

Re-Creating the Urban Landscape of Modern Korea

On August 15, 1995, Korea celebrated the 50th anniversary of independence from Imperial Japan, which had occupied Korea from 1910 until 1945. To commemorate its independence, the Korean government decided to demolish the Choson Ch'ongdokpu Cheongsa (CCC) building, the former headquarters of the Japanese governor-general of Korea in Seoul. After the CCC is destroyed, a part of the architectural complex of Kyungbok Palace called Keonjeongjeon, demolished by the Japanese colonizers to build the CCC during the colonial period, will be rebuilt.

The demolition of the CCC will create a new symbolic landscape representing contemporary Korea. The transformation of landscape through construction, demolition, and reconstruction indicates the crucial key to understanding the relationship between a place and a people and a particular culture. The landscape¹ is forged by cultural, political, and ideological formulation which in turn shapes and empowers the current cultural norm of a society. Because landscapes and their meanings are continuously created and transformed for contemporary purposes, they are not merely physical objects which people take for granted. The particular historical, social, and cultural contexts are important factors in understanding the complexity of landscapes.

The demolition of the CCC and rebuilding of Keonjeongjeon create a new landscape for Seoul

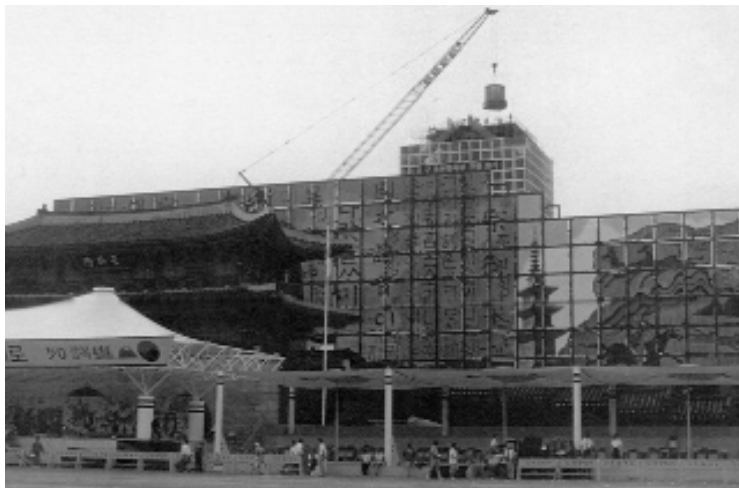
highlighting the social and political issues of contemporary Korea. Several issues to be discussed around the demolition of the CCC are cultural identity politics in relation to the colonial legacy; post-colonialism in contemporary Korea; and the issue of the democratization of Korea arising from the process of decisionmaking. Democratization should not be considered a separate issue because of the fact that cultural politics might ultimately lead in that direction. For example, rebuilding an old palace represents the indigenous high culture which largely alienated the majority of the people in Korea. The idea of democracy adapts and conflicts with pre-modern tradition in Korea.

The search for a national identity has attracted considerable attention in contemporary Korea. The demolition of the CCC and the reconstruction of Keonjeongjeon manifest the search for an acceptable collective memory of the colonial past and the national identity of contemporary Korea. The memory of the colonial experience contains conflicting assessments of Korea. On the one hand the CCC has played a crucial role in the modernization of Korea. Some historians argue that the birth of Korean nationalism was indebted to the Japanese colonial state while nationalist historians are eager to find proof of modernization in pre-colonial Korea.

Japan ended the 518-year rule of the Choson Dynasty in 1910 when it formally annexed Korea. In that year the GGK (Government General of Korea) decided to construct the CCC inside the Kyungbok Palace in downtown Seoul. The initial architect was George de Lalande, a German. Soon Nomura, a Japanese architect, took charge of the design and construction of the building after de Lalande's death in 1914. Construction began in 1916 and ended in 1926. building was constructed in the neo-classical style as a way of demonstrating Japan's equivalence to the European powers. CCC remained the home of the colonial government until Japan surrendered to the U.S. at the end of World War II.

