

Urban Parks Movement and Park Culture in Contemporary Korean Cities

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Introduction: Park Movements in Korean Cities

Park culture was imported from Western countries in the late 19th century. In the age of Japanese imperialism, Gil-Joon Yoo, one of intellectual leaders in the independence movement, introduced several urban parks in Europe and America in his writing called *Seoyookeonmun*. Many social leaders in the Independence Association at that time regarded the park as a civilizing institution of modern industrial cities and as a social enlightenment agency. In 1896, Jae-Phil Seo, who was a social leader and founder of the Independence Association, maintained the need of building urban parks in order to improve sanitary conditions and to upgrade the urban landscape. Eventually, they built the Independence Park in the city of Seoul based on voluntary donations. Even though the park was not fully realized as it was originally intended, it showed the citizens a new way of urban life. It also gave an impetus to mobilize urban park building from that point forward.

Almost one century later, park making in Korean cities is now quite prevalent. Many politicians and mayors attempted to build more green space in their cities. Park and open space issues often are regarded as a top priority in civic policy making. Reacting to citizens' desires and needs, park building is underway in the exiting cities by transforming industrial sites such as factories, railways, garbage sites, and military bases into green space. Recently, in the case of new towns such as Pangyo, Paju, and Kimpo, large urban parks were being planned as a major public space through a series of design competitions. In 2007, there was an international design competition for Central Open Space in Multi-functional Administrative City. It was a meaningful event because many international designers and firms joined in the competition and the size of the park was so huge - roughly two times that of Central Park in New York. Another challenging project is waiting for us. Yongsan military base in the center of Seoul will be transformed into an urban park in the near future. The international idea competition for Yongsan Park will be held in 2008-2009.

Constructing urban parks has been a critical issue in city politics and policy agenda. People's perception toward parks and green space has been significantly changed in that they perform a critical role in upgrading the quality of life. It is also used as one of strategies for city marketing as exemplified in Cheongyeoncheon linear park, as it was a successful urban project to restore the waterway in the core of the city by demolishing the intercity highway.

In this essay, the park movement in Korean during the last few decades will be portrayed. Even though it was imported from Western culture, park culture has been successfully incorporated in the Korean way of urban life. The story of urban parks in Seoul city will be briefly sketched. How were urban parks constructed in the early stage in the late 19th century? How have urban parks been transformed during the 20th century? In the course of building urban parks, popular urban parks in other countries have been used as a role model. There have been cultural differences between western park culture and Korean cases. And sometimes it was successfully adapted in the urban context through the process of localization. I will explain in detail some cases of park design and the way of using park space. Even though it was imported from Western countries, what is the significant contribution in global park culture? Finally, the unique park culture in Korean cities will be discussed.

Transformation of Urban Parks in Seoul City

The city of Seoul has a long history dating back to Goryeo Dynasty. At that time, the city was called Namkyung and was renowned for its beautiful natural settings. Seoul had also been the capital city of the Joseon Dynasty since 1392. As the site selection was based on Korean feng-shui, the main core of the city was regarded as the ideal place for human settlement. Rugged mountains and winding rivers and streams are special elements of cityscape in Korea. As beautiful landscape was kept during the Joseon Dynasty, there seemed to be a reciprocal coexistence between man and nature in inhabiting the land.

Before importing urban parks to the city, there was nothing comparable to a park within the city boundaries. However, mountain hiking and visiting the valleys and spending time in the streams were popular leisure activities corresponding to park going culture in Western society. H.B.Hulbert, a delegate from the US government, commented on the Korean way of leisure activities in his book in *The Passing of Korea* (1896) saying that "Korea has no notion of park or other places of public ornament or recreation, and yet they are fond of wandering about hills finding picturesque views and enjoying the beauty of nature." As mountains and valleys are widely scattered within the city, the citizens have easy access to the natural environment. There were scarcely need of inventing urban parks in the city before the rapid urbanization in the late 19th century.

Tapgol Park (once called as Pagoda Park) which was designed by the English engineer John Mcleary Brown was made in 1897 at the old site of Wongaksa, a former Buddhist temple. The park design as a mixture of traditional elements and imported ones was difficult to categorize but it seemed to be loosely modeled after Western style urban parks. The park was regarded as a major open space and a place for public gathering. As the park was understood

as a symbolic place for civic virtue and democracy, it was used as a main gathering place for the independence movement in 1919.

In the early 20th century, park making was used as a negative way to demolish the sense of place during the Japanese occupation of Korea. It was a very extraordinary case in the history of parks in the world. From 1909 to 1912, a zoo, botanical gardens and a museum were added in Changkyung-gung (palace). The intention was to change the sacred place to merely an outdoor pleasure garden and to downgrade the royal palace by clearing away the existing buildings and by distorting the spatial structure. Japanese cherry blossom trees were planted in the palace and a festival was initiated, which was a popular leisure activity until the 1980s. Other sacred places such as Jangchung-dan and Sajik-dan were changed to public parks. Constructing public parks in Japanese imperialism was to convert the sacred place to a leisure ground for the common citizen. Caring for the citizen was often used as disguised rhetoric to destroy the spirit of Korean culture embedded in the place. It drastically contrasts the cases in England and European countries, where several royal palaces were converted to public parks by voluntary acts.

