

2007.01

KNUA Dep. of Architecture

suptextua

THE OTHER PUBLIC SPACE: THE KOREAN '*-BANG*' CULTURE

Kwangsoo Kim



Seoul Velocity and its By-Products

The population of Seoul, the city that has served as the capital of Korea for the last 6 centuries, has exploded from a mere 900 thousand to an astounding 23 million in just the last fifty years. As unbelievable as it may seem, nearly half the entire population of the nation (48 million) lives there, making its density among the highest in the world. One may summarize the hectic life in Seoul by the term, "high-speed compressed development." Baudelaire's melancholic reflection that the face of a city changes faster than the human heart ¹⁾ is a natural phenomenon to Seoul citizens, no different from the changes of the seasons, as the lifespan of a building here is shorter than that of man.

If you are unaware of this unique and exceptional process and search the exterior of Seoul for its public spaces, you would find yourself fatigued by the congestion and discursive density of the city, and soon come to the rather deflating conclusion that there are none. In order to discuss the public space of Korea, the question should detour from "where are the public spaces?" to "where do the activities that belong in a public space happen?" You would also need the wisdom to excavate the closed spaces rather than the open spaces of the city, namely the unseen interior. The public acts of Korea seen from this point of view, and the unique spaces in which they are performed, make the observer ask, "are such acts and places really public?" and invite further questions of, "what exactly are these places and acts?" making you feel as if you've entered Alice's Wonderland.

In Korean cities, reality always went ahead of planning, and planning always ignored reality. The public space of Korea resides upon the "by-products" left behind by the frantic rush of modernization. The uniqueness of Korean public space starting in the late 1980s can be seen in such by-products. Apart from a few minor examples formed during the Japanese Colonial Occupation (1910-1945), Korean public space can be roughly divided into two major types of output. Interestingly enough, these outputs are mostly spontaneous rather than planned. The first

such coincidental outputs were the open spaces segregated from the active parts of the city, produced as by-products of infrastructural construction works. The urban spaces left behind by newly constructed or enlarged roads, and the terrace lands on a river produced through the need for flood control are such. These examples started receiving the attention of civil administrators in the 1990s, and started to turn into public spaces. The transformation of a by-product of infrastructural construction into public space is not something exceptional in fact, it can often be seen in western nations. What I am most interested in, and the subject of this paper, is the second type of public space, namely "bang", a uniquely Korean indoor space. It may be a strain to define "bang" as a public space, but it is true that it is a place in which public activities take place. The same as the aforementioned public spaces, "bang" also resides in the by-products of a rapid modernization process (different types of "bang" are found within "keunseng", a uniquely Korean type of building).

'-Bang' Culture:

Two Faces of Extreme Velocity, Nore-bang vs. Jjimjil-bang

PC-bang/ Nori-bang/ Da-bang/ Nore-bang/ Jjimjil-bang/ Video-bang/ Board game-bang/ Online-bang/ Hyugye-bang/ Soju-bang/ Manhwa-bang/ Saju-bang ...

At present, various facilities whose names end with "-bang" are being created spontaneously and are flourishing within the urban spaces of Korean society. The name "-bang", which derives from traditional Korean dwellings, can be translated as "room", but does not have the private or personal implications the word has in western languages. This is because in Korean society, a "bang" has been more meaningful as a space for "close interaction with others" than as a private space for an individual. As recent as 50 years ago, the concept of privacy did not even exist within Korea. However, the unbearable revolutionary changes within the residential culture caused by the rapid modernization and urbanization (the distinctive Korean APT (apartment) culture will be

discussed in a later chapter), effectively caused the following: the "bang" which was subordinate to a dwelling space was "exiled", or even forced to "run away from home" into an urban space. I would like to take a closer look at two specific "bang" cultures that are noteworthy for their uniqueness, as well as being connected to the idea of public space.

