

Jinhee Park (SsD, principal)

Kick-off party

The Korean Pavilion at this year's Venice Architecture Biennale employs some of the most diverse mediums to present an almost extravagant amount of information. Once you enter you can almost feel the energy of the collective contents before you examine each individual piece. Although there are more visually 'striking' pavilions that strictly control the viewer's experience, Korea's makes its bold impact through exactly the opposite means: its raw layout strongly avoids a defined and directed viewing path.

Although the exhibit looks at both Koreas from the 'Crow's Eye View,' the subject of 'North Korea' has such a magnetic force which immediately draws the viewer into a focused 'information vacuum mode.' From the Lego-Land-like miniature model of the DMZ (Yereh Suh) as you enter, playful flipbooks (MOTOElastico), and the expected but still arresting images of North Korea (Maxime Delvaux) with even more strikingly North Korea lookalike images of South Korea (Kyoungsub Shin), this impressive spectrum of artifacts are deftly infused into a pavilion which is not the most generous exhibition hall in terms of spatial and lighting conditions.

The viewing experience is far from boring: like watching an entertaining movie, in between bombastic gulps of fascinating data you are forced to pause in front of puzzling psychedelic illustrations (Moon Hoon) that create fact-based fictions of modernity, while the room directly opposite are more vivid fictions of shouting propaganda posters. Instead of a standard timeline that other pavilions defaulted to, the curators take an approach of sampling cultural flavors, mixing science with shamanism, and displaying massive urbanism next to informal street culture.

The media takes on this diversity in the form of images, movies, and animations, to name a few, in the way the poet Yi-Sang experimented with fragmentation and juxtaposition. For us to begin re-constructing our own reading of the Koreas however, Dongsei Kim's 'Deconstructing DMZ' animation is especially eloquent. The film shows facts about the birth to the present state of the DMZ with very clear graphics and texts. Although it runs a little fast to read all the texts, the ambient music and impactful scene changes help audiences absorb complex information compelling one to watch through the video again and again, catching fragments or the whole.

The result is that the almost indistinguishable difference between North and South Korea is sometimes so strong as if the unification has already happened - perhaps this is the ultimate allure of the exhibition. Although I had the utmost pleasure to discover the similarity and differences in such a setup, I would not be surprised if it is understood by those with a minimum understanding of Korea's history that it is all about *North* Korea. Beyond the exciting content therefore, I wished to discover how these two built environments from the same origin mutated under different situations. This may then give us larger insight into how other nation states transform under the influence of politics, society, and culture. By refining the doppelganger relationship between the two nations, balancing the topics of North and South Korea within a framework that is akin to a decalomania may be able to help us quench the thirst for evidence of this mutation.

For instance, the utopianism of North Korea's propagandistic images remind me of those of the South's Saemaul Undong movement posters which were not in the exhibit. Including this parallel would have led us to question the effects of ideology vs. culture on architectural expression.

From the unveiling moment of the exhibition, it was clear that the Korean Pavillion was a strong candidate for the Biennale's Golden Lion award and I along with many others surmised it would be the winner. Some say that the sheer uniqueness of the contents concerning North Korea played a crucial role, but to me this was less relevant than the overall collective impact of the contents. Instead, the role of the Korean Pavilion's contribution on the international level is more akin to a kick-off party that will foster future discussions and multiple readings. It is my personal hope that it will also propel a more nuanced view of the complexities of the big topic in the room: unification.