Socialist Material Negotiations: North Korea’s Utilization of Cold War Architectural Aid (1950s-1960s)

Sulim Kim *

Introduction

Since the establishment of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) to the 1950-1953 Korean War, the North Korean society’s relentless project, which poured continuous effort without pause, was none other than urban development. This unwavering commitment to urban progress from 1950-1960 emanated from the broader global societal milieu of the early 20th century, characterized by a fervent desire for modernization and the establishment of a new foundation for life following protracted colonial experiences, wars, and diseases. The most visible indications of the hope for a new nation and the groundwork for societal transformations lay in the construction of fundamental urban infrastructure and the creation of new living spaces. The social aspirations for urban development in North Korea, entwined with the goals of both sides during the Cold War era to outshine their adversaries in urban planning, progressed even more dynamically. The socialist bloc began its theoretical articulation of socialist urban cities.

* Ph.D Candidate, Department of History, University of Hawai’i at Mānoa.
This paper has greatly benefited from the support of the Hyundai Motor-Korea Foundation Center for Korean History at the Wilson Center and the Korea Foundation.
In tandem, it initiated experimental endeavors aimed at integrating socialist ideology into architectural frameworks and everyday life. This visionary pursuit sought to reimagine a socialist mode of life in North Korea and the ambitious task of collectively reconstructing the material worlds shattered by the Korean War.

This study unveils the exchange of architectural aid and knowledge between North Korea and its socialist nations in the 1950s and 1960s on the landscape of urban housing construction. Noteworthy scholarship has delved into the fraternal countries’ contributions to early post-war urban and housing construction in North Korea. Cheehyung Harrison Kim provides valuable insights into the evolution of urban architecture in Pyongyang with various fraternal countries’ engagements.\(^1\) Young-sun Hong’s examination of East Germany’s assistance to housing development in Hamhŭng and Hŭngnam further enriches our understanding of this collaborative effort.\(^2\) Zihua Shen and Yafeng Xia shed light on the substantial impact of Chinese aid in the postwar reconstruction of North Korea.\(^3\) By capturing the diplomatic maneuvers of the DPRK and detailing the aid it received, this paper contributes to the ongoing discussions surrounding the transnational nature of post-war North Korea’s reconstruction. These research endeavors seek to situate the urban development of North Korea within the broader fabric of global urban socialist experiments during the 1950s and the 1960s.

This paper centers on the DPRK’s strategies to secure foreign aid and their indigenization of international practices. This approach stems from a cautious consideration of the potential oversimplification in por-

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traying foreign aid as a unilaterally benevolent support. Instead, it exposes a dynamically evolving aid and Cold War political situation with financial constraints served as motivation for the Workers’ Party of Korea to focus more on independent architectural endeavors. Throughout this process, the field of architecture, both in academia and on construction sites, aimed to minimize resources and materials in response to the Party’s encouragement for independent construction. This response affected a diverse group of workers in the architectural field from various backgrounds, entrusted with the mission of providing modern homes and conceptualizing North Korean-style socialist construction. By shifting the focus from the political leadership as the sole recipient of aid, this paper brings to light different sectors and divergences within North Korean communities. This decentralization of perspective offers fresh insights into the diverse actors who engaged in a multifaceted process of comprehending and implementing socialist architectural ideology, materials, knowledge, and aid.

**Collaborative Endeavors in Maximizing Aid and Crafting Socialist Urban Vision**

In the transnational architectural endeavors, socialist nations, like the Soviet Union, with their economic and technological foundations, decided to extend aid to economically less affluent nations under the umbrella of socialist internationalism. North Korea was the very first beneficiary of Soviet architectural aid given in this spirit, and it subsequently received assistance from other socialist countries as well. During the 6th Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea on August 5, 1953, Kim Il-sung formally declared alignment with the international Socialist front, securing support from fraternal socialist countries led by the Soviet Union. Vietnam also entered the same sort of alignment and received development aid as a result. But the aid from socialist countries to North Korea preceded
Vietnam’s by three years, underscoring the swift nature of North Korea’s engagement with international socialist architectural aid.⁴

At that time, North Korea was among the socialist countries that had just entered the early stages of urbanization, yet that modest urban landscape was devastated by the Korean War. This created an environment where the financial burden associated with the demolition and reconstruction of existing buildings was, for all intents and purposes, negligible.⁵ The attractiveness of drafting basic blueprints and urban development aligned with socialist ideals at minimal initial costs was apparent. Furthermore, the successful reconstruction of cities that had become ruins due to imperialist U.S.-led bombings—cities that were revived through the principles of socialist internationalism and fraternity—emerged as a potent narrative that could be adeptly employed for propaganda purposes. Another decisive yet often overlooked reason North Korea received the first architectural aid in the name of socialist internationalism is because of the proactive efforts of the Workers’ Party of Korea and architects. As early as the beginning of 1951, before the end of the Korean War, North Korean and Soviet architects devised plans for the reconstruction of Pyongyang. On May 19, 1952, these plans were approved via Cabinet Decision No. 125.⁶ The initiative was grounded in the prospect of receiving assistance for the reconstruction of Pyongyang and other urban cities. This proactive stance not only facilitated the solicitation of aid from socialist brother nations

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⁴ “Modŭn Kŏsŭl Chŏnhuinmin’ Gyŏngjebokkukbalchŏnŭl Wihayŏ [To achieve all for the recovery and development of the people’s economy],” Chosŏn Rodongdang Chungang Wiwŏnhoe Cheyukch’a Chŏnwŏnhoeŭi [the 6th Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea], August 5, 1953. Also, see Christina Schwenkel, Building Socialism: The Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020): 105.


⁶ P’yŏngyangŭi Ŭjewa Onŭl, 262.
but also meticulously detailed the utilization of such aid, offering a comprehensive and compelling narrative.

One particularly salient action by the Party and architects was an international conference convened on June 5, 1953, just a month before the armistice of the Korean War. This conference centered on reconstructing Pyongyang and served as a platform for North Korea to appeal for architectural aid. This conference, orchestrated at the governmental level, gathered ambassadors from socialist brother countries. During this gathering, then-Vice-President Ch’oe Ch’ang-ik and Minister of Construction Kim Sŭng-hwa took center stage to present a vision of Pyongyang’s urban plans. Underscoring that these requests for architectural aid were indeed diplomatic proposals grounded in socialist internationalism, Vice Minister Ri Dong-gŭn from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was also present. A confidential document from the Polish ambassador, who attended the conference, revealed that the presentation portrayed North Korea’s situation strategically, retracing pre-war colonial exploitation up to the adverse conditions preceding the war due to imperialist attacks. The presentation artfully expressed gratitude and underscored the pivotal role played by various fraternal countries aligned with the Soviet Union since 1952, with tailored emphasis on the importance of the Stalingrad model for the Soviet Union and the Warsaw model for Poland. The presentation appealed to emotional sentiments while remaining grounded in historical context, highlighting socialist fraternity, and fostering a sense of obligation. Showcasing the diplomatic finesse of North Korea, the presentation adeptly conveyed that donor countries could also achieve something politically and diplomatically.

