

**Valérie Gelézeau, *Ap'at'ŭ Konghwaguk 아파트 공화국*
[On the Republic of Apartments]**

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When I was a graduate student, we would seek entertainment as graduate students do—that is, cheaply and without an overabundance of ethical concerns. One cool Chicago weekend, fortified with coffee and donuts, we trudged out onto the Lake Shore Drive median in the dawn's early light to witness a free if bitter spectacle of the turn-of-the-century United States, the destruction by implosion of one of the buildings of the Lakefront Properties high-rise apartments, among the city's notoriously troubled large-scale housing projects. People had lived there—many, despite years of crime, neglect, and problems with the police and with the lack of police, did not want to leave—but urban planners and city government had moved on. And so, we returned home covered in cement dust from what had almost unanimously become a symbol of urban dysfunction, though from that agreement etiological arguments might diverge into discussions of bureaucratic pathology, “the gangs”, de facto segregation and racism, or the evils of modernist overconfidence.

In Valérie Gelézeau's natal France, too, large-scale, high-rise apartment complexes have gained an image as a twentieth-century bad idea whose time has gone. Particularly in the *banlieues*, the outskirts of the districts of Paris and other cities popularly associated with poverty and the tinderbox politics of immigration, the massive apartment block as urban form is commonly regarded as a co-productive element in the social alienation that is occasionally violently evident. Yet, how different is the situation and perception of apartments in contemporary South Korea, the focus of this valuable study. While there are certainly Korean social, cultural, and architectural critics of apartment blocks (*tanji*), it is not a drastic overstatement to say that for many Koreans apartment life is the substance or aspirational desire object of urban modernity. People *want* to live in them; as Gelézeau notes (16), since roughly the inception of apartment complexes in Korea, their “convenience” and “cleanliness” have found its antithesis in the social imagination in the *hanok*, an

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older style of detached urban dwelling thought of as “uncomfortable” and foul of smell from dodgy plumbing.

Ap'at'ŭ Konghwaguk translates much of its material from Gelézeau's French-language work *Séoul, ville géante, cités radieuses* (Gelézeau 2003), but the text has been rearranged, expanded to add discussion of the late 1990s (i.e., the Asian financial crisis), and reframed for a Korean audience. The comparison of Korea with the French case recurs throughout, though nowhere more prominently than on the cover where the publisher has added some rather perspectivalist, “Korea through Western eyes” explanatory copy that this is a book about “Korean apartments as seen by a French geographer” (one might wonder whether she is better described as “a geographer who happens to be French”). Yet Gelézeau clearly also believes that *Koreans* should be more surprised by Korean apartments, that they were not the wholly determined, inevitable result of rapid modernization under conditions of high population density (16). It is this more subtle agenda of the book that provides a starting point for reading it in relation to science and technology studies. For many of us who intellectually came of age in the social science of the early 1990s, one of the first significant brakes on our then-prevalent theorizing through metaphors of imagination, discursive foundationalism, and social construction—one of our first encounters, in other words, with something like a principle of irreduction—came not via STS or the history of science (though they were out there if we knew to find them) but rather through the ferment in geography and what Edward Soja (1989) called “the reassertion of space in critical social theory”. To cite but a few key texts, Soja's work, the engagement with Henri Lefebvre (1991; for English readers often first via David Harvey 1989) and his “trialectic” refusal to allow Marxist theory to rest on its tonic, and Edward Casey's (1993, 1997) rereading and revitalization of place all moved away from treatments of spatial categories as either epiphenomenal of or disembedded from social process. For my own field, American-tradition anthropology, it is at least possible to conceive of a genealogy that would link the growing “non-obviousness” of space and place from around 1990 to the non-obviousness of the non-human flowing out of the appropriation of STS a decade or so later. Gelézeau's variation on this irreductive commitment aims to grasp the material, urban landscape as complexly interactive with political, social, and economic factors in giving form to South Korean modernity, South Korean desire, and the reality of class and citizenship relations (20). Late in the book, she even describes apartments as “laboratories for the transformation of customs (*kwansŭp*)” (205). If the vernacular notion of the laboratory as a space for experimentation is prominent in the metaphor, so is also an STS understanding of the congealed historical work and pre-establishment of power, interest, and knowledge relations that are the infrastructure of experimental spontaneity: Apartment blocks are likewise spatio-material arrangements that have canalized the continuity and change of everyday practice (205).

