Ken Fallas, Ekaterina Kochetkova
**From Parasite to Pandemic. How Korean Cities
Can Lead the Way to a Global Post-COVID Urbanism**

Abstract
Nature does not negotiate, and COVID-19 proved it by triggering a real-time experiment on a self-confined civilization trying to cope with its effects over our most densely inhabited environments: cities. Just within weeks, South Korea shifted the world's attention from its "Parasite" film's satire on urban social inequality and modern isolation, to become one of the most virus-affected territories, ending up as a top reference on flattening the curve. Yet, Korean cities' resiliency did not only rely on a trace, test and treat system, but on an emerging technology-based and human centered urbanism. This article aims to analyze the South Korean urban experiences which allowed them to overcome the current crisis and how this can guide the way for other cities in the post-COVID world.

Keywords
COVID-19 — South Korea — K-urbanism — Burnout Society

A virus of truth

During centuries, architecture and planning were considered health disciplines, confronting diseases through environmental approaches that shaped new movements, such as the modernism with its functional, clean and well-ventilated spaces against "bad air". (Campbell 2005). But the progress made by scientific research in a world ruled by hyper-speed and hyper-connectivity allowed us to act quick and more efficiently than ever before, exempting design fields from these tasks; thus influencing a "globalist urbanism" that focused on market-led solutions to problems faced by capitalist cities, equipped with smart systems and prefabricated standard characteristics regardless of context considerations, as reimagined generic cities (Greenfield 2013).

However, are there any differentiable urban characteristics on design and planning causing that only some cities succeed on containing the current pandemic crisis while others struggle with such a heavy impact?

For instance, Chinese and Russian cities followed similar paths through tech-assisted policing and lockdowns. European cities established special measures for quarantine but a more restrained usage of technologies due to data privacy concerns. American cities on the other hand, found themselves alarmingly unprepared, as well as many urban centers in developing countries. But just a small group of cities, especially in Asian countries, showed capabilities for controlling the outbreak.

Yet, even from architects and planners perspective, much of this discussion on cities' virus-response (as it happens with climate change or migrations) has being restrained by ideology-techno-governance blinders comparing outcomes from main contenders: liberal democracies vs. authoritarian models, capitalism vs. communism, or ultimately, a cultural clash of east vs.
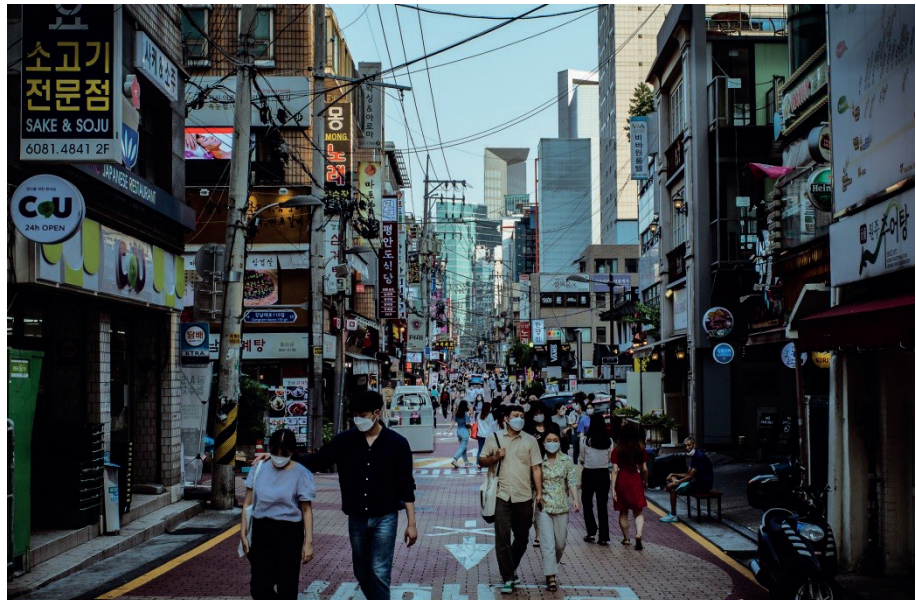
Fig. 1
Scena di (nuova) vita quotidiana a Seoul dove l'utilizzo delle mascherine è ampiamente diffuso già da tempo. Seoul, Corea, 2020. © starstruck2049 / Shutterstock.

west (Harari, 2020; Carrion 2020; Agamben 2020; Zizek 2020).

This approach has reduced our capacity to understand that regardless of ideologies, COVID-19 has acted as a "virus of truth", shaking power structures and unmasking vulnerabilities. The pandemic biggest impact is not merely a sudden health issue, but a collective anguish, paralysis and isolation due to an extended quarantine used as the only tool available at the moment for fighting the virus. Yet, this confinement effect is amplified since the quality of spaces we all live in make us experience it in very different ways due to a global persistent urban shaped problem: inequality.

