

A NEW URBANISM OF SEOUL SEEN THROUGH THE PRISM OF ITS HETEROGENEOUS NETWORK

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Abstract

Unlike other Chinese and Japanese cities, Seoul did not know about Geometry. It was a city built with Nature, along the mountain ridges and a skein of streams. There was of course a meta-order that prescribes the positions of palaces and administrative buildings; but it was by no means geometric nor pragmatically sophisticated enough to penetrate into the everyday lives of ordinary citizens. Within this politics-free space have citizens, or better, liberal individuals nurtured their own spatial culture, to the extent that Nature allows. However, the city is now buried, after such a short period of modernisation and economic growths, underneath the intricate layer of unprecedented values. Strict geometry has been added, although being incomplete in itself, and institutionalised as such to be blended completely into the spatial culture that was already there. To discover it is like a painstaking job of archaeologists. Space syntax has been a great success in this respect. But, I should admit at the same time, there are also some difficulties.

Let me first illustrate those little episodes that seem to defy our understanding of the city from a purely spatial point of view. These are the stories of places where the so-called 'spatial law' conflicts with the institutional power that is mostly executed in the form of urban planning. We may call the latter a 'transpatial law', which operates, based on abstraction and similarity, to distort, homogenise and eventually nullify concrete differences inscribed in the spatial culture. Spaces now become political and individual subjects, or citizens, are awakened to act politically. They sometimes succumb, but more often demonstrate how their spontaneous, extemporaneous and creative strategies can ridicule or even outstrip the rigidity of the power. This dynamics are essentially heterogeneous and could never be reduced into a single layer that is purely spatial. For, in this whole process of tension, the spatial law itself seems also to be distorted or at least deferred from operation for a while.

Instead of confining the operations of the two laws within two separate domains, what I suggest here in a way to overcome the difficulties is to enfold them, with all of their actors, into a single vast Network. Such a Network will be heterogeneous in nature; in which spatial organisations not only take effects on transpatial counterparts but also get shaped and transformed by and through them; for which the lexicon of the spatial law should be translated into and thus connected with that of the transpatial law on a commensurable basis, however provisionally it is. This idea basically requires post-structuralist epistemology or perhaps ANT(Actor Network Theory), in which no dichotomies between nature and culture, matter and concept, individual and group, technology and institution, and even space and society can hold their places. We do not know yet exactly how space syntax, which is itself an actor, can be adapted to the Network. Space syntax may take a central position while defining other actors and weaving the Network

around it. But, in order for this to occur, it seems that space syntax may need to open it further to its outside and consequently be mobilised from within.

Returning back to Seoul, the city is currently like an amorphous field where various actors and actants interact under the influence of omnidirectional forces: the restoration of natural resources and traditional values, an increasing demand for citizen participation, a uncertain shift towards an extremely mobile lifestyle, the law enforcement for urban planning, the regulation of real estate speculation and unequal developments, the space structural reorganisation to cope with global market challenges, and so on. The Network these forces create will also evolve over time: it may converge to a certain stable state, although only for a while, after some necessary time lags among actors, or may diverge to an unexpected, perhaps unmanageable level. To draw such a Network, through the various processes of translation and representation, is thus our first step to envisage a new urbanism of Seoul in a more distinctive form. It is also necessary for us to act wisely within the network and ultimately share power democratically with others.