In this conference, the North Korean presentation team articulated an

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eight-year plan for urban recovery that would provide residential spaces for a substantial population of 600,000 in Pyongyang. The presentation asserted that these urban living spaces would be designed to accommodate residents’ preferences while concurrently interpreting socialist realism within a modern architectural context. Notably, policies aimed at protecting parks and mountains within the city were explicitly mentioned, thereby distinguishing North Korea from its capitalist counterparts, which supposedly neglected green space in the urban landscape. Following the conclusion of all the city planning presentations, North Korean officials reiterated their gratitude to their socialist brother countries and appealed for sustained assistance during the challenging post-war period characterized by “imperialist” attacks.

An interesting strategic choice was observed during this conference: North Korea refrained from specifying a detailed list of demands. According to insights from Kiryluk Stanislaw, the Polish ambassador, this deliberate omission suggested consideration of the potential burden of providing aid to each country, taking into account not only North Korea’s needs in the architectural sector but also across various societal domains. An additional layer of intrigue arose from the participation of foreign workers who had previously collaborated with North Korean architects in the pre-war city recovery process. Among these individuals were lead Soviet architects who had actively contributed to the initial reconstruction plans for Pyongyang from 1951. Their addresses to the ambassadors of their respective nations demonstrated a continuity of engagement and a mutual desire for collaboration and constructive criticism. For example, the head of the Polish mission advocated for ongoing support of Pyongyang’s reconstruction in the

8 The Polish ambassador clearly stated that “The plan (for the city of Pyongyang) was prepared with the help of Soviet specialists.” “Report of the Embassy of the People’s Republic of Poland in Korea,” July 16, 1953, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Polish Foreign Ministry Archive. Obtained for NKIDP by Jakub Poprocki and translated for NKIDP by Maya Latynski, digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114953.
name of freedom and peace, while Soviet architects not only appealed for aid but also welcomed feedback and collaboration from architects of other nations, expressing a keen interest in potential modifications to North Korea’s urban plans to improve.9

This international conference for Pyongyang’s reconstruction was quite successful; indeed, Ambassador Stanislaw was moved to write, “I am asking [state authorities] to take a stand on making the assistance of the People’s Republic of Poland to the reconstruction of Pyongyang concrete” in his report.10 After the conference, North Korea engaged in further discreet diplomatic maneuvers to persuade nations that had yet to commit to providing assistance. Central to these clandestine negotiations was Park Chŏng-ae, a confidante of Kim Il-sung and a member of the Supreme People’s Assembly.11 She conducted meetings with ambassadors from various nations, fervently appealing for support for Pyongyang’s reconstruction plans. Employing a strategic approach, she underscored the substantial aid already received from different nations and selectively revealed commitments made by other countries to exert peer pressure on the respective ambassadors. During a meeting with Ambassador Stanislaw on June 16, 1953, it emerged that the Polish government had yet to finalize its decision regarding assistance. Park Chŏng-ae mentioned that the previous aid decisions of Bolesław Bierut, the former president of Poland, were instrumental in various reconstruction endeavors in North Korea. She also referenced the provi-

9 “Report of the Embassy.”
10 “Report of the Embassy.”
11 According to the records of the Polish ambassador, the individuals who visited to persuade the ambassador at that time were Hŏ Ka-i and Park Chŏng-ae. However, at this point, Hŏ Ka-i was on the verge of being marginalized due to friction with Kim Il-sung, and particularly since Park actively attacked Hŏ, it is reasonable to believe that even if they visited together for official business at that time, Ho’s influence would have been minimal. See Andreĭ Nikolaevich Lankov, From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945-1960 (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 147-152.).
sions from China, the Soviet Union, and Czechoslovakia, aiming to de-
lineate an ongoing collaborative effort and thereby encourage Poland to
join in providing support. Following this meeting, the Polish ambas-
dador communicated Poland’s potential contributions to North Korea.

Upon the culmination of these conferences and covert negotiations,
North Korea officially announced the initiation of the reconstruction of
Pyongyang through Cabinet Decision No. 125 on July 30, 1953. A
month later, during the 6th Plenary Session of the Central Committee
of the Workers’ Party of Korea on August 5, Kim Il-sung declared
that the Soviet Union had confirmed assistance amounting to 10 billion
rubles. Simultaneously, announcements were made regarding aid
campaigns initiated in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria.
The concerted efforts of the North Korean government, architects, and
delegates during the conference and subsequent covert activities proved
compelling to socialist brother nations, ultimately yielding positive
outcomes.

Kim Il-sung, expressing aspirations for sustained assistance, con-
veyed gratitude to nations that had committed to aid, including the
Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary.
Remarkably, as early as September 1953 plans were articulated for a
visit to these countries—a visit that came to fruition in June 1956.
Furthermore, the North Korean government extended its efforts to mo-
bilize initiatives in the civilian domain to promote its urban campaigns.
In 1954, a movement supportive of North Korea’s urban reconstruction
emerged within the socialist sphere. Initiated by writer Max Tzinering.

12 “Report of the Embassy.”
13 Ri Sun’gŏn, Chut’aek Soguyŏk Kyehoek [Housing Zone Planning] (Pyongyang:
Kungnip Kŏnsŏl Ch’ulp’ansa, 1963): 15; “Modŭn Kŏsŭl Chŏnhuinmin’ Gyŏngje-
bokbulchŏnŭl Wihayŏ.”
14 “Note from the Embassy of the Polish Republic in Korea”, September 2, 1953,
Wilson Center Digital Archive, Polish Foreign Ministry Archive. Obtained for
NKIDP by Jakub Poprocki and translated for NKIDP by Maya Latynski,
digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114960.
and backed by the East German government, a delegation named the Committee for the Support of Korea and Vietnam was established. This overseas delegation congregated in North Korea on December 25, 1954, engaging in a campaign for urban reconstruction and expressing a desire for sustained architectural aid to North Korea from various countries.\textsuperscript{15}

Scholarly debate exists regarding the veracity of claims suggesting that the 10 billion rubles North Korea received from the Soviet Union for reconstruction might be an inflated amount. However, considering the consistent reporting of the same figure in dispatches sent by ambassadors from Poland and Romania during that period, it appears to be a reasonably accurate fact.\textsuperscript{16} This substantial aid, far exceeding the 344 million rubles received by Vietnam from the Soviet Union for its initial reconstruction efforts, serves as a testament to North Korea’s diplomatic adeptness and the keen interest of socialist nations in the country.\textsuperscript{17} In 1955, the Soviet Union estimated North Korea’s entire national reconstruction investment for 1954 at around 2.06 billion rubles.\textsuperscript{18} This indicates that the Soviet Union pledged an amount equivalent to five times the entire annual budget of North Korea. Moreover, as of 1955, Romania promised 65 million, East Germany 45 million, Czechoslovakia 35 million, Hungary 25 million, Bulgaria 20 million, and Poland 19 million rubles in aid, further attesting to North Korea’s success in securing substantial initial assistance.\textsuperscript{19}


\textsuperscript{16} “The Political, Economic and Social-Cultural Situation.”

