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Title: **Restoring Urban Sensibility: Returning Soul to Seoul**

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Subject: Urban Design

Keywords: Density
Master Planning
Mixed-Use
Redevelopment

Publication Date: 2004

Original Publication: CTBUH 2004 Seoul Conference

Paper Type:

1. Book chapter/Part chapter
2. Journal paper
3. **Conference proceeding**
4. Unpublished conference paper
5. Magazine article
6. Unpublished

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Restoring Urban Sensibility: Returning Soul to Seoul

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Abstract

Historical Korean cities placed a greater appreciation for integrating buildings within the surrounding natural landscape. These manmade components seemed to fuse into an organic whole that allowed the buildings to transcend function and engage its surrounding- breathing new vitality to an area. Recent decades suggest a lost sense of this connection or “sensibility”. In the interest of creating “sustainable cities” one must look upon the past layers that comprise their identity and recapture their essence. Post-war Korea was burdened with overwhelming housing shortages that resulted in a rapid mobilization of housing rows in the form of apartment blocks. While this policy addressed an immediate need, the execution has left a scar across the Korean landscape. In the rush to observe outdated civic policies, many developments have lost a sense of connection to the city, via contrived massing and constrained proportions that lack the creative silhouettes found in great cities. This paper will serve as a critique of certain “lost opportunities” encountered in the recent context of Korean development that resulted in the rapid emergence of formula driven “satellite cities” and their harmful impact, while prefacing an urban renewal that attempts to regain this “soul”. There remains a civic responsibility to revitalize urban centers with “smart mixed-use projects” that better address the working, housing, retail and leisure needs of its citizens. These developments will inevitably take advantage of the densities provided by tall buildings strategically placed in concert with more pedestrian level low-rise amenities- a new found “smart densification.”

Keywords: redevelopment, mixed-use, revitalization, densification, renewal

1. Introduction

The population of density of Korea (473/sq km) ranks third in the world and is one of the countries whose available area per capita is the lowest in the world. (MOCT, website) A comparative illustration of urban population densities shows that at 18,958 people/km, Seoul is ranked between Tokyo (Yokohama) at 9,660/km and Shanghai at 34,334 people/km. (Abel, 96)

While Korea continues to envision and build some of the largest projects in the world, civic leaders, planners and architects need to seize the opportunity to take these projects to the next level in terms of true mixed-use quality through integration/redevelopment

of the overall urban context, quality pedestrian environment, environmental technology, and life cycle costing. From our viewpoint, it is clear that most of the right ingredients for a true integrated mixed-use project exist in abundance in Korea. These evolved design concepts transcend notions of “maximum area” and “program type” and introduce elements that take into account site constraints and opportunities, urban fabric, local geography and views, history, and projected economic development.

2. Background

With the majority of job growth occurring in the service sector of developed countries it is apparent that cities will need to evolve in order to accommodate housing, work space and leisure in this escalating urbanism. Service oriented professions are more suitable to urban environments and hence rapid urbanization is taking root in the burgeoning

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cities and immediately adjacent districts. Many have argued that in the Information Age where computers and internet connections allow one to work from anywhere that geography is less important than technology. In reality, however, most urban professionals and their companies prefer select urban environments as a matter of prestige and visibility and in order for cities to maintain their competitive edge and retain this highly desirable workforce, cities must respond with elements that improve upon the quality of life.

Given the perceived notion that little available land remains to accommodate housing and leisure needs of its citizens the Korean government has initiated several plans to develop new urban satellite cities: Pangyo, Hwaseong, Gimpo, Paju and Suwon. If implemented correctly with the necessary infrastructure to provide housing, office space, leisure, perhaps people will chose to live and work within a close proximity. However, Seoul will always have the cache corporations' demand and existing conditions will fail to improve unless action is taken to integrate smart mixed-use projects into the urban core.

3. Satellite Communities

Ebenezer Howard's concept of Satellite Towns and part of his Garden City theory calls for "exporting" growth of a Central City to surrounding rings where "Green Belts" would serve as buffers between the central city and Satellite Towns. The goal was to have these areas attract businesses and low cost housing to lessen the burden on the Central City. Unfortunately, "the New Towns of London and Stockholm never attracted sufficient businesses or industries to compete with the city, turning instead into dormitories occupied principally by commuters and their families." (Abel, 70)

If one were to stand along the Han River in Seoul during the early morning hours one would witness a mass invasion of vehicles staggering towards the urban core—a pattern that is repeated in the early evening hours as vehicles re-enact a mass exodus or evacuation. All of this still taking place in a city that has perhaps one of the best mass transit systems in the world.