From *Parasite* to pandemic

In pre-pandemic days, Korean film *Parasite* (2019) satirized the relation of a family surviving in a small and deteriorated semi-basement unit with few hopes of leaving the "bottom of society", and a privileged one enjoying a quasi-perfect life in a hill mansion. A normalized gap between socioeconomic groups cohabitating the same city, but which for its director Bong Joon-ho, this feature does not represent a Korean-only condition, but a common element of the late capitalist society we are all living in globally (Hagen 2019). The rich can work, live, play and study from home without worrying for income, food or medical attention: the system provides. While for the rest, the film suggests that there is no escape from poverty and the pre-established unequal distribution of opportunities regardless of how hard you work: meritocracy is now a myth.

During the last decades, Korean economy success pushed its cities for fast growth and high competitiveness, triggering a race for access to housing, mobility and services, but also pressing citizens to believe that this performance and merit-based system will be the key for owning those resources as their pursuit of happiness. This, according to the philosopher Byung-Chul Han, has transformed South Korea in an "achievement society", leaving many behind with a burnout effect characterized by excessive working time, high income inequality, social privilege segregation, self-exploitation, overwhelming youth unemployment and proliferation of stress-related disorders (Han 2015). This tendency is also widely spread in western societies, which has evolved into a state of general exhaustion and isolation especially in cities. It is no secret that architects and planners hold an important share of responsibility since they shaped these cities that are now shaping us.

Fig. 2
Scena dal film *Parasite* (2019) diretto da Bong Joon-ho. Bagno dell'appartamento seminterrato. Seoul, Corea, 2020.

However, for South Koreans there was no time to celebrate *Parasite*'s international success, neither to appropriately analyse nor confront the very same urban and social challenges the film exposed. On February 18th, the 31st COVID-19 case was reported, catalogued days later as a super-spreader that moved Korea up the charts as the most affected territory outside China (Hernandez et alii 2020).

Beyond test, trace and treat
The Korean strategy was clear; apply all learned lessons from past pandemics (SARS in 2003 and MERS in 2015) through policies allowing rapid distribution of diagnostics, but more importantly: identify infected carriers' path before the contagion spreads (Lee & Jung 2019). For that, officials took advantage of the last 20 years investment on urban digital infrastructure, allowing them to keep track of everyone who tested positive by crossing interviews, CCTV records, phone GPS data, credit card history or any source that can provide a real-time geolocation of the virus path. Much of this data was publicly available through media, websites and the national mobile alert system which warned residents by customized messages if new cases were detected nearby. In collaboration with the private sector, several apps were also developed to help users find near clinics (and drive-thru test booths), mask vendors and clean zones. This ICT and public-private-partnership approach has been vastly covered by preliminary reports aiming to guide other nations based on Korean experience (ROK Ministry of Economy and Finance 2020). However, despite the undeniable main role of tech features to contain the spread, much of this success story has been portrayed as "hyper-tech capacity", "cultural exceptionalism" for rules compliance, or even as "normalized fashion" for the use of masks, yet diminishing the influence of the planned built-up urban resiliency that helped Korean cities to minimize daily life disruptions without extended lockdowns, fear monger or economic depression.
Korean architects and planners' approach on urban inequality have evolved during the last decade (despite still dealing with failed attempts caused by sprawl-induce models such as new towns with speculative generic housing, basic-amenities deserts and car dependency) (Lee 2019) to reconsider urban renewal strategies and multi-nucleic systems as a return to the community. This has widely increased levels of public participation and local interven-

Fig. 3
Una postazione per i tamponi *walk through*. Incheon, Corea, 2020. © Rapture700 / Shutterstock.com

tions, not only in megacities like Seoul, but in small and mid-size urban centres all over the country. The Happy Living Zones and tools developed by the Better Life Index guided effective planning for assuring a multiscale physical and digital decentralization of essential services, welfare, education, culture, medical assistance and green public spaces (Kim 2013). Compact cities within cities, providing 15-minutes-walkable equal access to urban diversity and its benefits, in other words: cities for people (Gehl 2010). This have been reinforced by governmental transparency and public trust, which is key for digital data sharing, revealing an emerging technology-based but human centred urbanism, shaping the core for the recently launched Korea's *Digital and Green New Deal* (Economic Policies, H2 2020).

K-urbanism and the challenges ahead

It should not be a surprise that these urban concepts described above appear to summarize much of the already-known global progressive design strategies that many other cities are currently pursuing. Korean cities have been developing these concepts into their own agenda, yet major challenges remain, especially in terms of providing access to quality housing, encouraging public community life through active and welcoming spaces, transitioning to healthier work environments and responsibly assimilating digital systems to urban daily life. This pandemic exposed that quarantines are not a new phenomenon since our current urban living paradigm has been producing a systematic isolation. However, *K-urbanism* comes to show that, far from perfect, it is possible to co-create a model for improving urban quality of life tailored for local needs while targeting competitiveness, sustainability and equality.

This has been proved effective during the pandemic providing living zones fully equipped with physical and digital amenities to cope with social safety, reducing exposure to the virus without breaking daily routines for workers, students, elders, etc.