<Nore-bang>

A nore-bang literally means a place in which you sing, but it is quite different from its Japanese counterpart, the karaoke. If the Japanese karaoke is an open hall in which each member sedately and politely enjoys the alternating roles of the singer and appreciative audience, a Korean nore-bang is a space of collective participation and even mass hysteria. Such a facility is usually composed of ten or more very small and close rooms. The sizes of these rooms vary from between 9 m² to 35 m². Nore-bangs can be found anywhere within the urban space of Korea, and there are more than 30 thousand in the nation. And within each individual room, there is the "continuation of ceaseless singing", and the excessively deviant behavior of the "collective", immersed in the act. Nobody goes to sing at a nore-bang alone. Usually, groups of

corridors



behaviors

3 up to perhaps 20 sing together within a room. The essence of this space is not "singing", but rather a type of carnival in which the feeling of "togetherness" is raised. The singing continues without pause. The fact that the space is rented by the hour (the remaining time is shown as a countdown on the singing machine) urges the lack of rest. However, the more important reason is that the silence between the ending of the last song and the beginning of the next means the "pause" of velocity, and that leads to the "awakening" from the mass hypnosis. Such an "awakening" makes the stopping of the music taboo to the participants. The music must continue. The end of the singing does not come with the natural and voluntary ending from the relaxation of velocity. It is a "disconnection" of the carnival caused by the stopping of the singing machine timer. The carnival ends through another's initiative, thus allowing the members of the collective to avoid the voluntary stopping and the relaxation of velocity.

While it depends on the price of the nore-bang, their interior decoration usually shows an extreme case of kitsch found in popular culture. Various types of murals sometimes using fluorescent pigments, pictures on the ceilings, dazzling lights, artificial nature manufactured in FRP, and unclassifiable works of art all combine with cutting-edge digital equipment, large multi screens, PDP, and other fantastic images. In this space, technology is subordinate to kitsch. Technology's functionality cannot exceed the mythological power of the collective conjuring that this space pursues. This is perhaps the reason why a state-of-the-art singing machine developed by a Korean conglomerate, equipped with cutting-edge acoustics and imaging, could not compete in the market against a crude machine developed by a trifling small business.

To summarize, the collective absorption found within a nore-bang is a type of conjuring act or ritual to "outrun time", while under the condition of being "short of time". It is a place of endless continuance of song, namely a place to be oblivious of velocity through the thrill of rushing by at high speed, and a place to collectively transcend the limited space through the brilliancy and infinity of images. The chronological and spa-

tial theme of the nore-bang is "endlessness". The collective can be pictured as bikers who ride infinitely at breakneck speed within an extremely limited space called "bang". How could the collective chronological and spatial desire to be infinite be possible in any outside public space? Here is the paradox of the Korean public space called "bang", which attempts to achieve "infinity" through extreme "finiteness".

<Jjimjil-bang>

The word "jjimjil" literally means a type of sauna. The idea that spending time in an enclosed space at extremely high temperatures to sweat and relax the body stimulates your metabolism and is good for your health became popular in the 1990s. Within a few years, jjimjil-bangs started springing up in urban space. With the active diffusion that followed, jjimjil-bangs merged with different preexisting programs, including public baths, at incredible speed and variety. Now, to receive "jjimjil" is a secondary aim when going to a jjimjil-bang. There are more than 1,600 such facilities in Korea at present, and the phenomenon is much more than what its name suggests; it is in fact a huge resting and cultural space within the city. The jjimjil-bang is the combined product of the ever-increasing and diversifying Korean "bang" culture. It is no exaggeration to say that within a jjimjil-bang, all kinds of "bangs" of modern Korea are included. Along with the original jjimjil-bang, the facility may include nori-bang (a place where children play), nore-bang, PC-bang, movie-bang, comic book-bang, game-bang, seminar-bang (where groups hold seminars or meetings), dallim-bang (a type of health club), and sumyeon-shil 2) (sleeping room). Restaurants, fast-food places, a convenient store, a sauna, and more are all included as well, and so a jjimjil-bang is a veritable "bang-complex". There are various grades according to the price, but since you can stay in the 24-hour facility all day for between 5-10 dollars, you are not pressed for time like in a nore-bang. Jjimjil-bang activities are carried out barefoot, usually sitting on the floor. When entering, you must store your shoes and clothes in a locker and wear a uniform provided at the counter. Excepting maybe the nore-bang, PC-bang, comic book-bang and restaurants, most faci-

ilities within are used without further charge. And additional charges, for instance for food, can be first approved with your locker key that you wear on your wrist, and then paid for later when you leave.



