

DEBATES AND ISSUES

Modernism and Post-colonialism in Korean Architecture

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Introduction

Until recently, modern architecture in Korea was understood simply as a new style which developed in the west during the early twentieth century and spread throughout the world. The functional undecorated cubic form of this architecture was thought to be a universal style representing the spirit of modern technological society. Thus history of modern architecture in Korea was regarded as the process of reception of the western born modern architecture. Underlying here, of course, was the assumption that modernization meant westernization and western modern architecture was a visible symbol of that westernization. Reception of western modern architecture was then an inevitable historical process that Korea had to undergo as an undeveloped, pre-modern and thus, not yet westernized country (Yoon Il-joo 1966; Shin Jae-uk 1978: 130; Kim Jung-dong 1982: 34-47).

Since modern architecture in Korea began with the introduction of western architecture, it was unavoidable that there was a historical rupture between traditional architecture and modern architecture. The main theoretical concern for the historians of modern architecture in Korea was thus how to explain the transition from traditional architecture to modern architecture. For that matter, the western eclectic style of architecture that had been introduced to Korea by foreign powers after the open-door policy in 1876 started a transitional stage. Thereby

it became possible for historians to construct a historical narrative based on the developmental stages of architectural styles from traditional architecture to eclecticism and finally to modern architecture, following the western model (Kim Sung-woo and Song Suk-ki 1998: 165-74).

As it seems already clear, this view tends to see modern architecture from a purely formalist viewpoint. While the history of modern architecture is understood ultimately as the history of stylistic changes, the conditions of modernization and experience of modernity that produced these changes were not taken into consideration. Thus, western style architecture transplanted in Korea was considered part of Korean modern architecture regardless of its relationships to Korean society and people. Even those buildings produced by Japanese architects and engineers during the colonial rule under Japanese control were considered as the valuable inheritance of Korean architecture which paved the way for the development of modern architecture of Korea (Yoon Il-joo 1966: 13; Kim Jung-dong 1982).

Undoubtedly, this position reflects the theory of colonial modernization which argues that despite colonization, Korean society was significantly modernized under Japanese rule. In the architectural field, there seems an underlying belief that the colonial rule, despite the harsh political and economic domination, laid ground for the modernization of Korean architecture by bringing in a formal, technological, institutional and educational basis of modern architecture to Korea. Western eclecticism and modern architecture transplanted to Korea by Japan during colonialism, though neither produced nor possessed by Korean, was used as evidence of the modernization of Korean society and conversely, this view of modern architecture justified and reinforced the idea that Japanese colonial rule contributed to the modernization of Korean society.

Nationalist Theory of Modern Architecture

This view of modern architecture based on the theory of colonial modernization has been criticized under the academic atmosphere of

nationalism since the 1970s. Influenced by the nationalist position appearing in studies on the history of modern Korea, certain of scholars began to question the validity of western style architecture transplanted by foreign powers as a legitimate part of Korean modern architecture. What they focused on was the subjectivity of the modern architecture: that is, who produced it, who possessed it, and for whom was it built (Lee Sang Hun 1984; Kim Hong-sik 1987, 1993). Modern architecture in Korea should be the history of development of architecture for and by Korean people in the first place (that is, *minjok* or *minjung*). From the nationalist point of view, western architecture built under the colonialism cannot be counted as a legitimate part of Korean modern architecture since it had no essential relationship with the modernization of Korean society and people. In most cases they were rather a means of colonial domination, separated from the life of Korean people. The scholars tried instead to find Korean traditional architecture's autonomous process of modernization. Influenced by the historical studies on the socio-economic transformation and rapid urbanization of the Yi Dynasty during the Young Chǒngjo period, they extensively studied *Shirhak* architecture developed at that time and showed that the use of new materials such as brick and the considerable rationalization, specialization, and standardization in the construction process of Suwon walled city, which was strongly influenced by *Shirhak* thinkers like Chǒng Yak-yong, exhibited a certain modernity. *Shirhak* architecture was considered to reflect enlightened thinking and thus, as a nascent movement towards the architecture for people as a new modern subject of history (Kim Hong-sik 1987: 111-136). Following this line of study, the process of modernization of the traditional guild of carpenters and the historical process of their ascendance to modern builders were also examined (Kim Ran-ki 1990). In this light, two-story wooden buildings and traditional houses with brick construction were noticed as an important modern transformation of traditional architecture (Lee Sang Hun 1984; Yang Sang-ho, 1985). Among the western style architecture introduced after the door opening, only those built by Korean government or people, or by Korean national capital or by Korean architects were valued as part of Korean modern architecture (Song Yul 1993).

