

‘Moments’ of the Future: Imagining the Public Spaces and Monuments of Pyongyang in 2050

The scenario

The project ‘Moments of the Future’ was created using the scenario technique in a space design studio to envision possible future of Pyongyang. The two key factors we identified as crucial for the spatial future of Pyongyang were the economic and political systems. These two factors lie at the core of separation of North and South Korea and their different future development could give extreme opposite end results.

In my scenario the two countries unite in the form of federation, the Federal Republic of Korea in which both states, the Republic of North Korea and Republic of South Korea, have a large degree of economic and political autonomy. A federal government is formed with the equal participation of both states. The seat of the federal government and the capital of the Federation is located in the former Demilitarized Zone. In the former DPRK the Korean Worker’s Party is disbanded and the three new political parties are formed. The Kim dynasty still has a large number of supporters among the *conservatives* in the country, but a strong body of opposition is also present, mostly young progressives who want radical changes in the country. Political tensions between the two sides persist long after the unification. Economically, the Republic of North Korea will continue to function as a largely Socialist country, but the economic circumstances would change as Free Economic Zones (FEZ) are formed within overall limited market economy of the Republic of North Korea.

Political and economic developments bring changes to Pyongyang’s cityscape. On the north side of Pyongyang, a special economic zone called *Shindoshi* is built as a center for international economic relationships. This new city area is characterized by super-modern high-rise office buildings. The south side of the city becomes the place of migration of the poor and unemployed from all regions of North Korea. This settlement of squatters, poor services and low-quality residential buildings is called “New Comers Town.” The sharp contrast between these two new neighborhoods reflects the continued differences in the social and material status of citizens in the newly formed Republic of North Korea.

With the opening of the Republic of North Korea’s borders to tourists and the changes in lifestyle of local population such as shorter working hours and more leisure time, there is increased need for the public facilities and outdoor activities in the city that was formerly characterized by its empty and deserted streets.

‘History of the Future’ as Method

To imagine how Pyongyang would develop in this scenario, and to design space within that scenario city, I used storytelling as a method in the form of writing a ‘history of the future.’ This ‘history’ locates the “historian” in the future writing about the developments that occurred in past and present through to 2050. The story begins with presumed change of political and economic circumstances after the establishment of the Federation. The fictional narrative further envisions the imaginary protagonists, their personal feelings and attitudes towards the political and economic changes, and how these affected their everyday life. By

applying this method, we were able to imagine how the city would change and how the actors of the story would behave in the new circumstances. This fictive narrative was a way to put ourselves into the situation, to have empathy with the character rather than pushing forward my own ideas to access how these actors might think and act in these conditions. The project “Grid of Moments” is situated in the scenario of the fictive narrative, but grounded in the experience and histories of other post-socialist cities. In this project planners and designers addressed two problems for the development of Pyongyang after unification: how to bring life to the deserted streets of Pyongyang and to develop a strategy for the existing monuments that in the future will represent a past ideology.

The monuments of Pyongyang are closely tied to its social past, emerging present and future political system described by this scenario. In the socialist era the city adopted Lenin’s notion of “monumental propaganda” i.e. using spaces of the city as site for propaganda by placing monuments and revolutionary slogans at key points around the city (Miret and Prokopljević 2011). Citizens of Pyongyang were never free of the gaze of this propaganda that seeped not only into public spaces, but also into the interior spaces. Pyongyang in this scenario had, and continues to have, a representational role of promoting the Kim’s leadership and Juche ideology. The center of the city was organized by the Kims around three main visual axes (Joinau 2014, Meuser 2012, Miret and Prokopljević 2011). All the monuments and important buildings are positioned relative to these axes and residential buildings were built to provide undisturbed view of these monuments (Meuser 2012).

This ‘history of the future’ addressed the issue of what to do with these historic and future landmarks of political importance when the political ideology they represent no longer exists. The practice with this kind of monuments in the socialist states after the transition was to remove, or collect them in one historical park, where they eventually lose their original role and meaning, but their historical importance is still acknowledged.

