

# Culture of Mix: Keunseng, a Building Type for Open City

Modern Asian cities have unique urban qualities that are not easily explained by traditional theories of Western urbanism. Due to unprecedented expansion of new production and consumption, they are in a state of constant flux without definite form. Scholars and architects have coined terms like 'generic city' or 'city of flux' to describe this extraordinary phenomena of Asian cities, with the additional intention of envisioning the future form of global cities in the post-industrial world.

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Being dominated by information technology and service industries, the cities in the post-industrial society have become a center for the convergence of ideas and services. As cities become points of exchange capable of providing the latest information and service, and as their circulation accelerates, cities need to become more open and adaptive. However, urbanism as developed in the West, whether it be a historic model or a modern utopia, has not been able to successfully cope with the changing urban conditions created by post-industrialism. The main reason is that the city has been treated as a closed system, a balanced organism with over-determined form and functions, not fully considering change in time.<sup>1</sup> While most European cities still retain classical form with a historic center, as Koolhaas points out, post industrial cities tend to expand outwards without limit.<sup>2</sup> In this process new suburban centers called edge cities are constantly created. This decentralization and low density expansion of the city boundary has been criticized on various grounds such as the disconnection and segregation of urban spaces, along with alleged negative impacts on the environment

East Asian cities, not being restricted by the traditions of western urbanism, have grown rapidly, adapting to new urban conditions. Seoul, among other East Asian cities, is unique especially in the way it adapts to constantly changing programs within the city. Keunseng, the most common type of commercial building in Korean cities plays a key role in this respect. Keunseng is a multistory grid-frame building within which almost any urban program, ranging from commercial to religious, may be adapted. With great flexibility, it accommodates various commercial programs. Originally named for neighborhood support facilities in Clarence Perry's theory of the neighborhood unit, it at times even takes on the function of housing.

This paper attempts to analyze characteristics of Keunseng as an efficient building type for Seoul as a capitalistic open city and the culture that gave rise to this



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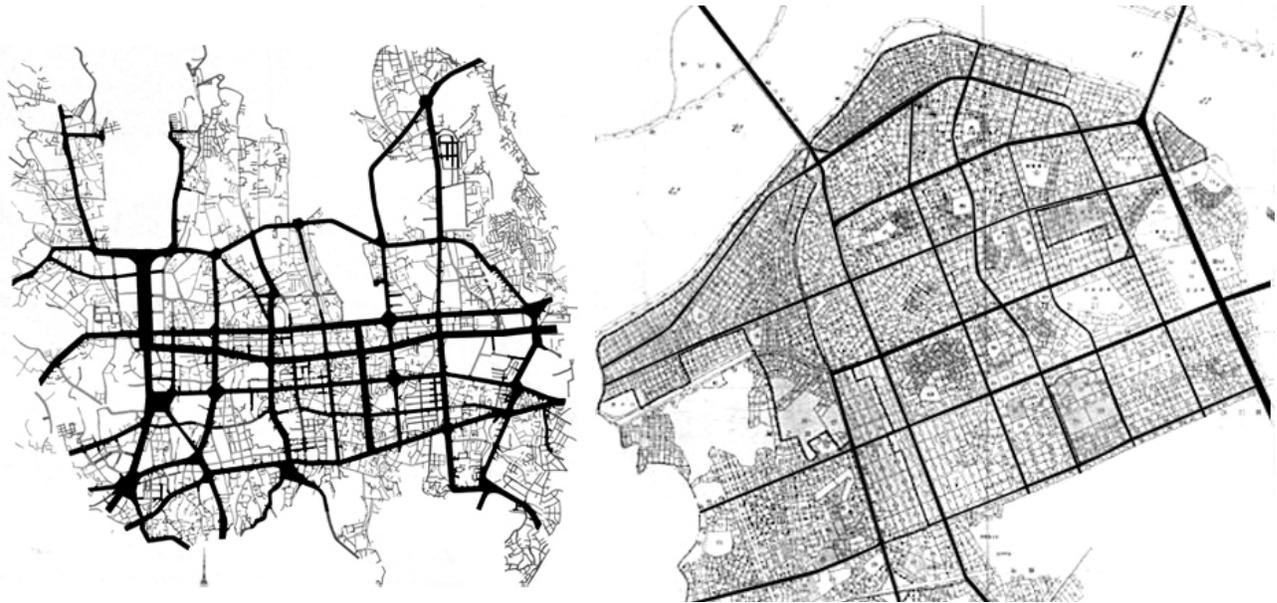
unique type of urban building. Like the “Culture of congestion” that Koolhaas analyzed in Manhattan skyscrapers, I would like to encapsulate the cultural attitudes manifested in Keunseng as a culture of Mix, as a form of negotiation between influences of the past that shaped architecture and city of Seoul, and the logic of capital that determined the modernizing process.

#### HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Keunseng is no doubt a product of the unique process of the capitalistic modernization as it occurred in Seoul. The origin of Keunseng has yet to be investigated but it seems apparent that it was greatly influenced by the urban pattern of traditional Seoul. Unlike many western cities, the urban fabric of Seoul is not composed of urban blocks formed with adjoining multi-story buildings wherein ground floors are often occupied by shops. The urban planning of old Seoul was originally structured around a main street running east and west (Chong no), dividing the city into two residential areas in which narrow alleys spread like branches of trees. Shops supplying goods for the Royal family and the aristocracies were located along this main street in a linear fashion, screening the houses behind them. The modernization process of Seoul which occurred after the Japanese occupation of Korea in 1910 completely changed the urban structure of old Seoul: New grid patterned wide streets were superimposed on the preexisting urban fabric, forming large urban blocks. As Seoul developed as a capitalistic consumer city under Japanese control (1910-1945), commercial buildings appeared along the main streets at the periphery of urban blocks in a way similar to the traditional urban pattern. And as the ground rent rose, commercial buildings gradually expanded vertically with residential areas inside the blocks remaining low.<sup>3</sup>

This urban pattern was applied to the new towns developed in the process of government led urbanization starting in the 1960’s. For example, Gangnam newtown was planned with large residential blocks with narrow roads (4-6M in width) circumscribed by grid patterned wide streets (50-70M in width). While houses were built inside these blocks, multi-story commercial buildings developed by private capital appeared on the periphery.<sup>4</sup> Unique zoning was added as an afterthought, designating linear commercial zones along the main streets, consolidating this pattern of urban development. This particular spatial

Figure 1: Typical Keunseng buildings with houses behind, Hwayang-dong, Seoul.



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configuration of houses and shops is unique in Korean cities. In this respect, Seoul differs even from other East Asian cities in China and Japan.

Keunseng thus emerged in this rapid process of urbanization as a typical form of commercial building, providing spaces for various small scale commercial programs and offices for urban residents: tea rooms, bars, restaurants, retail shops, hair shops, private learning academies, banks, public baths, churches and even housing in the form of Gosiwon (minimum size one room). These programs were accommodated within one building in various combinations, making Keunseng a mixture of various small scale commercial programs. While oft discussed bangs (Nore-bang, PC-bang, etc.) are a unique Korean cultural phenomenon, buildings consisting only of Bangs, namely 'bang-building,' do not exist.<sup>5</sup> Bangs are only part of the variety of commercial programs in Keunseng, in which new ones are constantly invented and added to existing ones. The large portion of small scale business unique in the Korean economy has also been a crucial factor that enabled the growth and pervasiveness of Keunseng in Korean cities.

#### **KEUNSENG: A UNIQUE BUILDING TYPE FOR COMMERCIAL PROGRAMS**

Keunseng is a building type never anticipated by western urbanism. In Western cities, commercial shops were usually placed on the ground floors of apartment blocks. This vertical combination of houses with shops on the ground floor developed early in the history of Western cities and has maintained until capitalistic modern metropolis like 19th century Paris. Early 20th century Modernists like Giedion and Le Corbusier criticized the mixture of houses and shops as inefficient for the modern city. Giedion wrote:

Such apartment houses artificially bring together functions which, in an industrial society, should be kept strictly separate. It is absurd in an age of industrial production to permit residence, labor, and traffic to intermingle. If in an industrial age the various functions of daily life cannot be clearly separated, that fact alone spells the death sentence of the great city.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 2: Street Patterns of Gangbuk(left) and Gangnam(right), Seoul.

