

Housing Construction and the Art of Dwelling: Korean case

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Today the capacity of Korean society to build housing has been greatly expanded. Does this mean that we are now capable of realizing the value of home? The meaning of home has a variety of dimensions including shelter, privacy, location, economic asset and root. This paper attempts to review housing construction in Korea with a focus on the last dimension, "root". It indicates happiness based on mutual affection and support, and source of one's identity and meaningfulness.

1. Housing Conditions

Until the 1960s, most Koreans lived in very poor quality housing. As of 1960, single-room households accounted for 28% of total households; those who were provided city water were 14%; households equipped with flush toilets were only 2.1%. Most houses were using firewood or charcoal briquette for heating and cooking. (National Statistical Office, 1960). More than half of total houses was built of mud as late as in 1970.

Housing construction was at a primitive stage. Most people had to build their own houses by hiring building workers or small builders. House builders were mostly chief workmen, usually master carpenters, heading several workers. They built houses for markets occasionally and on a small scale. Nationwide housing construction was between 60,000-80,000 units a year. Housing shortage was becoming also a problem as urban-rural migration accelerated. Many housing experts and architects believed that only mass construction of apartment housing could solve these problems.

40 years later, Korean housing construction industry developed into a capacity of building 600,000-700,000 units a year. Large construction companies are actively involved in. Apartments, which were almost non-existent before 1960, have become major housing types. As of 1998, 40% of total housing stock is now five- or higher-storied apartments and its proportion is rapidly increasing. Apartment complexes with magnificent appearance of 20- or higher-storied blocks are common scenes in large cities. The improvement of housing quality is remarkable. Most houses are equipped with flush toilets, regional or central heating systems, city water and city gases. The ratio of housing supply, once fallen to 70%, is now 92% and is rapidly increasing. Residential space per person increased by 2.5 times between 1970 and 1995. The dream of those housing experts and architects in the 1950s and 1960s thus seems to have been realized. (KNHC, 1999).

2. Housing Construction Market

Housing provision in Korea has been dependent upon speculative investment because of the government's repressive financial policy, a policy to concentrate financial resources into industrial development. Housing provision has to be financed by private funds. The expansion of new middle class has brought about growing demand for apartments and their savings have been the source of the private funds. Housing has been an important means of accumulating domestic wealth since it could be exchanged against money while maintaining or increasing in relative exchange value in the periods of rapid economic expansion and high inflation. Housing construction in Korea has thus been dependent upon people's speculative investment.

This system has produced houses that are easily exchangeable in the market rather than that meet specific needs of particular consumers. An anecdote instances the trend: when the government planned to provide housing for a group of disabled veterans in the early 1980s, they demanded not to design their houses for the handicapped but for ordinary households. They concerned that housing specifically designed for their use would have less exchange value in the market.

The conflictive relationship between housing developers and landowners has also affected housing construction. Once a new high-density development yields high surplus profits and land prices rise to a higher level, all other land where such high-density development is allowed is priced at the same or higher prices. This results in a higher land cost burden on later developers. The latter then follows the same or new ways of development that can finance high land prices. It conditions land prices and new house prices to affect each other resulting in a spiral rise in both. Increasing high density and high rise apartment complexes are a product of this conflictive process. In this process, housing, cities and even nature were commodified and became objects of speculation and consumption.

3. Problems

This housing construction practice has problems. The first is the way that housing construction exploits nature. Speculative investment has dictated housing construction to exploit nature increasingly in destructive ways. Forests and green areas were often recklessly bulldozed for high-rise apartment complexes destroying the topography and ecosystem of nature. Flooding of two small towns to the north of Seoul last and this summer is suspected to have been due to the environment-damaging development of apartment estates around the areas.

A statement made in the 1994 ACSA/AIA teachers_ seminar describes the situation at global level: "Architecture, once just a matter of style, is now a matter of survival.... After thousand years of building to protect ourselves from the environment, we are discovering that our designs are diminishing our health and well-being, as well as the carrying capacity of the planet Earth."(ACSA News, 1994: 51).

