

Colourful propaganda

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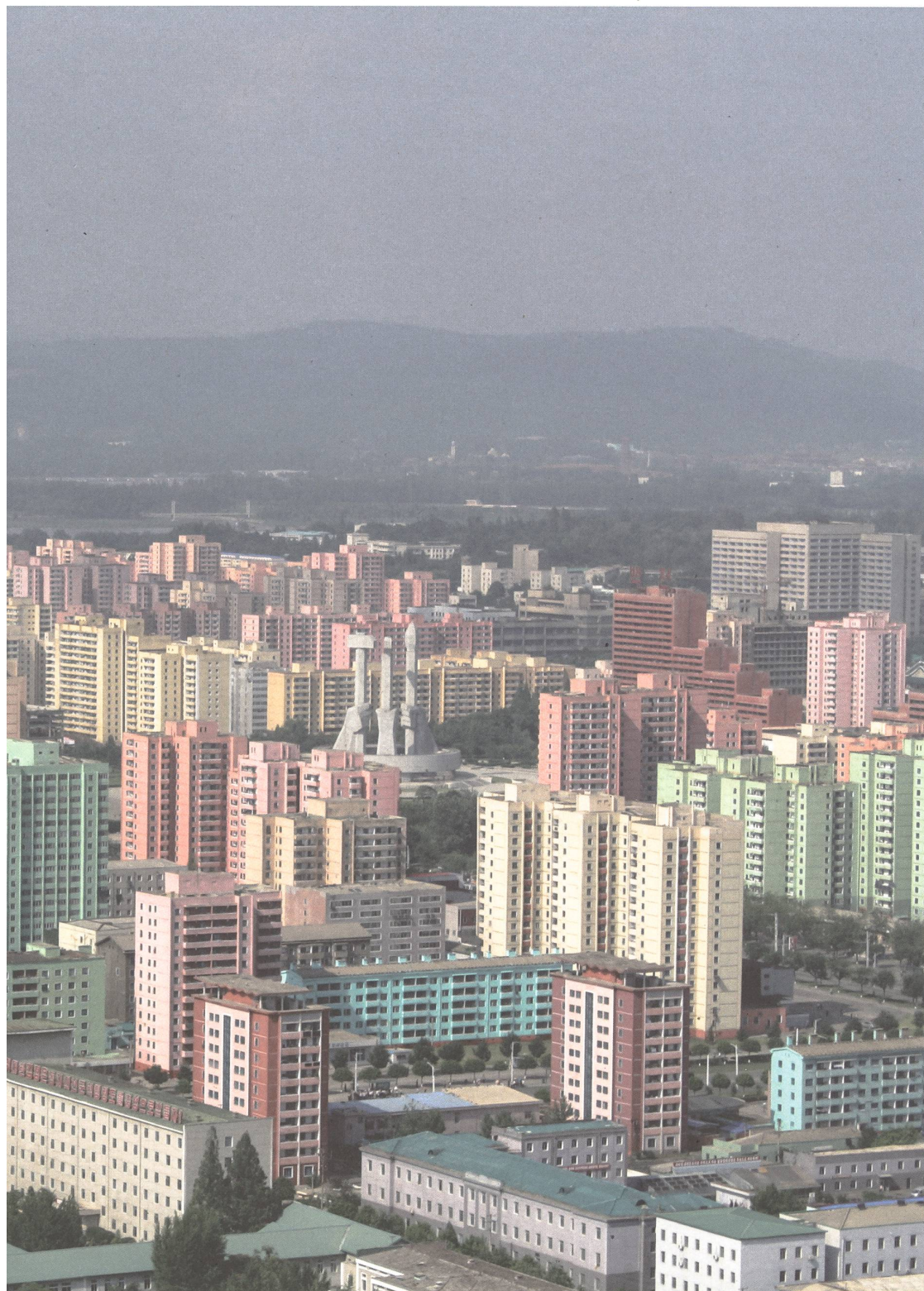
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COLOURFUL PROPAGANDA