Le Corbusier proposed an ideal city for modern society with functional zoning. However, he never imagined an independent multistory commercial building like

the Keunseng. In his plan for the ideal city, there were actually no buildings for everyday commercial life, but only business towers and high-rise apartments. Hilberseimer, another visionary for the modern city, criticized Le Corbusier's plan as unrealistic and nonfunctional. In his plan for the high-rise city, however, commercial shops occupied lower grounds of high-rise apartments unlike traditional European urban building type.

New building types for shops-only had actually appeared in the 19th century European cities with the rapid increase of population and the dominance of commodity culture. Arcades in the early 19th century and department stores in the late 19th century were such new building types: Arcades were street shops covered with glass roofs and department stores were a new type of vertically expanded shop in which many commodities were exhibited and sold in one building. However, unlike Keunseng, these building types did not accommodate the variety of commercial functions within a building.

The main reason for this is that in western architecture, there has been a strong tradition of correspondence between form and function. Building types such as churches, city halls, palaces, for instance, must be perceived as such. In other words, architectural form should express function and social status as a cultural object. When many new building types like banks, libraries, factories, prisons and the like emerged since modernization, a new theory of character developed in order to address the linguistic problem of architectural form. The Mixture of different functions in one building was not welcomed because it defied the tradition of architecture as a singular object. Thus, for example, arcades had an introverted space for shops with a singular building facade on the street front.

Keunseng was possible in Korea due to the fact that there has been no such architectural tradition. Traditionally in Korea, one type of wooden frame building was used for many different functions with only slight changes made in the spatial division and site plan. More than anything else, architecture was not a formal object charged with meaning. Thus, unlike western society, problems of language in architecture during the process of modernization were not met with anxiety. While various forms and styles of buildings for specific programs (banks, post offices and so on) were designed and built in the urbanizing process, it turned out to be more economical for them to occupy space within Keunseng, except for a few large scale commercial and institutional programs. In this process, Keunseng emerged as the most common building type for small scale shops and offices without fixed programs, as a commercial building with very general functions. There was actually no clear differentiation between Keunseng and mid-rise office buildings.

#### **NEUTRALITY AND CHANGEABILITY OF GRID FRAME**

Since it is difficult to predict or pre-determine the programs in Keunseng, and since they change constantly, a neutral grid frame is the most efficient structure for Keunseng. Grid frame space could take almost any program and easily adapt to the changes necessary. As the adaptability, flexibility and density of the buildings greatly improved with the development of building material and technologies, multi-story grid frame building became the most efficient and economical form of Keunseng for rent, favored by real-estate capital seeking profits through land speculation.

In fact, grid frame has been a constituent element of modern architecture. Multi-story grid frame buildings for rent were first developed in Chicago during



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the late nineteenth century. The so called Chicago frames, however, were high-rise buildings for offices, not for shops and commercial programs like Keunseng. And the architectural potential of grid frame was not fully explored either since its architects and engineers considered it simply a practical solution to technological and economic problems. The envelopes of grid frames were thus simply covered with various historical styles. It was European Modern architects who explored the architectural potential of the grid frame as a constituent element of modern architecture. In Mies' glass tower, for example, grid frame itself was abstracted as an aesthetic form.<sup>7</sup> Le Corbusier invented the domino system as a neutral frame for the mass production of houses, envisioning many forms of collective housing based on this system. He further suggested free plan and free facade which became possible with the grid frame structure as new principles of modern architecture.

Keunseng is unique in that the domino system was applied to a commercial building with vertical stratification. What Keunseng achieved, however, is not so much free plan or free facade, but rather free program. Within the neutral frame of Keunseng, various urban programs coexist, and since they express themselves directly through the building skin, it is impossible to draw a facade of Keunseng as a singular architectural object. Free facade that Le Corbusier put forward in grid frame then becomes meaningless. Any formal gesture for the facade is useless since it is covered with various signs representing the inner programs.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, grid frame of Keunseng is not an aesthetic object but a neutral infrastructure without formal meaning whatsoever, a site for various programs. In this respect, Keunseng is clearly a building type that could be found only in non-western cities like Seoul.