\textsuperscript{17} Christina Schwenkel. \textit{Building Socialism}, 337.

This significant foreign aid was positioned for a favorable comparison with assistance provided to South Korea in the Cold War context. A Soviet Union report overtly contrasted the aid it and other socialist nations offered to North Korea with the aid plans of the United Nations and the United States. According to a survey by the Soviet ambassador to North Korea at the time, the UN Commission on Korea pledged a total of $1.25 billion in foreign aid over five years to South Korea, and the United States allocated $280 million for economic aid to South Korea in 1953–54. These figures fell far below the 10 billion rubles the Soviet Union promised to North Korea. These contrasting aid amounts underscore the generous and steadfast socialist internationalism of the Soviet Union and brother nations. While the narrative of the report was written within the Cold War context, its information was generally accurate: the United States had in fact confirmed an aid package of $280 million for South Korea in 1954. Even the administration of Syngman Rhee, dissatisfied with the initially confirmed sum, lodged complaints, asserting the inadequacy of the US aid. In response to these concerns, the South Korean delegation decided to visit the States, seeking an additional $500 million—an initiative that garnered considerable attention, even featuring on the front page of the South Korean Kyŏnghyang shinmun.20 Subsequently, on September 13, 1954, the United States committed to an additional pledge of $100 million.21 The Soviet ambassador’s report thus not only gave information on the economic support to South and North Korea, it also constituted a carefully orchestrated narrative showcasing the strength of socialist internationalism. These dynamics highlight the multifaceted nature of Cold War politics, where economic aid served as a tool for

19 “Information on the Situation in the DPRK.”
21 “Midaehanwŏnjoirŏkpul Chŭng-ga [U.S. Aid Increases by 100 Million Dollars],” Kyŏnghyang shinmun, September 15, 1954.
geopolitical maneuvering and ideological competition that ultimately shaped the urban landscapes of the Korean Peninsula.

The foreign aid North Korea received was a crucial prerequisite for national reconstruction efforts. While slight discrepancies may exist in the figures cited by various ambassadors, the consensus suggests that foreign aid accounted for over 30% of North Korea’s annual budget. According to Soviet reports, foreign aid constituted 31.6% of North Korea’s budget in 1954. Similarly, the Romanian ambassador reported in the same year that the budget was secured from the aid (33.6%).

Of the over 30% of the aid budget, a substantial 18% was specifically allocated for construction. In the 1954-1957 three-year plan, approximately 9 billion won of these construction aid was designated for housing. However, classified North Korean documents from the same period indicate that from 1954 to 1957, a staggering 13.2 billion won was devoted exclusively to housing construction in Pyongyang alone; 9 billion won was insufficient even for housing construction only in Pyongyang. This was because aid directed towards construction primarily targeted urban heavy industrial structures, while funding for constructions benefiting non-industry sectors, such as housing, was relatively low. As North Korea chose to invest the majority of its foreign aid to industrial projects, non-industry sectors like housing construction should facilitate through internal funds and the support of non-monetary forms of aid from abroad.

Other non-monetary forms of foreign architectural aid expanded to encompass construction machinery, advanced architectural theories and technology, and skilled experts. Fraternal nations promptly dispatched

22 “Information on the Situation in the DPRK”; “The Political, Economic and Social-Cultural Situation.”
23 “Information on the Situation in the DPRK”; “The Political, Economic and Social-Cultural Situation.”
24 “For the construction of Pyongyang,” the DPRK Cabinet Decision No. 83, July 10, 1958, 369.
25 “For the construction of Pyongyang,” 370.
a diverse array of construction machinery, allowing North Korea to commence construction immediately given its challenging situation and lack of domestic facilities for producing construction equipment. By 1954, the Soviet Union had provided almost 100 types of construction machinery, including trucks, perforators, iron plates, rolled steel, slated and angular steel, electric locomotives, rasping machines, transformers, excavators, diesel engines, lathes, smoothening machines, pneumatic hammers, turbines, and various other construction materials. All these machinery types were indispensable for initiating building projects. China also contributed material aid worth 8 trillion yuan, featuring items like electric engines, cranes, and brick machinery. Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and East Germany likewise supported North Korea with construction machinery and materials. Importantly, these nations went beyond providing one-time material gifts, extending their assistance to include the transfer of factory blueprints and advanced technology usage methods. Their aim was to help enhance North Korea’s domestic manufacturing capabilities. This multifaceted aid, as documented in North Korea’s records, supported the advancements of the country’s foundational architectural and construction technologies.

Notably, North Korea often adopted the latest advanced construction technology and theories more rapidly than its southern counterpart. For example, North Korea swiftly transitioned from the traditional single-story house format to new multi-story, Western-style housing. In 1947, North Korea constructed apartments for laborers working in the Hŭngnam chemical complex. With the assistance of Soviet architects, in 1949 Pyongyang established a large multi-family apartment complex

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26 “The Political, Economic and Social-Cultural Situation.”
27 North Korean publication also has the same information. See P’yŏngyangŭi Ōjewa Onŭl; “Information on the Situation in the DPRK.”
28 P’yŏngyangŭi Ōjewa Onŭl, 269.
29 Kim Chŏng-hŭi, Toshigŏnsŏl [City Construction] (Pyongyang: The DPRK Science Bureau, 1953), 39, 42.
for Kim Il-sung University faculty and students along the Daedong River. Remarkably, North Korea’s early apartments were constructed a decade earlier than South Korea’s first apartment building, the 1956 Haengch’on-dong Sŏdaemun Korea-American Foundation Apartments. With apartment construction having commenced as early as 1947, by 1957 around 55.2% of all entire residential construction in Pyongyang was 4-5-story apartment buildings, and 35% comprised 2-3-story apartment buildings—an achievement that would not have been feasible without architectural aid.

