

Gaps between Thoughts

Jeonghoon Lee places great architectural value on material, the properties of matter, and detail. Persistent experimentation towards possibility of expressiveness in architecture and the construction methods when using bricks is an important theme often behind his work. On the other hand, one may encounter Lee's writings or projects which reveal his concern over the ideology of contemporary architecture, such as hollowing out and filling up, vague boundary lines, de-signification, and strategies for coexistence. Where did such a gap between these two ideas start? It is too easy to define this as a disjunction between ideal and reality. Besides, Jeonghoon Lee is hovering between this interstice in his projects. We can see his interest in humanities from the fact that he minored in philosophy. Lee is an architect who is trained to define the humanistic concepts of architecture. We can see that he considers a clear definition important in his comments on the surplus of manufacturing as the main problem of the modern city, 'The fundamental problem of this surplus comes from an uncertain definition of the subject that we have to fill'.¹ Maybe his architectural observation, which swirls between subjectivity & objectivity, ideal & reality, and idea & matter, is the progress of collecting seed money for his long architectural journey. The two projects that we intend to observe are rooted too deeply in the prescriptive reality of Korean society. Therefore, it is not easy to connect these two projects with Lee's prodigious discourse. Even so, we will attempt to find the common trains of thought, without speculating over the concerns of the architect, and carefully connect them with his works.

The Sociology of Yangok

The recently completed projects Casa Geométrica in Nonhyeon-dong and the Time Stacking House in Gugi-dong were both easily more than 30 years old. The Gugi-dong house is still residential, but the Nonhyeon-dong house had changed its use to non-residential. Still *yangok*, the two-storey Western housing model, remains because the plan and form has not been modified. Until the early 1980s, the western house in Seoul also signified a home for a wealthy family. Under the enlightenment period and US military rule, a vast amount of Western culture and its illusions lent the *yangok* the image of luxury housing. In fact, most residential houses built in Seoul until the 1970s were in the traditional Korean Style. As they were in-between alleys, the city-style *hanok* (traditional Korean houses) with both wings, typically built on narrowly divided lots, were the dominant type of housing in Seoul. The urban *hanok* were classified as similar to the traditional *hanoks*, but were modified to meet the standards of life in the city, hence gaining the name *gaeryang hanok* (modified hanok). As they were built at around 82m² to 100m², the houses did not have much space in-between, sometimes with the walls

facing each other. The disappearance of the fence was one of the major changes resulting from the introduction of a city style *hanok*.²

The elimination of the external fence brought major changes to the general structure of the house. The external walls now either faced other homes or the alleyways, allowing only small and high windows. The houses were only opened out towards the yard, so the yard became priceless. It ought in light and air, and also functioned as an extra space, a work space, or a storage space to make up for the cramped residential spaces. The city style *hanok's* yard functioned more like a European atrium than a traditional Korean yard. The citizen's house, built during the restoration period after the Korean War, took away the yard from Korean residential culture. Using cement blocks imported from the United States, single to quadruple unit houses were built with a minimum yard only for entrance purposes, or none at all.³ The sudden change to the residential form meant a deficiency in the nature of layperson's common home. Korean people have a peculiar obsession with houses. The deficiency of the house has become a symbol of a simple dream for the citizens in Seoul. The three elements of a Western house, a high exterior wall, a spacious yard and a two storey building, is a dream combination that can fill up the residential cultural DNA stolen during urbanization. This simple dream still exists. As Korea enters into the post-industrial age, the option of housing is limited. Courageous people who want to achieve this dream move out to the suburbs for a country house or a town house. People who are more prepared to accommodate new conditions are looking for single unit houses in the city. The old western houses meet these demands. Over the course of three decades, western houses are now resurrected as an object of admiration for the citizens of Seoul.

The Lamination Layer and its Geometry

Gugi-dong house stands on a steep hill alleyway. The masonry that is used to overcome the slope is now made up with bricks. The existing house is also a brick house, so the new brick wall fits well. The extended part of the second floor uses the same bricks, changing the former rough image to a refined brick house. If the former masonry looks like a rough and heavy artificial ground, the new brick wall has a stronger image of being a plain surface. Each layer of bricks are facing into a different horizontal direction, and also has a calibrated interval between bricks, which add details to the artificial ground. The exterior wall going up the slope mingles with the V-shaped roofline, revealing the distinctive scenery of the alleyway. This house has a one-way headed sloping roof pointing towards the roof, which is a different feature from ordinary Western houses. It also has an interesting plan, elevating the kitchen by 1.1m, which is located on the right side of the entrance and inserted a parking lot, leaving a skip floor inside. It seems as if there may have been concerns over the cramped site from the



original design. Jeonghoon Lee understood the conditions of the original building, making use of it effectively. With a site area of less than 330m² and with a 30% building to land ratio, the floor area was insufficient, even with the extension on the 2nd floor. If the reconstruction of the space and its various applications are the solution to the limitations of the area, finding the form within the existing structure is a concerted effort, especially to meet the limited construction expenses. As a result, the Gugi-dong house is the most minimalist work among Lee's projects. The change in the facade is limited, but the image of the house as a whole is much more balanced in proportion than the stable mass. The extension in the children's room has a symmetrical structure, alongside the living room which is placed across the terrace. The extended V-shaped roof that is piled on the existing roof creates a modern mass. A space placed between the existing and the new roof has a ceiling, attracting light to the centre of the room. This ceiling is more effective on the hallway than the children's room and living room, which already have big windows.

