POSITIVE FRAGMENTS
The ALLEGORICAL LANGUAGE of CONTEMPORARY KOREAN ARCHITECTURE
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"Chimneys and smog, enormous stone embankments, the frightening speed of highways, city landscapes that can scarcely be called a city, monotonous spaces, the flood of images, absurd regulations: these are the conditions that have created and bred the architecture of KYWC. They are not works that present new dreams borne out of the disillusionment of our cities: they rather acknowledge our urbanity, seeking hope within its conditions. They are works that wish to inscribe the patterns of our lives, not from concepts and languages, but from the proportions and materials of houses, from structure and methods of construction, from walls and courtyards, and from stone and wood."1 —KIM SEUNG HOY, "Dream of a Winter Tree," 2002

Architecture is a complex mixture of materiality and space, politics and practices, images and language. Reading this passage by Kim Seung Huy, one of the most important architects now working in Korea, we discover a particular configuration of this complexity; it is a carefully crafted statement about the relation between the difficult social and urban realities of his work, the role of language and concepts, and an array of architectural elements, methods, and ideas. It may be construed as a typical moment of conflict for the modern architect: the chaotic conditions of architectural practice and the autonomous principles of architecture. Striking, however, is the very deliberate denial of the role of language in the mediation of this opposition. Despite his own eloquence, Kim is assuming that the role of language is absent in the construal of both the haphazard conditions of his work and the disciplinary formation of his architecture. This seemingly self-contradictory statement is in fact quite convincing because a history of the most basic concepts of Korean architecture has yet to be written. Though in the Western tradition we may understand the meaning of proportion, tectonics, and type—key terms for Kim Seung Huy—they are unstable, evolving concepts within the context of Korean architecture.2 To put it bluntly, there has always been authority and power in Korean architecture, but there is no viable language of authority that has been established to either follow or move against.

This problematic extends to the task at hand. If it is the goal of this essay to describe the work of Kim Seung Huy and his contemporaries, where does one find the language? If one were to follow the structure of Kim's statement, the language would have to oscillate between a description of an urban reality virtually devoid of architectural language and an array of well-known architectural entities. Adopting a meta-language would be equally unacceptable, at least for this author, because its legitimacy would be historically and theoretically unconvincing. In the language of architecture, as in all language, there is an assumption of grammar, conventions, and cultural codes that take a long time to be established. How does one describe an architecture within a landscape that scarcely sustains such a language? Moreover, how is such an architecture produced?

These are the paradoxical questions that must be asked of Korean architecture. It is a condition created by the fundamental cultural, social, and political disruptions of Korea's modern history. In approaching contemporary


culture in Korea, we must always remind ourselves of this disjunctive history. Powerless in the struggle among imperialist forces, Korea was annexed by Japan in 1910. It was around this period that the term *keonchuk*—initially a Japanese translation of the English term “architecture”—began to be used in Korea. This was by no means an indication of the beginning of modern architecture in Korea. While suppressing the older craft-based traditions of architectural production, the Japanese had little inclination to train Koreans to become modern architects. The task of building Korea up as part of the Japanese empire was left to Japanese and Western architects. During the colonial period, few Koreans were able to practice as architects, and their legacy rarely continued after the end of Japanese rule in 1945.

The beginning of a modern Korean architecture was further delayed with the eruption of the Korean War five years later. In the aftermath of its devastation, in one of the poorest countries in the world, there were barely 20 individuals who could be called architects. Among those few who constituted an architectural intelligentsia, many died during the war or went North to the communist regime. Architecture, in the modern Western notion of the profession and discipline, could scarcely be said to exist.

It is not that Korea does not possess an architectural history. Indeed, it has a beautiful tradition of building and landscape that can be traced back two millennia. From at least the fourteenth century, led by Confucian literati and Buddhist monks, court officials, and carpenters, Korea’s architectural traditions understood building more as part of a political landscape than as an independent artistic discipline. Before the twentieth century, the architect and the concept of architecture did not exist in Korea. Even during the past half-century, a dynamic period of economic growth and democratization, architecture has been an unstable, continuously evolving body of knowledge and practices. During this period, generations of architects were trained not through disciplined and theoretical learning but through intense and wide-ranging practice, an education accumulated on-site and in the office and thus fragmented, figurative, and virtually devoid of theoretical language. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are just starting to evolve the narratives that try to make sense of the present and its relation to an estranged past.