While most "bangs" have a limited group of users depending on their age and sex, a jjimjil-bang transcends the boundaries of generation and sex. This place includes all generations, starting from toddlers, to youths, adults, and even the elderly. If you think about it, a jjimjil-bang is perhaps the only place in Korea of the last fifty years, since the dissolution of community, where all generations can gather together. Families, lovers, friends, coworkers and even those who don't have a convenient place to stay for the night, are all potential users. There, you can sleep anywhere, eat anywhere, play cards, read while lying on your back, work or even watch TV. Because of this lack of boundaries, you can find in a jjimjil-bang, a surreal scene resembling an imaginary convergence of the family rooms of each user. The personal spaces in a jjimjil-bang are limited to just the lockers, and all personal activities are exposed and mixed together with those of others. You can see dozens and even hundreds of people who do not know each other lying or sitting on the floor in various positions in a casually undressed state, watching a TV drama together on the big screen. Among all the bangs that we've discussed, this is perhaps the most bizarre, in that the boundary between the commonplace and the nonsensical is very "comfortably" pulled down. Since the jjimjil-bang is such a strange space in which all the pre-existing social standards and representations of values are ignored, the

Korean government is perplexed by the spread of such an unexpected facility. When you put on the uniform, all personal social representations as an individual disappear, the spatial representations are deconstructed, and no appropriate standards for behavior apart from endless "relaxation" exist. What can we call such a place? Considering the fact that a varied multitude of human beings have gathered together for enjoyment, it can be classified as a plaza as well as a park. In contrast, since all sorts of behavior that belong within the home happen without reserve, it is another home and private space that exists outside the home. Since these activities happen with uniformed anonymity and as a collective, as well as without class, the jjimjil-bang may be analogous in appearance with the 'falanstere'. We may call this the "*falanstere of relaxation*".

The time in this hallucinatory wonderland of a space is completely opposite from that of the nore-bang, namely the forgetting of velocity through dashing by at a reckless speed. A jjimjil-bang is a place where you challenge velocity through endless "relaxation" and extreme "laziness", and thus attempt to forget time and space. This is a place, not for overtaking time, but for regressing without limit. In fact, nore-bang and jjimjil-bang share the same origins in that they sprang from the extreme velocity of Korean society, but they are the two faces of the coin that show completely different pictures.

The "high-speed compressed development" of Korea, along with the advent of the later industrial society, is a little late compared to that of the west, and at present, the rapid spread of individualism coexists with the still-important remainder of the collective mentality and culture. Such a situation results in creating the background for an IT culture based on the close relationships unique to Korean society, makes possible a collective ritualistic meeting of voluntary yet systematic supporters during the 2002 World Cup, and creates the distinctive "-bang" culture. If a nore-bang is a place where the various conflicts contained within society caused by individualistic desire and collective culture are resolved through the ritualistic conjuring of mass hysteria, a jjimjil-bang is a

place of reconciliation or an armistice of conflict through relaxation. The "fatigue" created by the velocity of Korean society is the connecting medium between the two spaces.

'APT' & 'Keunseng':

Two Extremes of the Striated & the Smooth

What could have happened to Korean society that caused the "bang" that belongs within, to effectively leave home and hide in the dark labyrinth of a metropolis? It is my theory that it was caused by the rapid ruin of a traditional society, the swift introduction of a new form of dwelling, the resulting expansion of the city scale at a revolutionary rate, and the escalating intensity of the dense population.