The philosopher Byong Chul-han suggests that temporal crisis will only be overcome once the vita activa (active life) incorporates again the vita contemplativa (contemplative life) (Han 2017). In other words, it is crucial to repurpose our time for critical analysis of the present circumstances, identifying how our cities can integrate these changes to cope not only with the

K. Fallas, E. Kochetkova, From Parasite to Pandemic. How Korean Cities Can Lead the Way to a Global Post-COVID Urbanism

130

Fig. 4
Progetto di rigenerazione urbana Seoullo 7017 e area limitrofa. Seoul, Corea, 2020. © Nghia Khanh / Shutterstock

COVID-19 pandemic, but with other major environmental and social issues that cannot be postponed anymore. The challenges ahead will require decisive actions based on a deep revision of what we truly consider valuable as an urban specie, but most importantly, that architecture and planning should overcome the noise of political polarization that distracts its core goals and take back responsibility for people's safety and happiness.

Fig. 5
Vista sulla torre di Namsan e skyline del centro di Seoul. Seoul, Corea, 2019. © PKphotograph / Shutterstock

Bibliography

AGAMBEN G. (2020) – "Giorgio Agamben on coronavirus: "The enemy is not outside, it is within us." [online] Available at: <http://bookhaven.stanford.edu/2020/03/giorgio-agamben-on-coronavirus-the-enemy-is-not-outside-it-is-within-us/> [last access 24 July 2020]

CAMPBELL M. (2005) –"What tuberculosis did for modernism: the influence of a curative environment on modernist design and architecture". Medical history, 49 (4), 463–488.

CARRION J. (2020) – "La biología está acelerando la digitalización del mundo". The New York Times. [online] Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2020/03/29/espanol/opinion/coronavirus-revolucion-digital.html> [last access 24 July 2020]

ECONOMIC POLICIES, H2 2020 (2020) – Ministry of Economics and Finance, South Korea. [online] Available at: <https://english.moef.go.kr/pc/selectTbPressCenterDtl.do?boardCd=N0001&seq=4913> [last access 24 July 2020]

ROK MINISTRY OF ECONOMY AND FINANCE (2020) – "Flattening the curve on COVID-19: How Korea responded to a pandemic using ICT", The Government of Korea. [online] Available at:< http://www.undp.org/content/seoul_policy_center/en/home/presscenter/articles/2019/flattening-the-curve-on-covid-19.html>[last access 24 July 2020]

GEHL J. (2010) – *Cities for people*. Island Press, Washington, DC.

GREENFIELD A. (2013) – *Against the smart city: The city is here for you to use*. NY: Do projects, New York.

HAN B. (2015) – *The Burnout Society*. Stanford University Press, Stanford.

HAGEN H. (2019) – "The Black List Interview: Bong Joon-ho on Parasite". [online] Available at: < https://blog.blcklst.com/the-black-list-interview-bong-joon-ho-on-parasite-5fd0cb0baa12>[last access 24 July 2020]

HAN B. (2017) – *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingering*. Wiley, New Jersey.

HARARI Y. N. (2020) – "Yuval Noah Harari: the world after coronavirus". Financial Times. [online] Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75> [last access 24 July 2020]

HERNANDEZ M. e SCARR S. e SHARMA M. (2020) – "The Korean clusters How coronavirus cases exploded in South Korean churches and hospitals". [online] Available at:<https://graphics.reuters.com/CHINA-HEALTH-SOUTHKOREA-CLUSTERS/0100B5G33SB/index.html>[last access 24 July 2020]

LEE K. e JUNG K. (2019) – "Factors Influencing the Response to Infectious Diseases: Focusing on the Case of SARS and MERS in South Korea". International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 16(8):1432.

LEE H. (2019) – "A Study on the Characteristics of New Towns and the Redevelopment of Project-Canceled Areas: A Case Study of Seoul, South Korea". Sustainability, 11(20), 1-18.

KIM Y. (2013) – A *Primer on Korean Planning and Policy*. Regional Development. Korea Research Institute for Human Settlements (KRIHS), Seoul.

ZIZEK S. (2020) – "Coronavirus is 'Kill Bill'-esque blow to capitalism and could lead to reinvention of communism". [online] Available at: <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/481831-coronavirus-kill-bill-capitalism-communism/> [last access 24 July 2020]

Ken Fallas (b. San Jose, CR. 1990) is a Costa Rican Architect and Planner based in Seoul, Korea. He holds a Master in Architecture and Urban Planning by the Seoul National University of Science and Technology. His current work focuses on advanced research for regional planning and urban quality of life in South Korea, Philippines and Latin America.

Ekaterina Kochetkova (b. Vladivostok, 1993) is a Russian designer, graduated with honors from Vladivostok State University of Economics and Service in the faculty of Interior Design. In 2015 moved to South Korea under the Korean Government Scholarship Program to obtain Master of Arts in Design in Hongik University. Currently she is a Ph.D. Candidate in the department of Architecture at Seoul National University of Science and Technology, South Korea. Her research field focuses on digital architecture, cultural theory and future housing.