Meaningful attempts they may be, such lines of studies stopped short of clarifying the characteristics of modernization of Korean architecture. Although it is possible to argue certain aspects of modernity of Korean architecture in these developments, they could not lead to construct a coherent narrative history of modern architecture in Korea, especially of its historical relationship to the development of modern architecture after de-colonization. For that matter, nationalist theory of modern architecture tends to admit the rupture of the historical process. That is, Korean architecture's spontaneous process of modernization was stopped by colonization. The inability to accumulate national capital and the limited accessibility of Koreans to knowledge of modern architecture and engineering after colonization were the main reasons why modernization of Korean architecture could not continue. All the fragmentation in architectural culture afterwards were considered as the consequences of this historical break. Colonization of Korea by Japanese imperialism had then been **blocking** the modernization of Korean architecture rather than having contributed to it (Kim Hong-sik 1987; Lee Sang Hun 1984).

Although it might be an easy tactic to avoid the theoretical difficulties, this cannot explain the reality of modern architecture in Korea and cannot help but simply deny its historical legitimacy. Furthermore, the basic concepts behind the nationalist theory were those derived from the western model of modernization and modern architecture, such as the progression of history based on economic determinism, the concept of people as a new subject of history and the formation of the nation state, the development of new architecture in accordance with the modernization of society, the rationalization of production systems, and the emergence the rational consciousness and so on. By applying the partial concepts of modernization and modern architecture of the west to the Korean architectural situation, this position tacitly admits a Euro-centric concept of modernization and modern architecture, thereby perpetuating cultural dependency on the west,

Postmodern Critique of Modernity and Modern Architecture

It was with the advancement of the post-modern critique of modernity that the western concept of modernization and modern architecture themselves began to be examined critically. At first, the so called post modern architectural discourses which emerged in the late 70's began to criticize the deterministic view of western modernism as a universal style for modern technological society and revived the values of traditional historical styles that modern architecture claimed to have surpassed (Charles Jencks 1976). Post modern discourses soon developed to a critical position questioning the stylistic concept of modern architecture and determinism, and trying to redefine it in relationships with cultural modernity. From this point of view, searching for a stylistic alternative to modern architecture is itself to accept and to repeat the inherited ideology of modernism. Modern architecture should rather be dealt with as a total condition of culture in modern society, responding to the profound industrial, political transformation of the concept of man in relation to the environment (Anthony Vidler 1977:2).

In fact, modern architecture developed in the west was more than a new style. It had a close relationship with the process of modernization and the emergence of modernity in European society. The process of modernization since the eighteenth century included industrialization, urbanization, capitalization, specialization and the division of labor and so on. Modernity, on the other hand, is defined as an awareness of newness by people in the process of the modernization. Although it is not easy to define this whole historical change with simple concepts, modernity can be defined as the emergence of a modern rational subject and its awareness of self and history, to borrow Kant's definition (Kant 1973). Scholars have pointed out that there are two opposing aspects in the experience of modernity. First is the bourgeois rationality which has been a driving force behind the project of enlightenment and the capitalistic development since eighteenth century Europe. What Habermas called the separation of three spheres — political, scientific and moral — was a result of this modernity. On the other hand, aesthetic modernity which was represented in arts from romanticism to

modernist avant-gardes, is a critique and resistance to the process of modernization and the capitalistic rationality (Matei Calinescu 1987).

The development of modern architecture can also be understood as responses within the field of architecture to the process of modernization and to the experience of modernity. In other words, the historical situation that western architecture has faced since the eighteenth century reflects the cultural and institutional condition that the process of modernization had brought about. Modern architecture should then be defined in terms of the modernization of architecture, which responded to the emergence of the modern rational subject and the process of rationalization on one hand, and to the experience of modernity on the other. In the field of architecture, these changes were manifested specifically in such problems as the paradigmatic crisis of architectural language after the collapse of neoclassicism, institutional and technological changes with the development of modern engineering and the modern capitalistic city, and social and ethical issues of architecture for the newly emerging mass public.