This rapid progress in multi-story housing technology was also propelled by a swift theoretical trajectory crafted by North Korean intellectuals. Kim Chŏng-hŭi, a North Korean architect, educated in the Soviet Union, explained in a manuscript three years before South Korea constructed its first apartment that the embrace of apartment living was imperative for cultivating an anti-imperialistic and modern socialist lifestyle. Within the Cold War framework, he contended that US aid to South Korea not only disrupted South Korea’s native economy and industry but also failed to ameliorate the material culture and life of its working class. In stark contrast, the assistance from fraternal nations established conditions for North Korean architects to freely showcase their abilities. They gleaned insights from advanced Soviet architects, contributing substantively to the generation of a creatively


32 P’yŏngyangŭi Ŭjewa Onŭ, 291.

33 Kim Chŏng-hŭi, Toshigŏnsŏl, 41.
conceived socialist city that prioritized worker convenience and well-being. Kim asserted that the material manifestation of a superior, creatively conceived socialist city compared to capitalist counterparts lay in the apartment. He posited that in foreign cities, multi-story houses emerged under the influence of capitalists, whereas in Korea, apartments were not proliferated to the public due to the interference of capitalists and Japanese imperialists. Capitalists created inconvenient conditions for ordinary Korean residents to live in apartments by setting exorbitant prices that were affordable only for Japanese inhabitants. Consequently, Koreans were confined to residing in single-story houses. However, with Soviet assistance and “Kim Il-sung’s direct guidance,” the realization of multi-story housing complexes, complemented by various auxiliary facilities and parks designed for the convenience of residents, empowered the socialist working classes in North Korea to attain the status of “noble human beings.” Within this architectural theory, the construction of apartments was not a symbolic action of capitalism or affluent cosmopolitanism; rather, it was a material embodiment of North-Korean-style socialist ideology. Apartment architectural style became a visible and symbolic representation of a superior socialist Marxist-Leninist ideology within the post-colonial and Cold War narratives.

Divergent Perspectives on the Juche Ideals and Aid Landscape

Exchanges through architectural aid impacted the urban shapes of North Korea as many early North Korean cities were influenced by the Stalinist-inspired plan. This plan involved the subdivision of cities into several zones according to administrative, residential, and industrial functions. Often there was also an exception to incorporate the

34 Kim Chŏng-hŭi, Toshigŏnsŏl, 41.
35 Kim Chŏng-hŭi, Toshigŏnsŏl, 184-185.
Stalinist-inspired city plan due to the different theoretical pursuits of architects from donor countries. The transformative urban landscape in North Korea found its conceptual grounding in socialist theory through diverse actors’ contributions. Ch’ŏngjin, designated according to a resolution established on July 17, 1954, was managed by Polish urban planners based on a resolution jointly formulated by Poland and North Korea. According to research by Korean scholar Kim Jongyeon, the Polish Ch’ŏngjin urban planning team, led by urban reconstruction expert Piotr Zaremba, pursued a city plan which was different from the Stalinist city model. Kim posits that the decision of Zaremba’s team seems to have been influenced by Poland’s opposition to the Stalinist socialist model. The significant difference of Ch’ŏngjin’s master plan was that it was stable and progressive in the long term, but it required development plans spanning 25–30 years and demanded significantly more initial resources. Ultimately, the aid given to Ch’ŏngjin city development was not used to follow the Polish architects because their long-term vision did not align with the Workers’ Party of Korea’s reconstruction plans.

In another case, Polish architects discerned during the initial urban analysis that certain residential areas in Ch’ŏngjin were situated below sea level. They proposed raising the terrain through construction before building residences. However, this plan was rejected by their North


37 Kim Jongyeon, “Han’gukchŏnjaeng Ihu,” 23. Other Polish engineers who visited North Korea were Zaslaw Malicki, Bronislaw Sekula, Kazimierz Pencakowski, and Zbigniew Karakiewicz and industrial planners Andrzej Jędraszko, Jerzy Gularski, Jacek Nowakowski, Eugeniusz Pascal, Zygmunt Buczeń, and Janusz Stankiewicz.

38 Kim Jongyeon, “Han’gukchŏnjaeng Ihu,” 12.

39 See Choi Wan-Kyu, Puk’an Toshiũ Hyŏngsŏnggwga Palchŏn [The Formation
Korean counterparts out of concerns that additional construction activities would impede the overall pace of housing construction and significantly escalate costs. This produced a protracted dialogue that ultimately favored the North Korean standpoint. This case demonstrates that within the North Korean architectural community, there was a nuanced dynamic of embracing the urban plans and aid from donor countries’ architects while simultaneously adapting, customizing, and concretizing them according to their preferences. Notably, this debate between North Korean and Polish architects is conspicuously absent from contemporary North Korean official documentation. Such information is ascertainable exclusively through the memoirs of North Korean defectors and in official documents drafted by Polish engineers.\textsuperscript{40} Concealing this conflict may be interpreted as North Korea’s endeavor to underscore national solidarity and counteract the semblance of reliance on foreign aid. In the backdrop of requests for aid, there is an absence of any reference by North Korean architects or government officials to confrontations with Polish architects.\textsuperscript{41}

Not only were there disagreements between architects from donor countries, there were also disagreements between the central Party and individual architects. The Party’s focus on using aid for chemical and heavy industry development resulted in comparatively diminished a lack of distribution of aid to basic architectural science and the architectural community. As an illustration, the North Korean architectural

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community exhibited a keen interest in the continuous advancement of basic architectural technology and advocated for more dynamic international exchanges, but the Party disliked the idea.42

The community proposed the dispatch of more students abroad for technical education and the expansion of advanced technical personnel training. To avoid a short-term solution, they even advocated for the recruitment of foreign professors at domestic universities to contribute to the sustained development of architectural theory and technology.43 However, these propositions encountered resistance from the government and political figures. During his speech to the faculty of Hŭngnam Industrial University in 1953, Kim Il-sung asserted that “technicians who only possess technological knowledge without a comprehension of politics are ineffectual,” cautioning against the potential diminishment of independence and creativity if foreign teachers assumed a leading role in lectures and scientific research.44 Similarly, the notion of sending students abroad was dismissed as it was deemed inappropriate to cultivate technical talents through international exchanges.45 Kim argued that students returning from foreign studies lacked the political training and wartime experiences of their domestically educated counterparts, rendering them unsuitable for the prevailing conditions in North Korea.