The majority of Koreans now live in a dwelling called APT (apartments), or if not, desperately hope to do so. One of the most important and sensitive policies planned out by the Korean government is to supply enough housing for the national population, and that almost always



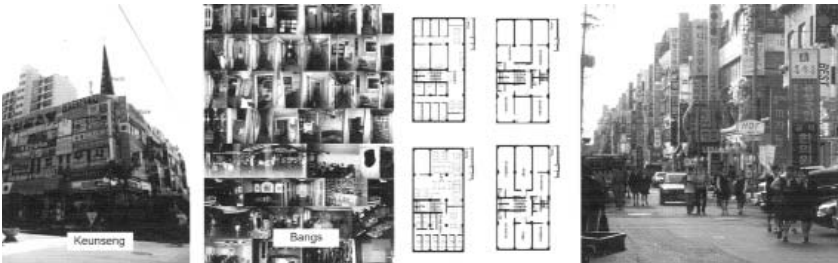
means the construction of new APTs. In fact the dwelling form of the Korean APT occurs at the junction between Ludwig Hilberseimer's hoarded building form of the social dwelling, and C.A. Perry's community-based neighborhood site planning. However, the radical nature of that junction and its sheer magnitude in execution reveals the banality in an entirely "new" way. The fact that the seemingly-impossible goal of building 2 million new homes within the Seoul metropolitan area, announced by the government in 1988, was finished and even exceeded within merely four years will surely illustrate the violence of scale and speed. The rise of various new satellite cities surrounding Seoul increased the population of the metropolitan area in just fifty years to nearly half the entire national population (23 million). This astounding fact clearly shows the revolutionary nature of the strategy for "supply" through the APT, as well as how innovative the joining of banalities can potentially be. It would be a mistake to see the Korean APT as the dwelling form of just the "commoners" based on its dull outward appearance. It in fact started out as the housing for the middle class, and now serves all classes of Korean society. The price of an APT varies enormously depending on its location and size. Considering the fact that the APT price in an exclusive residential area south of the Han River, when taken in scale with the GNP, is five times the price of a comparable apartment in Manhattan, you can easily see the acuteness of the value given to the dwelling in Korean society. But an interesting fact is that despite the vast range of prices, the outward appearance and form of the APT are monotonous, and a crude aesthetic based on the vastness of the facility is created. A Korean's obsession for owning his or her own APT is quite extraordinary. The obsession for the home is the obsession for settling down. However, this means only the settling in a certain socio-economic class, not actually living in a fixed place. Furthermore, the consistent effort of Koreans to upgrade the size of the APT they live in has accelerated the rate at which they continue to "move", and made commonplace a nomadic existence. The "possession" of the APT has been substituted for the traditional fascination with a fixed location. The APT shows the unusual example of the exchange value absolutely ruling the use value. The APT's dull appearance and its identical plan type, and

the fact that it solidifies the everyday lives of Koreans since every values in the society are converged into the value of the APT, make it a representative example of Deleuze's "striated space".

In traditional Korean residences of the past, individual rooms were placed around a sort of mediator called the "Madang" (court) and there was a composite quality to the life within a house inhabited by a large family. With the advent of modernization, that lifestyle was almost instantly compressed into a two-dimensional plane called the APT household unit, demanding an entirely different mode of life. The uncomfortable jostling of family members in this process, and the uniform lifestyle demanded of each member is perhaps what made the dwellers abandon the warm "right to light" they pursued for such a long time and retreat into the dark "bang" of the city. The flourishing of the "bang" culture in Korean society coincides with the early 1990s when living in an APT became the ruling residential form of the nation. Also, the rapid deconstruction of the local community, the acceleration of the migratory culture, and the explosive expansion of Seoul allowed for the prosperity of the urban "-bang" culture