First of all, after the development of the modern scientific paradigm and modern technology since the late seventeenth century, the classical paradigm of architecture could not subsist any longer. As architectural styles became relative, the creation of a new style for modern society emerged as an urgent issue in architecture. With the development of modern engineering, architecture was institutionally separated from engineering during the nineteenth century. While engineering developed as a positive science, architecture defined itself as an art of design. With the development of the modern capitalistic city in the process of modernization, architecture gradually lost its grip on the city. Modern metropolis was no longer controlled by architecture but expanded with its own rationality. As modern city planning techniques developed, architecture became gradually separated from the city. The emergence of mass public was a new phenomenon in the modern city. Thus, the design of new civic institutions for the new mass public was a major program of modern architecture and the creation of a new universal language of architecture for a new mass democratic society was a thematic issue in the history of modern architecture. In the early twentieth century, modernist avant-gardes such as constructivism and

productivism had even attempted the abolition of the high culture of the bourgeois through industrial mass culture in order to create new architecture for people.

The concept of modern architecture as a new style for modern society is therefore only a narrow concept which stands for the international architecture of the early twentieth century. Besides international style, there had been many other positions within modern architectural movements. The modern architectural movements, however, while clearly connected with modernist avant-garde movements in arts, did not represent aesthetic modernity as consistently as artistic avant-gardes did. While certain movements had resisted the process of modernization, the mainstream modern movements exhibited the enlightenment rationality envisioning the positivistic utopia of modern technological society. The diverse positions of modern architectural movements themselves reflect diverse attitudes towards the conditions of modernity in Europe. The narrow concept of modern architecture only constitutes a part of the historical continuum of modern architecture. Therefore, it is mistaken to define modern architecture with a few formal concepts; rather, modern architecture should be understood in terms of architectural conditions influenced by the process of modernization and the experience of modernity (Lee Sang Hun 1998).

Modern Architecture in Korea and Cultural Modernity

Under the influence of the post modernist critique of modern architecture, attempts were also made to understand Korean modern architecture in relation with the concept of cultural modernity. However, these attempts invited a more complex set of problems to the definition of modern architecture in Korea. As it seems already clear, one cannot apply the concept of modern architecture developed in Europe as a whole consistently to Korean architectural situation. First of all, there is no clear historical connection between the process of modernization and the experience of modernity in Korea. One could argue a spontaneous process of modernization in Korea in the seventeenth and eighteenth century development of commerce and industry. Yet it is not

easy to find the corresponding experience of modernity. As for the rise of self consciousness of the rational subject, for example, one could mention *Shirhak* thinking of the Young Chŏngjo Period. However, in terms of the experience of modernity in the modern metropolis, one could find its manifestation only in the capitalistic urbanization under the Japanese domination (as in the cases of Lee Sang and Pak Tae-won), or in the characteristic feature of intellectuals of the 1960s during the rapid industrialization of Korea (as in the cases of Kim Su-young and Ch'oe In-hun). Whatever the case, however, it is hard to find a modern artistic avant-garde movements with resistant modernity as were found in the western modernity (for the distorted form of urbanization and modernity see Ko Sŏk-ju 1996).

In terms of the rationalization of architectural production one could certainly argue the beginning of the modern back to *Shirhak* architecture during the Young Chŏngjo period. However, this process of partial modernization in Korean architecture did not create the conditions of modernity which had affected the development of modern architectural movements in Europe. Although the architecture of *Shirhak* achieved rationalization up to certain point, it was basically medieval architecture. The rationalization and modern pragmatic thinking that *Shirhak* exhibited did not put the traditional architectural paradigm into crisis. The traditional wooden architectural style still persisted with a little formal change. In other words, there was no crisis in the traditional form of architecture and the explosion of language, and the subsequent search for a new modern architecture. In terms of the crisis of traditional architectural language, the beginning of modern architecture in Korea in the western sense, should be located in the introduction of western style architecture and urban expansion by Japan after the colonization. Even this crisis was created by force, rather than from within, and thus, it could not lead to the self conscious movement for the search for a new style. Furthermore, the modern functional style of international architecture was imported only after 1930 without any relationship to a spontaneous attempt to overcome the anachronism of traditional or eclectic architecture.