Not only architects in major urban centers but countryside architects also proactively articulated their perspectives. Countryside architects voiced grievances, contending that regional intricacies were in-


44 Kim Il-sung, “Chach’eŭi Himŭ-ro.”

45 Kim Il-sung, “Chach’eŭi Himŭ-ro.”
sufficiently considered, thus accentuating the inherent challenges of aligning local policies with the overarching central government directives. In the eminent North Korean architectural journal Kŏnch’uk- wa Kŏnsŏl [Architecture and Construction], these regional architects ar-dently called for the incorporation of diverse technologies and experiments, especially those conducive to economically constrained regional contexts.46 Their entreaties specifically sought insights derived from the construction experiences and practical knowledge of “advanced na-tions,” underlining the necessity for technologically feasible solutions within financially austere regional settings.47 Finally, a consistent call emerged for the regular introduction of architectural trends from various other countries. This voice of regional architects indicates the heightened interest among regional architects who sought an elevated discourse on architectural aid and exchanges that transcended major urban centers and extended to the nuanced domain of regional architecture. The mere inclusion of these letters in the editorial discourse of Architecture and Construction signifies recognition within the main-stream architectural community of regional architects’ frustrations and aspirations. However, just as the dreams of recruiting myriad foreign instructors or technicians envisioned by urban architects were thwarted, the ambitions of regional architects were also not easily realized. In this regard, Kim explained the fiscal challenges associated with large-scale invitation of Soviet technicians, positing financial consid-erations in tandem with the expeditious resolution of technical challenges. Instead, he advocated for the rapid assimilation of advanced technology by domestic technicians for the nation’s sake.48

From its nascent stages, the North Korean government highlighted Juche [independent] construction and economic viability. This strategic stance derived from the discerning calculations of North Korean politi-

46 Kŏnch’ukwa Kŏnsŏl (February 1958): 15.
47 Kŏnch’ukwa Kŏnsŏl, 15.
48 Kim Il-sung, “Chach’eŭi Himŭ-ro.”
cal leadership and navigated the intricacies of a severely constricted fiscal landscape. This stance was also closely correlated with the changing landscape of aid. Support from socialist brother nations, which had been actively underway for almost a decade since 1945, began to undergo a shift in sentiment around the latter half of the 1950s. This altered milieu was shaped by North Korea’s socialist diplomatic posture, the impact of conflicts between China and the Soviet Union, internal political and economic exigencies within fraternal nations, and the donor countries’ negative perception of North Korea’s achievements after receiving aid. Consequently, from the 1960s onward there was a perceptible reduction in major aid to North Korea, with the Soviet Union markedly curtailing support and East Germany even diminishing previously committed funds earmarked for reconstruction endeavors in Hŭngnam. Despite North Korea registering its implicit dissatisfaction with these geopolitical shifts, a substantive metamorphosis of changing aid plans remained elusive.

In the dynamic landscape of evolving aid scenarios, Kim Il-sung’s vocal disagreement with the recruitment of foreign educators, stating that “technicians who possess technical expertise but lack political acu-

49 Previous studies have illuminated the intricate dynamics of the aid relationship between East Germany and North Korea. These research discuss East Germany’s adverse perceptions regarding North Korea’s performance despite the provision of aid. See Lee Kyung Suk and Kim Kyung-Mi, “Naengjŏn’gi Puk’an - Tongdogŭi Oegyogwan’gye(1953–1989): Hyŏmnyŏkkwa Kaltŭng [Foreign Relations between North Korea and East Germany during the Cold War period (1953-1989): Cooperation and Conflict],” Yurŏbyŏn’gu 34, no. 3 (September 2016); Myun Kim, “The History of Interchange between Former E.Germany and N.Korea through the Research on Oral Statements,” Kukche Jŏngch’I Yŏn’gu 10, no. 2 (December, 2007).

50 Archive #: 051200181, II 1157/64, A 7011, Sekiton Korea. Hilfe der DDR beim Aufbau der koreanischen Stadt Hanhyng – Reduzierung der Hilfe [The East German Aid Provided in the Reconstruction Process of Hamhung, a City in Both North and South Korea - Reduction of Aid] (April 1960 – November 1962) in German Foreign Ministry Archives. The author checked this source at National Institute of Korean History in Seoul, South Korea.
men are of limited utility,” deserves attention. This statement serves as both a warning to dissenting architects and an expression of the nuances and political calculations within the socialist realm of aid. As socialist internationalism converged with North Korea’s distinctive form of socialism, the warning of diminishing aid had profound repercussions for North Korea’s architectural community. The Party intensified its emphasis on Juche construction surpassing previous levels, ceased overtly extolling past fraternal aid, and gradually eradicated the narrative associated with architectural directions influenced by fraternal nations.

The transition towards prioritizing rapid Juche construction can be attributed in part to the unavoidable consequences of diminishing aid in a situation where external support was significantly dwindling. The perceived lack of consistently positive outcomes from foreign aid projects may have contributed to this strategic shift. While foreign aid has been acknowledged for its potential to stimulate local economies in growing nations through large-scale architectural projects, North Korea, due to its socialist nature, has witnessed minimal development among small and medium-sized architecture enterprises. This lack of cascading economic development heightened concerns over economic and technological dependence, posing the risk of North Korean architectural communities becoming overly reliant on foreign aid and thereby impeding local self-sufficiency and broader developmental trajectories.

A Central Intelligence Agency’s report from the United States on June 19, 1950, critically examined against the negative impact of aid on North Korea. The report suggested that aid from the Soviet Union and socialist nations did not contribute to sustained economic development in North Korea as anticipated, and it did not necessarily advantage North Korea. It underlined the conditional nature of aid, with

North Korea often compelled to purchase goods from the Soviet Union at overpriced rates. The support of goods from the Soviet Union was not free grant assistance, and it is true that North Korean architects purchased items from foreign countries. There are documented conversations within North Korea where concerns about the economic burden of continuously importing construction machinery from overseas are raised despite high economic costs, with calls for buying more domestic machinery. However, as much as North Korean records portrayed US aid as an exploitative tool due to Cold War geopolitical considerations, the CIA report depicted US and free-world aid as superior, painting the Soviet Union as exploiting North Korea. It is therefore crucial not to accept all records in the CIA report as factual.

Early aid from the Soviet Union and brotherly nations undeniably had a significant impact on North Korea’s urban development. Nonetheless, it is essential to critically consider the inherent nuances of foreign aid from both sides. Issues such as hierarchies within socialist states and the racialized orientalist perspectives of European architects during the early 20th century should be recognized as part of the ongoing awareness of the challenges associated with foreign aid that extend beyond the Cold War.

Amidst various political and economic challenges, North Korea’s architectural community understood the Party’s emphasis on the purpose and significance of Juche construction. However, within academic circles, a preference emerged for a gradual separation from foreign supports rather than hasty independence, with concerns regarding the swift termination of exchanges. This caution emanated from a perception of practical maintenance challenges rooted in North Korea’s enduring

shortage of leading architecture cadres and technical experts within the construction process.\textsuperscript{54} A statistic from the North Korean Central Yearbook of 1959 disclosed that only 35.4\% of the total skilled construction engineers in North Korea were domestic, indicating significant reliance on foreign skilled engineers (64.6\%).\textsuperscript{55} Moreover, if there is insufficient planning for ongoing maintenance and upkeep, architectural projects may fall into disrepair, rendering them ineffective in the long run. Due to such concerns among architecture scholars, despite diminishing aid and political pressure to prioritize \textit{Juche} construction, Korean experts managed to maintain collaboration with the international community to the best of their abilities. This ongoing effort saw 250 Soviet counterparts still working across 27 construction technology fields in North Korea in 1968.\textsuperscript{56}

