Thoughtful Interruptions

Discovering a Unique Brand of Korean Modernism

by Robert Watkins

One of the first things visitors to Korea will notice is how busy everyone seems. This is not only evident in the frenetic pace of people's lives but it is also manifest in the environment. Industry thrives wherever you look. On any major thoroughfare virtually every street level store is occupied by businesses. Sometimes stores are even shoehorned into the narrow space between two buildings. Homes and businesses are stacked on top of each other and high rise apartments seem to grow like weeds. Vacant lots are never vacant, just put to other uses such as parking spaces or sites for temporary businesses. In both urban and rural areas small patches of land are considered potential vegetable gardens. When renting a brick and mortar store is prohibited by cost many Koreans make their living selling goods on sidewalks, from the backs of trucks or with mobile carts. This was the case when I first came to Korea in 1990, and these examples of Korean ingenuity and industry have shown no signs of letting up in the past eight years during which I have lived here.

In light of the country's tumultuous history it is easy to understand why even today Koreans feel the need to make up lost time by maximizing time and space, but the nation as a whole has long surpassed the need to struggle for mere survival or even jostle for global recognition. It seems that more and more Koreans are finding time to enjoy the fruits of their labor. This new found reserve translates into more time spent on enhancing the visual appeal of their surroundings. Koreans apply a particular sense of order and uniformity to their environment. In my opinion this sense of uniformity is evidence that the country is still synthesizing numerous styles in search of its own distinct voice, no doubt a symptom of the growing pains associated with any rapidly developing nation.

After only a few days in Seoul on his first visit to Korea my older brother matter-of-factly stated that “Korea does big cities well.” This comment was made atop the Seoul Tower in Namsan Park overlooking the cityscape. It followed a road trip that encompassed much of the Korean countryside, historical sites, temples, a folk village and stops in Daejeon and Busan. My brother’s experiences in many of the world’s major cities and his limited experience of Korea afforded him a unique albeit generalized perspective. He could see the forest in spite of the trees. Doing a big city well implies that the disparate parts of the city work effectively as a whole in spite of its vast size. Seoul and other large cities in Korea are peerless with regards to many modern conveniences but are sometimes wanting in terms of the natural landscape. Although scenic areas exist, they often seem kept at bay by the built environment. Pocket parks hemmed in by tall buildings seem like their only function is to facilitate exercise equipment. Other parks suffer from being too manicured and overly designed. These may be cordoned off within historical sites or squirreled away within the confines of exclusive apartment complexes. What Seoul lacks in natural beauty, however, is more than made up for by the abundance of human nature. It is visible in the people, the multitude of interactions between them and in the ways they try to rediscover what they feel is missing in their lives.

Korea as a whole seems to be making meaningful steps toward reconnecting with the natural environment, a vital part of the country’s history and culture. This interest in nature is apparent on a small scale in the preponderance of holistic remedies, the prevalence of potted plants in homes and small businesses and in the popularity of outdoor activities like hiking and mountain biking. Some attempts to reconnect with nature appear in more subtle ways such as the jagged lines tracing the tops of apartment buildings built at different elevations in order to mimic the rise and fall of the hills which form their backdrop (see Figure 1). On a larger scale public works projects like the Ch’ŏnggye Ch’ŏn and Gwanhwamun Square or the

sustainable architecture of city hall bear witness to Korea's pride in its heritage and a desire to be on the forefront of ecological progress. These and other examples prove that Koreans are applying the same diligence that made them an economic power to their stewardship of the environment, but the speed at which these advancements are made comes with some caveats.

Many efforts to preserve the city's natural heritage seem bland and ill conceived, especially when compared with the numerous examples of innovative contemporary architecture. The grounds surrounding buildings often represent lost opportunities because nature is only given half a chance to thrive. Hillsides of equally sized granite blocks and sporadically planted azaleas are all too ubiquitous. Narrow containers filled with an uninspired variety of plantings grace many large structures that seem to begrudge nature's minor encroachment. These attempts look more like afterthoughts than thoughtful designs begun in the planning stages and intended to complement the architecture. Uniform solutions like these ignore the complexity of the problems facing growing cities and are plain lazy.

A unique aspect of traditional Korean architecture seems to be its adaptation to the natural landscape. When planning a complex of buildings architects endowed individual structures with scenic views by staggering them at different elevations on a hillside. The same architects took care not to obstruct the sightlines along pathways. The desire to bend one's will to nature rather than the other way around is also evident in the manner in which traditional Korean architects approached the foundation. In the past architects often fashioned a building to suit the incline of the site by differentiating the elevation of pillars on which the structure stands rather than leveling the site and disturbing the continuity of the landscape. Today one is lucky to have an apartment looking out on a hillside. It is not for lack of vistas but the demands on limited space that most apartment occupants are forced to look out upon another row of apartments. Planners seem all too eager to stamp the most recent land

development with the pattern of the last space saving apartment complex. At a time when Korea can afford to be introspective about its growth and development it seems regrettable that more architects and designers don't look to the richness of their shared past for inspiration.

The charm of traditional Korean architecture and gardens, like many products of the country's artisans, rests in their consideration of what it means to be human. I recall reading the words of a Japanese ceramicist who lauded the way traditional Korean potters of tea ware embraced the flaws and irregularities that occur naturally during the process of creation. A fingerprint left in the glaze, an irregular pattern, or an asymmetrical blotch all serve to connect the person drinking tea with the maker and hopefully remind them of their humanity by virtue of the cup's unique imperfection (see Figure 2). Creating moments of thoughtful meditation is a means of intentionally disrupting the pace of life and seems to be the point behind drinking tea. Deliberate interruptions like this help to yield aesthetic experiences and promote an awareness of one's individuality. This tradition of looking inward is not the same as looking backward and it is apparent in contemporary architecture.

