

## Two Houses in Seoul

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**“We are inverted utopians. While utopians cannot make what they envisage, we cannot envisage what we are making.”**

Günter Anders

Seoul is a megapolis that is located within a two-hour flight from two other megapolises: Tokyo to the east and Beijing to the west. The city of Seoul occupies a particular spatial niche, just like Korea’s unique geopolitical location. If Tokyo has elevated its state of ultimate urban chaos that peaked decades ago to an art form, continually refining it microscopically and intricately reinventing itself, Seoul’s landscape is still marked by a primitive dynamism. While Beijing plows ahead with an ambitious, remarkably cohesive radicalism in a quest to add to its collection of architectural enigma (in time for the 2008 Olympics), Seoul feels ideologically spent and jaded by the economic reality.

### **Hilberseimer’s Dream: The Average “Salary-Man’s” Spatial House**

Outside of city-states, Korea is now the most urbanized country in the world. Over 80% of the country’s 48 million people currently reside in urban areas, and the figure is expected to exceed 90% by the year 2030. Seoul is filled with architecture that, in effect, has been prodigiously commodified and branded by a market economy. With 16,000 persons per square kilometer, Seoul is the most densely populated city on the planet—five times the population density of Los Angeles and 1.5 times that of New York City. (Area: 605.40 Km, Population: 10, 300,000, Density: 17,009 People/Km as of 2005.) Seoul has surpassed Tokyo and Hong Kong on the list of the world’s costliest cities to live in, second only to Moscow. In this present-day Seoul, approximately 80% of its residents live in apartments, which Korean refer to as “apart” and comprise 98% of recent residential construction). The wealthiest Koreans voluntarily exile themselves to high-rise apartment buildings that boast a Floor Area Ratio of 1000%. Presumably, the privileged class does so not, for the most efficient use of space in a small country but rather because the apartment has proven itself to be an incredibly efficient source of profit. As a result, the apartment has become the most coveted living space in Korea—across all socioeconomic strata—for its investment value rather than for its use value. Even the average *salaryman* toils away to attain this dream, a utopia for the new middle-class nuclear family: an apartment in central Seoul. The reality is that our *salaryman* could save his entire paycheck for thirty years and still not be able to afford such an apartment.

On the surface, the Korean apartment may resemble Hilberseimer’s proposal that he developed in Europe in the early part of the 20th century. However, it does not take long to recognize that the Korean apartment is one of the most striking examples of transmutations of iconography or ideology that has been imported from the west. While Hilberseimer’s original focus was on egalitarian distribution and efficient production of residential space for the working class, his vision in Korea has been unaccountably transformed into an emblem of the new middle class nuclear family’s elusive fantasy, with any divergence from substance and intent obscured and achieving spatial homogeneity through endless repetition. Often the only apparently distinguishing features of these residential structures are

the brands names designated by their suppliers (usually construction companies), which play a significant role in determining property values. Logos comprised of euphemistic English words such as “Green,” “Park,” “View,” and “Palace” adorn this architecture of restrained utilitarianism and a rationalism extreme to the point of being post-human. These Korean Hilberseimer apartments are featured heavily in advertisements, and the fantasies repeated in mass media have conditioned wage earners so effectively that mere logos can elicit a Pavlovian response. Such fantasies have helped fuel the frenetic pace of Seoul, an impatient city with residents who work the longest annual average work hours of the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) nations at 2,380 hours per person.

At a certain point, the average *salaryman* may come to accept an alternative to his dream of a Seoul residence and settle in one of the satellite communities that could require a daily roundtrip commute of three hours. The house, the spatial home that he acquires would likely be in a Hilberseimer apartment complex with the same brand name and appearance as its counterparts in Seoul. The scenery in Korean suburbs closely resembles the neighborhoods of central Seoul, and these so-called “bedtowns” have a comparable population density, thus perpetuating the illusion that their residents are part of a big city--a virtue, perhaps, that distinguishes them from suburbs in the west. However, in the process of achieving his compromised dream, Korea has become an unfamiliar place to the *salaryman*: a country with the world’s lowest birthrate (1.08 children per woman of childbearing age, a rapidly graying population, and a divorce rate that rivals the United States’, with one out of three marriages ending in divorce. Consequently, even when our average *salaryman* finally arrives at his middle-class nuclear family utopia, he may discover that the promised land is not what he expected and that he himself has contributed to the extreme social changes.

