

Projecting Presence: The 20th Busan International Film Festival

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This year forms a landmark anniversary for the recently concluded Busan International Film Festival (BIFF), an event which has become synonymous with the dynamic reputation actively cultivated for this port city. In the span of two decades, this annual affair has surpassed its humble origins as a local project initiated by committed cinephiles which, with decentralized state support, organized screenings of curated films across four independent cinemas in Nampo-dong's theater district to emerge as a leading film festival in Asia. Unbeknownst to casual tourists who still associate the BIFF Square in Nampo-dong as its primary venue, most of its scheduled events are now held at Centum City following the inauguration of the iconic Busan Cinema Center complex, designed by acclaimed architecture practice Coop Himmelb(lau) in 2011. The planned relocation was in response to ever-increasing attendance by industry professionals and general cinema-goers alike. Since tourism and the multi-media industry are identified as among the key sectors that could propel the city's regeneration and resuscitate Busan's economy in the current millennium, the former Sujeong airport site was thoroughly redeveloped and relaunched as Centum City, the designated film and

media hub for Busan. Located on the western periphery of Haeundae-gu, this newly constituted sub-centre, like the recent resort-cum-commercial skyline hemming Haeundae's famed beach, conveys an image that is devoid of colonial or industrial vestiges.

At this point, there is no indication that the organizers intend to concentrate all of the BIFF's screenings, gala presentations, private functions, public outreach events and sponsored activities in Busan Cinema Center and the auxiliary theatres in its vicinity. If anything, it remains imperative for BIFF to maintain a visible presence in the city. A superficial approach would be to simply erect eye-catching promotional banners in prominent locations. However, I believe that a more effective way is to directly engage local residents and outstation visitors, i.e. members of the general public who would not necessarily be enthusiastic moviegoers or connected to the media industry, in in-house or sponsored outreach activities, since these are more likely to create an enduring impact. By immersing myself in the festival's array of offerings—attending film screenings in assigned cineplexes across Centum City, Haeundae and Nampo-dong, ticketed gala events at the central site and watching open dialogues featuring renowned filmmakers—I was able to discern four layers of functions (termed as such due to their propensity to overlap), and have differentiated them based on their primary objective, the level of access offered to their respective participants at festival sites and the capacity in which they contribute to Busan's socio-cultural and economic environments.

The first layer caters to the demands of domestic cinephiles and draws in attendance from overseas. Over the years, BIFF has carved itself an international reputation in the film festival circuit by reflecting a strategic regional focus on East Asian and Asian films in its annual program. Its predominantly non-competitive format underscores the cinephile spirit, which its organizers are committed to upholding. This implicit bias is perceptually felt in the registered attendees' informal appropriation of the

central site's visitors' lounge. Within the BIFF Hill building, which houses a cinema resource centre, post-production and film restoration facilities, the ground floor concourse operates a visitors' information booth and help desk for badge holders. Although there are no restrictions imposed on the general public, the space appears to function more as a sanctuary for badge holders who wish to recharge in between screening sessions or conduct work-related meetings in an informal setting.

The second and third layers concern those who have professional reasons for attending BIFF. These are typically closed-door events run as part of the festival, but outside the Busan Cinema Centre's compound. An important aspect of BIFF is the Asian Film Market, which takes place midway into the festival in one of BEXCO's exhibition halls in Centum City: introduced in 2006, the success of this industry-oriented event confirms another pivotal role played by the festival. By hosting a platform for investors, filmmakers and distributors to come together, promising film projects can be matched with suitable investors at the pre-production stage, while the early involvement of other relevant parties ensures that the completed products are placed in an advantageous position when they enter distribution. More recently, there has been greater emphasis on promoting knowledge exchange within the film and media industries; this therefore constitutes the third layer. The academic conference, which forms one half of the BC&F (Busan Conference and Forum), is oriented at deepening critical discourse on cinema. In lieu of the esoteric tangent of the topics covered, the target audience is inevitably niche. On the other hand, discussions addressing emerging trends in the film industry arising from its public forum counterpart resonate more with its target audience, as they offer practicable strategies for media and IT professionals, as well as investors and policy makers. Having witnessed firsthand the heavy reliance on young volunteers of tertiary education age who form the bulk of the event staff, it can also be suggested that this group qualifies as indirect beneficiaries, since the

opportunity to work at BIFF allows them to come in contact with industry professionals and gain practical experience in event management at the same time.