In this context, it is essential to note that there were differences in opinion between the Party, the workers in construction sites, and academics. North Korea’s architectural scholars were far from homogeneous, meaning that not all architectural experts blindly adhered to the Party’s opinions. Instead, they expressed their individual views, playing a role in shaping North Korea’s unique form of socialist architecture within the prevailing political-economic-social context. An illustrative example of this can be found in the criticism directed at Park Ŭi-wan, the representative of the Construction Ministry who led early con-


\textsuperscript{55} Chosŏn Chungang Nyŏn’gam 1959 [North Korean Central Yearbook of 1959] (Pyongyang: Korea Central News Agency), 87.

struction in North Korea in the 1950s. According to the record of the First Representative Meeting of the Workers’ Party of Korea in 1958, the criticism directed at Park for giving the advice to architects that “Do not mechanically accept party decisions or cabinet decisions, as they are adopted for ideological mobilization and propaganda,” allowing individuality in architectural creations.\(^{57}\) Park was also criticized for his remark that “while political figures might not be mentioned in encyclopedias, the names of architects certainly find a place” imparted a sense of individual moral duty to architects regardless of political agendas.\(^{58}\) Claims made during the 1958 meeting were likely exaggerated and entangled with falsehoods, with records indicating that Park protested against inaccurate statements.\(^{59}\) Nevertheless, this criticism indirectly reveals that some “rebellious” architects, who supposedly followed Park’s advice, nonetheless existed and expressed architectural creativity and integrity in their work. Furthermore, this dynamic reveals inherent tension between architects and politicians within North Korean society. Certain architects were dissatisfied with the government officials’ decisions. The next section details a case where construction workers refused to follow Party orders, arguing that the politicians did not have appropriate knowledge of construction works.

Particularly as the political situation solidified in the late 1950s, marked by the 1956 August Faction Incident, the consolidation of Kim Il-sung’s ideology, a diplomatic landscape witnessing a sharp decline in foreign aid, and a strategic shift towards heavy industry within the Party’s directives, the architectural community in North Korea faced the imperative of devising strategies aligned with the Party’s demands. Yet, some individual architects found themselves negotiating with the socio-political landscape.

\(^{57}\) Chosŏn Rodongdang Cheilch’a Taep’yŏjahoe Hüiŭirok, 203.

\(^{58}\) Chosŏn Rodongdang Cheilch’a Taep’yŏjahoe Hüiŭirok, 203.

\(^{59}\) Chosŏn Rodongdang Cheilch’a Taep’yŏjahoe Hüiŭirok, 424-441.
Strategies for Frugality: Navigating Architectural Creativity for Housing Productivity

The propaganda actively disseminated by the Party during this period centered on the “speed battle (Soktojŏn).” Soktojŏn, or Pyongyang Speed, geared towards constructing early houses within a short timeframe, remains a symbolic slogan and representation of North Korean construction. The myth of assembling one generation of houses in 16 minutes effectively motivated a considerable labor force to construct their nation with remarkable speed. The important symbolic weight of this movement has meant that many previous studies have underscored the speed battle as the paramount challenge in North Korean housing construction. However, this article argues that the emphasis on speed was utilized for propaganda to align with the Party’s productivity goals. There was another crucial task or deemed more critical task that workers in actual construction sites and project plans addressed, diverging from a growth model reliant on international exchanges to instead emphasize an independent development approach. In light of diminished external aid, to achieve continuous construction and the Party’s speed goals, the overarching and immediate concern of North Korean workers was the reduction of costs.

North Korean architects were confronted with a twofold challenge. Their mandate encompassed the imperative to curtail resource consumption within the confines of postwar limitations while simultaneously grappling with the exigency to address acute housing needs.

60 The DPRK Cabinet Decision No. 83, July 10, 1958.
The Party’s directive for “rapid and extensive construction” was contingent upon the implementation of a commensurate reduction in construction costs. Given the severe paucity of resources and fiscal constraints, the realization of construction goals hinged on the imperative to construct at the lowest possible cost. Consequently, construction sites became arenas of concerted efforts of numerous architectural experts to minimize expenses.

Experts’ initial recourse entailed the formulation of standard guidelines. The overarching objective was to mitigate waste by advocating uniform construction adhering to standardized principles in order to achieve the utmost efficiency. In housing construction, experts advocated the construction of multi-story residences through prefabricated methods, which were not only cost-effective but also facilitated the accommodation of a maximal number of residents on minimal land. The use of large panels, especially in assembly, aimed to curtail the volume of construction components required for linking small panels, thereby saving essential materials. In addition, measures such as reducing the height and area gap of construction floors were implemented to minimize the use of building materials. The ensuing outcome was a reduction in floor height from the original 2.8 m to 2.4 m and a concerted effort to diminish wall thickness and corridor area from 10-11 m² to 7.6 m²—all strategically devised for cost reduction. Architect Kim Gyŏng-ju attested to the successful implementation of these guidelines, noting that the cost per square meter of construction plummeted from 2,300 won in 1957 to 1,635 won in 1958.

This astute strategy of conserving materials not only facilitated an increase of over 21% in the number of households in comparison to the cost of designing a 5-story assembly housing unit in 1957, it also resulted in an overall 

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cost reduction of approximately 46.6%, underscoring the efficacy of this approach.

In another case, construction workers offered innovative proposals on the amalgamation of sanitary and water facilities within a single space as a practical and economical means to adhere to the Party’s policy. Acknowledging that this merger might compromise hygiene, they rationalized it as an unavoidable decision to achieve the requisite low-cost parameters essential for meeting the Party’s production and speed objectives. Additionally, architects in Pyongyang expressed a collective desire to solicit insights on construction not only from local architects but also from various regions, lower-level workers, and experts through multiple meetings and forums. The “economic” construction ideas discussed in these forums, aimed at cost reduction, held in North Hamgyŏng on March 13, Kaesong on March 22, and North Hwanghae on March 24, all in 1958. These events provide a window into the extent of political pressure on the architectural community at the time.

During the 1st Representative Conference of the Workers’ Party of Korea in 1958, architects and housing experts placed greater emphasis on reporting the methodologies employed for achieving cost savings than strategies to enhance speed. For instance, Kim Ŭng-sang, the representative of the Pyongyang City Construction Bureau, argued that out of the total basic construction investment of 146.2 billion won, 20.9 billion would be allocated to housing construction, and he discussed utilizing the budget surplus to construct an additional 42,000 households than included in the original plans. To do so, he suggested producing lightweight construction materials to save on buying raw materials and organizing cranes in a way that allocates only one crane to construct over 1,000 households—an arduous task for a single crane operator. The architectural community’s frequent reliance on cost reduction through the use of inexpensive labor (mobilized free labor) to

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64 Kŏnch’ŏkkwa Kŏnsŏl (February 1958): 15.
65 Chosŏn Rodongdang Cheil-ch’a Taep’yŏjahoe Hŭiŭirok, 206-207.
address funding gaps was a common occurrence in North Korea’s architectural history. This method led to various problems, such as labor accidents and lack of safety measures. Nevertheless, it is still employed in many cases due to its effective cost reduction. In the above-described case, according to Kim Ĭng-sang’s calculations, the measure would significantly reduce construction costs and facilitate the construction of an additional 42,000 households beyond the initial plans.

