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High Flown Architecture and Ascendancy of the Building

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Abstract

High-rise office towers recently erected in central Seoul have much changed the city's inner skyline which was often criticized for its monotonous grey concrete blocks. Sculptural buildings such as SK Telecom Headquarters (2004) and Jongro Tower (2000) are designed by world famous architects and the buildings' appearances make the city much more vibrant and richer. Similar fashion occurred in Kangnam (southern part of Seoul) residential areas with the erection of extravagant high-rise apartment buildings epitomized by the 69 story Tower Palace III (2004). These two occurrences however differ in their social commitment and associated impacts. Whilst the office towers generally received favorable comments from the public, high rise residential buildings in Kangnam area raised an issue of social disengagement and discontentment. Cultural discontinuity is another aspect of the high-rise residential buildings. This paper intends to assert, from particular frame of reference in architectural history and theory, that more careful building strategies are needed for a better balanced development in future, as we learn an important social implication from the recent high-rise building projects in Seoul. High-rise buildings in Seoul reflect multiplicity of attitudes and values of an ever-changing urbanity, but current changes in the built environment are not only against the traditional aesthetics and building practice, but are also in lack of timely response to a better balanced development.

Keywords: high-rise buildings, social impact, cultural discontinuity, social disintegration, balanced development

1. Introduction: High-Flown vs High-rise

In the last ten years, Seoul has witnessed an overwhelming amount of high rise building projects that included up-to-date technology and new material for the industry, and fine images for the public. For commercial buildings, architect's reputation became an important element for the clients in considering building proposals. Public recognition of the corporate identity through building design is now considered a mirror of the firm's success, and also functions to promote corporate brand values. High flown architects somewhat helped to build better corporate images in this context and a reverse order would also take place. Social and cultural prospects, such as environment, ecology and community alike, became major considerations for the architects. Vortex of the building forms no longer projects whims and/or wishes of an individual architect, nor was it considered a formal excess against Modernism's

hangover, but a fine expression of corporate identity and societal commitment. Jongro Tower (2000), by Raphael Vinoly, and SK Telecom Headquarters (2004), by Rem Koolhaas and OMA Asia, in central Seoul are good examples of such kinds. (Figs. 1, 2)



Fig. 1. Jongro Tower (2000)



Fig. 2. SK Telecom Headquarter (2004)

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For residential buildings, in the mean while, no debate could have taken place without reference to ascendancy as it symbolically reflects descent social status of the residents. In their appearances, apartment buildings now show much refined images, compared

to what they used to be, and such improvement naturally lead to judge building quality by design originality and creativity. (Figs. 3, 4, 5)



Fig. 3. Tower Palace I / Seoul



Fig. 4. Tower Palace III / Seoul



Fig. 5. Typical Apartments in Seoul

However, there exists another layer. What shadows behind this fashion is a sheer commercialism that can take best advantage of imagery well-being in the tall buildings, and a strategy to reward the largest profit for the investment. Especially for those high-rise residential buildings, the city of Seoul and neighboring municipalities saw a steep rise of its market value which is in many ways deliberately manipulated. Enormous amount of property premiums sky-rocketed immediately after the lot distribution, and subsequently caused a serious imbalance in economic justice. General public responded to such phenomenon in the forms of either speculation or desperation of which neither response could be an appropriate answer for the current dilemma of social disintegration. From the perspective of traditional aesthetics, high rise buildings are largely avoided for aesthetic reasons, and this has long been a common norm in Far Eastern countries. The biggest problem arose from this phenomenon is that developers pay a little consideration for cultural and ethical dimensions in building practice. Its results turned up most recently in the heart of Kangnam area in Seoul in the most frustrated and embarrassing manner that we will shortly examine.

2. Traditional Aesthetics on Ascendancy

Traditionally, tall buildings were not built in Korea unless there is a call for exceptional needs. Imperial and religious structures were such exceptional instances, but only several stories. Wooden structure was partly responsible for low-rise building practice. Tall dwelling buildings were hardly built throughout Korean history. (Figs. 6, 7)

The vast majority of rural tabernacles are single story structures with modest materials and limited plastic expression. Behind such practice is a geomancy that has long been an omnipotent guidance for design and building affairs. For Koreans, geomancy has long been an importance vehicle for dwelling design and construction, and has hindered tall buildings to be considered from construction.



Fig. 6. Kwanghwamun / Kyungbok Palace, Seoul



Fig. 7. Traditional Korean Dwellings in Jongro Area, Seoul
Behind low-rise Korean dwellings shows SK Telecom's Headquarter (Blue glass tower in center)

Traditional dwelling houses in Korea manifest ancient cosmology as well as its associated aesthetics. The ancient cosmology that is incorporated in the Korean houses dates back to remote past. Immensely influenced by Chinese natural philosophy that developed in the early fifth century BCE, Korean houses show morphological consistency along with many other Asian houses such as Chinese Ssuhu yuan.

