

NECESSITY FOR THE NOSTALGIC

Baruch Gottlieb with Jin Hee Beack

In its heyday at the dawn of the Asian Electronics revolution of the early 80'S it was said of the area around World Power (Sewoon) Plaza in central Seoul that one could find everything one needed to build a submarine. This place has never looked forward. You might still be able to build a submarine there, only a 1980s era submarine.

The unique conglomeration electronics-solderers and steel-smiths, printers and electrical wholesalers working in the alleyways that twist around the massive brooding modernist 'Plaza' is the vestige of the Park Chung-hee [1] era of export-driven development. It is a man's world where the guts of modern urbanity are still assembled and repaired right in the center of town. It is also a thankless place where people, since the war, and before, have come to work when they have no better options, a place of last recourse.

Undeniably, the area is on its way out. In the streets of circuits and diodes, the window displays are positively nostalgic of old science fiction TV. big colorful plastic illuminated panel lights, push-buttons and switches technology 20 years from state-of-the-art. Much of what is produced here is now supplanted with cheaper Chinese-manufactured products. Yet therein lies the nostalgia. There was a time when this area was thriving, but even then, it was on borrowed time.

The area has been slated for redevelopment since the war. At that time it was an important prostitution zone. A park was planned which cut through approximately 1 km of dense shanties uniting the Jongmyo Shrine (an important early 17th c structure which houses the remains of the Joseon Era Royal Families) and its grounds, rare un-built green-space downtown, with the city's central green, Nam Mountain.

60 years or so later, the park plan has resurfaced and looks very much about to be implemented. However, at the same time, cultural interest in the area has peaked, and the citizens of Seoul are very conflicted about the fate of the area.

One one hand, for all it's charm, it is an eyesore, tired tortured loveless alleyways wind in the shadows of a row of sorrowful concrete hulks. The area is dominated, cleaved in two by the Plaza, a clunky misplaced hunk of Corbusier's Habitations slashed into the the center of

[1] - Park Chung Hee: Military Dictator/President of Korea (1963-1979) largely considered responsible for the rapid industrialization of the country.



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[2] „The Loves of a 'World Power Plaza' Kid, was also turned into a film, directed by the poet
[3] „Generally speaking, suicide is considered a sin. So all the disciples were very interested to hear what Ramakrishna would say about the fact that a four-year-old child had just then committed suicide. Ramakrishna said that the child had not sinned, he had simply corrected an error; he had been born by mistake.“ - John Cage from Indeterminacy

a churning Asian urban matrix, the first and worst buildings built by Seoul's most important modernist architect Kim Sugeun.

When they were completed, they were the most expensive and sought-after apartments in Seoul, the insides, with their massive central light wells and beautiful wood trim still attest to that grand opening. Inspired by le Corbusier, the ground floors of the complexes was designed for small scale retail for the residents above. This was the first planned mixed retail/residential building in Korea.

However, the cost for this incursion of affluence in to the heart of the city's central slums, exhausted any further gentrification of the area. (The complex cost about 1/3 of Seoul's annual budget at the time). A new government moved its focus towards developing the farmlands on the south bank of the city and the revitalising project for central Seoul was shelved.

The affluent residents moved out to the new southern districts, and the building was taken over by office use and storage for the businesses below. In the late 70's it was known as a place in Korea to find pornography and bootlegged records. A hub of illicit male youth activity, World Power Plaza has been immortalised by poet Yoo Ha [2]. as a symbol of locus of desperate youth under military rule in 70's wildly developing Korea.

The Plaza has now fallen into neglect. The word 'slumification' is used in official documents, yet the slums that ring the Plaza are nothing new, in fact they have simply claimed the Plaza as their own. It is difficult to imagine wealthy residents proud to be seen there, yet it is hard to imagine why such hardscrabble shops came to operate in what was obviously intended to be an architectural shrine. In short the Plaza is an error. As Cage quoted Ramakrishna [3], it had been born by mistake.

Kim Sugeun did not get the contract to design the place by virtue of his talents alone, he was already close with the then mayor of Seoul and had relations in the Federal government. It is clear today, that, however gifted he was, he got a major opportunity to build, too early. Many of Kims other buildings, including the 1988 Olympic stadium remain, so there is no pressing reason to preserve his first and greatest failure.

Yet the building is also perhaps emblematic of the optimism of the time, thus the nostalgia for unrealised dreams.