Ap'at'ŭ Konghwaguk focuses on seven Seoul apartment *tanji*, built between the 1970s and the 1990s. It is broadly divided into three sections, first on the history of Seoul apartments, then on the mechanisms of their production and reproduction, and finally on their appropriation by residents (this overall ordering is a significant difference between the Korean and French editions). The first of these establishes the 1970s, the decade of the Yusin dictatorship and President Park Chung Hee's all-

mobilizing drive for heavy industrialization, as also the key moment of inflection in the development of Korean apartments. Notwithstanding colonial transformations, Gelézeau writes, the Seoul of the early 1950s—the “labyrinth by the Han”—in significant respects retained its Chosŏn-era morphology of large, commercial main roads with low residential house compounds set on twisting, branching, basically pedestrian alleys between (25). The aftermath of the Korean War had brought an increasing use of cement and standardization of house design, however, and these trends flowed into the first residential complex to be called “apartments”—the Chongam Apartments completed in 1958. This was a relatively small (152 unit), low (five-story) set of dwellings that in most respects did not offer a standard of living different from the detached houses of Seoul’s other residents. The 1960s brought a military government willing in the name of modernization and urban renewal to bulldoze the urban poor out of sight if not existence and in turn more apartment blocks on a larger scale, mostly built with public funds often derived from international aid. The Map’o Apartments completed in 1964, of 642 units, were among the most prominent. Even these, however, were not yet what Korean apartments were to become: The units were small, and the buildings, originally planned to be ten stories with heat from oil boilers, were reduced to six and heated with the then-ubiquitous *yŏnt’an* pulverized coal briquettes due to a lack of capital and technical expertise (32). They were not high-status dwellings. Gelézeau contends that the Chongam and Map’o complexes were thus hardly full models for the apartments of succeeding decades, but they did bequeath the paradigm of their separateness from the world of the small alleys (33).

The 1970s, then, brought in concert a set of coordinated shifts and transformations that culminated in the “era of the mega-*tanji*”, roughly 1975–1985, in which new developments—some with over 4,000 units and well over 10,000 residents—appeared at sites like Panp’o and Chamsil south of the Han River. State urban and economic planning began to grasp Kangnam and other areas like Yŏūido, within an overall functional division of space, as sites for the production of workers who might feed Seoul’s increasingly advanced industries—given the overall military cast of both the Yusin state and the economic mobilization it carried out, some have seen the large Korean apartment complexes as essentially gilded barracks (24). But, gilded they did become, at least relatively: The early 1970s was also the moment at which both the class image and the lifestyle facilitated by apartment complexes began to shift. Gelézeau identifies the Tongbu Ich’on-dong Apartments, completed in 1971 north of the Han and marketed not to the poor but to government workers and foreign residents, as important for the Kangnam model of a few years later (36). There is also a story of technical standardization here, as larger unit sizes, boiler heating, elevators, and higher buildings all became the norm—at Chamsil, in something of a reverse of the history of the Map’o Apartments of a decade previous, the upgrade occurred in the middle of construction, with the first four subsections of the overall development area limited to five stories and heated with *yŏnt’an* but the fifth redesigned to be fifteen stories with boilers (38). Finally, private capital was encouraged to and increasingly did finance new apartment *tanji*, with the Apkujŏng-dong Apartments built by Hyundai an early example (39). Today, few are the South Korean apartment buildings that do not bear a corporate brand name. The result of all of these developments was the rise to dominance, certainly south of the river, of a

new urban morphology of large apartment complexes, relatively self-contained with their own stores, playgrounds, etc., set among wide avenues designed to facilitate automotive transport and hence ownership—apartments for the new middle class. The 1980s brought financial deregulation and increasing speculation on apartments, as well as a greater diversity in the size of new *tanji*, while the 1990s brought redevelopment of *tanji* in the city (the Chongam and Map’o *tanji* are no more in their 1960s form) and, with local self-governance, a shift of the center of gravity of Seoul apartment development to satellite cities often well into Kyŏnggi Province. All of this is covered in more detail by Gelézeau, but I at least had the sense as a reader that the fundamental pattern had been set.