Like London, Copenhagen and many other cities with their neighboring satellite cities acting as "bedroom-communities," Seoul has fallen victim to intense traffic as workers commute from their

"satellite bedroom city" to the central city. This traffic congestion is attributed more to commuters attempting to "arrive" in the morning and "depart" in the afternoon as opposed to internal density. Large mixed-use projects that incorporate "planned" programming for office, housing and leisure could mitigate the impact of traffic, by removing the need to travel by car given that all necessities and amenities are contained in a short distance.

Several cities that continually rank highly in lifestyle surveys include: Toronto, Vancouver, Portland, Seattle, and San Francisco. While neither of these cities proclaim extraordinary weather, they do have natural settings like topography, waterfront, natural vistas, that are incorporated into their design. More importantly, they each have an appropriate mix of key components: office, residential, open space, public, sports facilities, within the urban core. Toronto has emphasized that housing is the cornerstone of its planning policy and is directly related to reducing commuter traffic into the core. These cities showcase the rich opportunities inherent in cities with a vision to promote "City-Living."

4. Urban Redevelopment

Urban Downtown Revitalization is seen as a worldwide trend to rehabilitate our cities. Recent projects around the world, especially in Los Angeles, New York, Denver, Berlin, Tokyo, and other cities have focused efforts to re-invigorate older or dilapidated parts of downtown districts. By relocating current industrial and manufacturing facilities outside urban centers and replacing them with new mixed-use developments, cities are better served with a more appropriate program that meets the needs of users.

Based on an international definition, a true mixed-use project includes office, residential, retail, public amenities, and other program types. In the Korean planning code, however, mixed-use simply means "having less than 80% apartment" in terms of above grade area. Likewise the development housing has been a very successful business in many countries in recent times. Developers naturally want to build as much housing as possible as it generates the highest profits, then build most of the rest of the area as "officetel," (really a small multi-room apartment), and finish off the notion of mixed-use with minimal amounts of fitness/spa and ground floor retail.

Beneath the surface lie significant opportunities

where fiscally sound investment ideas pair with sensible planning and design to provide a cohesive project that transcends the norm. In the bigger picture, the goal is to improve upon the social and urban context by opening up a project and inviting the City within.

This turning projects “inside out” is evident in the current vision for Busan Seomyeon Mixed-Use Complex (BSMUC) where a massive internal park and public plaza opens itself to the surrounding urban context- engaging pedestrians from all sides and providing them opportunities to filter through the development. This opportunity allows the project to take on a life and presence that permeates beyond project property lines and building height setbacks.

The BSMUC project serves as a good example of “insert” redevelopment as it will take the place of an existing factory that currently sits directly in the city core, preventing adjacent development opportunities from coming to fruition. In a thriving, mid-scale commercial district and adjacent to the main commercial tall building district of Busan’s Seo Myeon Rotary, the project brings residential, retail, and public amenities into an existing framework. A desirable outcome of this project is a “ripple-effect” of future adjacent redevelopment taking place that manages to balance the economics with user need and civic responsibility.

This new paradigm for housing in Busan supports the idea that, “a contrary trend to urban dispersal has been seen in cities around the world, in which increasing numbers of people, especially young couples and single persons, have chosen an urban lifestyle over the fading attractions of suburbia.” (Abel, 71) The resultant of this phenomenon has increased the densities of urban areas through various development programs initiated by government planning policies and has been referred to as “densification.”

Invoking the international work-live trend, BSMUC injects the existing Seo Myeon Downtown area with an additional 24-hour sustained population, and counteracts the nighttime urban flight from the city center. The project will infuse the existing area with a new critical mass of residential and business people to Downtown to eat, shop, work and play.

Some may argue that introducing densities of this scale will negatively impact the city in terms of traffic. But as we can see in Seoul, moving projects to outer

city limits, has little positive impact- those vehicles are still going to go where the jobs and activities are situated. The best possible solution is to give the people immediate access to these lifestyle necessities-urban renewal.

A side-by side density comparison (total area) of BSMUC to Roppongi shows that the density of Roppongi is approximately one-half of BSMUC. Even with a sincere attempt to meld a developer’s desire for maximized area with civic minded planning-the only existing municipal incentives in Korea is a slight increase in the height slope angle in exchange for increased public plaza area.