After independence from Japanese imperial rule with the end of World War II, the CCC was seen as a key symbol of the birth of two Koreas and the modern South Korea. From 1945 until 1948 the CCC was the base of the United States Army Military Government in Korea. In 1950, when the

The old landscape of Seoul is reflected in the new. Photo by the author.



Korean War broke out, the CCC was captured by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the official name of the North Korea Troops. Later that year Seoul was retaken by General MacArthur, and the Republic of Korea flag was raised over the CCC. The CCC building carries the physical scars of war that bring to mind the "legacy of fear and insecurity that continues even now to affect the two Koreas both in their internal development and in their relations with each other."²

Following the CCC's history as the scene of authoritarian regimes, military coups and dictatorships in modern Korean politics, the CCC was designated as the National Museum in 1982. In the course of renovation, the design of CCC was tailored to meet the purpose of a museum while preserving the Central Hall and the first meeting room used by the government of modern Korea.

Dissenting opinions were not taken into consideration during the current decisionmaking leading to the demolition of the building. The meaning of the CCC has changed periodically. Many find in the result an anxious attempt to synthesize the fragmented identities of individuals that are prevalent in contemporary Korea. Anti-demolition groups and individuals are opposed to the use of the building as an instrument to legitimize the current government, which, for them, is a disappointment. Possibly the anti-Japanese sentiment which has been inherited since Korea was a colony of Japan prevents people from challenging authoritarian decisions over the demolition of the CCC.

Most would agree that plans to demolish the building symbolize an absence of historical consciousness. Relocation of the building was suggested by those opposed to the idea, but this plan was dropped in the face of stiff resistance. The unwillingness to pay for maintaining and preserving the historic building indicates more than a lack of concern. Concurrent intellectual trends encourage an indigenous cultural identity supportive of demolition, simply because the building represents "foreigners." Thus, the question of whether to demolish the building reflects deeper issues of Korean identity and the future direction of Korean society.

Rescuing individuals from past memory is not easy. The criticism of nationalistic rhetoric may cause unexpected negative consequences in post-colonial societies. The critical perspective on Japan goes along with the anti-national narratives. In this sense, comparative researches are invaluable.

The History of the CCC

- 1928: Opening of the CCC.
- 1945: End of World War II. CCC converted into Capital Hall.
- 1948: The Assembly Hall of Korean Government.

- 1950: Korean War erupts.
- 1953: End of Korean War.
- 1962: Reconstruction and renovation of CCC due to damage from the Korean War.
- 1982: Conversion of the CCC into the Central National Museum of Korea.
- 1986: The opening of the Central National Museum.
- 1995: Decision made to demolish the CCC.

Note

- ¹ Duncan differentiates landscape from environment. "[A] landscape ... is a culturally produced model of how the environment should look. It is, therefore, not merely an environment but a type of arrangement of hills and trees, or towns and houses. Environments become transformed into landscapes as people transform them physically or merely reinterpret them in such a way as to bring the environment in line with a particular landscape model" John Agnew and James Duncan, eds., *The Power of Place: Bringing Together Geographical and Sociological Imaginations* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 186.
- ² Eckert, et al., *Korea Old & New: A History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 346.

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1998 Summer Field School

The 1998 Summer Historic Preservation Field School took place in the historic "Chinatown" area of Honolulu. Continuing the University of Hawai'i's Historic Preservation program's emphasis on the identification and recording of historic urban centers, the field school concentrated on the 12 block area adjacent to Honolulu's downtown. Listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1973, Chinatown includes a significant collection of late-19th- and early-20th-century buildings. A first complete inventory was done, and the students enrolled in the program participated in a design "charette" focussing on new buildings in historic contexts and on revision of existing design guidelines. The program was supervised by the Historic Preservation Program director, Bill Chapman, with the help of historical architect and program graduate Paul Morgan. Dr. Jeff Cody of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (formerly of Cornell) assisted with the survey. Urban designer and landscape architect Peter Drey, from Atlanta, directed the design sequence. The project was sponsored by the University of Hawai'i Summer Session and the Department of American Studies and the Hawai'i Heritage Center. Additional financial support was given by the Hawai'i Foundation for the Humanities.