Chapter 3 flattens out the historical narrative that has dominated until this point into a more typological consideration of Korean apartments. Gelézeau suggests that extant apartment complexes can be differentiated along several axes according to their overall scale, their builder type (government or private), and the socioeconomic class of their residents (65). The last corresponds reasonably well with date of construction, itself an index of both increasing Korean affluence and the improving perception of apartments. Much of the chapter thus offers an extension of the catalog of the material differences between the newer, more luxurious *tanji* and their predecessors: As wealthier families moved into larger apartments loudspeakers turned into intercom systems, underground parking for single or multiple automobiles per unit appeared where none had been before, and even the external colors of buildings shifted from boring white or beige to fashionable rose or sky blue pastels. Gelézeau also discusses the integration of technical systems into the newer generation of apartments. In the most recent generations, for example, natural gas (requiring connection to a city grid) has replaced the oil heating boilers that were preferred in the 1970s. For a long time, 15 stories represented the upper limit of Korean apartment design, but new systems for water flow and other developments have brought buildings of up to 30 stories into being (70–75). Chapter 3 is additionally where the typological comparison with French apartments begins to be reasserted, in part through inverted histories: The 1970s, when Korean apartments became popular with the more affluent classes, is roughly when young French of a similar class abandoned their equivalents (82). The author’s main point is that while Korean *tanji* possess some degree of functional self-independence in their on-site stores and groceries, their residents remain symbolically and socially integrated into the city in ways that contrast with the image of French apartment complexes as sites of alienation (77–79). Upper- and middle-class Korean apartment dwellers are not excluded from the rest of urban life, though foreshadowing later points that Gelézeau does hint that at the affluent extreme they may well be exclusive themselves, noting the greater difficulty she had gaining access to residents of apartments in Apkujŏng-dong versus Chamsil because in the former she would often be met by a maid or cleaning lady (62). Architectural form is not sociological destiny.

The second major section of the book is devoted to the “how” of Korean apartments, the mechanisms of their production. If South Korea is “the republic of apartments”, it is clear that the Fourth and Fifth Republics of the 1970s and 1980s had a particular lot to do with it. Gelézeau describes apartments as an outward expression of the policies of authoritarian governments that pursued growth first, hand in hand with the large Korean conglomerates (*chaebŏl*), without much concern

for economic distribution (86). Yet, it is also clear that the rows of *tanji* did not simply happen by fiat; Gelézeau is especially good on the governmentalities over public construction and personal finance that helped interest both corporations and families in their creation, and as such, the book is a useful complement to existing studies of the levers of Korean developmentalism (e.g., Woo 1991).

Amid rapid urbanization, Seoul's housing problem was clearly severe before and during the initial wave of apartment construction—Gelézeau notes, for instance, that its ratio of housing units to households actually fell from 1960 all the way until 1988 (88). Whatever ameliorative effect apartments might have had, their status as the chief publicly proffered solution had much to do with their making also as engines for the enrichment of certain parties. A housing law promulgated in 1972 simplified the administrative procedures necessary to build high-rise complexes, while encouragement of the standardization of building materials made it cheaper. Even after direct government financing of apartment projects ceased to be the rule, private capital was made loans and otherwise backstopped by government corporations in ways otherwise familiar from the state-corporate developmental nexus (91–92, 103–104). Meanwhile, a housing lottery system established in the late 1970s that gave only slight preference to those without an existing apartment, combined for a time with initial price controls and a flourishing secondary market, made apartments a significant means of *embourgeoisment* for those with the capital to participate (93–94). And Gelézeau cannot help note that, politically, putting some people into the middle class helped create supporters of the authoritarian state systems of the 1970s and 1980s (102). Chapter 4 culminates with a return of the comparative frame, in which one major reason why the surface likeness between “apartment complexes” in Korea and elsewhere is ultimately deceptive becomes clear—since the 1960s Korean apartments have not really been “public housing” in the way French (or American) apartments have been. Apartments in Korea have largely, though not exclusively, been bought and sold by the relatively well-off, rather than rented to the urban poor on long-term leases; no substantial utopian or socialist commitment (even one now failing) to bring the poor into the city stood behind them (95–99). In chapter 5, Gelézeau then turns to her ethnographic interviews with Korean apartment owners and would-be owners to reflect on both the symbolism and substance of an equation to which most subscribe, namely, that “apartments equal money” (134). Living in one implies that one has it, while having one helps one make it. Much of the chapter recalls other anthropological work in its focus on narratives and strategies of bourgeois capital accumulation and enrichment (e.g., Lett 1998; Nelson 2000). Even Koreans who do not own their apartments, who instead rent based on large lump-sum deposits of “key money” (*chõnse*) that they may eventually recover, tend to regard the *chõnse* system positively as a savings mechanism (143–144). Gelézeau closes the chapter with an ironic citation of a 1971 passage explaining that Koreans were then hesitant about apartments because of the lack of land and because they wished to be owners (145). This public perception has changed almost completely; her point is that it has been made to change.