Giulia Scotto



fig. a Tongdaewon district and Party foundation Monument, photographed by the author, 2016



After the Japanese occupation, the Second World War and the fratricidal Korean War, the Korean Peninsula was left divided and in ruins. Pyongyang's reconstruction represented the unusual possibility to realise the socialist urban utopia: a city built from scratches on top of a state-owned 'tabula rasa'. The predictable result of the initial planning was a very scenographic and monumental city based on a grid of kilometres-long axis, compositions of symmetric buildings facing gigantic squares, huge representations of the Great Leader, colourful blooming parks and a multitude of anonymous housing blocks. The pride of the newly founded Democratic People's Republic of Korea (D.P.R.K.), Pyongyang is a city where unauthorized social interactions are prosecutable and where only a few citizens, selected by the Party, are allowed to live. Its empty streets and squares are filled only by marching and idolising groups of soldiers, dancers and kids in uniform.

Thanks to one of the most stable dictatorships of the world, Pyongyang can be seen as the materialised evolution of propaganda architecture through the 20th century. The Kim dynasty, which has been ruling the country since 1948, has never underestimated the power of architecture. In 1991 Kim Jong Il published his treatise 'On Architecture'. Something between an essay and a handbook, where he organised architecture-related topics from the more theoretical to the very practical ones: from aesthetic theories to heating systems construction details. Architecture is described as «the most efficient representative art for the regime, able to give people ideological, aesthetic, cultural and emotional education.»¹ The author, whoever he really is, also acknowledges the essential role of architects in the construction of the socialist society, and warns them against «fame-seeking, formalism, art for art's sake, imitationism and all the other unhealthy creative attitudes that find expression among architects.»² Architecture is defined as as a collective art; every building is the result of a cooperative effort under the guidance of the Leader, whose «plans have to be accepted not as orders or duty but as matter of pleasure and honour.»³ He is the only individual in a country where collectivity comes first. The only name to remember in a country where architects are anonymous.

The first season of North Korean architecture was clearly influenced by Soviet aesthetics. Korean architects were trained in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union, where the socialist realism formula 'national in form, socialist in content', gave birth to an eclectic mix of neoclassical and traditional motives. Instead of applying the formula to Korean specificity, they literally imported the results: Doric columns, capitals and reliefs of hammer and sickle made their first appearance in the Korean Peninsula.

Things changed in 1972, when the local creative Marxist ideology of self-reliance, the 'Juche', was officially introduced in the constitution. Switching from the previous 'Kimilsungism' and 'Kimjongilism' to 'Juche' meant switching from universalistic socialism to nationalism and to take distance, politically and economically, from the allies of the Eastern Block. As a direct consequence, the architectural language changed quite radically. Socialist realism gave way to more traditional elements such as pagoda roofs and revisited versions of their colourful wooden substructure.

A third wave of influences reached North Korea in the 80s. Typical features of international style and brutalist architecture found their way through the non-aligned country in the Middle East, Africa and South America, and transformed Pyongyang's skyline.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the country faced a serious economic crisis that marked the end of the so-called 'golden age of construction'. China was, until recently, the only allied left, and the only country illegally overlooking the worldwide embargo established against D.P.R.K. in 1992. Because of the continuous and repeated threat of the Korean nuclear tests, the relationship deteriorated rapidly. Since then the permanent shortage of goods got worse than ever. Self-reliance is no longer the desired principle of a presumptuous nationalist ideology; it is a condition imposed from the outside that the country must undergo.

The actual young leader, the «Respected Comrade» Kim Jong Un, stands now alone against the rest of the world. A capitalist and individualist world that, unlike the majority of his subjects, he knows well. A world that clearly influenced his taste and priorities. It is not surprising that his main contribution to the architectural discourse is the construction of consumption and leisure facilities and the introduction of a playful and colourful Disneyland aesthetic.

