Neighborhood Archeology

Instead of highlighting macro-scale features surounding urban districts, neighborhood archeology asks students to focus on micro-scale traces of community networks and their corresponding physical contexts within a neighborhood, to generate concrete design solutions for urban community networks.

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ARCHEOLOGY OF US

The "archeology of us," or archeological study of the contemporary past, is regarded as an instrumental pedagogic tool for teaching students how to piece together a loose collection of found artifacts and hypothesize implicit relationships between human behavior and contemporary material culture. It is a simple but meaningful exercise that allows students to understand intricate relationships between human behavior and urban contexts by looking for traces of their interactions in hidden pockets of vacant lots and street corners. Applied to architectural pedagogy, its methodology can transform the often mundane task of site analysis into a forensic exercise, in which physical evidences of human interactions become directly translated as design solutions for forming new community networks. I have found this ethno-archeological method of site analysis to be particularly useful in teaching housing studios in Korea, where the site analysis phase is too often treated as a macro planning exercise, mostly focusing on transportation networks and geographic features, with little or no regard for social behaviors and communal habits of local residents. Urban housing as an architectural genre poses a unique pedagogic challenge in Korea, due to the prevailing housing culture in Korean cities that is primarily defined by politics and economy, with diminishing regard for the role of architecture as an agent of social change. By highlighting the informal public spaces hidden within residential communities, where traces of interaction between neighbors provide clues to the delicate structure of urban order in Korean cities, an archeological method for teaching urban housing in Korea may lead to a renewed relevance of architecture in shaping urban community networks. The implicit structure of social networks within generic residential communities, as revealed through site survey and documentation, serves as a potential catalyst for architectural intervention and innovation.

COMMUNITY VS. COMMODITY

Commodification of housing in Korea is so thorough that any value that architectural design may add to our domestic environment has little or no significance. In practice, most design moves that do not contribute to a brand cache that could enhance marketability are quickly dismissed as frivolous or outright non-sense. Housing to most Korean homeowners, are

nothing but an investment option, or a temporary boot camp for their children's education. Any search for domestic pleasure beyond these utterly practical and immediate needs is confined to the realm of the upper crust of the economic spectrum, realized mostly in private homes and rarely applicable to housing complexes. Urban housing projects also prey on the dream of instant riches, and fail to address the public needs for well-designed urban communities. How then do we teach housing against the backdrop of this blatant disregard for architectural design? What do we gain by instilling within the student's mind a utopian vision of a residential environment that is intended from conception to be truly public, communal and urban? The core principles related to housing projects in Western cities, such as social integration, community organization, and public spheres, are not commonly shared values within Korea's contemporary housing culture. They do exist in Korean cities, but only through clever adaptations of found spaces clearly unintended by its designers. If architectural intention is practically inconsequential compared to the ingenuity of end users who can appropriate any given environment, is architecture worth practicing, let alone teaching? Or it may be possible to get thoroughly familiarized with the operative logic of the housing market and work within the paradox of the post-capitalist culture. Not unlike social activists who infiltrate deep into their targets in disguise, we could insert ourselves into the market, to plant potential seeds of change with a hope of incremental but fundamental shift in the system at large. A discreet practice of this kind, however, requires as its prerequisite a broad ideological consensus among the entire generation, to be taught or disseminated effectively, and such breadth of discontent has not re-surfaced since 1968. Korean architecture schools seem to deal with this impasse in two polarized manners, either by intensely focusing on few design tasks still expected to be handled by architects—such as maximizing the number of dwelling units within a limited site, or by blindly catering to the whimsical fantasies of construction companies about new interior typologies tailored to fictional lifestyles. The first task is extremely dull in practice and utterly mind-numbing for students in pursuit of higher education. The second task, often proliferated through latest digital form-abusing technologies, and often asked to be taught by foreign faculty with a fresh "unadulterated" perspective, is seldom realistic and usually cynical.