In terms of institutional changes and the professionalization of architecture, it may be said that Korea is not yet in a full fledged state

of modernity. That is, architecture in Korea had never been institutionalized as an art of design and the professionalism of an architect was not put into practice until recently. The concept of western modern architecture imported through Japan was closer to engineering than to architecture proper. The reason for this was that in the first place Japan received western architecture as advanced engineering within the frame of their traditional concept of architecture. But in Japan the concept of architecture as an art was also introduced and subsequently, there were serious theoretical debates between two factions of architectural avant-gardes regarding the definition of architecture (for example, Theory of architecture as fine art (1894); Theory of architecture as non art (1915); Secession movement and International architects (1920) and so on). However, in Korea there has not been a self conscious effort to receive the western concept of architecture and architecture was practiced mainly as engineering rather than as art of design (it was in 1937 that the term architectural art was first appeared in Korea, Kim Jung-dong 1982). Thus an institutional boundary between architecture and engineering has not been clearly set and a general perception still tends to see architecture as engineering in Korea. This situation creates communicative problems between the two professions. In modern Europe, with the specialization of the two professions, there has been not only rivalry between them but also mutual effort to communicate with each other, building up a cultural system of cooperation in the process of building. In Korea, however, the concept of architecture as an art of design was introduced later without the cultural background for efficient cooperation with engineering in the process of building. This created the fragmentation of specialized fields of architecture as it is now in Korea.

The same is true of the relationship between architecture and the city. In the west, with the development of modern city planning techniques, architectural avant-gardes tried to adjust themselves to the new modern metropolitan condition, developing many design ideas, tactics and principles to bridge the gap between them (e. g. CIAM, Team X). However, in Korea western architecture was transplanted in isolation without relationships with urban planning disciplines. While the modernization of the city was rapidly under way under colonialism, the

main purpose of which was to provide an efficient means of transforming traditional city structure for colonial exploitation, city planning techniques were introduced as civil engineering without reference to architecture. Thus the separation between architecture and the city in Korea became more serious and continues to be a problem to the present. From this point of view, it may be said that while the economic modernization of Korea was carried out, the cultural or institutional modernization in fields like architecture and city planning is not yet in practice.

As discussed earlier, the development of western modern architecture had a close relationship with the emergence of public mass. However, in Korea there existed no modern avant-garde which had a desire for new architecture for the public mass. In terms of an ethic of modern architecture to resolve the social and environmental issues of modern society, it can be said that modern architecture in Korea is not yet in place.

Modern architecture in Korea, therefore, cannot be understood by directly applying western concepts of modern architecture to the situation of Korea. From the point of view of western modern architecture, modern architecture in Korea is not only lagging behind the west but is also inconsistent, discontinuous and fragmented. All the revisionist studies after 1990, which tried to interpret Korean modern architecture in terms of cultural modernity were trapped in these kinds of difficulties (Jung Tae-yong 1994; Kim Il-hyun 1994). How could then we define the characteristics of modern architecture in Korea?

Modern Architecture and Post-colonialism

The recent development of post modern critiques of modernity and modernization highlighted the fact that the process of modernization is not monolithic. The process of modernization started from the west and proceeded globally. But, the modernization of non-western countries is not just self adaptation to the Euro-centric process of modernization. But rather, each country has a history of its own process of transformation and therefore, there are many courses of modernization

besides that of the west (Gi Wook Shin and Michael Robinson 1999: 9-10). Then, the modernity of Korea is not simply the a copy of the western model, but has its own characteristics distinguished from the west. If modern architecture in Korea has its own characteristics distinguished from the western process, how could it be defined? This question leads to that of architecture which is modern but not western, which is the quint-essential issue of post colonialism in Korean modern architecture.