## **Flâneur in the Digital Age: A Homeless Man’s Temporal House**

By definition, a homeless man in Seoul does not own a spatial house, a physical location to call home, but he can instead occupy the largest space available in Seoul--the entire city--as his residence, one instance, one space at a time. A plethora of 24-hour establishments that fill a variety of needs are scattered throughout the city to serve as spontaneous, temporary “homes.” He can wake up on a warm heated floor trimmed with jade in a public bath’s sleep cell, perhaps to the sound of snoring from a nearby office worker who got too drunk the previous night and missed the last train to his home in the suburbs. If he chooses, the homeless man can work out in the exercise room or take a yoga class in the bathhouse before taking his morning shower. In addition to bath facilities, bathhouses often contain sleep lounges, fitness facilities, restaurants, Internet cafes, karaoke rooms, movie theaters, comic book reading rooms, performance spaces and more, supplementing all kinds of leisure and entertainment in a remarkable example of spatial convergence. For a modest fee, one can easily spend the entire day inside this artificial oasis without ever emerging outside. If our urban flâneur does decide to leave the bathhouse, he can easily take care of breakfast at one of the 24-hour convenience stores situated on almost every block. He can buy one of the prepackaged meals (at a 50% discount if he takes advantage of final expiration sales), warm it in the store’s microwave and consume it at a corner counter reserved for that purpose.

The vast majority of Korean adults (and quite a few children) own mobile telephones, and fierce competition among service providers translates to relatively affordable prices for subscribers. Without a permanent address, a mobile phone is instrumental in keeping the homeless man connected to the rest of society. A mobile phone could also be an essential tool in his economic pursuits, to maintain a minimal standard of living. The recent inception of subway messenger services in Seoul is a prime example. Unlike the preexisting “quick service” deliveries speeding around town on motorcycles, the subway messengers utilize public transportation, requiring more time but at about half the cost of motorcycle deliveries. A person needs only a mobile phone, a subway pass, and enough strength to carry a maximum weight of three kilograms to qualify as a subway messenger; a significant number of retirees seek such messenger work. Even a homeless person can respond to a dispatch from the central office, if he is near the designated location, and amble over at his own pace to pick up a delivery. His wages increase in proportion to the number deliveries he completes, but since three or four deliveries are sufficient to cover the bare minimum for a day’s room and board, he need not expend himself further if he does not desire to. He can wander aimlessly like a member of the leisure class, maintaining the

freedom and ease of a flâneur, while digital communications technology allows him to be a member of the working class--multitasking and assuming multiple roles.

His social life is most active not in "real" space, or fixed locations, but in real time: the virtual space of the Internet. These activities can take place in one of the ubiquitous, inexpensive Internet cafés dotting the streets of Seoul, or at a complimentary computer station in what is referred to as "brand spaces" that are currently proliferating in urban environments like shopping malls. Devoted to corporate marketing, the space is comprised of product advertisements and seemingly blurs the boundaries between public and private. Koreans are the global leaders in Internet usage, averaging eighteen hours of web surfing a week per person, with the highest penetration rate for high-speed Internet connection (70% of the population). In this environment, the homeless man can readily visit his homepage on Cyworld (a popular online community to which one out of seven Koreans belong), upload photos from his mobile camera phone to "decorate" his virtual room, and surf his ring of Cyworld friends as a member of a community, giving him a sort of virtual existence and sense of belonging. Occasionally, online socializing may lead to offline connections and perhaps to a situation requiring more privacy. In such cases, one of the countless "love hotels" that rent rooms in four-hour increments are available throughout Seoul. It would not be too outrageous to speculate that the sharp increase in the number of Internet users, motels, and divorces over the last ten years were somehow related.

## **Envisaging**

The physical environments in Seoul that the two contrasting characters above occupy as houses can be divided into two categories. Firstly, there is the white-collar *salaryman's* Hilberseimer dream, wherein extensive, infinite repetition of paranoid activities leads him to capitalism's ultimate conclusion, the house of Nowhere. Secondly, the house of Temporal criteria is contained in the process of capitalization by the radically new, schizophrenic methods that are exemplified by the transmuted flâneur, whose multitasking abilities are enabled by digital technology. Seoul is a place in which these two types of temporal/spatial conditions continually interact to weave a tight, intricate organism.

Practically speaking, most of the people who live in Seoul occupy as their house a specific temporal/spatial point amidst the variety of interwoven transmutations of time/space occupied by the two extreme characters we observed above. Until recently, simplistic market demographic classifications prevailed; a dichotomous view that divided the population into a majority comprised of nuclear families and a minority of those who were not a part of such units. Presently, however, Seoul's constituents are diverging and differentiating themselves in a wide variety of ways. I believe the new diversification, though limited, is the only reason to be optimistic about Seoul's future.

The salaryman's futile Sisyphian movement toward an unreachable goal and the transmuted flâneur's transgressive labor--most of Seoul's constituents occupy a place somewhere in between the two extremes. For them, the city is a place where reverie and nightmare are constantly interchanging, barely distinguishable. Would it be impossible to envisage that, in some leftover niche still existing in this meticulously interwoven network of time and space, there is yet another mode of occupation?