Korean geomancy (or *feng shui* in Chinese Mandarin) can be largely defined as a mélange of art and science which governs design issues of architecture and planning embracing wide range of disciplines of human interest. It manifests a unique organisation of world congruent with various

phenomena in its own right. The theoretical foundation of Korean geomancy lies in the theories of chi, yin/yang and five elements found in the ancient Chinese classic *I-Ching* or the Book of Changes. Chi is a vital cosmic current which runs the universe. Yin/yang theory claims that all phenomena in the universe are the result of endless interaction between the two opposing natures of yin and yang. The concepts of yin and yang are further related to five elements, i.e., water, fire, wood, metal and earth. A set of five elements works as a classification system. In short, the principal concept of geomancy is how to order an omnipotent cosmic current in harmony, which allegedly brings human well being, in close association with ancient symbolism. Korean peninsula is often characterized for her steep and tough mountainous topography (yang element), and this caused man's habitation mostly built low and flat (yin element). Along with geomantic aesthetics, what people care most in Korean houses was the way in which people interact with the building and nature. House is the very place where man is born, raised and eventually return for its eternity. Hence what building matters to man is the way in which people communicate with one's earliest and latest memories. In this context, height and acreage of the buildings were not important matters, but formed part of large goal in human prosperity and happiness.¹

3. Ascendancy of Contemporary Residential Buildings

Verticality of the building ensured by the polarity of cellar and attic, as the philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) once elegantly suggested, can not be easily transformed into the top floor penthouse and the basement garage in high rise apartment buildings. (Fig.8) Axial distance, particular place and associated meanings no longer bring us delicate experience in phenomenal dimension.ⁱⁱ In a way, although Bachelard's fine imagination and sophisticated narratives are not applicable in current high rise residential buildings, alternative concepts in their own rights maybe found. These may not be sacred and pure, but mundane and realistic. A capitalistic division and polarity of high and low can be so vividly represented by the heights of the buildings and low urban squatters. Ascendancy of the building does not always qualify for the good architecture, of course, and high flown architects are not produced by the works' ascendancy at all. Some residential skyscrapers are monotonous and maintenance is badly managed; some are old, unattended and even dilapidated and obsolete. Nonetheless, ascendancy still means much to the market especially in the current Korean context. Fiscal values of the apartment lots zoom overhead even before the building construction begins. In Korea, apartment buyers pay in advance when a developer distributes individual lots to would-be owners. (Would-be owners should be legally qualified for the

purchase as Korean Building Code strictly limits potential buyer's eligibility) When one gets a legal right to own a unit of the apartment building to-be-built, then he/she begins to make installments which completes by the time when the building construction also finishes. When the construction completes and ready to accommodate new residents, realty value of the new apartment lots would nearly double up. Realty market in Seoul has been performing like a magical world where no logic and calculation would make sense. This phenomenon is unique, but has long been exercised in Korea. For both developers, buyers and even architects, concepts of social and cultural responsibilities became elusive, vague, auxiliary and even inappropriate in the context of monetary exploration. What matters over this kind of building practice is the speculation by well-to-do investors and relative divestment imposed onto poor have-nots. Discontinuity of cultural identity and lack of humanism in urban environment are other aspects of the practice. Culture and Humanism are no longer key issues in apartment building ventures, but profitability is. In a way, all parties related to such aspects are now exhausted and yielded them to hands of no one.

4. Current Dilemma and Future Orientations

There were pros and cons of course for tall residential buildings. Poor fiscal circumstance in domestic market is partially responsible for this arid architectural business as capital finds no alternatives to invest. Realty investment has always been the best choice when market stagnates and economy wanes. Disorientation of architectural practice helped to worsen moral and ethical aspects of the building. Apartment building industry in Korea appears to have lost its cultural and social commitment today, and future orientation must be discussed at this point where Korean realty market confronts a critical challenge from both government and public sides. Members of public and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) began to raise fundamental questions over land development and related profits. NGOs and other independent organizations claim that building developers and construction companies profit 12 digit numbers (9 digit US dollars) over a single project, in some cases, whilst lay buyers pay more than triple the actual cost for the construction and associated expenditures. (What is even worse is that apartment buyers pay in advance, even before the construction begins.) The role of the visual pleasure and aesthetic criticism behind the surface is hardly seriously analyzed in tall apartment buildings, but often talked in amateurish fashion without imbuing significance of the meaning.