Alongside architects’ alteration of architectural design guidelines for cost reduction, factories engaged in the production of construction materials also made relentless efforts to reduce the costs associated with constructing essential elements. Constructing new homes required key materials like steel, cement, bricks, and tiles. Focusing on cement as an example, to economize on its usage—which was originally mixed at 200 kilograms per cubic meter for exterior walls—the mixture was reduced to 150 kilograms, with the remaining 50 kilograms mixed with lime. Although this compromise resulted in a reduction in strength, experimental evidence validated its “acceptability.” Applying this strategy meant a significant volume of cement was conserved, with a 20% cost reduction amounting to approximately 20 billion won. This substantial savings facilitated the construction of an additional 32,000 households within the same budgetary constraints. Mitigating cement costs became a prevalent strategy due to its relatively straightforward nature compared to other construction elements. Consequently, when most regional construction managers reported considerable reductions in construction costs to the Party, they tended to display their cost reduction on cement.

66 Chosŏn Rodongdang Cheil-ch’a Taep’yohahoe Hūiūirok, 92.
68 Chosŏn Rodongdang Cheilch’a Taep’yohahoe Hūiūirok, 206-207.
69 Chosŏn Rodongdang Cheilch’a Taep’yohahoe Hūiūirok 73.
Methods for reducing the cost of assembly components were also devised. For instance, during the construction of new homes in the Eastern Pyongyang Triangle Zone, waste boiler slag from the nearby Pyongyang Spinning Mill was mixed to create assembly components used in housing. The National Construction Committee organized experience-sharing sessions during which workers engaged in component production exchanged insights on how to reduce component costs during assembly construction. The boiler slag account originates from discussions held during the 1958 experience-sharing session. Within these records, it is crucial to highlight that, despite omissions in North Korea’s official documentation, on-site architects, technicians, and especially laborers in challenging local conditions were investing substantial efforts into reconstruction.

Nevertheless, the relentless pursuit of ambitious cost-saving measures during the 1950s and 1960s in North Korea, particularly in housing construction, gave rise to unintended consequences. The era witnessed a pronounced emphasis on prefabricated construction methods as a means of simultaneously achieving cost reductions and expeditious construction. While prefabricated construction was acknowledged for its economic efficiency, it was not without drawbacks, particularly the compromise in structural robustness compared to traditional apartment construction. The endeavor to further curtail costs within this framework thus inevitably led to unforeseen complications.

One of the easiest methods for cost reduction centered on curtailing labor expenses. In prefabricated construction, the minimum personnel required to assemble a single block—excluding the foreman—comprised eight individuals. This team structure was overseen by a foreman and included various roles such as crane operator, mortar worker, block preparation workers, mortar placement operatives, a welder, and a signalman guiding crane operations. However, records from 1958 re-

70 “Kyŏnghŏmgyohwanhoe,” 38.
71 Ri Myŏng-nyŏm, “Ch’ŏtpŏntchae Oerangshik Chut’aek Choribesŏ Ŏdŭn Kyŏnghŏm
Sulim Kim

revealed that, during the construction of a prefabricated housing complex in the Eastern Pyongyang Expressway Zone 13-1, the workforce proudly claimed to have completed the four-story detached homes within a month with a team of merely 82 individuals.\textsuperscript{72} This “achievement” implies a precarious undertaking as the reduced workforce had to navigate a workload that inherently carried risks.

Furthermore, insufficient planning and coordination often resulted in misalignments during the assembly process. Some architects, particularly those deeming the Party’s “standards and drawings that minimize material usage” as excessively risky, opted not to adhere to the prescribed cost-saving plans, implementing alternative approaches during execution.\textsuperscript{73} One illustrative case, presented during the 1958 Representative Conference of the Workers’ Party of Korea, involved architects in Hamgyŏng Province who sent specifications and drawings to the factory according to their standards instead of the Party’s ones. In another case, when plans were issued to lower the supporting wall to 18 cm, there were instances of resistance on construction sites, even to the extent of refusal to proceed with construction.\textsuperscript{74} Workers on construction sites argued that such a plan was ordered without introducing a method for engineering apartments to prevent collapse. Despite their concerns, the plan was enforced and eventually caused additional losses “in political and economic costs” that the Party had aimed to save.\textsuperscript{75} This exemplifies the ongoing tension between workers in construction sites and Party officials in the department of construction due to varying perspectives on limited resources amid the up-

\textsuperscript{72} Ri Myŏng-nyŏm, “Ch’ŏtpŏntchae Oerangshik,” 24.
\textsuperscript{73} Chosŏn Rodongdang Cheil-ch’a Taep’yŏjahoe Hŭiŭirok, 208.
\textsuperscript{74} “Kŏnch’uk Kŏnsŏlmurŭi Chirŭl Kailch’ung Chegohagi Wihayŏ [To Improve the Quality of Architectural Constructions],” Kŏnch’ukkwa Kŏnsŏl (October 1958): 1.
\textsuperscript{75} “Kŏnch’uk Kŏnsŏlmurŭi,” 1.
heaval of aid situations.

In the pursuit of the Party’s quantitative objectives, there was a discernible decline in the quality of construction, ultimately resulting in significant harm to residents. In certain instances, newly built apartments collapsed or “split apart” in the rain before even welcoming their first residents.\textsuperscript{76} To economize, the reduction of floor height from 2.8 to 2.4 meters and the compromise of material strength for the redesign of sanitation and heating led to the construction of apartments with compromised soundproofing and insulation functions. The simplification of electrical facilities sometimes resulted in inadequate heating or cooking. Numerous expressions of dissatisfaction from residents surfaced. Residents actively discussed issues such as improperly installed windows and exposed upper parts of exterior stairwells without waterproofing, leading to rainwater leakage into houses. In 1958, an architect magazine even published remarks such as “It’s not surprising that basic requirements to prevent rainwater in residential living are not met; it’s equally unsurprising that there are narrow kitchens, no wardrobes, and even no storerooms.”\textsuperscript{77} Such expressions indicate robust criticism within the rigid North Korean society, signifying the depth of both architects and residents’ frustrations.

