

PREFACE

THE SUBWAYS OF SEOUL BURROW THROUGH THE STRATA BENEATH a complex, urban matrix. Every once in a while, the trains come up for air, as they cross the expansive Han River or roll to a new town on the periphery of the city. I'm a stranger to this hemisphere. My companions on the train are not.

We're traversing Seoul. My new students know this place. I'm trying to learn. They direct aboveground students to the location of our rendezvous. Cell phones connect us to each other and to the weather on the surface.

A cold front entered Seoul the night before, bringing with it strong winds and snow. Will we be able to conduct our charrette, or will it be snowed or rained out? Reports from the students outside the train indicate improved conditions.

From an earlier visit, I've selected an appropriate place for our daylong charrette, the Insa-dong neighborhood. I like this district because remnants of traditional Korean culture persist in the design of the windows and roofs. Its original builders designed with nature. The students and I are going to Insa-dong to learn about human ecology.

We have already spent an hour or so back at the conference center reviewing the history of Insa-dong. A translator had been provided even though all twelve students speak some English. They come from several

disciplines—architecture, planning, landscape architecture, graphic design, interior design, and geography—and represent four universities.

Some of the students dress rather conservatively, others quite trendily. One young woman wears beautiful, layered grays and black. Several students sport Nikes. Two male architects present themselves in gang-banger costumes and have dyed their long hair blonde, well, sort of blonde.

The conference organizers have provided us with maps that present broad information about Seoul—its geology and hydrology, the road and park networks—as well as site-specific data for Insa-dong, including topography and soils, land use, and structures of the neighborhood. We review these maps in the subway. Upon entering the main street, Inсадong-gil, we will attempt to read the text of the city among the art galleries and handicraft shops.

The students huddle in the cold.

The snow has turned to light rain.

We share umbrellas and seek refuge under storefront roofs.

I take a picture of some soggy leaves on the sidewalk. I don't know these leaves, and I wonder from what naked branch they fell. I also ponder who built this street, this city, this nation, what forces needed to be understood and harnessed before safe and healthy settlement could occur.

My charge to the students: Tell me how nature and culture interact here.

We walked and talked. We sought to understand the ordinary, but this was no ordinary place. Perhaps no place is truly ordinary. Every spot on Earth has its own tale to tell. So we sought the story of Insa-dong.

Shoeless and sitting on the floor, we ate lunch in a restaurant in a traditional Seoul courtyard house. Over *yukgaejang*, *kimchi*, *bulgogi*, and *poricha*, we discussed the students' interests and backgrounds. One student spoke in a rural dialect, and the others poked fun as she blushed.

After lunch, the students sketched and I took pictures. We studied walls and doorways, gutters and paving, paintbrushes and handmade paper, storefronts and street trees. The sun broke through the clouds for a while, but then the rain returned. We retreated to the conference center where I gave the students a second task: based on the nature and the culture of Insa-dong, suggest one intervention.

The architects designed a building for a vacant lot, the landscape architects proposed some trees and street improvements, the planners had ideas about how to make the circulation more effective. The graphic designer presented the most poetic proposition: she suggested a scheme of

basic colors—blues and greens—to call attention to the current drainage patterns of the neighborhood and to retrace those of the past.

At the end of the charrette, we had a group photograph taken of our community-for-a-day. A couple of the students have stayed in touch with me via e-mail. They tell me how their studies are progressing and seek my advice about graduate school. Through them, through our electronic interactions, I remain connected to a place many time zones away.

My quest in this book parallels the two charges I gave to the students in Seoul. First, I seek to explore how nature and culture interact in human settlements. Second, I'm interested in how an understanding of such interactions informs how we shape our homes, neighborhoods, landscapes, city-regions, and nations.