Up to the 1970s, park making was not regarded as a serious endeavor because Korean society as an underdevelopment country was driven to economic development. In 1973, the legal system for urban parks was established and the institutional support systems to construct public parks were prepared. Urban parks such as Children's Grand Park and Seosomun Park were planned as a tool of urban planning and were open to the public. In the 1980s, the '86 Asian Games and '88 Olympic Games provided the impetus to upgrade the park and open space system. New urban parks such as Asian park and Olympic park were made. In the 1990s, the type of urban parks such as ecological parks, cultural parks and pocket parks were diversified and park making became popular. The local government was empowered by adopting self governing rule in 1996. Since then, the quality of urban life came to be one of critical issues in urban policy. Since 2000, there have been rising concerns about the environmental problems and sustainable issues. The value of urban parks has been significantly increased. Due to the industrial restructuring of the city, new kinds of urban space such as landfills, factory sites, and water purification facilities were transformed into diverse parks. Seonyundo Park and Haneul Park are those kinds of parks, which are now incorporated into new types of public leisure space.

Transfer and Localization: Learning from Foreign Models in Park Design and Management

Public parks seem to be indispensable in contemporary urban life. They exist through relentless negotiations of transferring foreign models into Korean settings. Participants in

planning and design often discuss the possibilities and limitations of knowledge transfer. Some people argue that they can learn from their own experience and feel they should not copy. Others maintain that they can learn from the practices of foreign settings. This inherent dilemma of learning from a foreign setting has been embedded in the history of urban parks in Korea.

Foreign model syndrome was quite dominant in the case of park design and planning. In 1996, there was a park design competition for Youido Park. This competition showed that the typical phenomenon was to adapt foreign precedents in the park design. Many fragments of foreign parks could be found in various park competition proposals. Green fields and meandering paths in the Olmstedian park style were prevalent in several park plans. And in several design proposals, we could see the concept of imitating repetitive structures like folly in La Villette Park and the diagonal axis and thematic gardens of Citroen Park. On the other hand, several design proposals kept their concern on traditional design principles and elements such as feng-shui and yin-yang without contemporary interpretation.

Seonyudo Park is one of the best examples in the history of urban parks in Korea in terms of the planning idea and design quality. It received the design merit award from the American Society of Landscape Architecture in 2004. We could find diverse design variations in Seonyudo Park design competition plans. Some of them were to restore the forgotten hill within the site; the other was to create a fantastic world in unique way. The winning design proposal successfully adapted foreign models into a local setting. Various foreign models such as Gas Works Park, and Duisburg Nord Park were utilized as references. Rather than imitating the form and structure of the park in itself, the idea of transfiguring the old structure into a new one with new functions was adopted. Despite learning from foreign models, there are original elements of park design in the case of Seonyudo Park.

In 2005, Seoul Forest Park was opened. The site was originally designated for mixed-use development. Preserving and converting a vast area of land within the city into parkland was initiated by the collaborative partnership between the city government and Seoul Green Trust. In the case of Seoul Forest Park, the foreign model was used not in designing park but in park management. Seoul Green Trust established the Seoul Forest Conservancy following the mode of Central Park Conservancy. Beyond the managing of the park after the construction, Seoul Green Trust played an active role of engaging in the stage of constructing the park by promoting donations and voluntary tree planting. Before this case, learning from foreign models stayed in the park planning stage and park design in itself. Innovative park management was adopted from learning foreign models. It was a significant development of urban park practices in Korea.

Conclusion: Inventing Unique Park Culture of Korean Parks

Urban parks and park culture has been institutionalized in Korean cities during the last century. In terms of park design, there seems to be many repetitions and copies while learning from foreign models. However, the way of using park space seems to be quite different from Western cases. Ordinary park culture is dependant on different social conditions and cultural backgrounds. On fine summer days, many people enjoy lying down on the grass or playing sports in Western urban parks. However, you might not see this kind of scene in Korean parks. It is partly because of the climate condition and ecological environment. In Korea, people can be exposed to a lot of natural light due to clear weather. Humidity is also high on summer days though, making it difficult to stay outside for extended periods of time. This is a totally different situation compared with urban parks in Western countries. Korean people used to complain that there are few shady spaces in the park. Therefore, the meaning and function of a large empty grass lawn seems to be quite different. Koreans prefer benches to pavilions or pergolas because they are familiar with sitting culture in a room while taking off their shoes. It is natural that there are cultural differences between Western park culture and Korean park culture. Sensitive and inventive adaptations should be taken into consideration in park design and management.

There have been continuous endeavors to integrate Korean aesthetics and culture with urban parks. Korean style pavilions were used as the typical park structure. Linear water streams in the park are unique gestures that reflect Korea's natural streams in the valleys and the creation of mounds or hills reminds people of surrounding hills nearby their hometowns. Searching for a Korean park has been the imperative for all park designers. However, it is a difficult task to reconcile traditional sentiments with our contemporary way of life. Therefore, there are few successful cases in urban parks which incorporate tradition with modernity. It will be a challenging task for Korea to invent a unique park design and culture. In a recent park design competition for Multi-functional Administrative City, an innovative idea for the urban park by a Korean designer was selected as a winning entry. It was a new kind of urban park keeping production function as an agricultural field while allowing water flow within the field by tearing down the bank. As the idea was too radical and was still controversial, there will be no chance of realization. However, this kind endeavor is relevant and important in seeking out Korean versions of urban parks. Through a series of trial and error, we could produce fine urban parks which can contribute in global park design and park culture.

The necessity of urban parks has been increased recently due to climate changes and environmental crisis. There has been a slight variation in accommodating universal park culture into a local setting. The value of parks has remained the same regardless of time, place and culture. As Olmsted pointed out, urban park has evolved and progressed as "the Genius of Civilization" and it will continue to do so forever.

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