

## Pyongyang: A New Socialist City

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Pyongyang is like no other city on earth.

But you need to go there to feel what it is really like.

First impressions: you might look at one or two individual buildings and wonder at their architectural style. Here you do not have the fashions of the 'West', in which buildings look striking for a while, only to appear worn and clumsy soon afterwards. Nor do you have many 'Asian' influences that feature elsewhere in this part of the world.

If you look carefully, a few buildings from the 1950s and even 1960s evince a Soviet-era style, influenced by Stalin-baroque. The best quality materials, careful design and a permanent grandeur – these and more are features of such a style.

But they are relatively few, for the DPRK has followed its own patterns of architecture, increasingly conscious of a distinct tradition that has a consistent distinct feature: again and again, the buildings are focused on facilities and opportunities for the people. I have never seen so many concert halls and theatres, for all manner of public events. So also the multitude of specialised sports facilities, catering to a tradition in which physical exercise is central to one's wellbeing. To be sure, there are the expected museums – of art, the anti-imperial struggles and the lives of the Kim family – but these too are places where one always finds people.

Deeper reflection: perhaps night is the best time to see the city in a different way. Now the lines of connectivity emerge. Turn this way and you see the light show on the pyramid-like Ryugyong Hotel; turn that way and you see how they point you across the river to the Juche Tower and the statue of two men and women holding up the symbols of the Workers Party – hammer, writing brush and sickle. Turn again and again and you see how one building after another has been located in careful relation to the others: the children's playground with its carnival features; Mangyongdae Children's Palace; the Grand People's Study Hall; Mirae Scientists Street; the collection of residential high-rises that weave and rise – in purples, greens, blues and reds. A setting sun catches on another set of apartment blocks on the other side of the road from the circus building and you

realise that each block has been located to do precisely that: reflect light in ever changing patterns. The examples could be multiplied again and again.

Some would call this ‘town planning’, but that is a weak term for what continues to happen in Pyongyang. It is a wholesale reorganisation, if not a completely new production of space itself.

How did such a city arise? In some sense, the Fatherland Liberation War (also known as the Korean War) did Pyongyang a favour. I mean not the massive slaughter perpetrated by the United States in what can only be described as war crimes. No, I mean that the city – indeed the whole country – was completely destroyed. After the armistice was signed and the United States reluctantly settled for occupying the southern part of the Korean Peninsula, the people of the north set about the massive task of building anew.

The model city of Pyongyang is the result.

As I write, the city is undergoing another building boom, a visible sign of the economic boom of the last five years or so. The new phase was kick-started by a year devoted to building. All able-bodied people not involved in agriculture or defence took a year away from study and work to focus their energies on building sites. Old buildings that had fallen into disrepair during the 1990s continue to be renovated and a spate of new constructions are under way.

At the other end of the scale, a foreign architect or two has been busily at work with local architects in developing new and distinct building styles. As Calvin Chua, a leading architect from Singapore who has been working on Pyongyang since 2013 observes, he may come up with a list of suggestions, but the local architects take up his ideas and develop them in their own way and in light of the tradition they have developed. He admires their skill, experience and unique creativity.

All of this has produced an absolutely unique city. It can disorient a visitor accustomed to other cities and their traditional or bustling spaces. It can make one wonder at how such a unique place could indeed be built.

Earlier, I used the term ‘feel’ for gaining a sense of what the city is like. I do not mean an emotional perception or even a gut feeling, but a feel for the very different production of space. One needs to take in the whole rather than individual units. If you do

so, you begin to understand that the nature of the space has changed. Space is not a given, in which human beings find their place, but space is produced in different ways by the acts of human beings and their socio-economic systems. Thus, space has been produced in Pyongyang like no other place on earth.

Let me put it this way: during the communist era in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, they began feeling their way forward for a new and socialist production of space. For example, you can still find this effort in parts of East Berlin (the former capital of the German Democratic Republic). Karl Marx Allé is perhaps the best example, with its magnificent Stalin baroque devoted to flats for workers. But you can also find it in the outskirts of Halle, or in the centre of Baia Mare in Romania, or indeed in Minsk, which was flattened during the Second World War. Keep looking and you will find more and more such examples.

Nonetheless, these were initial and partial efforts and the sense of a newly produced space is fleeting – especially today as efforts to obliterate them in terms of a capitalist production of space continue.

By contrast, in Pyongyang they have been producing a new sense of space for 65 years, beginning with nothing and building anew. In many respects, it is what eastern European and Soviet cities tried to be: a new socialist city.