Throughout the year, the D.P.R.K. observes many 'religious' festivities related to the lives and deaths of the actual and the former leaders. The most important one, comparable only to the Christian Christmas and New Year, is the celebration of 15th April 1912: the birthday of the 'Eternal President' Kim Il Sung.⁴ 1912 is the 'year zero' of the history of North Korea and the 'year one' or 'Juche 1' of the 'Juche' calendar. In relation to the festivities, the Party organises various campaigns. The aim of the campaigns is to push citizens to work harder and with more devotion in order to 'accelerate the construction of socialism'.

Everyone has a part to play: kids have to train for the 'mass games', farmers have to produce more, and construction workers have to speed up and deliver the new building in time for the celebration. The level of productivity of every team is proudly shown on big charts hanging outside of schools, factory, and construction sites. The extraordinary effort is not rewarded with money but with rice and glory.

The 'beautification campaign' announced in 2012 for the 100th birthday of the 'Dear Leader', corresponded to a further evolution of the national style and saw the introduction of novel materials, colours and spectacular lightings, which, due to power shortage, can rarely be turned on. The new buildings, erected at incredible speed with poor technology and limited resources, look like the future we imagined in the 60s. Something between 'Star Trek' and the 'The Jetsons' visionary settings.

Following one of the basic principles of totalitarian architecture, it is more convenient to invest in a few exceptional buildings than on what is really needed. The extraordinary is what really touches and excites the masses, the ordinary is secondary. Nowadays war museums and monuments are no longer given priority; modern propaganda focuses on water and amusement parks, ski resorts, restaurants, primordial commercial spaces and pseudo-luxurious housing complex for the most worthy, productive and devoted citizens.

At the bottom of the priority list stands the existing housing estate. Legacy of the old alliances, the soviet-style housing blocks are everywhere and everywhere in bad condition. Cracks on the facade are visible from the distance, the windows are often broken or missing and on the balconies many inhabitants have placed a little solar panel hoping for a little extra electricity.

The campaign timidly reached the existing neighbourhoods, which have been repainted with gentle and soft colours. The make-up campaign did not require big investments and did not change much from a structural point of view, but it did change Pyongyang's skyline. Pictures taken before 2012 show a grey monochromatic city, similar to any ex-Soviet periphery. Now it looks colourful, innocent and cute.

The variety introduced by the painting is especially surprising if one thinks that all the buildings belong to the same owner. Diversity is not a consequence of free individual choices but the result of 'planned randomness'. Fake pluralism lightens the austere and flattening image of anonymity and repetition. In such a strictly egalitarian society, it arouses unprecedented feelings of belonging and collective identity.

As Kim Jong Il explains in his book, «colours talk directly to the heart of the masses»⁵ and they have a key role in the creation of what he calls an «optimistic environment»⁶. It goes without saying that maintaining the environment optimistic is the best way, for him, to keep power and control.

The cheesy colour palette chosen for the refurbishment campaign is officially justified by a sort of nationalist theory of colours, stating that «The sentiments of Koreans are very delicate, beautiful and noble, and therefore Koreans are fond of light, soft, vivid and deep colours.»⁷ Yet, in the use of light green, pink, baby blue and yellow, one can read the attempt to make the population even more dutiful and naive.

North Koreans, especially the ones living in Pyongyang, not only ignore what is happening outside their country, they also ignore what happens within its borders. Keeping their street clean, their building colourful and their mood up is the best way of telling them that everything is going fine. No more serious and intimidating marble buildings, no more scary squares of inhuman proportion; the new 'gentle propaganda' with its harmless and sedated aesthetic is not aiming to express power or virility, but optimism. We could almost say, reusing Marx's famous statement, that «optimism is the opium of the masses». And not only of those living under Communist tyranny.

