Ewha Womans University is a manifesto, a paradoxical project that accomplishes all the dimensions of the research Dominique Perrault has consistently pursued for nearly 30 years. Ewha is a manifesto of urban integration that with a single line traces a path, a new street in the continuation of the neighborhood’s circulations, creating a link between the city and the university. The new perspective, the new axis offered to the viewer, underlines the main building of the campus – a neo-Victorian construction housing the offices of the president – recentering the entire reworked layout of a distribution system linking all the buildings and creating an open public place, a focal point strongly enhancing the university’s sense of physical identity. This geographic, topographic approach sets the urban intervention front and center, setting up lines of tension with a few stokes on a map, seemingly erasing the main subject of the program – the construction of a major building containing 70,000 m² of built surface area and 31,000 m² of landscaped spaces, and a complex program comprising not only study and fitness room, libraries, administrative offices and a cafe but also commercial activities including a cinema, a theater, shops as well as parking garages. The Ewha Womens University, with a capacity of 22,000 students, is a university within a university. It is a genuine village, if not a city, bustling with activity and integrating a broad range of operations requiring complex logics of circulation and management of human flows. Contrary to the first impulse of any architect, which is to solidly set the buildings on the ground incorporating the different functions of the programs, Dominique Perrault proposed a solution of effacement privileging openness and interrelationships. Contrary to the habitual impulse of elevation, the architect preferred to develop the dynamics of a different axiality by playing with the naturally rolling landscape of Seoul, by seeking a low point and deliberately sinking the construction into the ground, as opposed to the inevitable enclosure that the construction of enormous volumes at the entrance to the campus would have required. This new geometry, or central horizontal axis, which one journalist has dubbed the “Champs Elysées”, divides the territory, the effective verticality of the building, or rather two buildings, blending in laterally on either side of this street, serving the space in depth, varying gradations of light, and organizing all the circulations on 7 levels interlaced with a complex network of circulation.

Once defined, these axes enable the whole project to enter into movement through a radical reversal, whereby the urban circulations are placed above, on the ground level, while a central path, a pedestrian boulevard, gradually sinks into the slope of the hill all the way to the base of the buildings. Inserted like a guiding organ, this central way gradually descends into the ground, reversing the effect of monumentality and creating the feeling of an architectural promenade along which the building gradually rises, affirming itself as a genuine wall of glass. A negative construction whose facades should normally be on the exterior, in fact encloses us in an interior space open to the sky. The mineral character of the staircase, or rather the grades, analogous to cascades in Renaissance gardens, reinforces the impression of a stage, lending a theatrical aspect to the site, which is further accentuated by the hollowness of this fracture and by the presence of a telluric force, with the overall layout organizing the relation between the ground and the sky. This is symbolized by the well of light Perrault designed to illuminate the collective spaces underground, placing the sky and ground in tension, which is further accentuated by the horizontal glass facades. This is the essence of the paradox in the architecture of Dominique Perrault, who at first glance seems to be imposing the syntactical forms of a refined modernism, with his glass facades regularly punctuated by chromed stiffeners, his precise and ordered interior distributions. And yet, he seizes the vocabulary and means initiated with the radical architecture of the 1970s which was never ever really implemented on an urban scale. Seizing the ground as the expansive domain of architectural practice, hollowing out and burying constructions, he negates the limiting idea of the modern plan, of a tabula rasa, the space limited to a domain of inscription, to an extension open to a simplistic functionalism. Dominique Perrault draws on the research of Richard Long and his experiments with Land Art and development of the perceptual and cognitive dimensions of space, but also on the urban visions of Hans Hollein, Gianni Pettena or even Archizoom, all of whom designed urban projects involving the assimilation of the ground.

When gazing upon Ewha, how could one not be reminded of Michael Heizer’s work, Double Negative (1969) For this work Heizer cut an artificial fracture 500 meters long and 15 meters wide into a mesa in the Nevada desert. The removal of approximately 250,000 tons of rock to create this artificial valley with rectilinear walls constituted a work of art requiring the mutation of an understanding of the parametric limits of space in favor of a complex cognitive understanding inviting viewers to engage with the work, to nurture it with their personal experience. That Dominique Perrault mutated this abstract intervention into a complex architectural ensemble takes nothing away from the perceptive force it provides, offering everyone the possible daily experience of an alternative in terms of the economy of space. In this context architecture comes across as a comprehensive landscape, but not merely one
of a garden designed as a surrounding; rather it is organized through a three-dimensional system of connections, staggered and stacked circulations infinitely increasing the number of vantage points, and in the absence of a simple experience of frontality, assembling them into an impossible distance. When looking at Ewha, one is not facing an object, but rather entering into a kaleidoscopic machine that invites users to multiply their experiences, its vantage points constantly altering the perception of the whole. With the change of seasons, the university presents a perpetually evolving landscape – Ewha blanketed with snow, Ewha bathed in sunshine. The architecture is continuously enriched by a new set of images, a new range of perceptions. At nightfall, the whole building changes its appearance, the glass facades progressively emitting an intense, milky light that invades the valley, defining a sort of liquid fracture, a projection irradiating the entire area. Ewha softly demonstrates that architecture forcefully goes beyond a mere objective presence and that, by extension, the work of the architect is not limited to the elaboration of an object with a more or less structured form. For Dominique Perrault, architecture is always envisaged as a complex arrangement, an always active linking organ, blending the quantitative values and qualitative aspects into a skillfully arranged hierarchy. The material and immaterial are woven into a complex phenomenal domain, an economy in which architecture is constantly renewed like a physical and perceptive event.

Architecture that disappears, erases itself, is no longer an obstacle, a frontier between man and his surroundings, is the contradictory domain of practice Dominique Perrault has dedicated himself to. He has reinvented a material syntax of means and effects for each project, thereby developing an ever expanding phenomenal vocabulary. Ewha seems to be the culmination of a genealogy dating back to the National Library of France (Paris, 1989–1995, a+u 96:10) sinking the central core of a supposed building, leaving it hollowed out with only its four angles protruding, the Olympic Velodrome and Swimming Pool in Berlin (1992–1999, a+u 98:08, 03:04) sinking the buildings into the ground, allowing only their outlines to appear on the surface, enhanced by the visual aspect of metallic mesh. Dominique Perrault seems to master to the extreme these organizations, effects and phenomenologies in which architecture appears to be built and developed through its absence. The architecture, no longer just in the details, blends into the interplay of a complex set of interrelations. It is no longer simply materialized in space but also in time. Open to a chronic temporality, Dominique Perrault is inventing a new geometry, a three-dimensional graph that seems as much to organize the values of use as the more physical, sensitive parameters. He is introducing architecture without qualities, architecture that neither supposes nor imposes a priori any formal or material feature of Dominique Perrault’s work. But it is more an ecology in the basic meaning of the term; one of architecture that develops a milieu, reinvents the structure of man’s interaction with his environment – a sensitive intellectual and perceptual domain. Dominique Perrault constantly asserts that architecture is an envelope, a filter and an activator: “the concept of the envelope summarizes what one could call the zero degree of architecture, its point of incandescence... This envelope can be materialized in a layer, a thickness or a space, slipped between the building and its environment, between the artificial and the natural.”

Translated from French by Gammon Sharpley.

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