The problem of natural environment has already been a worldwide issue. Sustainable human settlement is an important part of Agenda 21 proposed by Habitat II. Sustainable construction has become a major research subject for international societies such as CIB. Ecological architecture, environment-friendly housing and sustainable construction are also the most popular subjects in seminars and conferences in Korea. The Housing Research Institute of Korea National Housing Corporation (KNHC) is conducting researches on environment-friendly housing and sustainable development. The Korean government announced "the Statement of Environmentally Friendly Construction" on June 6 this year, the World Environment Day.

The problem of natural environment is directly related to physical or physiological survival of humans, and environmental benefits and costs are now more accurately valued. This is why the environmental issue has become a matter of concern not only to particular groups of experts but also to the general public.

The second dimension is the quality of built environment. This is an issue similar to what is criticized against modern architecture. Modern architecture had legitimacy in that it pursued architecture for people rather than for styles. However, it began to weaken this legitimacy by presupposing that basic human needs are the same from the functional point of view and thus attaching importance to physiological needs while neglecting social and cultural needs. As they placed emphasis on technical efficiencies rather than human needs, they were criticized to have merely replaced the degradation and filth of the nineteenth-century industrial cities with the boredom of hygiene and unintelligible inhuman environment. (Lang, 1987). De-territorialization and placelessness are thus the words that describe modern cities as the diminishing importance of place and legibility of landscape results in 'a profound sense of loss and a corresponding deep nostalgia for the "world we have lost"' (Ellin, 1996)

In Korea, there were movements to make a public issue of the poor quality of built environment. In the mid-1990s, a group of young architects (called Gunmijoon) organized a movement to appeal the problem of built environment to the public. They described the present apartments as 'nomadic dwellings' in the sense that they are designed and constructed as such that it is difficult for dwellers to be rooted in. They criticize that "today's houses are only memorized in terms of housing sizes which have been indicators of social status of dwellers in Korea. 'Impoverished environment', 'inhuman life', 'despoiled neighborhood', 'despoiling settlements' are words they use to describe the present Korean housing environment (Group of Architects Preparing for the Future, 1994). Some government officials in charge of architecture and planning formulated a plan called "Urban policy for the 21st Century" to place stricter regulations on building and planning with the support of architects and planners who had a sense of crisis about deteriorating built environment in 1995.

The appeal of young architects was not successful in arousing immediate responses from the public. "The proposal for Urban Policy for the 21st Century" was not approved by the president. The reasons are multiple. Problems of built environment were recognized and discussed among limited group of architects, planners and environmentalists. The general public did not recognize the significance of the problem. The government housing policy was concerned mainly with the quantitative aspect of housing construction and thus the government worried that stricter building regulation would discourage housing construction. In this circumstance, business circles of housing construction could effectively lobby the plan dismissed.

Conflict is currently intensifying between the city government and resident cooperatives as developers in apartment redevelopment projects in Seoul. The city government wants to limit building densities at low level because the redevelopment of old low-density housing estates into higher density ones produces problems such as traffic congestion, overload on existing infrastructure and deterioration of landscape while the residents want maximum building density for more development gains. This illustrates the difficulties of managing built environment.

The third dimension of the problem is rather conceptual and ideal one while the above two problems are dealt with at some measurable and operational levels. It is an issue of home as "root". Heidegger said that dwelling is the capacity to achieve a spiritual unity between humans and things and thus "only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build". Homelessness in this sense does not mean simply lack of shelter. A much deeper crisis of homelessness is that many people have lost their roots and their connection to homeland, and found themselves cut off from all sources of spiritual nourishment. He observes that "the object-character of technological dominion" dictates the process of production and the delivery of the products by means of the market dissolving the humanness of man and the thinness of things into the calculated market and subjecting all beings to the trade of a calculation. As a result, he argues, we have lost our capacity to dwell. The problem, therefore, is to recover a viable homeland in which meaningful roots can be established. (Heidegger, 1971).

