KOREAN MODERNISM, MODERN KOREAN CITYSCAPES, AND MASS HOUSING DEVELOPMENT: CHARTING THE RISE OF AP’AT’Ü TANJI SINCE THE 1960S

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ABSTRACT

Completely unknown to Korean city-dwellers before the 1960s, large apartment complexes (ap’at’ux tanji) dominate South Korean cityscapes today. How did Western-style housing blocks migrate to Korea on such a large scale? These are issues in the relationships between the development of ap’at’ux tanji and South Korean modernisation. The paper will examine these issues in a Korea context, through an analysis centred on a macro-geographic approach allowing the interpretation of the cityscape.

The paper will first discuss the origin of the ap’at’ux tanji model, which takes its roots in intertwined modernist Western theories filtered through Japanese mediation during the colonial period and then processed by local post-colonial power structures; the paper will then show how the ‘Koreanised’ apartment complex was a central element of fashioning the modern Korean cityscape and urban society during the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, the paper attempts to reconsider the usually Eurocentric concepts of ‘modernism’ and ‘modernity’.

1 INTRODUCTION

South Korean cities today are visually dominated by ap’at’ux tanji, or ‘apartment complexes’. While single-family homes made up nearly 90 percent of Seoul’s housing stock in 1970, their share had diminished to only 25 percent by 2000. During this same period, the share of apartment houses in the housing stock jumped from 4 percent to more

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1 This article is a revised and amended version of the paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in San Francisco in April 2006, under the title: ‘Korean Modernism, the Visual City and Mass Housing Production: Charting the Cycle of Ap’at’ux tanji (1950-1980)’. The author would like to thank Frank Hoffmann for inspiring the subject, and Kim Kwangok for all his comments.
than 50 percent. This overall increase of apartments was coupled with the emergence of giga-sized apartment complexes in most South Korean metropolises, especially in Seoul. With fewer than 50,000 residents, the apartment complex (grand ensemble) of Sarcelles, north of Paris, is considered a very large housing estate, but some Korean ap’at’ū tanji today house more than 100,000 (Chamsil, Seoul), or even 200,000 people (Haeundae, Pusan).

This phenomenon is particularly striking when one considers that, whereas apartment complexes are at the core of Korean urban architecture today, they were almost completely unknown to Korean city-dwellers in the early 1960s. At that time, cities, with their low skylines, presented in many residential areas an urban fabric of individual houses connected by a maze of narrow pedestrian alleys. These large apartment complexes—ap’at’ū tanji—thus gave rise to urban environments completely alien to traditional landscapes, while being key elements in the constitution of the modern Korean city.

What is the connection between these collective housing forms and modernist theories of the city formulated in Western countries during the first part of the 20th century? How has the tanji model progressively become one of the main normative visual traits of South Korean cities? How did Western-style housing blocks migrate to Korea on such a large scale and achieve such wide success among local populations? These questions are at the heart of the research I have undertaken in Seoul since the mid-1990s, on the transformation of the urban landscape and the city residential environment (Gelézeau 2003, 2007).

While my analysis refers to a Korean context and is limited in this paper to macro-geographical facts2 (the relationships between ap’at’ū tanji and urban construction), my approach is based on the theory of landscape interpretation, which considers the landscape an ‘outside layer of geographical reality’3 (Pitte 1983: 23) and thus a possible mediation in the understanding of the society connected to that particular landscape. In this perspective, a ‘landscape’, which can first be taken simply as the visual dimension of space seen by an observer, is more precisely defined as ‘a mass of signs characterizing a geographical

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2 Thus leaving aside in this paper the micro-geographical consequences of apartment development on the city-dwellers’ way of life. These aspects are otherwise developed in the third sections of both of the following books: Séoul, ville géante, cités radieuses (Gelézeau 2003) and Ap’at’ū konghwaguk (Gelézeau 2007).

3 The original French wording is: ‘une pellicule de la réalité géographique’ (Pitte 1983: 23).