

Two Houses in Seoul

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*We are inverted utopians.
While utopians cannot make what they envisage,
we cannot envisage what we are making.*¹

Seoul is a megapolis that is located within a two-hour flight from two other megapolises: Tokyo to the east and Beijing to the west. Indeed, the idea of the city of Seoul occupies a particular spatial niche: not unlike Korea's unique geopolitical location, Seoul is somewhere in the middle. If Tokyo has elevated its state of ultimate urban chaos to an art form (which peaked decades ago), Seoul's landscape is still marked by a primitive dynamism: it is continually refining and intricately reinventing itself. While Beijing plows ahead with an ambitious (if remarkably cohesive) radicalism in a quest to add to its collection of architectural enigma (in time for the 2008 Olympics), Seoul already feels ideologically spent and jaded by the economic reality.

Hilberseimer's Dream: The Average *Salaryman's* Spatial House

Outside of the citystates, Korea is now the most urbanized country in the world. Over 80% of the country's 48 million people currently reside in urban areas, and the figure is expected to exceed 90% by the year 2030. Seoul is filled with architecture that, in effect, has been prodigiously commodified and branded by a market economy. With 16,000 persons per square kilometer, Seoul is the most densely populated city on the planet – five times the population density of Los Angeles and 1.5 times that of New York City. In fact, Seoul has surpassed Tokyo and Hong Kong on the list of the world's costliest cities to live in and is second only to Moscow.

In present-day Seoul, approximately 80% of its residents live in apartments (which Koreans refer to phonetically as *a-pa-te*) that comprise some 98% of recent residential construction. The wealthiest Koreans have voluntarily exiled themselves to high-rise apartment buildings that boast a floor-area ratio of 1,000%.² Presumably, the privileged class has chosen to house themselves in such close quarters *not* for the most efficient use of space in a small country but rather because the apartment has proven itself to be an incredibly efficient source of profit. As a result, the apartment has become the most cov-

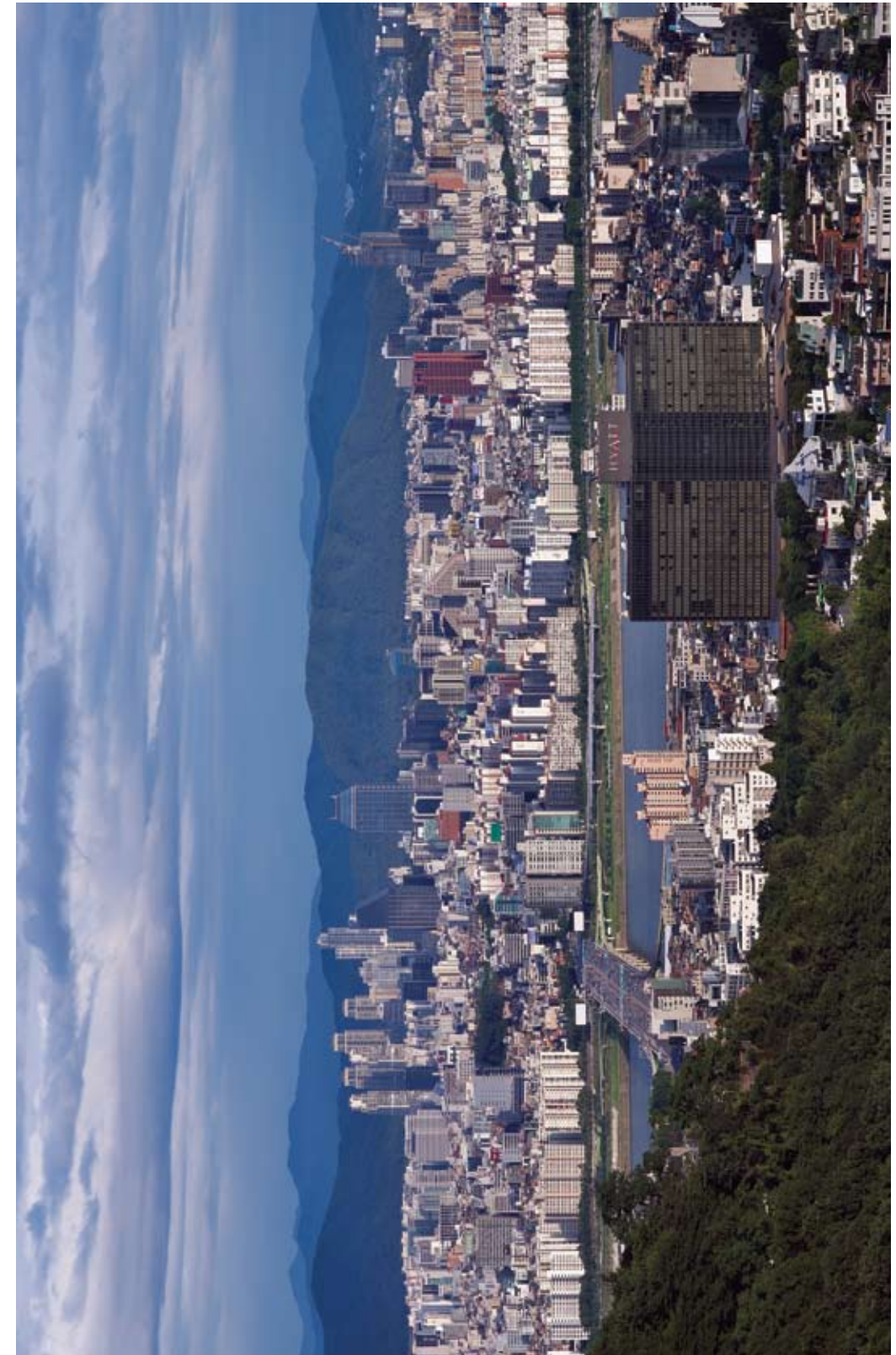


Fig. 1: General view of Seoul.

¹ Günter Anders, *Die atomare Drobung. Radikale Überlegungen zum atomaren Zeitalter* (C.H. Beck, München 1981), p. 96.

² translating into a building that is ten times the size of the land on which it stands.