Then where do these lost "-bangs" exist? As mentioned above, they dwell within the unintended "by-products" left behind by the rapid modernization of Korean society. There is a representative facility that has always been excluded from the history of Korean architecture. It shows no desire to present a vision for the future, nor any will to recover the authority of the past, but still remains a remarkably practical and powerful building type; it is namely the "neighborhood support facility" (keunrin senghwal shiseol, *keunseng* for short). Based on the concept of C.A. Perry's housing site zoning, its original purpose was to provide an appropriate number of commercial facilities in a residential area. Although it was developed in the name of supporting the neighborhood, it has no actual relation to its locale. The reason is that in the current urban behavioral topologies of Seoul, there is almost no sense of the community, and (despite the vastness of the property labeled residential area) all spaces have somehow become active and intensive

urban territory, anonymously absorbed in the proper noun "Seoul". The lack of prudence and rate of mass production that accompany the revolutionary expansion of a city have created an unexpected architectural type within urban space. And this type, namely a 3-4 storey building built within a 130 m² - 330 m² lot for commercial purposes, called "keunseng", makes for 92,7% of all buildings within Seoul. Let us take a look at the development of the area south of the Han River in Seoul. In the past the destitute Korean government could not afford to develop under public management the area spanning up to 30 million m². Consequently it split the area (excluding the land for building large scale APT complexes, roadside commercial areas, schools and roads) into a sea of small private lots, and allotted their development to the private sector. In this situation, the new architectural type of the neighborhood support facility was haphazardly born, whose function is completely belied by its name.



A keunseng building is basically a rental space. The builders usually do not know or care about the location and/or surrounding area where the building would be built, nor the program and facilities that will eventually use that space. Designing without knowing the eventual end product precludes even the intention to make the content and form coincide. The instability of the program continues after the building is constructed. There is only the "situation" of the ever-changing program. The keunseng is highly agile and flexible within all stages of its lifetime. The design is finished within 2 to 3 weeks of commission, and the Rahmen structure's construction using reinforced concrete is finished within 3-5 months. But the greatest advantage of this type of construction is the

adaptability it shows to any post-completion changes. Nothing is precious to this building, so there is no obstacle to any changes being made. The building represents nothing, and neither conforms to nor rebels against anything in its environs; so, a keunseng is closer to "infrastructure" rather than an architectural construction. Generally speaking, such a building would have the following programs at the moment (though it may change at any time): 24-hour convenience store, restaurant, real-estate agency, cafe, PC-bang, video rental store, dokseo-shil 3), room salon 4), office space, church, massage parlor, 24-hour jjimjilbang, preschool, nori-bang, nore-bang, beerhouse, etc.

As you can see, most "-bangs" dwell within the keunseng. To emphasize the unique and spontaneous creation of new programs based on the instability and dynamism of the existing program, I would like to call this facility the "bang breeder" or the "program incubator". The various "-bangs" that dwell in this place are kinds of "implosive spectacles", so the outfits of that building appear as if the secretions of an organic bangs or the debris after an explosion. These programs that cannot be classified together with common sense are spread all over the city in bundles called keunseng like "pixels". There are no main programs in keunseng, but all are incidental. This is why everyone takes a temporary attitude toward it, as if just hanging on for a short while. Directly opposite to the homogeneity pursued by modernity, keunseng absorbs diversity and hybridities too strongly, and reflects them in too vivid a manner. This de-territorialization maximizes the marginalization, differentiation and spontaneity of the city. Wholesomeness and degeneration, rules and transgressions, everyday and its deviations all cross each other within one spatial experience, overcoming the forceful rigidity of modernization, and display exceptional cases of gaining almost radical flexibility and autonomy. This is an infinitely "smooth" space, the direct opposite of the APT. This opposition generally teaches the extreme at rear-side roads in the areas around large-scale APT complexes, office buildings, and schools. In other words, in the disjunction between the front and the rear, this "-bang" culture metastasizes like some giant tumor. And the spread of the cancer that exposes the unwieldiness, violence, density

and instability, brings forth the need for "oblivion of space and time." It also makes our gaze turn inward to the closed interior.