The 'national marketing strategy' is addressed to the local masses and to groups of patient and motivated foreigners. Tourism is the only legal business that North Korea can still count on, a business that the country is seriously willing to expand in the forthcoming years. However, travelling to such a mysterious and suspicious country is not an easy enterprise neither for the guests, nor for the hosts. Every visitor must be constantly accompanied by two guides trained to answer insidious questions, avoid difficult answers, deny obviousness, and praise the country's achievements, beauties, leaders and traditions. The guides have to get in close contact with threatening groups of smiling capitalists without being influenced by their misleading mindsets. At the same time they have to make sure that the 'potential spies' see what has to be seen. Nothing else and nothing more.

The usual tour starts with a visit to the gigantic statues of the former leaders and proceeds with visits to the Palace of the Sun (the mausoleum where the preserved remains of the leaders are on display), the Victorious War Museum (where a 360-degree diorama explain the last phases of the Korean War, which actually ended with an armistice in 1954), the Friendship Museum (a bunker where all the donations received by the Kim family, including a plane, a car and a basketball signed by Dennis Rodman, are preserved), the Juche Tower (the tallest monumental column with an elevator in the world), the Arch of Triumph (10 metres taller than his original in Paris), and so on. The program can slightly vary; lucky groups get to see the famous mass games, the mass dancing or some of the child prodigies shows, but everything that was not agreed on in advance is banned. Walking around, getting in touch with locals, taking pictures of soldiers or construction sites is strictly prohibited. Every interaction with North Koreans is controlled and has to be pre-approved. Nothing is spontaneous or left to chance.

Even though foreigners are, unlike North Koreans, allowed to doubt, to be critical and suspicious, it is really hard to get to see behind the curtains and to read between the lines of what the guides keep on saying. One might almost end up believing what one sees; the brainwashing is almost successful. From the rotating restaurant on the top floor of the Yanggakdo hotel, Pyongyang looks like a colourful, clean, tidy, and efficient Potemkin village⁸ free from annoying billboards, crime, and cars' pollution. It is the beautiful and hypocritical mask of all the regime horrors, the triumph of kitsch or, in Kundera's words, it is a society «in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist»⁹.

1 Kim Jong Il, 'On architecture', Juche 80 (1991), Foreign Languages Publishing Home, Pyongyang, Korea, p. 34.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 The 'Dear Leader' was born on the same day the Titanic sank. Koreans ironically link the two, only apparently unrelated events, by the saying: "When the sun set in the west it rose in the east."

5 Kim Jong Il, 'On architecture', Juche 80 (1991), Foreign Languages Publishing Home, Pyongyang, Korea, p. 42.

6 Ibid.

7 Kim Jong Il, 'On fine art', Juche 80 (1991), Foreign Languages Publishing Home, Pyongyang, Korea, p. 67.

8 In politics and economics, a Potemkin village is any construction (literal or figurative) built solely to deceive others into thinking that a situation is better than it really is. The term comes from stories of a fake portable village, built to impress Empress Catherine II during her journey to Crimea in 1787. [...] the original story was that Grigory Potemkin erected the fake portable settlement along the banks of the Dnieper River in order to fool the Russian Empress.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Potemkin_village Retrieved: 17.01.2017.

9 Milan Kundera, 'The unbearable lightness of being', Harpercollins, New York 1985.



fig. b Residential buildings in the periphery of Pyongyang, photographed by the author, 2016



fig. c Mass dance in in front of the People's Palace of Culture, photographed by the author, 2016



fig. d Changjon Street apartment complex, photographed by the author, 2016



fig. e Pyongyang underground: Yonggwang station, photographed by the author, 2016