Since the late 1970s, scholars have already tried to interpret modernity of traditional architecture as a means of finding the uniqueness of Korean architecture distinguished from western modern architecture. However, in most cases, their efforts were confined to applying certain spatial and formal concepts developed in western modern architecture such as transparency and juxtaposition to traditional architecture (The pioneer of this line of study is Ahn Young-bae 1978). However, these are the concepts of western modern architecture simply applied to Korean traditional architecture, which is equivalent to admitting the universality of Western modern architecture. That is, it is an invention of western modernity in Korean architecture (Lee Sang Hun 2002).

After the 1990s, especially under the influence of post colonial discourses, there has been much effort to find the Korean-ness of Korean modern architecture as an expression of non-western modernity which goes beyond the formal norms of western modern architecture. In general, these attempts tend to argue for the spiritualism of the traditional paradigm of Korean architecture as opposed to the materialism of western modern architecture (e.g. 4.3 Group). In other words, they claim that the essence of Korean architecture lies in certain spiritual characteristics, which should be found and practiced in order to overcome the limit of materialism of western modern architecture. However this position reproduces a binary opposition between East and West, which is itself a product of representation of western modernity. Therefore the spiritualism also concedes the western concept of modernity and is imprisoned in the colonialism of consciousness in the sense that it reproduces the dominating ideology of western modernity through spontaneous agreement and respect for the dominating power (Lee Jong-gun 1995).

As I discussed above, the collapse of the traditional architectural paradigm and the search for a new architectural norm for modern society did not proceed spontaneously but started with the introduction of western style architecture by foreign powers. That is, the modernization of Korean architecture was forced by colonialism. Therefore it is important to note that the modernity of Korean architecture cannot be separated from the issue of (post) colonialism in the first place.

I already mentioned that since the 1980's the colonialism of modern architecture, or forced characteristics of architectural modernity in Korea have been taken seriously by scholars imbued with nationalist ideology. They tried to overcome the colonialism by finding out traces of spontaneous development of Korean traditional architecture. However, by focusing on the application of partial concepts of western modernization and modern architecture to the Korean situation, they universalized the principles of western modernization and modern architecture, thereby reproducing a Euro-centric concept of modernization and modernity. In terms of post-colonialism, this attitude contains a serious defect.

Certain scholars argue that in order to overcome the colonialism in Korean architecture we should find out common principles beyond the East and West in Korean traditional architecture. In other words, by uncovering the universal characteristics within Korean architecture we could overcome the cultural dependency on western modernism (Yim Suk-jae 1995, 1999). However, this argument neglects the fact that the claimed universal principles of architecture beyond East and West are already within the concept of western modern architecture dominating the contemporary world. This position simply obliterates the paradigmatic difference of architecture between East and West, which has long historical and cultural roots and thus, is being trapped in the same error of formalism as the theory of modern architecture based on colonial modernization.

Some argue, on the contrary, that we could overcome colonialism by discovering more fundamental differences of Korean architecture from Western ones other than superficial formal differences and turning the course of our architecture towards a completely different track (Lee Jong-gun 1999). However, this position cannot go beyond the

binary opposition between East and West, which holds the characteristic of the western modernity and thus reinforces the dominance of western concepts of modernity with the West as the center. This position also poses a fundamental epistemological question that it is possible to approach the essence of things without depending on the dominating conceptual frames of contemporary society; that is, is it possible to approach the essence of Korean architecture without reference to the existing conceptual framework of western architecture?

In order to overcome colonialism, it is necessary to go beyond the framework of center and periphery and for a culture of modernity in Korea to stand as a center on its own foot. However, how is it possible is not certain. Is it really possible to attain the autonomy and the centrality of one's own culture? Is it possible to recover the identity of one's own culture beyond the epistemological frame of Western modernity? In this regard, recent post-structuralist philosophy leveled up post colonial discourses on modernity by criticizing the epistemological grounds of Euro-centric modernity which are imbedded in such concepts as Modern rational subject, grand theory and determinism, and Representation. Here we need to notice that the colonialism of western modernity is not only a politico-economic process but also the issue of cultural representation. That is, modernity involves the question of who represents who in what way. Identity of the other cannot be defined by itself since, as Lacan explained, the identity of the self is formed by the mirror image. The identity of the East is thus already implying the marginality represented in the process of modernization by the West as the center. Even the concept of *minjok* or *minjung* which is behind the nationalist theory of architecture is one that is constructed as a mirror image rather than something fundamental (Gi Wook shin and Michael Robinson 1999: 15-16).