The last and perhaps most important function of BIFF with respect to the city would explain the organizers' efforts to include outreach events and promotional campaigns into its program, aimed at capturing public attention (including participants from the aforementioned layers). Considering the festival's status as one of Busan's premier events, it is unsurprising to find the Busan Cinema Center teeming with visitors on evenings and weekends over this period. Due in part to the current global fascination with Korean popular culture, compounded by people's long-running interest in the glamorous side of show business, the vast stage of the open-air BIFF Theatre—usually open to the public when there are no scheduled events—is an unmissable spot for those eager to vicariously experience the associated allure (Figure 1). One of the most common sights here are groups of friends coming to take photographs of themselves or be photographed standing on the stage.

The concurrent presence of the aforementioned layers of functions presupposes a continuous process of negotiation when planning use of space for different events during the festival. This is best represented in the demarcation of functions within the physical confines of the Busan Cinema Center's compound. Figure 2 illustrates how these zones are adjusted to accommodate various user groups during the opening and closing ceremonies compared with other times of the day in order to manage access of invited guests and ticket holders.

The wide appeal of contemporary festivals such as BIFF is increasingly exploited as a source of revenue for the cities hosting them, and local businesses that benefit from the resultant increase in visitor footfall. Although Busan is already a popular summer holiday destination for South Koreans, the festival's regular slot in October can be read as a conscious effort to stimulate tourism outside peak season because of its

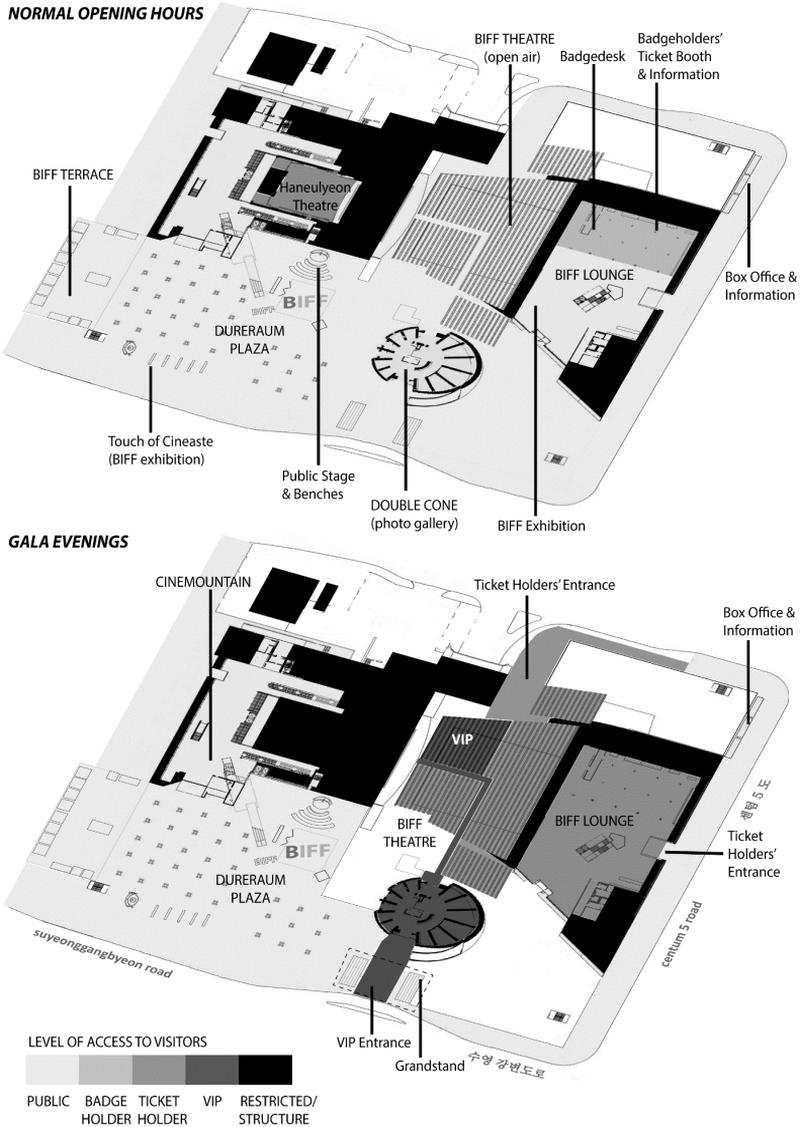


Fig. 1. Floor map showing levels of user access assigned to spaces in Busan Cinema Center at street level during normal operating hours (above), and gala events (below). Illustration by author (November 2015).



