The City Now?

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I have had the privilege of co-teaching with several of you, and serving on about 20 DArch committees in the last decade. I have learned so much from all of you.
For example, Heidi Newton reimagined the old idea of a Cushicle that I had learned about eons ago from David Green and Mike Webb of the Archigram Group.
Heidi designed a 2nd Skin Network for today’s generation of global nomads
One of Archigram’s other ideas of walking cities might be realized in Heidi’s vision by moving on the legs of people who carry light, flexible materials that can expand, join together for communal activities, contract and easily be carried elsewhere when the activity is over.
Down with all permanent buildings and cities.

The world is on the move.
From a completely different perspective, Celeste Matsukawa designed cheap, flexible, adaptive habitats for the Char people of Bangladesh who live where the world is moving under them—on the continually-shifting silt of the Ganges River Delta.

FLOATING ARCHITECTURE: A Solution for the Char People of Bangladesh
Celeste Aiko Matsukawa
This is a challenge that millions around the world—including us here in Hawaii—may soon have to face as sea levels rise.
For my dwindling seven minutes of infamy tonight, I have been inspired by Dominick Turner who showed how each nation’s embassy projects an image of itself to the people of the country it is in.
US embassies, such as this one in Baghdad, often project the fears of the dying American Empire.

It is in every way a dominating barricaded fortress demonstrating that its inhabitants are in deadly fear of the people of the country in which it is situated.
In contrast, this joint complex in Berlin of embassies of the Nordic countries projects an image of a part of the world that long ago gave up on violence, inequality, and imperial dominance.

It is without barricades, open, light, trusting, inviting.
This is the national parliament in Bucharest, Romania. Nice friendly, democratic-looking place, yeah?
I recently visited
Sejong Multifunctional Administrative City that is currently under construction in central Korea.
Many government functions and functionaries have already moved from Seoul to Sejong, and all national government agencies are supposed to move there eventually.
The area that is now called Sejong was until five or six years ago a rice-growing area with only a few hundred people. By 2015 it will have 150,000 and by 2030 it will have half a million residents.
It is A City of Happiness where everything is planned. Scores of buildings are going up all at once, like mushrooms after a rain.
The Multifunctional Administrative City (MAC—sort of like the District of Columbia) will have, well, many functions.
Note that it said “the ring shape allows decentralization and non-hierarchy”.

Much is made of the intention that not only will the city be environmentally sustainable, but also it will reflect the openness, participation, transparency for which King Sejong of the 15th century is revered.
King Sejong the Great, for whom the city is named, invented the Hangul system of writing that was intended to be so simple that any illiterate Korean could learn to read and write in one day.
That greatly upset the bureaucrats of the time who laboriously used Chinese, or Korean written in Chinese characters.

They knew that if ordinary people could read and write, it would be the end of their power.
I can assure you, the structures that I saw before me a few weeks ago are anything but environmentally-sustainable or politically-transparent and inviting.
Maybe no bureaucrat will feel intimidated by it, but most ordinary people will.
The main structure is a stunning design: all government functions will be in one long, winding, slinking building, linked by a continuous walkway that will take over an hour to navigate on foot from one end to the other.
I was told it was designed to look like a dragon, and it does.
Or maybe a snake.
If anything is transparent about it,

it is clear that the huge building projects nothing but centralized, bureaucratic power.
Sejong has been designed and built as though the thing for which Koreans are probably best known now—high speed, mobile electronic communication hardware and software—does not exist.
It is entirely about physical things and place.

An architect’s wet dream?
I don’t mean to pick on the Koreans, but cities and buildings speak.
And sometimes, people speak back to them.
Sejong City does not whisper transparency and participatory democracy.

It shouts centralization and bureaucratic power.
And so it will stand athwart all desires by many Koreans for transparent, open, direct electronic democracy for a long time to come.
The Archigram Group believed that all buildings should collapse at the end of 20 years.

Let’s pray for such an outcome here so that the desire of many Koreans for new anticipatory forms of governance can finally live and breathe.
The front page of the material that a woman from the MAC construction firm gave me, states, "Our aim is to build a city where everybody wants to live.” A noble sentiment. But I wonder if that aim will be achieved.
Also, the way she said it, in her excellent English with of course a Korean accent was:

“Our aim is to build a city where everybody wants to LEAVE.”

That aim might be obtainable.
The explosive and dynamic emerging urbanism in Asia and other world regions constitutes the biggest challenge in rethinking the city. Radical transformation is occurring in that region at a defining moment in global history, posing a theater of new challenges and conceptualizations for architecture and urbanism.

Room 215 School of Architecture, UHM
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(reception following)