The positive impact of “planned” urban renewal can be seen in the soon to be completed ION City located directed along the highly visible Seo Myeon Rotary in Busan. The project was originally a dilapidated hotel that the City and locals had scorned as one of the great eyesores of the City and many attempts were made to raze the building. It took an entrepreneurial client, like ION City to realize the potential of the site, the city, the current lack of quality retail/leisure and professional office space and the need to have an integrated design in which to unify the entire project. The result is a dignified revitalized development project that is expected to jumpstart an urban renaissance along the rotary as comparisons to a new Busan Times Square are brewing in the air. When completed the project will not only satisfy a current need, but will serve as a linkage to the surrounding urban fabric as Busan actively pushes redevelopment to other surrounding portions of the city. The project will serve as an impetus to encourage further investment and “planned” mixed-use development within the urban core as seen in nearby KEPCO Fiesta (under construction) and the previously mentioned BSMUC, providing Busan with a “Lifestyle-Corridor” integrating living, working, retail, leisure and culture.

5. Korean “Apartment Standard”

The Korean “Apartment Standard” refers to the countless drab housing block communities that are a precursor to the postwar building boom when resources were limited and demand high. Unfortunately in the last forty years we have seen limited improvement from “matchbox to mediocre”. These “cookie-cutter” communities have single-handedly ruined Korean cities as well as other developing rural areas as they place an emphasis of

quantity over quality. While sophisticated in many ways mentioned previously, the typical Korean apartment buyer has not been able to flex his buying power in terms of innovation in apartments.

The definition of apartment “quality” is a subject worth discussion. The Korean Ministry of Construction and Transportation states: “the quality of housing can be judged through the average size of houses, the dwelling area per person, the number of rooms per person and the convenience facilities.” While potentially correct, this definition focuses solely on the individual (internal) characteristics of the unit. One could simply place more, larger rooms with better appliances in the standard post-war “domino” style housing blocks under the guise of “quality living.”

The clear trend for urban, higher-end projects in Korea is to shift away from this “domino” type, and move toward a “center core” tower with high-end security and amenities. Regardless of which characteristics have higher value, it is clear that the Ministry’s definition needs revision, or at least expansion. As architecture is a “long to market” commodity, it is the developers who must re-prioritize, innovate and lead consumers to a new standard that values smart density, privacy, proximity to civic amenities/retail/leisure, general environment, building character, parking systems, access to public transit, views, landmark character, and city skyline.

When we began working in Korea, the southward orientation was the single most overriding factor in apartment design. This is a result of the post-war culture of “domino” housing that continues to leave a lasting impression on the housing market, driving up demand and price/pyug often forsaking units with better views. There seems to be a waning focus on the emphasis of a “south view” but it still remains a battle. In many instances site constraints may dictate that a unit will have southward orientation, but also have its distant view blocked by a massive flat wall of an adjacent slab apartment also jockeying for south. This is evident in the housing towers on the south side of the Han River in Seoul that have their backs turned on the fabulous river distant views in favor of southern orientation. It is encouraging that the current trend is to move away from the over prioritization of the south view, and to move toward a “center core” tower. However, this too is in its infancy, and primarily reserved for higher income housing as

“domino” housing blocks are primarily being constructed in “bedroom communities.”

6. The Entrepreneurial Spirit

Often a project is brought to us by a client or company, entrepreneurial in nature wanting to do a special project citing words like “landmark, gateway, hi-tech and monumental.” Through effective design workshops the client’s various needs are understood, tested analyzed and put forth in a series of several design options that attempt to represent the client’s vision and their impact to the surrounding landscape. Obviously this takes considerable time and effort and at the conclusion the client has enough visual information and documentation to make an informed decision about the project and begin the process of soliciting contractors to build the project-for they often act as “guarantors” of the development.

The size and clout of most construction companies that would be involved in these large-scale mixed-use projects often affords them the opportunity to muscle themselves into the project and assume the role of new client. A fundamental problem of this is the new client’s lack of understanding with respect to all the issues previously discussed-their concern is bottom-line. It is at this point where a project inevitably starts over, until due diligence has been paid again-with new criteria often lacking the energy of the originating entrepreneurial client. Thus the project commences a filtering process that more often than not manages to strip a project of many key design elements. The project gets built and the city has been dealt another lost opportunity.

The above mentioned scenario often leads to a term for the calculated science of maximizing FAR that our office coined. We call it the “GAS CAN OPTION”. The metaphor is derived from the idea that as you pour your liquid gas into your car it starts to fill the entire usable envelope-filling the tank and fuel line to its maximum capacity. It goes without saying that a project’s economic feasibility is often hinged on the need to maximize FAR in order to recuperate escalating land values and maximize profit.

