Curatorial Confessions of a Crow

I begin by stating the obvious. I know very little of North Korean architecture. I shall also declare that this has not disqualified me from being a curator for an architectural exhibition of North and South Korea. During the past eight years, there has been virtually no contact between the architectural communities of the Koreas and the situation remains unlikely to change at any moment. Including the brief periods of détente during the past decades, there has been no North-South architectural encounter of consequence. I may further surmise that there are very few in North Korea with any kind of expertise on the architecture of South Korea. It is a condition not limited to architecture but one that applies to all the arts and sciences. This is not all surprising because unlike most other people of the world who can enter North Korea through a relatively normal visa process, as a citizen of the Republic of Korea, I have basically no direct access to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Yet the thematic mandate of the national pavilions—“Absorbing Modernity: 1914-2014”—virtually demands that the Korean Pavilion deal not just with South Korea or North Korea but with the Korean Peninsula. When Minsuk Cho first told me that he would propose an architectural exhibition of the two Koreas, I was instantly convinced. But with such sparse engagement and interaction, how can any story of architecture be told? It goes without saying that the story of the two Koreas has been dominated by political and military narratives, intriguing yet in the end simplistic stories of conflict and negotiation on the global and ideological scale. It is a story that is not unfamiliar. It reflects the global forces of imperialism and the cold war—both destructive and inspiring—that moved the twentieth century. Within the boundaries of these forces, both Korea's have created contemporary mythologies. Despite my ignorance, I know that North Korea is the last communist state sealed off to most of the world, the last self-proclaimed utopian state. I know that South Korea officially views itself as the greatest national success story of the Post-World War II era: moving from one of the poorest countries in the world to an economic force in the globalized economy. Despite sparse intelligence, this discursive space is dominated by conflicting claims to positive knowledge. There are too many people who claim to know North Korea and its friends. Throughout the decades, ideological labels have been brandished at will, too many times destroying innocent lives. The division of North and South Korea has spawned one of the most persistent and dangerous divides in modern history. While there are certain truths and effects to these narratives, one would hope that many other stories of the Korean Peninsula will be told. As the first attempt to simultaneously see the architecture of both Koreas in the same discursive space, the Korean Pavilion explores how architecture—in all of its wide ranging connotations—brings together and separates North and South Korea. But having already admitted ignorance, how can the Korean Pavilion brazenly take responsibility for an exhibition of the architecture of the Korean Peninsula? Who would be the protagonists and what would be the plot?

The initial idea was for North and South to just meet. Since no such meeting had ever officially occurred, the important thing was to provide a forum for equal contributions. The curatorial process as well as the very idea of an exhibition on the Korean Peninsula was initiated by Minsuk Cho. He was not only the commissioner but the de facto chief curator who identified the many potential actors, agents, and works for the exhibition. But as he documents in his “Open Letter to Architects of North Korea” at the end of the catalogue, his efforts to get in direct contact with individuals and institutions of North Korea were for naught. Once the possibility of a joint exhibition was deemed unviable, a thematic framework and curatorial agency without the participation of North Korea had to be devised. An exhibition on the Korean Peninsula would require mediators and agents outside of our team: conceptual and historical mechanisms to somehow link the diverse and disparate entities. The Korean Pavilion is a small space that I have once called a house (see my essay “Dwelling on the Korean Pavilion,” in Diener and Diener, eds., Common Pavilions, 2013). For the art biennale, it is usually reserved for one artist. With the way we were gathering potential material, the small space began to feel like a cluttered Cabinet of Wonders. Perhaps it was the inertia of the initial ambition for a joint exhibition, an empty space lingered waiting to be occupied by North Korean architects. This hypothetically empty space began to be occupied, at least physically, when I started to edit this catalogue. Given the task of organizing the disparate items, it became clear that the exhibition should be structured by concepts and not by authorship.