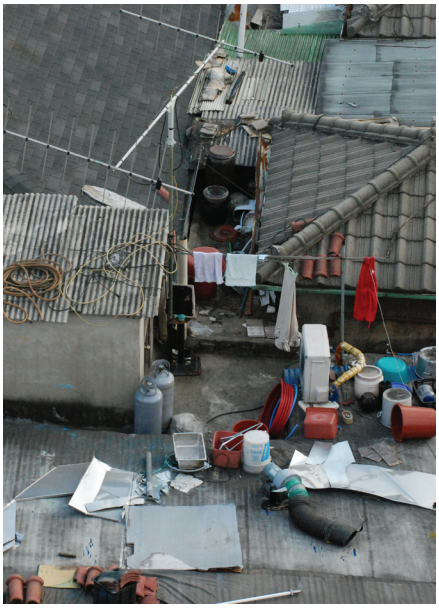

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Figure 1: Garbage on rooftops in Seoul's neighborhood in waiting

NEIGHBORHOODS IN WAITING

Unless urban housing can be designed, rather than styled, architecture schools have no justification for teaching housing outside its technical curriculum. To teach housing in Korean urban context, I decided to look for the evasive middle ground, between the high-rise and the low-rise; between the traditional and the contemporary, and between the urbanized and the pastoral. This urban middle ground is often found within informally settled residential districts, suspended in time between Korea's initial phase of urbanization and the subsequent flood of high-rise developments. For various reasons, these districts were left out during the first and second phases of urban developments, but the residents are hopeful that the influx of capital for major redevelopment is inevitable and immanent, therefore neglecting or abandoning their current supposedly transient environments. In other words, these neighborhoods in waiting have become urban ruins, where the architectural content is reduced to diagrams of community dynamics. Only traces of inherently weak architectural armatures remain inside these urban landscapes to support social mechanisms that have sustained vibrant but invisible communities. These communities have thrived despite the drastic morphological transformations surrounding them, preserving the core particularities of Korean villages, without a false pretense of traditionalism. The social hierarchy and the communal order of these urban pockets are essentially imported from the rural villages where the residents originally lived prior to the wave of urbanization. Understood as a modified form of village life, Korean urban communities start to reveal its invisible threads that establish subtle unspoken order that continues to dictate how communal spaces are formed despite the disjunctive nature of social behavior versus its physical context. Instead of highlighting the built

elements of new housing districts, the students of my housing studios were asked to trace community networks and their correspondent physical contexts, and document within this reversed figure-ground, architectural features that characterize such contexts. The research process somewhat resembles the methods of ethno-archeology, in which the recovered "cultural objects" illustrate lost or undocumented individual and collective lives. In *Archeology of Us*, Richard Gould and Michael Schiffer introduces their course assignment called "Vacant Lot Archeology," in which students were asked to survey a vacant lot in Tucson, Arizona:

- to construct a pace map of the area, including all major features, paths, sidewalks, artifact concentrations, and vegetation patterns
- to describe in general terms the distribution and variety of material culture
- to record the artifact inventory in five standard-sized sample units
- to formulate hypotheses about past and ongoing formation processes
- to make whatever additional observations were needed for hypothesis testing

The sites of investigation typically fall into the following categories: "model" apartments, which may be regarded as the first-generation modern housing types in Korea; hillside villages where the longevity of tight-knit communities is more of a product of clogged social mobility rather than a strong sense of belonging; and dense clusters of urban alleys where spontaneous acts of individuality frequently surface above the weight of communal propriety. Architectural features that support and shape community networks in these sites are often found within the crevices of urban fabric. A typical process starts with a personal reading of the site, documented through photographs and surveys, and field sketches.. Then by highlighting the informal public spaces hidden within residential communities, where traces of interaction between neighbors provide clues to the delicate structure of urban order in Asian cities, certain features that should be preserved are identified and incorporated into the new housing projects. These small artifacts of community life effectively serve as potential catalysts for architectural intervention and innovation.

