

CiViChon: A City in a Village

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Hi, my name is Kyong Park and I'm a professor at the Department of Visual Arts in the University of California in San Diego.

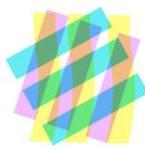
In my response to the question of how COVID-19 has affected my art practice, I would like to talk about my new project called CiViChon, city in a village, and how it explores the crisis in environment, community, democracy and capitalism and how these are interlaced together to the historical tension between urban and rural culture.

South Korea has hyper-centralized its economy, culture, education so that now, 49.6 % of its national population is living and working in Seoul Metropolitan Area. However, South Korea is not an exception as almost every industrialized nation around the globe, in varying degrees, have super-urbanized themselves into one or few globalized cities. Population, material and wealth of the world has coagulated into fewer and smaller islands with unprecedented prosperity with extreme wealth, thereby drowning the smaller cities, towns and villages under the level of sustainability, pulling them down deeper and deeper into the depth of despair with the weight of debris, waste and pollution that have been dumped at or shipped to or drifted onto them.

While the mega-city now begins to fear that they would soon disappear under the rising sea level, the rest of the world has already sunk long before. By depolarizing vectors of inequality that has taken the wealth, power and knowledge away from the rest of the world under the centrifugal forces of neoliberal economic system in the globalization of free trades, which almost all governments or nation-states have participated, colluded, or were unable to escape from the ruling elites of financial corporations and their unregulated, unlimited and unprecedented production of hundreds of derivatives, insurances and equities that have never existed half a century ago.

Victims are not just shrinking cities of the world exemplified by Detroit, Liverpool, Halle-Neustadt in former East Germany or Ivanovo, Russia, or so many other cities that we already know. But equally shrinking are the forest of small towns and villages around the world that are being emptied like the hill towns in Toscana, Italia or throughout the countryside in South Korea. They are depopulated and economically, in numerous other ways, marginalized and barely kept alive by aging population while under siege by growing numbers of empty homes and abandoned farms that are encroaching in this landscape of attrition, affirming the so-called creative destruction theory of Joseph Schumpeter.

The success of government policies to decentralize urban population have been too few in time and space and the imbalance from inequality in education, economy and culture between urban and rural areas have perpetuated to become normalized now. The industrial and developmental policies that promised a life of prosperity and liberation have not materialized for everyone and



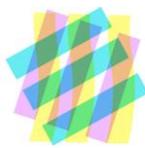
everywhere. The young generation in South Korea is becoming more and more skeptical to the myth of forever growth, as they are not awarded with jobs equal to their investment in higher education. The rising quality of life from its export-based developmental economy that was built and enjoyed by their parents appear to be fading into history. Similarly, the elders are unable to find good work to survive in high-cost living in urban spaces. Signs of disappointment with modernity and city-life are being posted more and more, as the annual national GDP is an abstraction that levels to increased diversions of the “haves” and “haves not”, where the promise of equality of the grand narrative of modernity have failed to deliver. Instead, the growth forever economy is guaranteeing an existential appointment of humanity with the environment as we have degraded or overused 60% of the world’s ecosystem to feed ever-voracious, capricious economy that have grown more than five times since the middle of last century. With the global emission rising by 4% since 1990, our rising GDP is pushing us to extinction rather than to the promised land of prosperity.

The idea of regenerating towns and villages or turning urbanization into ruralization is not simply moving people from urban to rural areas. It is a part of history of a much larger movement or transformation of civilization, and therefore, must be imagined and processed in the same context. The market-driven capitalism is the underlying genome of urbanization and concentration of wealth is probably the exact reason why the governments have been unable to decentralize its citizens. Regardless if they try or not, they were simply overwhelmed by the power of advanced and globalized neoliberal capitalism.

COVID-19, the first of many environmental crises to come, and a pandemic whose lifetime can be longer than ours, is showing us that individual rights can be disastrous. It showed us day by day around the world that us being all connected is not all good at all times. It is making us rethink about being more disconnected and away from the center, or more independent and more sustainable, self-sustainable, as we may have been in our pre-modern era, or have to be in our post-modern future. Why? Because the problem is not COVID or urbanization or global warming or anything else. It is none other than ourselves, because we are producing all these problems that threaten us.

The slogan of “We are all in this together” on COVID-19 capitalist brand of propaganda is in suspect. But not just because the mainstream capitalist corporations have commodified it to market themselves as humane and caring industries, rather it is the identity if “we” that is being pulverized by inequality in infection, death and vaccination between colored and non-colored, rich and poor, and insured and non-insured people. This is further divided by the fact that all nations in the far east wore masks 80% or above during the first four months of COVID-19 while the rest were refusing to wear the, with Germany starting from 0 to reach 60% mask-wearing, United Kingdom to 40%, Australia 20%, Denmark 5%. In the United States only 30% of Republicans always wore masks and 62.5% of Democrats did in June 2020. It’s pretty obvious that we were not all in this together. And the most disappointing was that people wore masks in order to protect themselves from others but not to protect others from themselves. We are all divided and we are all alone, instead.

Many think COVID would decentralize human population. Maybe so, until panic-driven exodus to the countryside expires. But certain remote working, reduction of office spaces and corporate



headquarters would likely stay and become more normalized than ever. Moreover, there were already some signs of reverse migrations taking place in South Korea well before COVID-19. The so-called “qi-nong” or return to farm movement since 1996, has grown to 10,000 - 12,000 households per year between 2011-2015. When combined with “qi-chon”, return to village movement, the rural migration has recorded 300,000 households moving to rural annually between 2013-2015. Although this number seems much too high, the report claims twelfefold increase of “qi-nong”, (return to farm) people from 2002-2015 annually, especially after 2008. The global recession that virtually stopped urban redevelopment projects in South Korea may have contributed to what is being claimed as a major geographical and population phenomena in South Korea. This makes South Korea the right place to start a CiViChon. This name is made from a combination of the first two letters of city (Ci) and village (Vi) and ending in “chon”, a Korean word that typifies a rural place. Its subtitle “city in a village” suggest moving an urban space into a village, suggesting ruralization process where city culture becomes rural, thus reversing urbanization, when rural culture moved into cities.

CiViChon is destined to be a very long project because it is a collaborative project that is oriented toward making a collective and in many ways, the project itself should become a community. It is an imaginary project because reality has proven incapable of solving our past and our future. CiViChon should never become complete because it would rather than remain as a process forever, because in all probability, there will be no single nor concrete solution at the end. CiViChon is a democracy in an anarchic state, willingly isolating between capitalism and socialism in search of something better and new.

Now, I did not have enough time to talk about CiViChon in detail but for further information on CiViChon, you're welcome to visit <https://civichon.com/> . And thank you for your time.