Sifting through the already burgeoning list of potential installations, we settled on four large themes—Reconstructing Life, Monumental State, Utopian
Tours, and Borders. Among them the first three bring the architecture of North and South Korea—historically, theoretically, and physically—into shared terms. “Reconstructing Life” begins with the immediate post-Korean War years when both North and South Korea are struggling to bring stability and growth to their societies. During the Korean War, many North Korean cities, including Pyongyang, were totally leveled by US bombing. The idea of architecture—the building of monuments, institutions, cities upon a tabula rasa—constituted a founding myth for the new socialist nation. If old Pyongyang was destroyed by bombs dropped from the sky, the historical landscape of Seoul was destroyed on the ground by bulldozers. For three decades, the mechanisms of development created by South Korea’s state-driven economy had grown at rates close and above 10%. In these peculiar conditions, “Reconstructing Life” takes a glimpse at the common and divergent ways the architectural environment of Seoul and Pyongyang functioned as mechanisms of memory and desire. For example, despite totally different mechanisms of reconstruction and development, both Koreas came to share the high-density form of apartment living. The analysis of the morphology of apartments in Seoul (by Marc Brossa) and Pyongyang (by Dongwoo Yim) illustrate that the apartment has become a communal symbol for both the South Korean middle-class and the classless inmin (people) of North Korea. At the same time, as Changmo Ahn points out in his comparison of Seoul and Pyongyang, compared to the city-beautiful plan based Pyongyang, Seoul is still more a hybrid city. For Seoul, MOTOElastic’s Borrowed City, Moon Hoon’s self-claimed doodlings, and the idea that “all that remains are the photographs” bring forth the images of memory and desire entangled with this hybrid structure. On the other hand, one of the most striking statements that came out of our editorial discussions was Ahn’s declaration that “there are no back alleys in Pyongyang.” But what does this mean? Does it mean that there are no informal sectors in Pyongyang? Instagrams show glimpses of everyday life but they are uncomfortable in the sense that they provide the furtive pleasures of the voyeur. As a curator, the absence of North Korea seemed evident even as the exhibition space was filling up.

Such curatorial challenges were no more evident than in “Monumental State” where the disparate positions and emotions involved in idolized building—delusion, condescendence, sympathy, loathing, confusion—had to be brought together. Our curatorial conviction was that architecture, mediated by film makers and photographers such as Che Onejoon, Alessandro Belgiojoso, Charlie Crane, Maxime Delvaux, Philipp Meuser, and Kyungsub Shin, would be able to make sense of this gathering. But again, what kind of architecture are we talking about? It is clear that the ideological divide brought forth very different visions of architecture and the architect. While the North Korean architect is bestowed with the heroic task of building a socialist society, the architect in South Korea—represented by Kim Swoo Geun, its most famous and important architect—imbued with the ideal of individual creativity, was to serve the requirements of the developmental state. Hence, the historical formation of architecture in both Koreas is structured by contradiction. On the one hand, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il understood the power and role of monumental architecture. On the other hand, as Jelena Prokopljević and Nick Bonner point out, the architect-author figure in North Korea fades out as part of the mandate of the “great” leaders. In the case of South Korea, Jong Gun Lee, in wry fashion, writes of its architecture as a “strange” entity: caught between the bureaucratic and capitalist requirement of being an underling to real estate development, on the one hand, and on the other, the ideology of the creative individual based on the western model of the architect.

Finally, in “Borders,” we come to a theme in which absence becomes both most literal and most abstract. Exemplified by the DMZ, it expands the exhibition’s architectural concerns to the spatial and physical boundaries that separate and mediate the two Koreas. We see, draw, and analyze, but the DMZ remains the ultimate no-man’s land, the emblem of political and natural human absence. At the same time, as the installations and research on the DMZ by Yehre Suh and Dongseki Kim show, even this seemingly impenetrable spatial divide contains an array of permeable elements and forces that will become the basis of a more interconnected future; that is, when the DMZ becomes a special link rather than a barrier. Along with such ecological and historical analysis, artistic interventions and novelistic essays—conceptual, naïve, poetic, and provocative—present the DMZ as a potential space of connection.

Among the main themes of the exhibition, “Utopian Tours” is an exception in its focus on North Korea. During the early research on North Korea, we came upon an online webzine for architectural tours in Pyongyang. It was an eye-opening discovery because in the website, we found an approach to North Korea that had none of the patronizing and condescending attitudes—what Cho in our meetings would call a “Christopher Columbus Syndrome”—too often evident in those with some form of familiarity with North Korea. It turned out that Nick Bonner, co-founder of Koryo...
Iours in 1993, was a filmmaker, a collector, and a friend of many North Korean artists and architects. It was the goal of this exhibition to lay bare the radically mediated relation between North and South Korea, and because of Nick Bonner, we think that it has been achieved with humor and affection.