This sense of radical separation from the past is not unique to Korea. In the Western literary tradition, allegory is the essential modus operandi within this historical condition. It is an attitude, a methodology, and an impulse that sustain, sometimes simultaneously, two opposing directives. On the one hand, allegory is employed by a conservative tradition that accords stable, even transcendent, meanings to figures and symbols. The mixing of Christian, classical, and secular iconic and narrative traditions is the most obvious example. On the other hand, there is also a movement within allegory that assumes a disruption of tradition, a direction highlighted by the theoretical concerns of Postmodernism. Noting its “allegorical impulse,” Craig Owens underscored its capacity to “rescue from oblivion that which threatens to disappear.”

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3 — In 1922, the Japanese colonialists established the Kyeong Seong Polytechnic, generally considered the first modern school of architecture in Korea. The goal of the school was to educate midlevel bureaucrats and technicians who would work not as architects but as civil servants in the colonial government.

“Allegory first emerged in response to a ... sense of estrangement from tradition; throughout its history it has functioned in the gap between a present and a past which, without allegorical reinterpretation, might have remained foreclosed. A conviction of the remoteness of the past, and a desire to redeem it for the present—these are its two most fundamental impulses.”

Even in its most conservative sense, allegory assumes the interpretation of a text in terms of something outside that text. It is not that there is no depth to its pieces; they are merely scattered in different, often unexpected places. Allegory is a mode of creativity that assumes gaps and breaks within and outside of the text. Pieces and elements are brought in from often incongruent sources. Allegory is hence a discourse of fragments. Walter Benjamin, the most important modern theorist of allegory, went so far as to define the practice of allegory as “the piling up of fragments without a goal.”

At the same time, fragments coexist with a system, or more precisely, the assumption of authoritative systems. In Western discourse, we must understand that fragments are created by the disruption of cultural tradition, but not necessarily the breakdown of the system itself. The allegorical force of the fragment is effective because the system still asserts its authority. With the disruptive experience of the last century, it is the notion of fragment that furnishes the starting point for a narrative of modern architecture in Korea. Yet we must acknowledge that not all fragments are the same. It will be the task of this essay to illustrate the different ways that the fragments and elements, the systems and traditions, of Korean architecture have evolved during the past half-century.

**FRAGMENTS OF EXPERIENCE**

After the 1960s, if architecture in Korea continued to be considered mostly a reflection of technical expertise, it was the fragment that began to give it symbolic meaning. One can pinpoint a specific moment—the 1966 competition for the National Museum—when cultural authority was given to a contemporary building through the adoption of fragments. Five years had passed since the new military government had come to power. Amid the uproar created by its reparation settlement with Japan, it began to adopt a conservative cultural policy that relied on highly selective reappropriations of the past. The official directives were specific. For the National Museum, the competition brief required design entries to adopt “pieces or whole monuments of the past.” This approach to the fragment as a piece of nostalgia continued well into the 1980s. Though that decade witnessed an immense expansion of the private sector, bringing with it opportunities to build increasingly large commercial projects, state monuments such as the Seoul Arts Center and the Independence Hall continued to define the architectural discourse of the time. Backed by authoritarian power, the architectural fragment, now colored by the imported language of Postmodernism, continued to construe narratives of national identity and authentic experience.

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7 — See *Space* 4, February 1987, for records of the competition brief.
It was only after the 1990s, with the greater freedom gained through democratization, that the discursive boundaries of architecture began to expand. With restrictions on foreign travel lifted in the late 1980s, young architects began to see first-hand the many monuments that they had experienced only as rough images in magazines and pirated books. This did not immediately lead to the formation of a systematic discipline or theoretical discourse. The role of the fragment would have to continue. For a generation of Korean architects who sought meaning in their architecture, the task was to bring fragments—whether pieces from a fourteenth-century Buddhist temple or an impression from a visit to La Tourette—into some kind of workable, powerful whole. It was the evening light of the western wall, the deep smell of a wooden floor, the spatial emptiness of a sculptured figure that had to be somehow reincarnated in the work. Without specific traditions and disciplinary systems to work with, these fragments were brought into their work as part of their subjective experience. This kind of practice may be called allegorical because in the hands of these architects, to again borrow from Craig Owens, such "appropriated imagery" would become "something other" in the new project. For the generation of Joh Sung Yong, Chung Guyon, Min Hyunsik, Kim Incheurl, and Seung H-Sang—to mention some of the architects whose works are included in this book—the search for sense and authenticity was the key to their practice. By appropriating fragments as the objects of experience, they became the first generation of Korean architects who willingly talked and wrote about their own architecture.