Fig. 2. View of open-air BIFF Theatre stage at Busan Cinema Center. Photograph by author (October 2015).

capacity to draw in new visitors, both domestic and foreign. This growing trend towards developing an experience economy market through festival tourism can be rewarding in terms of added social value and urban regeneration. Furthermore, it revises the traditional function of Busan as supporting places of production in lieu of its industrial background. To understand this better, we only need to look at the film festival's multiple venues.

Rather than simply hosting all of the events in one area for convenience's sake, the festival organizers clearly understood the importance of extending BIFF's reach by constructing a visible presence across the city. In addition to Dureräum Plaza outside the Busan Cinema Centre, the pedestrianized strip west of BIFF Square and the middle section of Haeundae Beach were temporarily expropriated to create civic spaces. Such an interventionist approach to promoting a convivial atmosphere in public spaces of the city is aimed at generating localized social and economic exchanges through this collective celebration of "cinema." The use of the distinctive BIFF logo and planned activities that took place in these locations were strategically conceived to construct a tangible connection that was visual as well as thematic across these three sites. Taking centre stage, literally, were the small stages set up in each

venue. As part of the festival's program, acclaimed foreign as well as domestic filmmakers and actors made scheduled appearances on the two stages located in Haeundae district. Although these well-publicized outreach events were arguably devised to attract the lay public, they also offered cinephiles the chance to ask film professionals questions in a relatively informal setting.

With regards to the venues' layout, the secondary sites were designed to reflect the features of their respective settings. Capitalizing on Nampo-dong's large catchment of tourists and shoppers who patronise the neighbourhood's high-street retail shops, trendy little eateries and entertainment outlets, the stage erected at the intersection of BIFF Gwangjang-ro and Junggu-ro during the festival served to reaffirm its reputation as Busan's entertainment district. In addition to footages of previous BIFF gala functions and live streaming of events from other venues on its prominently located screen, live performances from recognisable Korean entertainment figures and music acts were staged intermittently, to the delight of street crowds (Figure 3). Meanwhile, BIFF Village on Haeundae Beach emphasised a casual fun environment befitting its seaside location. The creative use of intermodal containers in



Fig. 3. Temporary stage at BIFF Square in Nampo-dong. Photograph by author (October 2015).



Fig. 4. BIFF Village at Haeundae Beach, Busan. Photograph by author (October 2015).

place of the conventional sponsors' booths added a whimsical touch that thoughtfully referenced Busan's port identity (Figure 4).

Revenues generated over the course of the festival extend beyond commercial ticket sales for the BIFF curated films screened at major cineplexes owned by Lotte, Megabox and CGV to include local businesses supporting festival tourism—namely tourist accommodation operators, individual proprietors running the catering booths in Busan Cinema Center's BIFF Terrace and the authorized food cart sellers sheltered by umbrellas decorated with the BIFF logo in the square. This lateral approach to stimulating local economy is one way of assuring the survival of localities, by augmenting their function as places of consumption. But what I believe this overview of the recent BIFF offers to the experience economy discourse is how it can be relevant to Busan's urban regeneration program. The answer perhaps lies in taking a long-term view on the desired impact to recognize that the objective is no longer about place-making, but how we can tap into the potential of localities imbued with distinct characteristics to create convivial spaces with the belief that this will not only reinvigorate the local community, but introduce economic opportunities in the process.

On a concluding note, I discovered that the secondary BIFF sites, being located outside Centum City, operated from the first to the penultimate day of the festival. For logistical purposes, the festival organizers had to divert their attention and resources to the final evening's grand closing ceremony. Furthermore, council requirements dictated that all structures, advertisement banners and panels pertaining to the festival were to be removed by midnight of the final day. By next morning, only scarce signs that BIFF had ever been held remained, and life resumed on a lazy Sunday morning in Haeundae Beach while the city greeted the wave of weekend shoppers descending on Nampo-dong. My guess is that this ephemeral phenomenon will repeat itself in the following year.

Key References:

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