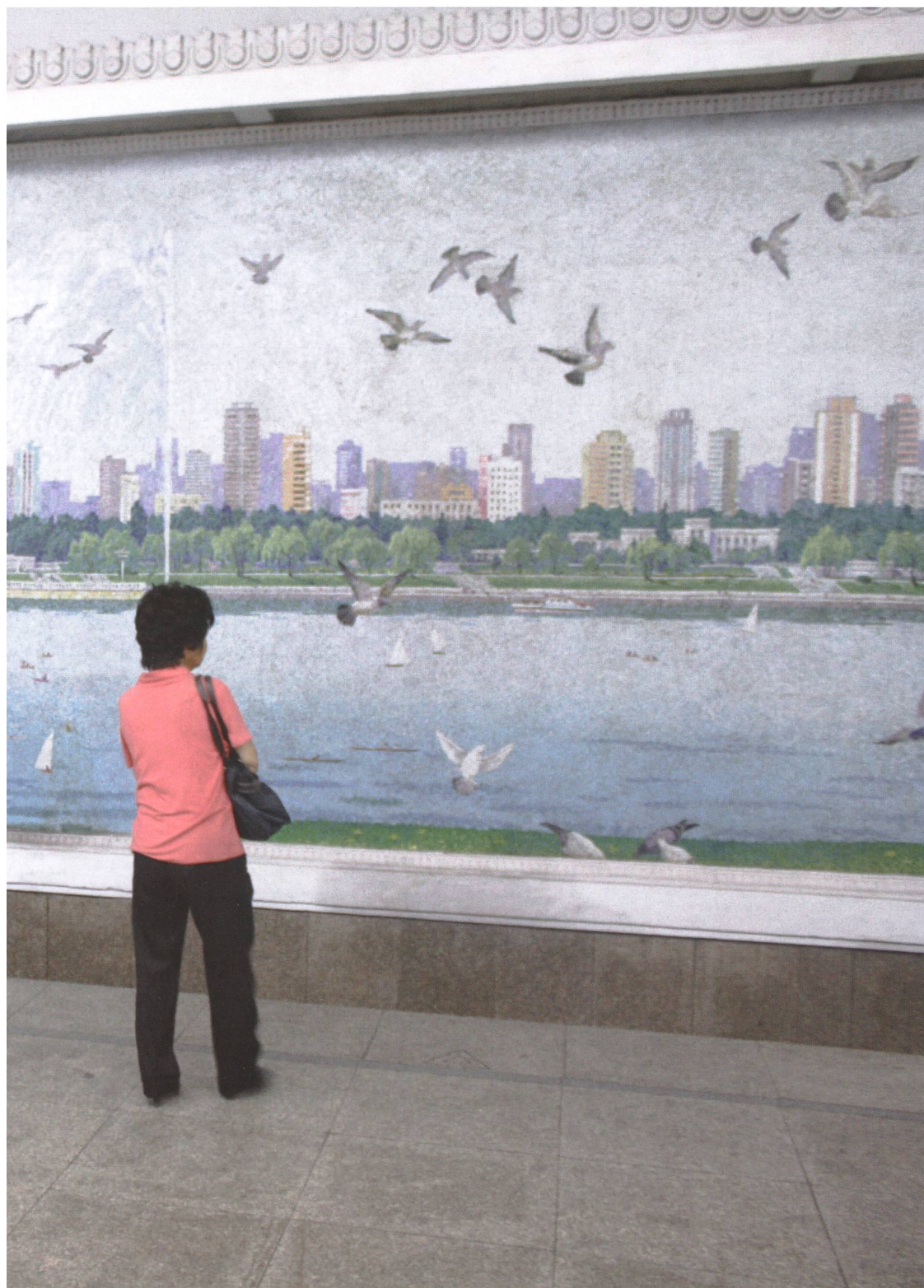




fig. f Arc of Triumph, photographed by the author, 2016



fig. g Kim Il Sung square and the Juche tower, photographed by the author, 2016



fig. h Children's performance at the Mangyongdae Children's Palace. On the backdrop: Mirae Scientists Street development, photographed by the author, 2016





fig. i Residential buildings in the periphery of Pyongyang, photographed by the author, 2016

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