For example, Seung H-Sang’s Hyehwa Cultural Center is a fascinating case study in the architectural formation of fragments. It is a building that creates constantly shifting views of its composition. Depending on the path of approach, it can be construed as a tripartite composition of base, column, and roof; an assembly of glass boxes, sunken gardens, empty steps, and horizontal platforms; or finally, a cliff-like monument clad in Cor-ten steel. Hyehwa Center is, however, not merely a clever scenic play. It is a building of overlapping plans, intersecting elements, and varied ground levels—that is, a building of multiple architectures. Though its composition draws from several basic plan types, its space is formed through the intersection of horizontal and vertical elements. With this intersection, the elements undergo a metamorphosis. The sunken garden becomes an interior courtyard, the roof transforms into a platform, the open stairway extends into a deep and narrow corridor, and so on. These pieces are detachable and interchangeable. For example, the entrance colonnade is an essential part of the experience of the whole building, yet it is a fragment that can be taken out without breaking up the whole composition.

The same can be said of the glass boxes, the ramp and the bridge, and even the roof-plateau. At the center of the building is a stepped void, a remarkable empty theater. These are not scenes that are contrived toward a climax. They are composed around what is seemingly the center

of the plan, in French academic terminology, the point, where the whole building comes together. But this is not the center. There are always multiple cognitive and sensuous adjacencies that disrupt their movement toward a subjective monumentality. It is a stage that is monumentally central, but at the same time dispersed and fragmented. This same architectural formation may be described in a reversed narrative. We could say that despite its assembled nature, despite the constant shift in horizontal and vertical movement, Seung is seeking a sense of monumental space. He is seeking to build meaning out of these sensuous fragments.9

The presence of the fragment can also be found in Kim Incheurl’s Urban Hive [p. 134], a remarkably monolithic, consistent building that would seem a contrast to the Hyehwa Center. All four sides of the building are identically construed as the concrete structure of this 17-story office tower. Though this tectonic exterior provides a visual anchor to one of the busiest corners of Seoul, conceptually the building is conceived as a visual frame that looks out toward the city. It is the architect’s acknowledgment of the subjective views from the interior, the selected views of the great metropolis of Seoul, that motivates the architecture. Its formation is more clearly understood when contrasted to Mario Botta’s Kyobo Building, which faces Urban Hive. This handsome brick-clad skyscraper is a building with a front, back, and sides as well as a bottom, middle, and top. It presents this disciplined configuration and anthropomorphic tradition despite an urban context that asks for a building that responds in equal fashion to all directions. The Urban Hive relies on the vast, haphazard yet monotonous landscape of which it is a part. Though realized through a clear tectonic and formal logic, as an experience and as an idea, it is the multiple and fragmented views toward the city that make the building so compelling. Rather than some horizon that is assumed to exist inside and outside of the subject, rather than an analogy between things and the world, it is the collection of the myriad views of its inhabitants that define its architectural formation.

FRAGMENTS AS SYSTEMS

Entering the new millennium, the fragment continued to sustain a forceful role in the work of the next generation of Korean architects. Though barely a decade may separate them from the previous generation of Joh, Kim, Min, and Seung, this group distinguished themselves from the latter’s more subjective and ideological attitudes. Many received their postgraduate educations in Europe and the United States—the first time that such a large group had studied abroad. Opening their independent practices during the late 1990s, Kim Jun Sung, Cho Byoungsoo, Kim Jong Kyu, Kim Hun, Suh Hailim, Kim Young Joon, Kim Seung Hoy, Choi Moon Kyu, Jang Yoon Gyu, and Cho MinSuk—to mention only those whose work is included in this book—demonstrated an apparent consistency

9 — For an extensive analysis of Hyehwa Cultural Center, see chapter 5 of my Sensuous Plan (Seoul: Dongnyok, 2007).
and methodology that were new to the Korean scene. In contrast to previous generations, who often took an oppositional view of the existing city, they were more comfortable acknowledging the forces that shaped their architecture. Kim Young Joon has argued that unlike earlier practitioners who "projected their individual view onto architecture," he was inclined to "bring things from the outside that would influence and change" his own view. In tune with the international trends of the time, the interest shifted from the creative subject to objective conditions, from fragments and elements to systems and processes. I would argue, however, that the fragment continued to exert its enigmatic presence.

Within this generation, the work of Cho Minsuk and Mass Studies provides a line of demarcation in the tense relation between fragments and systems. Unlike earlier Korean architects who, at the theoretical level, situated themselves against the forces of the market, Mass Studies confronts what are deemed its central characteristics. The first point of attack is what Cho calls the "systematic." In architectural terms, this consists of the manipulation of the flat-slab system of building Korean high-rise apartments. Since its emergence in the late nineteenth century, the flat slab has been the basic architectural mechanism of economic efficiency, form-making, and theoretical discourse. In the Korean context, Cho Minsuk is one of the first to make it an explicit part of architectural and discursive production.