The respect for and application of the existing text that this project devises is not the result of academic observation, which differs from the other works of Jeonghoon Lee. There is a sufficient amount of concern for the conditions on which the project lies, and a number of solutions proposed. The result is success. The attachment for the bricks is expressed as respect for the existing structure, and the complicated nature of the existing composition was approached not as an obstacle, but as an applicable value. The past and the present make an odd reconciliation here in this sensible approach. The gorgeous bricks, heightened in their red colour, are further emphasized by

the detail and the shade, and the existing bricks, which are of a darker colour, expose the traces of time. These two cooperate and become the marks of architect Jeonghoon Lee. This house, which was a dream come true for someone thirty years ago, has become a dream come true once again for a young couple with two children. The former owner would also be thankful that his traces remain. Renovation projects are good examples that the architect's sensitive approach can be a better solution than any academic approach.

If the Gugi-dong house is a project that retains a humanistic sensibility, the Nonhyeon-dong house holds the experimental spirit of the architect. This may be due to the fact that the Nonhyeon-dong house no longer has a residential purpose, but is planned as an exhibition/office space, which brings the need to transform the old Western house image into a contemporary image. The existing concrete embankment and the brick wall seems coercive, almost feeling like a wordless warning sign. The most urgent task was probably knocking down the borders. The glossy surface panel reflects the surrounding environment, which is used on the wall of the parking lot that is made by digging up the embankment, makes the borders vague. The combination of transparent reinforced glass and the steel frame makes the parking lot seem like an extended space of the gallery. The black stainless panels with holes, which wrap around the two storey house, plays a role to create a whole new image from the existing residential house. The observation of the triangular combination of the panels and the geometric modification with holes reflect the architect's interest in the use of materials and observing details. The double skin inevitably makes the interior space darker. It is the price of the full makeover for the old house. If it is hard to survive as an old Western house in the middle of Gangnam district, the price must be paid. It cannot be resurrected as a house like the Gugi-dong house, but this is the fate of an old house in Gangnam. The inclined plane of the roof is a deposition with concrete, which is now exposed. It even exposed the cement bricks, which are painted in white, that are roughly stacked to match the roof slope. For that reason, the interior space has a terrific spatial quality with vertical extension. Clear white walls and a rough roof are in contrast, expressing a good style. It might have been better to see the natural light attracting ceiling from the Gugi-dong house. A ray of light in the dark interior space would have solved not only the lighting problem, but would have helped to demonstrate a sense of space.

The Spatial and Expressive Value

'All creation exists in the process of interpretation as a principal agent, upon termination of judging visible phenomenon'.⁴ This is a passage from Jeonghoon Lee's master's thesis, written in France. He believes that interpretation starts by denying prejudice, and that it paradoxically starts

from looking at the nature of things in a genuine way. The thoughts about architectural materials in the French city of Nancy, and the experience of the feast of light from the stained glass cathedral near Metz, led to an observation of the expressive potential of architectural materials have on a Herman parking lot and houses on the Southern sea in Korea. Even when he uses bricks, his interest is the evocative possibilities. The method of expression in the shaded bricks from the Hwayang-dong renovation project, creating curves from the brick wall in the Curving House, Yongin, and using abnormally shaped bricks allowed for Lee to even try experiments in critical conditions on the Scale-ing house. However, the suggestive value of bricks and the theme of time have an exquisite point of contact in the Gugi-dong project. It reveals the past and the present openly yet coexisting beautifully without suppressing one another. Lee calls his own architecture 'troublesome architecture'. He focuses on the constructive value of work, so he tends to pay respect to the traces of efforts from the anonymous laborer from the former building. The trace of old work in the Nonhyeon-dong house is in the same context. The layer of time is a suitable theme in many ways. Interpreting the property of matter and the material, and their expressive potential, takes shape in the collection of Lee's projects and his own architectural language. However, his spatial experiments, which can be abstracted into a method of addition and subtraction, have not yet set sail. The experience with Shigeru Ban prompted his spatial imagination and inspired his construction methods, and his experience in the office of Zaha Hadid allowed him to work with digital tools such as Rhino. The Curving House in Yongin, and the design of the panels from the Nonhyeon-dong house, would have been hard to achieve without the help of digital tools. Surely the digital tools allowed him to make his architectural experiments much bolder. In the experiments with the space and property of matter at Prague National library and the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul became the first projection of his subjected interpretations. However, the experiment on the penetrated volume, in the reinterpretation of space and property of matter, and rediscovering architectural vagueness, remains incomplete. The vertical expansion of space attempted at the house in Yongin reveals in the Gugi-dong house project as the light well that delivers light through the ceiling. He goes to the trouble of stacking two layers at the ceiling, but the effect is limited. The attempt to redefine the border of the interior and exterior would have been good in the Nonhyeon-dong house, but it results in a more stable boundary.

In the historical point of view, the origins of the construction methods in architecture have been understood as piling methods from Roman architecture and the connecting method from Greek architecture. The digging method comes from pit dwelling and a wrapping method that comes from the dugout hut, which were considered a traditional way of understanding architecture from a construction perspective. These concepts are quite different from the apparent necessities of hollowing out and filling

up. From this perspective, the mass and the skin cannot be materialized at the same time, and the vagueness of the midpoint can only be understood as a process of metaphysical thought. For this reason, the hole that penetrates the Prague National library project loses its energy because of the lightness of the skin. The demolishing of the border between the interior and exterior in the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, is not delivering the powerful force of the colossal structure. The new interpretation of architectural materials will come as a touching experience like the cathedral near Metz when it's completed as an architectural space. At this period of time, it is a challenge to survive as a young architect in Korea. There are not many opportunities to work, and most of them are interlaced with difficult problems. The architect needs to promote a topic held in the heart in which he fiercely believes, in order to express it to some degree while also unleashing the problems one-by-one. It is why we want to see the sensibility that was shown on the Gugi-dong project to be completed on a spatial project.

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