Among the many works and artists that entered the exhibition, two came to have a special status in its narrative. Never incorporated into the main themes, they functioned as levers of sense and ambition. One was the exhibition space itself, the architecture of the Korean Pavilion. As documented through an interview with the architect Seok Chul Kim in the chapter "Birth of the Korean Pavilion," the Korean pavilion in the Giardini was a product of hopes for a new relation between the two Koreas. With the first summit of the two Koreas in sight, Nam June Paik's idea of a joint North and South exhibition to inaugurate the Korean Pavilion did not seem like a distant dream. However, the sudden death of Kim II-sung in the summer of 1994 dashed any possibility of a joint exhibition. Fortunately, the momentum for the Korean Pavilion survived Kim's death and it remains to this day the last national pavilion within the Giardini. The Korean Pavilion can thus be seen as both symptom and agent of the Korean Peninsula, as both archetype and anomaly of the tumultuous global trajectory of the past 100 years.

The other inspiration came from Yi Sang and his poem "Ogamdo"—translated into English, "Crow's Eye View," the namesake of the exhibition. "Crow's Eye View" was a serial poem written in Korean and published in the daily newspaper Joseon Joongang between July 24 and August 8, 1934. It was intended as a more extensive serial but was discontinued because of fierce protests by the newspaper's readership. "Ogamdo," the original Korean for "Crow's Eye View," is a phonetic, semantic, and visual play on the general term jogamdo, which means bird's-eye view. The Chinese character for the Crow (鴉; pronounced "o" in Korean) is created by simply taking out a short stroke from the face of the bird character (鳥; pronounced "jo" in Korean). Yi Sang had in fact written a poem titled "Jogamdo" in 1929. Yi Sang's later choice of the crow over the bird is deliberate. Its relentless movement and repetition—modernist mechanisms par excellence—ends up frustratingly as a dead end. Yet the performative effect and productivity of the "Crow's Eye View" are undeniable. They can be read in this very catalogue, where graphic designers Sulki and Min transfigure and transform the poem so effectively in conveying the multivalent possibilities of a difficult separation.

Though we assumed that the focus would be the half-century after the Korean War, the idea of understanding modernity and its formation throughout the twentieth century brought Yi Sang to the fore of the exhibition's narrative. Yi Sang is more the convincing figure because he was an architectural aspirant. It was an ambition virtually impossible for a Korean to realize under Japanese colonial role. He was born Kim Hae-gyong in 1910, the year Joseon was officially annexed by Japan. He attended a three-year polytechnic in architecture, had noticeable visual talent, and had aspirations to be a modern architect. He admired Le Corbusier and was enamored by Charlotte Perriand. As a clerk in the architecture department of the Japanese Colonial Government, his immediate reality was much more mundane. In 1931, perhaps as compensation for a frustrated architectural career, he began his literary career with a contribution to the Japanese architectural journal Chosen to Kenchiku. Yi Sang died in April 1937 from tuberculosis in the Tokyo Imperial University Hospital. He spent his short 28-year life entirely under Japanese colonial rule and thus did not experience the division of Korea.

Through Yi Sang and the birth of Korean Pavilion, I believed that we were drawing a series of historical cycles—knowingly and admittedly incomplete and unstable. From Yi Sang to Kim Swoo Geun, to Seok Chul Kim, and to our commissioner Minsuk Cho; a chain of architectural desire is deliberately linked to form a certain historical consciousness. Since the 1980s, Yi Sang has been considered one of the most important figures in modern Korean literature. In North Korea, on the other hand, Yi Sang is barely a footnote in the annals of Juche literature. Clearly, we are limited to a South Korean conception of modernity. This in itself is not a problem. What is troubling, at least to this curator, is that after all the research and exposure to things North Korean, I still know very little of North Korean architecture. After all the work, all the conceptual and historical wrangling, filling the Korean Pavilion with fascinating work, the empty space left for North Korea remains empty. That was why we thought ourselves to be the crows—birds with one eye blinded—in the first place. Crows do not acquire the all-seeing eye because of one exhibition. If particular exhibitions and books are supposed to represent a particular reality, then we have done our job. Rather than displays of positive knowledge, the Korean Pavilion is filled with empty spaces.