The second point of attack is what he calls "heterogeneity." In contrast to the superficial application of design elements that seeks to create an instant landmark, Cho argues for an "alternative social content and potential for true difference in this market-driven, highly dense urban context." Cho's strategy brings two realities—the simultaneously regimented and irrational logic of systemic production and symbolic desire—to invent a practical and creative discipline. To put it differently, he has identified necessities and turned them into a commitment: "We attempt to produce a building systematically, without creating a homogeneous environment, and aim to create heterogeneity without manufacturing a superficial identity." It is a logic that he has called "systematic heterogeneity." Through an attitude that is neither affirmation nor negation, Mass Studies has begun to theorize an architecture of high density within the specific conditions of the Korean metropolis.

Considered separately, the manipulation of the flat slab and the search for an authentic symbolism is not new. What is striking is the way these architectural formations meet, the way they intertwine to create self-enclosed organizations. In Boutique Monaco [p. 102], two systems—the differentiated slab system of the private residential units and the territorial, structural, and formal system of the lower public area—meet as if two completely indifferent fragments are juxtaposed. With their strong architectural logic intact, they remain fragments in the urban context. In the work of Mass Studies, systems become fragments, and fragments themselves are devised into systems. This kind of work is distinct from earlier proposals for high-density architectural organization such as Fumihiko Maki's propositions for "collective form" or the contem-


porary large-scale urban formations of BIG. If the latter formations typically expand and contract through the multiplication and division of elements, the possibility of working with such consistencies is rarely afforded to the Korean projects of Mass Studies. Cho shares many of the sensibilities of recent diagrammatic and landscape processes—systems-oriented approaches that consider fragments and elements as historical and preconceived barriers to new solutions. At the same time, he confers potential value to his enigmatic figures. Within the regimentation and arbitrariness of Seoul’s environment, the “systematic” and the “heterogeneous” are reconfigured into evolving allegorical figures that sustain, at different moments, a spatial aesthetic, a tectonic order, and a will to community.

FRAGMENT AS NECESSITY AND COMMITMENT

Theory, in the Western sense of the term, implies distance. Distance creates the space that allows one to think and talk about ideas and things that go beyond the description of immediate situations. This distance can be created with different kinds of language. Rem Koolhaas’s Delirious New York, one of the most influential works of recent decades, chooses to retrieve the irrational creativity of high-density environments from a seemingly logical formation of capitalism. His later statement that implores us to “fuck context” is a passionate annunciation of distance from an authoritative formation embedded in the architecture of the given environment. Unlike the early Koolhaas of Delirious New York, Korean architecture does not require a psychoanalytical language of hidden desires. It is already and necessarily part of this passion play. To adapt Koolhaas’s colloquialism, it already works in a context where there is none to fuck or a context that has already been fucked.

It must be underscored that there is no sense of melancholy toward this fragmented condition. In the Korean context, the fragment does not assume the death of a tradition. Speaking of the Western monument and the ruin, Kurt Forster has written that “the idea of the fragment arises not from the gesture of salvaging a piece of the whole, but from disregard or even denial of the value represented by integral works.” Allegory in Korean architecture neither tries to salvage some sense of a holistic tradition nor denies the value of the canonic work. We may thus understand why collage was never an important aspect of its art and architecture. It has never been clear what it is that must be torn away or cut up. To use Manfredo Tafuri’s metaphor, the “war-surplus material...discarded on the battlefield after the defeat of the Modern movement,” was never available to Korean architects because there never was a modern movement. Hence there is no idea of its death or defeat. Korean architecture will often adopt seemingly outdated concepts and elements not because of a belief in their theoretical validity but because they have never been tested in the Korean condition. Here, fragmentation is neither technique nor aesthetics. What I call the positive fragment is a mode of language, a necessary part of practice, and a phenomenon of everyday experience.

The language of Korean architecture can be very simple and it can be very complex. It can be simple because reality is already chaotic, and all that language needs to do is describe it. It is complex because this language, which necessarily sustains a certain order, cannot assume a cool distance attained through theoretical consistency. Contemporary Korean architecture is at its best when the work sustains both this simplicity and complexity. Its anxiety and energy derives from the fact that it is the result of both necessity and commitment. It is thus neither affirmation nor deconstruction, the two polar ideas of Western allegory. Yet I choose to call it allegorical because the constructed fragments are employed less for interpretation and more as invention—of both buildings and concepts. Unlike elements, the identity of fragments is secured with incomplete and often contradictory evidence. Fragments, by their very nature, divulge the gaps and inconsistencies of their assemblage. The positive fragment, by necessity, must take advantage of these gaps. It is these productive gaps that drive the dynamic of a different kind of relation between words and things.