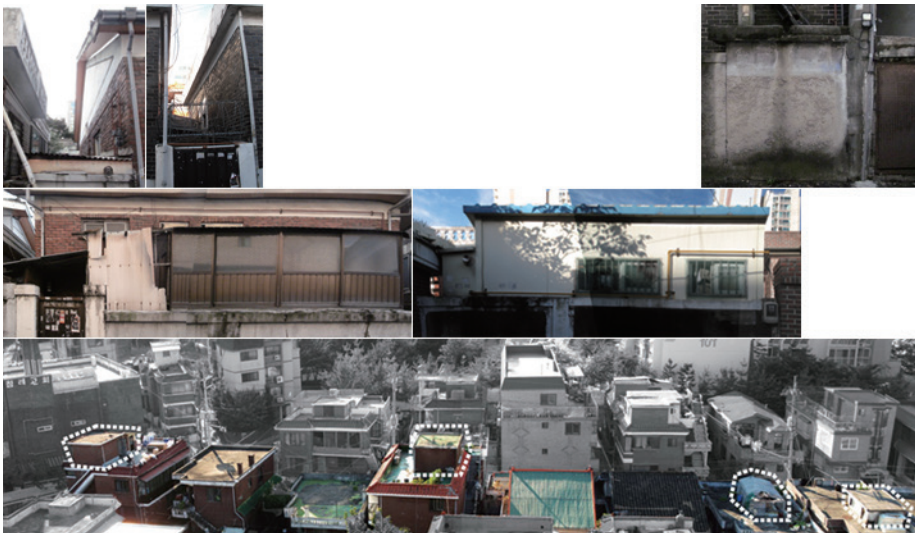

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Figure 2: Parasitic structures as shared spaces

CREVICES OF URBAN FABRIC

The first type of hidden spaces explored by students is the in-between spaces. Created by various set-back requirements of the Korean building codes, these spaces between buildings are usually occupied by informal, illegal storage shacks, but in some cases, are turned into shared public spaces by eliminating fences along property lines. These pocket spaces

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may be extruded vertically through external stairs, and these contorted voids for community encounters offer inspiring design motifs.

Some students studied the windows, and relationships of sightlines and additive screening devices. Ingenious ways of filtering visual/aural transmission became proofs that a discreet balance between privacy and porosity can induce spontaneous conversations among neighbors. A thorough survey of sizes and types of windows and screening devices, installed or abandoned, became an evidence for unspoken preferences by the residents. Through this exercise, students were able to initiate their designs by designing and positioning windows and spaces as the starting point for their projects. Another popular site of exploration is the rooftops of low-rise buildings.

Figure 3: In-between Spaces as Site of Design Interventions

Figure 4: Windows as Sites of Visual Collisions

By observing the patterns of social exchange among residents who are drying their laundry, or watering their plants, students were able to generate a design proposal based on ideal locations and frequencies of outdoor platforms that would receive direct sunlight, while allowing easy access through balconies or external stairs. Last area of exploration may be categorized as urban thresholds, such as simple landings in front of buildings, or steps leading up to front doors. Using a base map of these thresholds, students recorded and tabulated the types and frequency of uses, and used these findings for designing expanded platforms for social exchange. One particular example was a project that dealt with specific itineraries and stopping points of all yellow school vans, and created safer, more leisurely drop-off areas for children.

Neighborhood archeology, as a pedagogic tool, provided generative clues for urban housing projects. In lieu of meaningless diagrams based on abstract information, or misleading questionnaires, students were able to observe and participate in the various forms of interactions among residents, and learn how informal spaces of encounter were created over time. By starting with evidences of social encounters, and then understanding environmental traits that help them occur, students learn to extract design clues from ordinary urban contexts, and to turn everyday activity into a specific social program. Most importantly, students were able to experience how design can influence people's behavior and in turn help a community to become more active.

ENDNOTES

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