This project examines the possibility, if not the plausibility, of keeping the monuments for reasons that extend beyond their political and symbolic roles. First, monuments represent important landmarks of this socialist city that give Pyongyang its unique character i.e. not only that they are the main landmarks of the city but they are the city’s main tourist attraction. Second, according to the scenario for the project, the political regime they represent still has a large number of supporters among conservatives who hold significant economic power in the country.

Policy Design for the “Grid of Moments”

The concept for this project was to treat future Pyongyang as a palimpsest for another layer of monuments called “Moments” which would be added to the existing framework of monuments. Rather than authoritative master plan, this project represents merely a policy which imposes a finer abstract grid relating to the view corridors of the existing socialist era monument to determine the location of these nodes. Each Moment would be designed by a different architect and/or designers. The Moments would be built slowly over time and the Moments grid subsequently expanded from the historic center of the Pyongyang towards the more remote neighborhoods areas. Unlike the axes, which are symbol of power, the Grid of Moments is hierarchically neutral and politically democratic. More so, because unlike modernist urbanism grid plans,

it did not erase the existing layers of the city but conformed to the existing urban tissue. This finer grained grid neutralized the power of existing axes on one level while persisting on another.

The Grid of Moments was a simple strategy of creating nodes of public life on the streets, parks and squares of Pyongyang to encourage social interaction through public spaces for public events, festivals, exhibitions etc. They would bring life, tourism and diversity to the city. The guidelines developed by the municipal government of Pyongyang had no strict rules for designing these interventions except not to interfere with the staged views of the old socialist city to maintain the characteristic socialist era quality of the city. For this reason, during a delicate phase of political transition, the Moments are designed to be open but submerged interventions. The aim of these Moments was to have a different effect on the observer than the intimidating effect of socialist era monuments by strategy of displacement from the cityscape of inescapable propaganda.

The Moments

The first Moment that was built was Moment on the Rungra Island in the Taedong River designed to commemorate the unification of the two countries. The Moment cuts into the southern tip of this island in the Taedong River that runs through the city. The Moment has a symbolic form representing the different historical developments of North and South Korea, but which are reconciled in the end. Even though it is aligned with one of the main visual axes in the city that connects the Mansu Hill Grand Monument with the Monument to Party Founding, inside the Moment one can momentarily escape this dominant view.

The second Moment is constructed in Kim Il-Sung Square. This square has a political role to accommodate 100,000 people for mass performances. However, on regular days it is a large, deserted public space with little relationship to the buildings that frame the space. The entrance to this linear submerged Moment is situated at the center of the square. It is designed as a series of alternative paths that all lead to an open field at the end towards the Taedong River. One of the possible interpretations of this Moment is that it represents the suffering of the North Korea people which ends in freedom; another is that it prevents large public gatherings and performances that were characteristic of the pre-reconciliation era.

After these first two interventions a number of smaller ones were built on the main streets in the city center before gradually expanding toward peripheral areas.

The Grid of Moments was a strategy meant to create greater “walkability” and active public life in the socialist-modernist city, while acknowledging and valuing Pyongyang’s urban and political history. The Moments are different from the existing monuments because they do not impose or dominate but have a different subtler strategy and political message. They are not meant to have intimidating impact, but to be approachable and livable. Their meaning can be interpreted in many ways, and it is implied in the ‘history of the future’ that they, just like the socialist monuments, have hidden meanings. In this interpretation the strategy of the Moments is not only to preserve the visual axes but also to provide a moment out of the city stage of the *Juche* ideology. In this way two different ideologies and political messages coexist and compete in the same urban space.

Scenarios as Method

There are several advantages of using the scenario technique for envisioning the future of the city. The scenarios are one of many and not the only plausible option for the spatial future of Pyongyang after reconciliation. It provides us with plausible solutions that are not based on historical experience and solutions that we already know. The answer to the given problem is necessary new and innovative. Scenarios allow for more imagination and creativity.

The method of writing a 'history of the future' that addresses the issues within the scenario, allowed not only the dimension of time to be involved in an urban project, but also many other factors, such as economic system, political struggles and different ideologies which are normally taken for granted by architects and designers and not considered when approaching city design and urban planning. This method also prevented us from creating the future we ourselves aspire and impose our own willfulness as architects often do. On the contrary it forced us to approach the problem with objectivity, and explore possibilities we have even if they seem impossible.

References

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