Many modern buildings I have experienced transmit a sense of contemplativeness like that found in nature and in traditional architecture. While teaching at Pai Chai University I have noticed examples of spaces that reproduce this mindfulness in unique ways. Yu-gôl (유걸) designed the International Exchanges Hall (국제교류관) as well as three other structures on the campus. The International Exchanges Hall utilizes steel pillars to support a large concrete slab on the interior and the Appenzeller Memorial Hall boasts a similar element in the form of its wedge shaped roof. These are both trapezoidal shapes and are suspended high with an incline that points heavenward toward the viewer. It may be a stretch to say that these resemble the gently upturned tile roofs common in traditional Korean

structures but, like these roofs, they direct our sight upwards and serve to differentiate the buildings from others as trademark elements of the architect's designs. Complex wooden pillars buttress the roofs of traditional homes and temples (see Figure 3). Their diverse forms and permutations are unique to Korea. In the International Exchanges Hall a fantastic array of steel supports a glass ceiling in close proximity to the pillars supporting the aforementioned concrete slab (see Figure 4). These introduce a repetition and complexity similar to that found in the eaves of a traditional structure. Half of the building is submerged in the hillside and covered with grassy slopes with different degrees of incline. An angular structure in the rear and the spaces below the windows on the side facing inward are all clad in wooden panels. A small bed of rocks and an understated rock path through the building's lawn constitute a minimalist garden opposite the wood clad windows. Visitors to this space can enjoy eavesdropping on the mute conversation between these natural elements. The building succeeds by juxtaposing the natural and artificial to create a unique space where static and dynamic elements complement each other.

In the university's Art Hall (예술관) designed by architect Byoung Soo Cho (조병수) there is a central courtyard that for me reproduces the sensation of looking up from the floor of a valley. It faintly echoes the enclosed courtyards found in traditional Korean homes in the way it is bordered on all four sides. The structures which enfold this space are lined with windows that look out upon a large staircase. This staircase is made from perforated steel and contains irregular steps and volumes that prevent the person who descends it from mindlessly following a straight course, the path of least resistance (see Figure 5). By creating these obstacles the architect acts like the potter who uses irregularity to remind people that conscious navigation offers a greater reward than blind repetition. The volumes that seem to emerge happenstance along the staircase bring to mind granite boulders situated defiantly in the course of a cascading river (see Figure 6). On the outside the Art Hall

resembles a modern fortress replete with arrow slits, but once you penetrate the exterior you find a sun drenched inner sanctum. The staircase is not well traversed, thus amplifying its serenity, which is comparable to that of a Japanese Zen garden in which rock islands dot the undulating waves of a silent pebble sea.

Uniformity itself is not necessarily problematic. In fact, without some homogeneity any interruption would become imperceptible and thus purposeless. Several years ago I noticed that some districts in Seoul began enforcing a building code that regulates the size and composition of signage. Since then I have seen some buildings in Daejeon follow suit. For someone sensitive to visual stimuli, like me, this relatively small change was incredibly refreshing. It effectively cut away the clutter of signs that compete for attention and choke the life from building façades. Because signs differ in color, design and typography each regulated size sign is no less apparent than before. They are actually easier to see. Within a uniform system like this individuality becomes an asset because it allows signs to differentiate themselves from the rest. This raises an interesting question for contemporary architects: when the last boxy structure built by the old guard is razed and modern buildings cover the city what will distinguish your structure from the rest?

I do not mean to suggest that modern architecture must exhibit obvious or even subtle references to traditional architecture in order to stand out in a crowd, nor do I suggest that architects should always draw inspiration from their country's past. Cultural identity may play a productive part in a building's genesis. The aesthetics of traditional Korean crafts, architecture, music and the visual arts are vital resources for designers who endeavor to create work with a meaningful connection to their country's unique character. I feel it is more important for the architect or designer to draw upon the spirit of place found in traditional spaces rather than make a direct visual connection. The term modernism evolved to distinguish an era and its cultural products from those of the past while establishing new

criteria with which to judge those products. This process of differentiation need not constitute a clean break with the past nor with nature. Introducing momentary pauses in modernism's inexorable and uniform march toward the future may help Korea give voice to those characteristics which lend the country its unique charm. By doing so, the country's new artisans can dye the fabric of life in the modern metropolis with their own unique colors and patterns.

Figure 1. A typical skyline in suburban South Korea.

Figure 2. An example of Korean ceramic tea ware.

Figure 3. An example of eaves on a traditional Korean structure.

Figure 4. Interior view of the International Exchanges Hall (국제교류관) at Pai Chai University by architect 유걸.

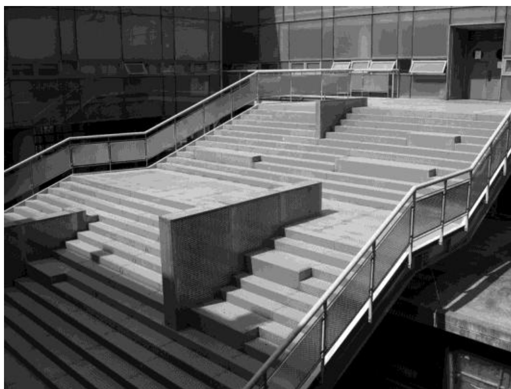

Figure 5. A staircase in the Art Hall (예술관) at Pai Chai University by architect Byoung Soo Cho (조병수).

Figure 6. A river valley in Daejeon, South Korea.