

Model City: Pyongyang

Cristiano Bianchi

Kristina Drapi

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North Korea fascinates a world bored with so many bland, decent-enough democracies. Covered by the tubby tyrant Kim Jong-un, the nation's 25 million citizens struggle to make do in a system that's so handcuffed by sanctions, so dysfunctional, and so secretive that words fail. Apparently, it's not easy to rule over a makeshift piece of land sandwiched between communist China and admirably democratic South Korea, especially when democratic values have no meaning.

Kim Jong-un does care about North Korea's international standing in terms of science, technology, military strength, and architecture. After its nearly complete destruction under the US bombings of World War II, the capital city, Pyongyang, was rebuilt under the influence of Soviet-trained architects. This "did not accord with our people's customs and sentiments," according to Kim Jong-Il (Kim Jong-un's father). In his 160-page treatise *On Architecture*, he wrote that an "architect who is convinced that his country and his things are the best will not look upon foreign things or try to copy them."

Game on! From father to son, North Korea has embraced a furious quest to build "monumental structures that will surpass global standards and remain immaculate even in the distant future." So Kim Jong-un wrote in his own manifesto, *For Building a Thriving Nation*.

With two hundred color illustrations, *Model City Pyongyang* takes aim at the most representative and elaborate of the city's buildings and complexes, from experimental housing to sports halls, public buildings, towers, squares, monuments, theaters, and hotels. Its preface by Pico Iyer and essays by experts on Korean architecture help to suss out the many-layered symbolism behind many of the design decisions incorporated into the city's architecture. This project offers the rarest of peeks inside an ideology gone mad.

MATT SUTHERLAND (January / February 2020)

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