As I mentioned earlier, the rational subject which is at the heart of western modernity implies domination of the other. While the instrumental reason of the modern subject dominates nature on the one hand, it also sets out the strategy of dominating other nations and other races on the other. Thus western modernity presupposes the colonization of the non-western worlds as the other of the west and thus, the process of modernity itself cannot not be separated from that of the

process of colonialization. In other words, modernity is a comprehensive process including modernization of both the west and colonial worlds. The identity of western modernity is then rightly defined only in relationship with the modernity of colonial worlds. By the same token the fragmented and discontinued characteristics of modernity of the post colonial world is itself part of authentic modernity (Colonial Modernity, Tani Barlow 1997: 1-7). The authentic modernity is then neither a western concept nor an eastern one. Neither the diagnosis that Korea was not modernized completely since she was colonized in the middle of a spontaneous process of modernization, nor the rather vague hope that Korea can accomplish authentic modernization after overcoming colonialism, is a realistic alternative. To complete the process of modernity and to overcome the limits of western modernity are directly connected with the post colonialism of non-western countries.

It is simply impossible to go outside the frame of western modernity dominating the contemporary world since the language, concepts and institutions we are practicing socially now are the products of western modernity. Therefore, what is crucial in post colonial culture is not to try to recover the subjectivity of one's own culture or its centerness, since it is uncritical reception of the western representation of modernity, but to reflect back on the conflicts and contradictions within the western modernity. This is ultimately to deconstruct the center of western modernity, which means the beginning of post-modernity.

Diversity of modernities that post colonial theory argues for does not simply mean the multiplication of centers against the western center. There is no change in the fact that modernization and modernity started from the West and proceeded globally, appropriating and colonizing others. Therefore, naive claims for the multi-centeredness of the process of modernization only confirm the course of appropriation of others by the West. Multi-centeredness in an authentic sense, is meaningful only when the center itself dissolves.

At this point, I would like to suggest a critical position to view modern architecture in Korea, which aims at overcoming the conception of western centered modernity and contributing to the post colonialism of Korean modern architecture at the same time. Western modern archi-

ecture is not universal architecture but one that was developed in the West. Reyner Banham had expressed a similar idea, saying that the western concept of Architecture is only one out of dozens of ways of approaching the design of buildings but it just happens to be the one which Western civilization still grants cultural hegemony to dominate the world (Martin Pawley 1989: X). In Korea, there was no western concept of architecture. However, this does not mean that Korea had no architecture. There was not only an art of building but also theories about it. It is just that the architecture that we practice now is a western concept dominating the contemporary world. If this is the case, the historical process of modern architecture in Korea could be said to be the result of an encounter between western modern architecture and traditional architecture, western architectural institutions being overlapped upon the traditional architectural situation. Thus, it was inevitable that Korean modern architecture is distorted and fragmented compared with the western one. Critical discourses on modern architecture in Korea should not try to create our identity (tradition or invention of modernity in tradition) given to us as the other of the west by applying western concepts of modern architecture, but try to unearth the differences and metamorphosis beyond the dominant paradigm of representation in this historical process of modern architecture. It is an attempt to find the cracks within the dominant history of modern architecture to uncover the gaps in the process of reception of western modern architecture in colonial worlds, rather than to apply partial concepts of western modernity and to generalize them or to simply deny them. Thus, critical history is describing partial cracks in the history instead of trying to write an apparently homogeneous and wholistic picture of history. For example, the disappearance of the utopian socialist vision in modern architecture is a dominant ideology of authoritarian governments in the non-western world, transformation of the idea of high rise housing from the modern socialist utopia like *ville residue* and *unite d'habitation* to a brutal means of real estate capitals appropriation of land and so on. It is to focus on the cracks within the history of western architecture which appears compact, universal, and homogeneous. Critical history which questions the apparently homogeneous, compact, and universal concept of western modern architecture

is to deal with the task of post-colonialism, problematizing the issue of who represents whom. By doing this, it would become possible to overcome colonialism in Korean modern architectural discourses and to correct the western centered concept of modernity.

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