Frederic Jameson once argued that 'extreme isometric space' and 'enclosed skin volume' are architectural styles for the age of finance capital.<sup>9</sup> He explained that this kind of abstraction might be a form of mediation between architectural aesthetics and finance capital which claims future value through land speculation in late capitalism. Keunseng in Korean cities is a perfect example of this negotiation between form, program, and economic forces, though without aesthetic mediation. The change of programs in Keunseng actually reflects the flow of

Figure 3: High-rise Keunsengs in Newtown, Bundang.



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capital invested in the land. New commercial programs are going in and out of business depending on the revenues they produce. In this respect, Keunseng is a building type for finance capital that seeks future profits through land speculation. In order to possess such flexibility, its space should be open and the envelope should be light and superficial. In absence of a tradition wherein architecture is a symbolic representation of function, there was no need for mediation between architectural form and program. Economy, structural efficiency and adaptability capable of accommodating constant flux are the first principles of Keunseng.

#### MIXTURE OF PROGRAMS

Mixture of programs within a building was in fact what Koolhaas found fascinating in Manhattan skyscrapers, as a manifestation of what he called a Culture of Congestion. In a Manhattan skyscraper, however, architectural tradition of representing itself as a meaningful object in the city had to be maintained. And this problem was solved by a complete separation of outer form from the chaotic congestion of the programs inside. Koolhaas likened it to a lobotomy, a resolution of internal and external instability in a definitive composition, while Tafuri had criticized it as an ideological attempt to cover the crisis of architecture in capitalistic society.<sup>10</sup>

Neither the imaginary resolution of form and function that Tafuri criticized nor the lobotomy that Koolhaas advocated in American skyscrapers was necessary in Keunseng. Rather it was impossible since programs within Keunseng keep changing, and thus the façade, if any, of the building changes over the course of time. The reception of this dynamic change in Keunseng without anxiety seems to be related to the architectural tradition of Korea in which a temporal dimension is more valued than building itself. Traditionally in Korea, architecture meant not an ideal form with fixed meaning, but the activities of building, managing and living with time and nature in the built environments. The flow of nature and time in traditional architecture was simply replaced by that of capital and programs of the modern city.

Indeed modern architecture in Korea has had to cope with such rapidly changing urban programs. The modernizing process of Korea was so fast that the

Figure 4: Satellite Photo of the Urban Block, Gangnam, Seoul.



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post-industrial service industry emerged immediately following government led rapid industrialization. Large scale production spaces within the city became inefficient while new types of small businesses began emerging. Factories built less than thirty years ago were transformed to offices for technological and service oriented small businesses. Even buildings originally built for a specific program were often transformed to the Keunseng type. In essence, Keunseng is a very efficient building type suitable for a fast changing society because it is built for general purpose and undetermined programs. The way dynamic change and mixture of programs occurs within Keunseng is very efficient. It is both dense and flexible at the same time, and has great adaptability.

#### A CULTURE OF MIX

I would like to call the cultural attitudes that made Keunseng possible a culture of Mix, one which allows for mixing and integration of different elements within a frame to create new entities with flexibility. This culture of Mix has indeed been a consistent force in Korean culture throughout history. Korean traditional houses with Ondol (floor heating panel) and Maru (wooden floor), for example, are a prime example of mixing elements of northern and southern housing types. As explained, various commercial programs are integrated together within grid frame space of Keunseng.

The culture of Mix plays out in urban planning level as well; urban fabrics of Seoul consist of a mix of two different layers, old and new. That is, modern grid patterned thoroughfares superimposed upon traditional city fabric. An urban block also mixes linear commercial building zone along the periphery and houses inside. In this spatial configuration, change of urban programs takes place very efficiently. First, change occurs within the Keunseng building. Since functions are neither fixed nor pre-determined, Keunseng can absorb various programs with great flexibility and maintain high density. When there is economic pressure for further commercialization within the urban block, houses in the inner areas begin to transform to Keunseng usually along the main streets inside the block. While zoning does exist, it is so loose that many kinds of commercial programs can be admitted in most residential areas. This sometimes results in the whole block being transformed into a commercial area from the outside in.(i.e.