The final group of chapters in *Ap'at'ü Konghwaguk* turns to the issue of the common ideological coding of Korean apartments as “modern” and “Western” as well as the transformations of spatial and social practice that apartments have in fact helped engender. Chapter 6 addresses the relationship between Korean apartments

and the international modernist movement in architecture. It begins with another irony: Among both Koreans and foreign visitors, apartments are usually not thought of as locations of Koreanness but rather as products of “Westernization” or even “Americanization”, yet most Americans in fact live in detached houses (152). This serves as a bridge to a discussion of the underappreciated internal hybridity and the “nomadism” (159) of models within international architectural modernism and thus to the conclusion that Korean apartments did not have any singular foreign source. To the degree that one searches for antecedents, the “vertical modernism” of Le Corbusier is certainly present (though it is equally clear that it had little influence in Korea at the moment of its initial promulgation in the 1920s and 1930s), but so is the neighborhood model associated with the American planner Clarence Perry and initially applied to American-style communities of individual family residences—the term *tanji* itself, Gelézeau states, derives from Perry’s “neighborhood units” (156, 159–160, 164). Ultimately, then, the larger point is that the mass of modernist theories was appropriated and adapted to the Korean situation. When Park Chung Hee, at the inaugural ceremony for the Map’o Apartments, emphasized clearing away the past in the name of productivity and efficiency, he sounded a bit like Le Corbusier, but he did so in the context of a society that was not then already urban (as Le Corbusier’s France had been) and a political project that saw apartments not as appropriate housing for an extant “machine age” but as among the instruments that might bring such an age about for South Korea (166). Apartments at first were interventions, in a sense deliberately *inappropriate* housing designed to drag society behind them, another point that belies the reduction of apartment complexes to a natural response to high population densities (170). If tour groups do not usually visit the apartment canyons of Kangnam in search of the particularly Korean, perhaps they should.

There is, of course, another way of approaching the question of how and for whom Korean apartments are modern or Western: What do apartment residents say about them, and how do they use them as spaces? Chapters 7–8 (along with chapter 5) are Gelézeau’s most ethnographic. When asked directly, most of her informants considered apartments categorically modern—so much so that the question of whether one was more modern than another bordered on unintelligibility—and in turn many equated modern with Western and opposed it to the “Korean” or “traditional”. They described *tanji* life in terms of a further set of multivalent symbols: Apartments were “clean”, “orderly”, and “comfortable”, as opposed to the world of the alleys, but they were also spaces in which people supposedly did not know their neighbors (178–185). The second half of chapter 7 then steps away from ideological representations to look much more closely at the pragmatics of apartment space in relation to its *hanok* antecedents; an instructor looking for an illustration of the hybrid character of everyday Korean modernity could hardly do better than these pages. For example, the dining room with its dining table and chairs and indeed the whole “living room–dining room–kitchen” complex of stabilized functional units at the center of apartments (surrounded by bedrooms) is often considered one of the most distinctive aspects of apartment living and is contrasted with the multi-functionality of *hanok* rooms. Yet in practice, many families situationally make use of both their dining room table and the low portable tables that were used for eating meals on the floor in the *hanok* (185, 198). Apartments of course lack *madang*, the

enclosed courtyard of older houses that served as a storage space (especially for *kimch'i* and other preserved foodstuffs) as well as a transition between the street and the house interior. Yet, the symbolism and functionality of the *madang* have effectively been parceled into number of other distinctive spaces in Korean apartments: the small transitional entryway from which one steps up into the apartment proper, the unheated pantry or utility room (*tayong tosil*), and the enclosed or screened-in unheated balcony (almost unheard of in Western apartments) likewise used for storage (192–198). For the foreign visitor, certainly, the transformation and not simply displacement of older Korean customs is evident in what in the French edition is rather charmingly called the “ballet of shoes” as one switches from outdoor shoes to socks or soft slippers for the interior to harder plastic slippers for the bathrooms and the *madang*-derived storage spaces (Gelézeau 2003: 219).