Initially, the Party’s publications categorically dismissed apartments with compromised quality as the outcome of “irresponsible construction by some designers.”\textsuperscript{78} However, as architects continued to make choices aligned with the Party’s rapid development goals, the issue persisted, prompting the Party to react. While highlighting the need for change

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\textsuperscript{77} Ri Myŏng-nyŏm, “Ch’ŏtpŏntchae Oerangshik,” 25.

and the significance of heeding the opinions of construction workers, the editorial sponsored by the Party published an article and clarified that the Party “did not outright demand a reduction in strength and never discouraged architects from going to construction sites and listening to construction workers’ opinions” in 1958. By jointly conveying a message that alleviates much dissatisfaction, it is evident how substantial the discontent among residents, architects, and workers was in the face of the political agenda that excessively emphasized cost reduction in construction. The emergence of these social phenomena within North Korea can be attributed to the Party’s expeditious endeavors to foster economic independence and reduce costs in the architectural domain, resulting in undesirable outcomes. North Korea gradually distanced itself from embracing novel architectural technologies and fostering creativity. Instead, the prevailing focus became the maximization of productivity by conserving costs and resources. This trend underscored a discernible reluctance within the North Korean architectural milieu to entertain innovative architectural techniques and individuality, especially when compared to the atmosphere of the early 1950s.

Conclusion

The architectural evolution of North Korea, initiated amidst the ruins of the Korean War, unfolded against a backdrop of profound economic inadequacies, compelling the nascent state to seek extensive architectural support from fraternal socialist nations. Despite grappling with severe economic constraints, the early 1950s and 1960s witnessed a determined effort by North Korean architects to rapidly advance their architectural science and technology. This fervent pursuit of progress, driven by the exigencies of the Cold War, resulted in North Korea outpacing its southern counterpart by nearly a decade in the construction

79 “Kŏnch’uk Kŏnsŏlmurŭi,” 1.
of apartments and swiftly adopting the latest architectural forms.

Architects operating within the framework of the newly established North Korean government demonstrated a proactive approach marked by continuous learning and concerted effort. Their endeavors yielded commendable results in terms of multifaceted aspects of housing, recruitment practices, international collaborations, and a nuanced understanding of user needs. This proactive stance enabled architects to create diverse housing options, despite limitations in resources and materials. However, the history of North Korea has also experienced the nuances of both the advantages and disadvantages associated with international aid. Cold-War-driven aid did not create long-term growth in the architectural environment in North Korea. The strong connection between aid and diplomatic-political conditions motivated North Korea to gradually shift towards less enthusiastic engagement in international exchanges to instead concentrate support within the military and economic technology sectors. The country also faced shortages in recruiting open-minded talent, and the momentum in architectural science and technology underwent a pronounced deceleration. The political emphasis on resource conservation in the productivity sector, prioritizing short-term and visible outcomes over the continuous development of architectural innovation and the incorporation of new technologies and styles, contributed to a noticeable inflexibility within the North Korean architectural landscape.

The government’s prioritization of efficiency and short-term visible outcomes over investments in basic science and creativity hindered the development of an environment conducive to the emergence of genuinely unique North Korean technologies over time. This often resulted in a missed opportunity for the North Korean regime to invest in future generations and diverse projects under a socialist state-led context possibly detached from capitalist influences. While previous research has emphasized North Korea’s speed-driven narrative to elucidate its architectural propaganda, this study sheds light on construction cost reduction within the architectural discourse of North Korea’s academic
community in the 1950s to the 1960s. In this way, this research provides a nuanced perspective on the endeavors of individual North Korean architects and technologists who strived to produce results matching the economic, social, and political conditions of the time. Architectural officials, who were operating within the constraints of limited resources stipulated by the higher central government, were tasked with formulating plans that could yield optimal results. Likewise, individual architects and workers, upon receiving the negotiated plans devised by these officials, found themselves compelled to conserve resources and materials on construction sites to achieve the prescribed outcomes. In their collective endeavor to construct a socialist-minded city, both architectural officials and architecture workers engaged in an enduring struggle against the demands for materials. Architecture laborers, ranging from individual crane operators to everyday people mobilized on construction sites, underwent a continuous negotiation of materials and often their own safety to realize socialist material dreams.

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Abstract

Socialist Material Negotiations: North Korea’s Utilization of Cold War Architectural Aid (1950s-1960s)

Sulim Kim

This paper unveils the impact of architectural aid and knowledge exchange on the development of urban housing in North Korea during the 1950s and 1960s. By capturing the diplomatic maneuvers of the DPRK and detailing the aid it received, this paper situates the urban development of North Korea within the broader fabric of global urban experiments. North Korea received foreign architectural assistance more swiftly than Vietnam, enabling the early adoption of advanced architectural technology and theory in urban construction compared to South Korea. However, the intricate relationships and evolving aid dynamics with fraternal socialist countries within the Cold War paradigm later emerged as one of the motivating factors for North Korea to prioritize independent architectural development. Meanwhile, amidst the emphasis on Juche construction and rapid industrialization, the field of architecture, both in academia and on construction sites, faced the challenge of minimizing materials and resources to enhance productivity. Various agents within North Korea’s architectural workforce presented diverse viewpoints and engaged in complex negotiations with the party regarding resource conservation. Drawing from a vast array of primary sources from North Korea and socialist countries, this research elucidates the heterogeneous comprehension of aid acquisition and the indigenous adaptation of the practice and theory of architecture in post-
war North Korea.

**Keywords**: North Korea, housing construction, architectural aid, Cold War, socialist urban construction, material
사회주의적 물질 협상: 북한의 냉전 시기 건축 원조 활용
(1950 - 1960)

김수림 (하와이대학교 박사수료)

본 연구는 1950-60년대 북한과 형제 사회주의 국가들 간의 건축 원조와 건축 지식 교류가 북한의 도시 주택 건설 지형에 미친 영향을 조명한다. 농동적인 외교로 베트남 보다 빠르게 해외 건축 원조를 받은 북한은 선진 건축 기술과 이론을 남한보다 일찍 도 시 건설에 적용할 수 있었다. 그러나 냉전의 패러다임에서 원조와 차관을 주고 받는 형 제 사회주의 국가들과의 미묘한 관계성과 변화하는 원조 상황은 이후 북한이 독립적인 건축을 강조하는데 동기 중 하나로 작용했다. 한편, 주체 건설과 속도전이 강조되는 과 정에서 북한의 건축 학계와 현장은 생산성을 높이기 위해 물자와 자원을 최소화하도록 당으로부터 요구 받았다. 이러한 자원 절약의 과제에 대해 북한 내 다양한 건축 인력들은 여러 의견을 제시했고 당과 복잡한 협상 과정을 거쳤다. 이들의 목소리는 당대 건축 사상, 기술, 지식, 그리고 원조를 이해하는 과정이 단일화되어 있지 않았고 북한식 물질 세계 건설의 복잡한 양상이 있었음을 보여준다.

주제어: 북한, 도시 계획, 냉전, 사회주의의 도시 건설, 주택 건설, 건축 원조