Figure 5: Off road of the urban block. Houses were transformed to Keunsengs. Pedestrians, cars, bikes are intermingled.

Apgujung-Dong and other several blocks in Gangnam) This pattern of change in Seoul is more efficient than in any other western city in which fixed building types of mixed use apartments multiply throughout the city (Barcelona is one such example), or in which form and function of the buildings are predetermined by restrictive zoning codes.<sup>11</sup> In this respect, Seoul is a planned unplanned city, where the culture of Mix is pervasive throughout its urban environment. As one foreign architect acutely observes:

Mixing is a truly Korean method of modifying the city environment. In the back streets, lines for power, telephones, and cable television mix with one another in a show of artful splicing and tension. Delivery motor bikes swerve in and out of stopped cars, slowing down only to dodge pedestrians unaware of their presence. Even the buildings take part in this process, mixing LED signs and advertisements of shops and business which hide just behind the facades.<sup>12</sup>

The culture of Mix that has manifested in Seoul is distinct from mixed use development advocated by proponents of New Urbanism.<sup>13</sup> For the latter, programs are relatively fixed and simply put together in a building. However, in Keunseng, programs are unpredictable and ever changing; they are mixed while retaining high density within the building and are in a state of constant flux. Ultimately, Keunseng is an infrastructure for these changes and mix to occur.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Seoul has an open city structure represented in Keunseng, which functions as a very efficient tool and infrastructure for ever changing programs in the post-industrial society. New Urbanism criticizes urban sprawl in post industrial cities for destroying city life through segregation and alienation while post-industrial urbanism considers it inevitable, advocating more open cities with technological networks. While urban sprawl takes place in Seoul, it occurs with high density, great adaptability and openness. Therefore, there are no suburbs in Korean cities and no clear differentiation between city center and suburbia. . With this unique building type of Keunseng and the culture of Mix which it represents, Seoul is a new kind of open city never anticipated by western urban theories.

Undoubtedly, Keunseng is a disorderly, untamed type of building, without any architectural form and order. However, its positive role in the urban structure of Seoul as an open city should not be underestimated. Mindless (re)developments of urban blocks without considering this characteristic urban spatial structure would then weaken not only the identity but also the performance of Seoul. If the role of architecture is to ultimately make interaction between people and built environment more meaningful, perhaps providing a new kind of order to Keunseng while maintaining the flexibility, density and openness should be the issue that architects and urbanists alike should aim to address.

## ENDNOTES

1. Richard Sennet, "The Open city", Newspaper Essay, *Urban Age*, Berlin, Nov. 2006.
2. Rem Koolhaas, "What Ever happened to Urbanism?", *S, M, L, XL*, The Monacelli Press, New York 1995.
3. Kim Sung Hong, "From the Aristocratic to the commercial: Chong no Street in Seoul", *Journal of South East Asian Architecture*, vols.5&6 Nov. 2003.
4. This piecemeal development of urban blocks reflects the characteristics of the urbanizing process of Korean cities, heavily dependent upon the private sector. This was an economically efficient way of achieving urbanization when the government lacked sufficient money for the development.
5. Kim Kwang Soo, "the Other Public Space: The Korean-Bang Culture", *Germany-Korean Public Forum*, DAM 2005.
6. Siegfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1956, p. 769.
7. Grid frame was abstracted not only in modern but also in post-modern architecture as we have seen in de-constructivists' deformation of grid.
8. In this respect, various Keunseng buildings designed by elite architects can be critically judged.
9. Frederic Jameson, "The Brick and The Balloon: Architecture, Idealism and Land Speculation" *The Cultural Turn Selected writings on the Postmodern*, Verso, 2009.
10. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, the Monacelli Press, 1994 and Manfredo Tafuri, *The American City*, the MIT Press, 1979.
11. In this case, changes of urban programs take place only in the ground floor of the city and thus, are slow and limited.
12. Evan Douglas Hall, "Reflections on the Han, A Journey of Urban Formlessness in Seoul", *Seoul Steel life*, Qoudlibet, 2011 p. 72.
13. New Urbanism criticizes the modern industrial and post-industrial city based on the principle of functional zoning, arguing for the mixed use buildings and for the mixed use urban development.