In spite of everything, the Korean keunseng buildings and the various gaudy "-bangs" dwelling within are a type of "mirror image" reflecting the uniformity and heterogeneity of office spaces, schools, and APT complexes. And this is where the dynamism and instability that represents Korean society exists. As Lefebvre discussed in *The Production of Space*, a homogenous, universal space is in a paradoxical situation where it becomes a broken fragment no matter how hard you try to unify it into a large whole. And we can also see the possibilities in the rift created by this uncontrolled fragmentation. In other words, you can see the potential for flexibility, indistinctness, deviation and providence, as well as the boundary between the legal and illegal, and the crossing of meaning. That is, as long as you acknowledge that potential is always accompanied by risk.

The Paradox and Irony of Korean Public Space

Lacking public space that acts as an intermediating urban element, Seoul's outdoors became a battlefield in which private property, roads, and other urban functional spaces collided with each other without any buffering processes. The various activities and demands, as well as the leisure supported by an open space (that would have been fulfilled by public space in the west), turned its back to the outdoors of Seoul. Instead, it headed into building interiors. The subtle and informal flow of limited capital that understood such demands created programs, and transformed the "-bang" of the home into a new form, which fulfilled the demands and delivered it into urban space. But the ability of this space to meld the "differences" and its flexibility in evolution and creation doesn't allow us to leap to the conclusion that it is merely another commercial space. The public characteristic of the activities carried out within is quite different from the closely planned and systemized large-scale commercial spaces of modern cities, namely the pseudo-public spa-

ces. "-Bang" is a boundary area where the legal and illegal, rules and deviations, the normal and the abnormal and the sane and insane come across. It is also a place for informal gatherings to confirm relationships. It is in fact an interior square or park, which has never been named before or perhaps called many different things. I would like to call this space the "other public space."

The paradox and uniqueness of the public activities in Korea is that by turning their back on the spatially unlimited outdoors and choosing extreme local limits, Koreans transcended velocity and space, allowed for communication through a sort of ritual rather than conversation, and finally attempted the acquisition of infinity. Turning away from the exterior seems a very private thing, but the birth of the contemporary Korean "bang" that resulted from the need for a public yet private space is ironic in that it made the space an unknowable territory that can neither be classified public nor private.



The structure called "keunseng" where such "bangs" dwell, and the uniqueness of the programmatic activities carried out within occur on the boundary of the legal and illegal, traversing the restrictions and regulations, and its life mainly depends on spatial and programmatic fluidity. The fluidity of the "keunseng" is quite exceptional. This is not achieved in open, streamlined or bloppy spatial continuity. Interestingly enough, it is achieved within extreme differentiation, unseen closure and the negative minimum box called "-bang". The "bang" consists solely of an interior without an exterior. And these tiny programs, like rhizome, endlessly join with other programs, to create new mutant programs according to the situation, as well as destroy them. The efforts to own a fixed home

(APT) ironically accelerated the situation of the floating rooms and gave birth to the query, "do we live in the home, or in the city?" The private space called "home" and the extreme search for its private ownership also gives birth to the numerous spaces of "non-ownership" called "-bang". While "home" is a location within the city, it is also the desire to leave it and settle down. These paradoxes create an insoluble conflict. The "-bang" disquietingly leaves home, learns the nomadic strategy of the "life within a huge metropolis", and provides us with a lesson in "how a contemporary city must be".

English translation by Koeun Rha

- 1) Paraphrased from Charles-Pierre Baudelaier's *Les Fleur du Mal* (1857).
- 2) "-Shil", similar to "-bang", can be translated as "room".
- 3) A dokseo-shil is a place of study for mostly middle school and high school students. Within a dark room, there are dozens, and sometimes even hundreds of desks separated by partitions, and it is similar to a kind of voluntary jail that is run 24-hours a day.
- 4) A type of bar at which you can drink heavily, sing as if in a nore-bang, and enjoy the company of members of the opposite sex.

Source:
Germany - Korea Public Space Forum,
German Architecture Museum DAM,
edited by Sunghong Kim,
Frankfurt am Main, Germany, 2005
Reprint by courtesy of Kwangsoo Kim