

North korean show flat in... Seoul



During the Seoul Biennial of Architecture and Urbanism, two architects, Calvin Chua of Singapore and Yim Dong-woo of Seoul have built a full-scale mockup of a North Korean apartment. The same to the ones you can find in Pyongyang among the buildings which welcome middle class people like teachers.

It is forbidden for South Koreans, with rare exceptions, to travel to North Korea. So the architects imagined bringing a piece of Pyongyang to Seoul. This project was planned long before the crisis between Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump!

Yim explains that his approach was to show a North Korean apartment like during a pre-sales of real estate projects in Seoul. he also wanted to give an insight into the living conditions and way of life of North Koreans to the South Koreans visitors.



For decades Pyongyang was synonymous of dilapidated buildings...



Kim Jong Un launched a construction program in 2012 to change the face of the capital with brand new buildings built in record time..



A crazy race against the time started and ended with the collapse of a building in May 2014, killing hundreds of people. The price to pay to make Pyongyang the showcase of the country and pamper the Elite with brand new apartments.



The show flat has only three rooms: a living room with an european style dining table overlooking a balcony, a children's room, and a kitchen. No restrooms or bathrooms. 36 square meters in total. The South Korean visitors interviewed admit to being a little surprised by the dull look of the apartment..



An apartment in North Korea. Touristic visits to North Korean apartments are always planned well in advance and the homes shown are built to stick perfectly to propaganda. The North Korean guide kept on telling awkwardly that this house had nothing special: everyone in North Korea is lodged with the same level of luxury.



Mrs Moon fled North Korea in 2004. she was from the Elite class in Pyongyang. She works as guide for the exhibition in Seoul. The apartment is more or less what she kept in memory, but some details dazzle her...



On the walls above the sofa of the exhibition are two frames representing white silhouettes. This is the place where are hung the official portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. They are featured in all North Korean apartments and offices.

Kim Jong Un, the young leader is not yet represented.

But as it is forbidden to reproduce their faces in South Korea, under penalty of serious problems with the National Intelligence Service, the architects had to leave the frames empty.



Also lacking in the show flat is the loudspeaker that can be found in all the Pyongyang houses , and which broadcasts all day long some propaganda speeches to the 2.5 million inhabitants of the capital.



The Seoul apartment (left pic) is furnished and decorated thanks to informations and pictures that the architects have found on the internet. Singaporean Calvin Chua was even able to travel to Pyongyang. Finding the materials like wallpaper was not difficult since most of them are made in China where North Korea has always been supplying itself.



The room on the left is in Seoul exhibition, the one on the right in North Korea, much more basic.

The apartments are distributed to deserving middle-class families, and are partially equipped. Generally a wardrobe and a bed are provided to the newlyweds. They will have to buy the sofa with their own savings. North Koreans of the upper class order furnitures according to their tastes, and have a wide choice. They are even delivered at home.



On the left, the exhibition kitchen. On the right: a bathtub in North Korea. The lack of bathroom in the exhibition is surprising. Architects may have not wished to show the sensitive sides of everyday life in North Korea, including the headache of getting water. Most of the time bathtubs in North Korea are not used to take baths but to store water.



Hello Kitty table set in the Seoul exhibition. In Pyongyang, the elite likes famous brands and luxury goods. The most requested are french perfumes, or South Korean furnitures.



In the remote areas, people use pigs manures to save fuel and to cook in the kitchen.



The content broadcasted by the television set in the exhibition: some beautiful touristic footage of Pyongyang. Watching the North Korean channels in Seoul is forbidden, so South Koreans visitors stay for long minutes to watch the flat screen..



North Koreans only enjoy Russian and Chinese old movies and propaganda reports endlessly. Once again, the upper class avoids this brainwashing thanks to the USB keys and other DVDs that are smuggled and which allow to see the latest American or South Korean blockbusters!



On the left, a North Korean house with a military jacket and a Nike cap. On the right, a bunch of plastic flowers in the exhibition.



A South Korean visitor looks at a North Korean calendar. The pics on the wall are a fantasy of the architects: nobody would dare to pin some half naked men running in their home!



A calendar in a North Korean house, lit by a candle after the power was down like every night at 9pm...

The middle class families have a rechargeable Chinese LED lamp, the rich have now solar panels on their balcony. But the vast majority of poor people in the countryside are still using oil lamps. According to testimonies of the last North Korean defectors, there are always more hours without power than with during a day in Pyongyang!



Different kind of products mostly manufactured in China. The names of the brands make South Korean laugh as they say they have weak marketing.



A small food shop in North Korea. The Elite in Pyongyang can access to supermarket where they can find imported food for huge amounts of money. Only affordable for the rich families.



The show flat also hosts a balcony overlooking the pyramid-shaped Ryugyong Hotel, which seems to be nearing completion after work began in 1986 ...!!



The balcony is often used as an annex kitchen for making smoky Korean barbecue.



One of my North Korean hosts had confessed to me without any shame after a meal in his home and to much glasses of Soju that thanks to the tourists visits, his apartment had been furbished from top to bottom. He had received an electric generator, a fridge, and even three television sets, one for each room! Sometimes too much propaganda kills propaganda ...



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