This notion of dwelling might have been realized in the pre-capitalist agricultural societies. Then is Heidegger's conception of dwelling simply irrelevant today? We cannot reverse the history; we cannot reject

or destroy the highly industrialized, modernist and capitalist world. And in the modern capitalist market society, the conception of home as root can be materialized when people as demanders in the market appreciate the types housing that can be a home as “root” and demand it in the market. Alternatively people as a political power can demand the state to provide such homes, or they as communities can help themselves to create their own homes. In any case popular understanding of the notion of dwelling becomes critical. Lack of popular support was the main source of the failure of the attempts to make the social issue of the problems of built environment.

4. Steps to Approach the Problem

I would here propose some measures or steps to approach these problems.

First, we have to spend greater efforts to find ways of translating the Heideggerian notion of dwelling into actual construction of housing. The discussion of Heidegger is extremely vague from the practitioners’ point of view. However this does not mean that his idea is irrelevant in practice.

In architecture and urban design, a search has been underway: a search for urbanity, a center, a usable past, a sense of community, a neighborhood, a vernacular, diversity, meaning, innocence, origins, roots, certainties, and heroes. These goals have been sought through the preservation or rehabilitation of old central cities, the building of new cities which resemble old ones, the cooperative movement and other grassroots social movement, as well as through a reassertion of traditional social values and institutions, particularly marriage, the family, and the religion. (Ellin, 1996)

Studies of traditional ways of housing construction could provide materials for learning the art of dwelling and translating it into actual housing construction. The Housing Research Institute of KNHC was conducting a research titled “Design Concepts and Elements of Traditional Korean Housing” to find some useful clues to housing types appropriate for the life of Korean people. (Unfortunately this research project is suspended due to lack of funds for a while).

Once we get concrete ideas, we can demonstrate them in the form of housing projects to the public. This will help people to understand what is good housing and places to live in and how they obtain them. This can be a new job of public housing agencies including the KNHC whose role is presently under reconsideration.

The next is education. We are now taught about the importance of and ways of treating natural environment from our childhood. The art of dwelling is no less important than this. Both are not simply a matter of technology but that of attitude, value and ideology. Thus we must be educated about the art of dwelling from childhood. This will help people as consumers, as community members or as political power, develop their ability to discern housing or living places that encourage their spiritual nourishment.

Social movement can be a way of encouraging people to participate in the creation of desired living places. Apartment Community Institute of the People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, a NGO established in the mid-1990, has organized apartment community movement. This movement aims at a wide range of goals including running of credit cooperative association and production cooperative association, experimentation of communal living, self-governing of housing estates, and running of facilities for communal use such as reading room for children. The institute runs a citizens’ school where they provide people with information and instructions on how to live in apartment estates as good neighbors, how to use or operate community facilities and how to participate in the management of the estates.

The movement is still limited to public rental apartment estates, that is, low-income settlements. And its objective is largely confined to helping people to realize their rights and responsibilities in the estates. However, it is important that the movement attempts to awaken people to the importance of places for communal living and even that of environmentally friendly settlements. These are elements of the art of dwelling. This type of community movement should be expanded.

Finally, these activities must be supported by policy. Housing policy in Korea has so far been obsessed with the number of houses. Only the material meaning of home is recognized in official government perceptions and constructions. Urban planning and design, aimed at controlling individual building construction in the context of cities or districts have often been overridden by the necessity of increasing the number of housing units. Regulations on building density, building height, building distances were relaxed to a significant degree during the late 1980s. This has resulted in the landscape of not only large cities but also rural towns overwhelmed by 20-storied or higher-storied apartment buildings. Housing policy must be changed into a policy for place rather than units of housing.

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