One thing that separates Roppongi from BSMUC is an enlightened developer who envisioned a development that values innovation and significantly emphasizes the ground and lower level environments. The tall tower no doubt assumes the majority of the FAR requirement and the end result is a freeing up of

the ground plan and a project that is vastly improved over its Korean counterparts. In terms of desirability and marketing, Roppongi serves as an international benchmark.

7. The Right Stuff

While Koreans typically remain in the forefront of technology, computerization, electronics and gadgetry, they often overlook the rich cultural connection to their land. They have a strong affinity towards it, but they just need to be reminded of its importance in improving the quality of their lives.

A reminder of this occurred on a recent tour of the several historical palaces, temples and landmarks of Kyung-Ju. As we approached each landmark, a plaque would indicate a Landmark number that is linked to a National Historic registry, the name, the date, and physical dimensions. We found ourselves continually looking at each other trying to understand how each landmark fits into the greater context of its time, what purpose did it serve, why here, why is it important, how did it help contribute to Korean culture? We were looking for a narrative that could re-assemble these remnants into some big picture that would explain their significance. The flip side is that every conversation with a Korean resulted in them asking us if we visited Kyung-Ju—obviously a great source of pride to Koreans.

Characteristics that factor into Korea being ripe for new urban renewal include:

1. Young culture that easily adopts to the new.
2. Leading spenders of percentage of income on leisure, entertainment, dining,.
3. Koreans have a strong history of co-existence with nature..
4. The land abounds in natural topography and beauty, which is constantly visible and commonly separates cities into smaller districts—often serving as ways of establishing identity.

It is as if in the mobilization to emulate and innovate for the sake of industrialization that they have escaped this connection and in essence misplaced a truly unique part of their identity—one that historically venerates nature and the importance of environment.

Current cultural, socio-economic and political

conditions in Korea are ideal to take full advantage of creating more inclusive urban mixed-use developments that engage the rich historical and geographical context surrounding these cities. It is encouraging to witness cases like the highly controversial Chung Gye Chun Renewal Project by Seoul Mayor Lee Myung Bak. In this project, we see a civic leader with a more comprehensive vision and initiative to restore a sense of historical connection to a specific site in Seoul by unearthing a long hidden natural stream. Although challenging and difficult such a feat welcomes new opportunities to engage this newly unearthed landmark in ways that improve upon the social condition of the city. While immediately improving the surrounding natural landscape of the area and providing more open space, this opportunity will undoubtedly manifest into additional site sensitive projects along this corridor that will further enhance the living and working conditions of nearby users.

The conversion of the Seoul City Hall Rotary into an open park is an appropriate response for a civic minded leader to place greater focus on pedestrians and the quality of life over convenience and the need to drive everywhere. The closing of boulevards along civic center corridors is prevalent in many cities and have proven to be the far more user friendly environments.

A significant missed opportunity for Seoul is Han River corridor. This area is completely underutilized and seems to serve as a dramatic backdrop for those stuck in traffic as they approach or leave the city.

8. Masterplan—Plan vs. Reality

We have also had the unique opportunity of leading the master planning of Centum City. A 312-acre parcel of reclaimed industrial/shipping facilities located near Haeundae Beach resort along the Suyoung River in Busan. The city proposed a massive redevelopment of this large parcel with the truest notions of integrated mixed-use facilities comparable to the Tokyo Port area. Distant views of water and mountains are abundant, as is common in Busan. The master plan, developed by our consortium and based upon the city's raw program, consisted of a wide variety of: residential, office, live/work hotel, theme park/animation studio, recreational/leisure, waterfront uses, retail, and more. Currently construction is nearly complete on most of the infrastructure, including an extension of the

subway line. Many projects have been built, including a landmark (and very successful) convention center. Many other projects are under construction.

Unfortunately the level of integration envisioned in the masterplan has yet to be realized. Touted as a live-work/leisure environment of the future by the City of Busan, the project has materialized into segregated patches of housing and big box retail. Additionally, the notion of interconnectedness and sectional variation of our design is also significantly missing. Several parcels have yet to be completed, and there is hope that portions of the original masterplan will be observed. So far there is clearly a breakdown between the originally approved design and the built project. An additional opportunity for civic space remains in the waterfront park that was part of the City's original design direction.

9. A New Urban Vernacular

The current direction of District Unit Planning (Jigudanwi) can be potentially good if executed correctly. This would encompass transitioning away from existing code requirements by making a specific district planning that takes into account the surrounding area and typically for larger-scale projects while also providing for multiple DUPs to all work together. With proper planning and creative design, this is in my opinion the best opportunity for Korean cities to develop unique and innovative development clusters.