Such atmosphere has completely broken down on 30th of March 2004 when a group of people from various sectors of the country gathered and performed a demonstration, a call for a government and public measurement against poverty, at right in front of the

Tower Palace apartment which is considered by far the most luxurious apartment in Korea. (Figs. 3, 4, 8)



Fig. 8. A Demonstration at Tower Palace Apartment
Source: Yonhap News Agency, Seoul

Demonstrators' performance included a ritual for the people who committed suicide as poverty prevailed against their will to work and live. The performance was intended to exhibit extreme social and fiscal polarity among people, and associated emotions and antagonism over the well-to-do people. The Tower Palace became a symbol of the unbalance and social injustice. Dark and grey costumes and weird bodily movement denotes the trauma within which the country's unbalanced distribution of the wealth is represented. The performance is a clear indication of a tense relationship among altering social groups. Given the circumstances, from the social and historical points of view, building conducts in apartment development appear to be beyond redemption and an urgent call for the reflexive construction is advisable.ⁱⁱⁱ When an extraordinarily extravagant apartment building does not get an honor from the society in which it belongs to, then its erection is a failure, no matter how profitable it is, as it lacks fundamental idea of dwelling. Tall apartment buildings and traditional tabernacles may differ in their forms and appearances, but the fundamental idea of dwelling would be the same and both should contain the best of its kind in their own right. Sense of community and being together are most important constituents for the concept of dwelling, and associated memory about the place is another. A dreadful performance that took place signifies meanings of the place, shapes a memory in people's mind, and remains as such for a quite a long time.

Be that as it may, in search for an alternative, more balanced development is certainly ethical statement, but it stands almost uncompromisable when compared with other parameters in building enterprise such as advanced technology, new material and architects' creativity. As a humanistic matter, balanced development may be a naive illusion, nothing but an ideal concept that does not dwell in reality. It is no wonder that an architectural hero in Aynd Rand's 1943 novel *Fountainhead* can not be easily found in the high street.^{iv} The film features that the architectural profession is obliged to show a leadership over

developers and clients. This approach is often rebuked that its idea is excessively romantic and ideal that can not be compatible in the real capitalized world where money has a big say. No skepticism prevails for future apartment buildings in this regard though, as it is always possible to eschew general tendency in practice. As opposed to money oriented business, one might nevertheless find that building high-rise apartments under the idea of balanced development is rather ambitious and can be seen as a paradoxical construction of space that bridges high/low, public/private, rich/poor, and separation/integration.

5. Conclusion

Despite the fact that erection of tall offices and dwelling towers maybe considered a success in financial terms, aesthetic aspects on tall apartment buildings do not pertain to its cultural and social context today, quite unlike business buildings that acquire friendly comments. High-rise apartment building projects in Seoul were products of the moment when land price steadily sky-rocketed and blind investment was common in realty market, but such practice do not justify today's need of better balanced distribution of national welfare and desire of living in better habitation and surroundings. From the perspectives of history and theory, contemporary apartment building practice has a room for improvement both in ethical and cultural terms. What prevails in realty market today distorts people's mind less conscious about cultural values and attitudes that result in building industry a money oriented business devoid of deeper human interests in providing genuine habitation which should be in harmony with nature and culture. Discovering that politics, building business performance and the lack of architects' leadership are fated to collapse each other does not mean that one has to yield passively to the wicked play of money-greed building developers, nor has to become excessively intransigent not workable with varying parties and preferences. Unlike corporate buildings that show fair goodness of the architects and attached values of many kinds, high-rise residential buildings are now stigmatized for its inappropriateness in the current fiscal unevenness and hardship in the country. The Tower Palace and other extravagant apartment buildings are significantly more expensive than other apartment buildings, and their locations and building heights represent polarizing images of high/low that jeopardize our sense of community and being together.

This paper did not intend to reflect lineaments of the practice of the tall apartment buildings, but an assertion that a timely response for the call on better practice in building and living is required. Current critique is not leveled against the legitimate needs for such residential skyscrapers, and also in the course of building large scale structure, human construct can not be flawless, and may not be all that one wishes for.

Professional performance of architecture, however, as an intellectual construct, should have considered the social impact of the large scale extravagant apartment buildings more carefully, especially in the period of slow development, and now, social responses are a lot more embarrassing than one could have ever imagined.

Photo Credits

Fig.1 Monthly Magazine 「*Architecture and Culture*」

Fig.2 OMA Asia

Figs.3, 4 & 7 Anonymous

Figs.5 & 6 Taken by Author

Fig.8 *Yonhap* News Agency, Seoul

Endnotes

ⁱ For more details on geomancy, see A. B. Hwangbo (2002) *An Alternative Tradition in Architecture*. In *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* (JAPR), Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 110-130; A. B. Hwangbo (1999) *A New Millennium and Feng Shui*. In *Journal of Architecture*. Vol.4, No.2, London: E&FN Spon, pp. 191-198

ⁱⁱ G. Bachelard (1964) *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press

ⁱⁱⁱ Concept of Reflexivity is derived from U. Beck *et al.* (1994) *Reflexive Modernization*. London: Polity Press

^{iv} Ayn Rand (1943) *The Fountainhead*. New York: Macmillan; A cinema produced under the same title in 1949 by Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc.