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Converging Fragments

Seoul: A Portrait of a 21st Century City

BY PETER FERRETTO

Seoul is a city of discontinuities, a sequence of fragments that collectively converge to form an urban settlement set against a dramatic natural backdrop. At the heart of Seoul's DNA is absence, or rather the absence of any grid. Unlike its neighboring capitals – Beijing and Tokyo, Seoul is a capital whose urban fabric expands in direct symbiosis with its topography.

The urban fragment is the very marrow of Seoul life; apparently incongruous elements that continuously generate new reciprocities. For this reason Seoul is a difficult city to comprehend on first encounter; each fragment subverts preconceived notions of the familiar, where what you see is definitely not what you get.

There is no better example to demonstrate the validity of this conjecture than to dissect the Seoul Church. The typology of the church has remained (at least in western society) unquestioned for centuries, design follows strict canons that control both its layout and latent symbolism. The Seoul church subverts all these preconceptions to produce a notion of a genetically modified church that at first sight might remind us of past post-modern pastiche exercises but on closer inspection reveals a highly complex hybrid.

First you have the sheer numbers of churches, according to various search engines; Seoul has more than 48,000 churches, it is simply impossible to navigate the city without encountering a church. Then you have the scale, literally from micro to macro with every possible in between permutation.

All these characteristics still barely scratch the surface of the real complexities behind Seoul churches, which can only be understood through a direct example. The bell tower is the ubiquitous symbol of any self-respecting church; over the centuries it has acted as both as landmark and performed the key function of announcing the commencement of the proceedings.

In Seoul, like in most other contemporary metropolises, bells have long stopped ringing, leaving the tower to become a redundant symbolical gesture. However rather than accept this superfluous act the Seoul church reinvents the tower as a vertical car-park, an ingenious solution to stack cars and at the same time keep the traditional aspects alive.

A more familiar Seoul fragment for both architects and urbanists might be the apartment, the quintessential element of Seoul's modernization program which since the late 60's has transformed the city into one of the biggest

metropolises in the world. There are numerous books that explore the evolution of this ubiquitous building typology; my fascination lies more in the context the apartments generate.

These apparent incongruous dwelling machines, the sign of tomorrow's utopia have here become the reality of today. Just like in Godard's *Alphaville* the Seoul of today is where we can find our future. Gone are all subtle relationships with the surrounding landscape, that for centuries have characterized Korean traditional architecture; the apartment blocks with their imposing concrete structures, reign supreme over any terrain.

Apartments never work alone; they work in formations composing clusters much like coral colonies on the sea bed. One perceives that their design follows a series of strict parameters, yet there is an underlying tone of dictatorial control. They are inevitably surrounded by ample public space, but on closer inspection one can recognize the *True-man Show* shell hovering above.

Converging fragments is a series of photographs that I have taken over a five year period while living in Seoul. They belong to wider research project that will be published in 2015, which aims to create a systematic record of Seoul that escapes from preconceived notions of how we should read the city. ■

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(b. 1972, Manchester, UK). BSc in Architecture, University of Cambridge; MSc in Architecture, University of Liverpool, UK. He worked for several international practices including Odile Decq & Benoit Cornette in Paris, Eric Parry Architects in London and Herzog & de Meuron in Basel where from 2001 to 2007, he was responsible for numerous projects including *Caixa Forum* Madrid and the Goya Museum in Zaragoza. In 2009 he founded his personal office, PWFERRETTO (www.pwferritto.com), based in Seoul and London. From 2007 to 2009 he was a Unit Master at the Architectural Association in London and now is a full time Assistant Professor at Seoul National University, South Korea.

Seoul Fragments is a research Project by Peter Ferretto, Associate Professor of Architecture at Seoul National University. The work was carried out by a research team including Heeyoung Pyun (Research Assistant) and Byunggon Shin (Photographer). All Photos on this essay: Photos of Seoul, South Korea. © Peter Ferretto, 2014



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