Current code and regulations governing building have not changed significantly since after the war. The timing is right for a major shift in ideology and execution concerning development. Koreans need to be reminded of the opportunities that exist to better integrate future built form with the surrounding landscape and urban context in a manner reminiscent of the "soul" found in their temples and palaces. These traditional palaces shouldn't simply serve as iconic ruins one stares at, they should remind us of the importance of how built form integrates with its natural surrounding to create a harmonious entity-an improvement to the fabric. "Cities are amalgams of buildings and people. They are inhabited settings from which daily rituals- the mundane and the extraordinary, the random and the staged- derive their validity. In the urban artifact and its mutations are condensed continuities of time and place. The city is the ultimate memorial of our struggles and glories; it

is where the pride of the past is set on display." (Kostoff, 16)

There is a need to develop a much broader understanding of city as an organism and remove the current tendency to focus on a specific part with little understanding of the whole. This burden falls not only on civic leaders entrusted to oversee and regulate current laws, but also clients/developers and architects with visions and determination to improve upon the status quo. It is imperative that these influential people, charged with creating and restoring our city landscapes remain the purveyors of the "BIG PICTURE."

The planning initiative to meld tall building with generous pedestrian walkways and open spaces speaks wonders for providing the community with a much needed amenity in an urban core. This extensive use of terraced landscape surrounding lower profile buildings that transfer to tall building structures is a sound model from which to transition ground plane to sky. Edmund Bacon once commented on the successful urban implementation of the Commerce Square project by Harry Cobb of I.M. Pei & Partners. The project incorporates a central courtyard with direct pedestrian access from the sidewalk while symmetrically placed between two office towers. "Cobb's design proves that it is possible to create a building that adds to the drama of a city's skyline and yet provides a green and restful welcome to the pedestrian, who is aware of the high building but is not visually or psychologically dominated by it as is true with the more conventional skyscraper." (Guinther, 214)

The integration of landscape to built form as evident in Oakland Museum by Kevin Roche is a sincere effort to accommodate the human scale with desired landscape that appears to take precedence over the actual structure and not serve as just some arbitrary 15% coverage rule. One could easily surmise design opportunities that involve several heavily landscaped terraced ground planes that would have the appearance of infinite landscaping approaching a ratio of 20-30% that was usable and accessible to pedestrians via walkways and ramps. However in the current code roof garden provisions have been included that allow projects to meet the landscape requirement with additional area allocated to the roof at a reduced factor. The result is often landscaping that is forced to the roof with no true

pedestrian access or use and in many cases abandoned over time-left to die and disappear. The urban ground plane and pedestrian experience is compromised because such requirements are understood by many developers and are executed in favor of maximizing ground floor area. More often than not the rules and regulations that Cities often have are arbitrary and unwilling to accommodate innovation.

If one observes traditional Korean architecture and its emphasis on sectional variety one could envision a system of terraced buildings that transition from low to medium to tall buildings one moves further from the street. This staggering and terracing of the built form addresses the urban street edge in a more accommodating manner and invites pedestrians to engage these developments while the tall building further back absorb the majority of the required FAR that allows a project to remain economically feasible. "Making small footprints relative to their size, such towers if carefully sited, can provide much needed modern accommodation within older parts of cities with minimal disturbance to the existing urban fabric, revitalizing the area." (Abel, 75)

In fact we see that several cities like Toronto, Seattle, Chicago, Vancouver and New York actively pursue development opportunities along water edges. It comes as no surprise that these opportunities are market driven due to the high demand and economics involved with desirable views, however this does not diminish the positive impact these projects often have in reintroducing the waterfront to its people.

10. Conclusion

Overall city and urban planning codes and compliance requirements need to be based on long-term goals and visions of the city. At minimum there should be a system of planning codes regulating clusters of developments based on overall big-picture master planning. There needs to be economic

incentives to do something other than cookie cutter matchbox block apartments. This does not exist in most and the same thing is built over and over again continuing the ruin of the beautiful Korean natural environment.

"Cities are a reflection of our collective culture and as such, represent cultural values and urban life. If cities are to maintain their distinctiveness, tall buildings which are significantly higher than their immediate context should be assessed both in terms of their impact on the immediate surroundings, and their impact on the wider city scale." (Short,8)

It is encouraging to see emerging Satellite Cities" like Centum and Hwaseong adopt such a broad and comprehensive look more in favor of large-mixed use development. One that understands the paramount importance of a "kit of parts" organized into a cohesive system, so the need for one to travel afar for work, leisure and housing are mitigated.

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