Chapter 8 is devoted to social relations in the *tanji*. In families, one again sees not simply an eclipse but a transformation of older residence patterns. Although there are many nuclear families, 30% of apartments house more than two generations (Gelézeau 2003: 235; note that p. 211 of the Korean edition lists the figure as 0%, a crucial typo). Yet in these, it is often aged parents who have come to live with their grown children, an inversion of patrilocal married residence. Gelézeau devotes considerable discussion as well to female sociability in apartment complexes, the nets of *kye* mutual credit organizations, *pansanghoe* residents' groups, and other such mechanisms that create both community and self-regulation (217–223). For me, however, the most intriguing topic of chapter 8 lies in the discussion of the relation of residents to the office staff and guards employed at *tanji*, the array of low-paid workers (often retirees) called upon to provide a mixture of security, maintenance, and far more personal services (receipt of deliveries, pickups, etc.) than might be customary elsewhere. In guards in particular, Gelézeau finds a formalization and an exteriorization of the surveillance function that in alley neighborhoods might be performed by the informal action of residents themselves within the shared space of the street (226–234).

Gelézeau's conclusion in part reiterates the central comparison and the irreducible premise of the book, but it is also drawn back to the question of surveillance. The surveillance in Korean apartment complexes, the loudspeakers, and even individual institutions such as the *pansanghoe* are in a sense reminiscent of Korea's authoritarian past, but they have created a sense of apartments as spaces of safety; such an equation is clearly lacking in France. She at least wishes to ask the question of whether the Korean equation of surveillance and social safety will continue to hold (245). One interesting development, in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis (which, because apartment prices fell but then recovered more quickly and completely than other housing prices, had the effect of reinforcing the apartment model [238]) and, perhaps, the wider environment of neoliberalism, comes in the appearance of higher and higher status apartments with increased degrees of both imbedded services and controlled access. It is possible, in other words, that a book on Korean apartments written 20 years from now will look not to the French apartment block as its natural comparison but to the gated community (cf. Low 2003). This is an issue, of architecture and of value, that Gelézeau suggests Koreans might think and talk about more explicitly (247–251).

Gelézeau's work brings a focus on urban forms that nicely complements other studies of class and particularly of new middle-class strategies, lifestyles, economics,

and narrativity in contemporary urban Seoul (e.g., Mun 1992; Kim 1993; Thomas 1993; Lett 1998; Nelson 2000; Kendall 2002; Abelmann 2003); selfishly, of course, but also for the sake of wider dissemination of her important research and unique perspective, I hope for an English translation to join the Korean and French editions. *Ap'at'ŭ Konghwaguk* also raises questions for future study. To leap onto a personal hobby horse, while clearly formative and important Seoul is not South Korea, is not even a proxy for South Korea. Elsewhere in the country, apartment complexes have sprung up at the margins of regional cities and in rural towns where one even sees apartment building rising like monoliths out of rice fields. What sort of conjunctural relations have apartments entered into in these settings? Meanwhile, as an American writing in 2008, I cannot help but feel that the study of “comparative housing systems” that Gelézeau helps open up is timely, given that on some days the United States’ “republic of individual houses”, with *its* complex interrelation of ideology, government projects, architecture, and finance, seems poised to take out the world economy.

Yet, there remains the question of reading this book as STS: how, why, and why one should bother. Early in this review, I sought to evoke the challenge of irreduction that STS and spatiality have commonly posed to the social sciences. For some, I suspect that it will nonetheless remain decisive that Gelézeau herself would not describe her work as STS, that her topic is not really “science” or “technology” as directly as it is for many scholars. I would argue, however (cf. Oppenheim 2007, 2008), as used to be argued for “cultural studies”, that even as STS seeks *institutional* recognition in the academy, in East Asia and elsewhere, it should work to retain the *intellectual* commitment to interdisciplinarity or even “antidisciplinarity” (Pickering 1995) that made its practice conceptually exciting to begin with. *Should* STS be “about science”? In the actor–network theory and “post-ANT” tradition, both Bruno Latour (2005) and John Law (2004) have offered recent revised syntheses that answer, in effect, no; Law (2004: 157) gives a definition of ANT as a “sensitivity to materiality, relationality, and process”, if one usefully tempered by historical engagement with the “hard case” of scientific facticities. In this view, it is helpful to have Gelézeau’s work at hand, as a prod to a topically non-restrictive, “open source” East Asian STS attuned at its base to the sociability of materialities.

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