The working day begins around 10am , Koreans are hard drinkers, some stores don't open until 12pm. The shutter roll up and the printing presses begin their rhythms. By 2 or 3pm there is a variety of traffic in the narrow alleyways, mostly, overladen motorcycles and the like teetering with deliveries. The bosses and workers shuffle between the shops. When on shop gets too big a project, the competitor becomes a partner and the tasks are divided up among the neighbouring shops. Once in a while, a rare private customer gingerly passes through staring into the dusty and disorderly storefronts.

The people who have worked around the building are complaining. The redevelopment project is going forward and they are not being consulted, in other words, sufficiently financially recompensed. Do these workers really care deeply about this place they were never meant to occupy in the first place? Like any slum, it was a temporary solution which became a lifestyle. But, do the inhabitants of the slum really mourn it's disappearance, or just the time they spent when they wished they might have done something else?

What is being mourned by the people who might have something to mourn? How is it the role of intellectuals and their artists to collect the scraps and echos of the fading lifestyles of the people who have spent years working here? The questions compels us to celebrate labour, and the smallest of small business, on the desperate edge of legality.

No-one is making a million here. The price of lunch is low. The only ladies one will see working here are those emerging from hidden kitchens with trays of bowls and plates on their heads. Like the men they serve, in the thriving class- and appearance-conscious metropolis, they are ashamed to be discovered here where they work.

As dusk falls and the streets slowly become deserted, the city's ubiquitous semi-legal tent-bars appear on the major street corners, dispensing bottles of clear, potent Soju and the requisite

drinking snacks, steamed clams, fish cakes, dried squid. These bars, glowing orange and red plastic walls, can be found almost everywhere in Seoul, except the most exclusive residential zones. Business and drinking are symbiotic in Korea, even on the smallest scale. Friends don't let friends stay sober. The bars stay open until the last drink and then fold up discretely into half a parking space.

Insolently, against the wishes of their subjects, the artist moves to memorialize them. The profoundly positive act here is in alternative history where the heroes are the annihilated. An anthology of expendable humanity, without the artists no more mourned than the razed neighbourhoods where they worked their whole lives, allowing the city and the corporations to build the sterling metropolis we inhale today.

What parallel can be drawn here to the great cities of Europe, now inhabited Disneylands, staunchly branding all manner of surviving building as a heritage monument and incessantly preening them for the tourists? The golden age of European industrial development was, too, largely excised, often by war. Those buildings which survive are now prized because they hark back to the origins of a modern civilized age of general affluence. In this way too, perhaps, World Power Plaza arouses fond feelings despite its brutality.

So when we mourn, we mourn not the people or the culture which evolved there, in this case, that particular and peculiar little dialect of a proto-geek male light industrial culture which blossomed and died in the alleyways of central Seoul. No...how could such culture be even be identified much less preserved? Vestiges of Confucian honour codes, ancient trading practices, and western science, the language of electronics neologisms, and seeping awareness of the place of Korea in the wide world of globalised commerce, could any public monument or film suffice?

5 or 6am the whole area is at peace. There isn't a soul here. The incessant traffic in Jong-no (avenue) now rushes by in tiny timed hand-fulls between the lights, and in the regular intervals, even the birds are audible.

Look at the images of the current redevelopment plan, where the entire existing place has been completely excised, and imagine two old men meeting in a hot late afternoon across the street from Jongmyo shrine. As they stroll together along the grassy paths among throngs of new bourgeois families and their prams, they won't be able to help but feel the new optimism rising in the center of the city. Finally, the dirty core, where they once worked is gone, the city sings with relief. But at nightfall, they can be sure, on every available street corner, the illegal tent bar will spread it's plastic wings and illuminate for another evening, of remembering and forgetting. ➡

From October 16th 2007 at 3pm until October 17th 2007 at 3pm, Baruch Gottlieb spent 24 hours roving the area around 'World Power Plaza' in central Seoul, Korea, with a recorder, still and video camera, documenting, at selected locations or vantage points, at regular 3-hour intervals, the day-cycle of the place. The result is a audio-visual documentary sculptural portrait of that day in that place. This sculptural portrait represents a permeable volume of approximately 2500000m3 (with 10m headroom). It was first presented in an installation at MEDIA + SPACE Gallery in Seoul Korea. In the installation, the video footage was used to illuminate the space as the 5-channel audio documentation //(each channel representing a vantage-point)// waxed and waned according to the time of day in the videos. The original volume was represented at a scale of approximately 1:75 in the gallery space. The text of this article was written 3 months later. /

some documentation of the installation is viewable here:
<http://gallery.yonsei.ac.kr/archive/gottlieb/index.html>



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