the pavilion, in May 2016, I had to make an effort to convince myself that the extraordinary work on display, intellectually systematic and visually consistent, had been completed in the short time of only a few months. While I had been afforded a privileged overview, I had clearly missed a tightly organized process of collective creativity, a series of discoveries along the way, the excitement of turning a focused agenda into rich content. Below are my thoughts on the achievements of the curatorial team and the issues that they invite the international community to reflect upon.

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 coverage 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 predominance of multifamily houses, usually with commercial premises on the lower floors, accounts for the typological focus of much architectural ingenuity – high rise apartments are still the residential type of choice but they are not affordable for all. 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 everyday 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 ambitious building envelopes; 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 per 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. This is how it should be.

This brings me to a related issue which is touched only by implication. 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 or what less desirable outcomes they still fail to exclude. The question to ask is whether regulations, which are put in place to safeguard or promote public interests and collective benefits, work as intended. 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 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, we must 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. Second we must address the environmental problems that are caused by our technological civilization given the present urgency of managing and reversing man-induced climate change. 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 Burdett. There, for the first time at such a grand scale since the 1960s, architects confronted a statistical account of the forces and problems which form the context of designing cities, or designing in cities. Today, the information technologies industry seeks to persuade us that new and more deliberate modes of practice are possible, based upon 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 (barring 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 and integrity of thought and aim.

The Korean pavilion calls attention to this front also, and invites us to formulate 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 am 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 turn helps sustain a plurality of urban actors (investors, organizations, individuals). 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 working to provide a sense of spaciousness within density, we can discern the vitality of a contemporary culture that asserts itself in increasingly powerful ways.