

City and Architecture in North Korea

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Changmo Ahn is an architectural historian. I am especially focusing on the modern architectural history of Korea. I started studying architecture to become an architect, but now I make my living as an architectural historian. I thought that the most important thing for an architect was a comprehensive understanding of the architecture and Urbanism in which he/she lived. During my master's studies, I tried to interpret the development path of modern Seoul from the perspective of 'war' rather than 'port opening' or 'colonial era'.

Korea, which has a history of nearly five thousand years, started westernization with the 'opening of ports in 1876,' but it became a colony after losing its sovereignty to Japan in 1910. In 1945, the defeat of Japan in the Asian-Pacific War liberated the Korean Peninsula. However, the country was divided in two, and the civil war that took place on the divided Korean Peninsula was actually a proxy war between the capitalist and socialist camps. In 1953, the armistice agreement temporarily halted the war. Since then, 70 years have passed, and the South and the North became enemies. This rivalry lasting more than 70 years (three years of hot war and 67 years of Cold War) changed the appearance of cities and architecture in South and North Korea in a completely different way.

So, I chose the subject of my master's thesis as 'Changes in the Characteristics of Korean Architecture Before and After the Korean War', and started researching North Korean architecture.

There are many architects who have had to leave their hometowns and move to the other Korea ruled by different camps due to differences in ideology. I started to study the role of the architects who moved to each area and how they shaped the "architecture and Urbanism" which they lived in.

The Korean Peninsula has maintained a unified state for nearly a thousand years since the Goryeo Dynasty (AD 936). In other words, the north and the south had shared a homogeneous history and cultural experience for about 1000 years, but after the division in 1945, they were divided into two countries operated by different ideologies.

As a proposition widely recognized in the architecture world, there is an old-saying — 'architecture mirrors the time.' This means that architecture in each period reflects the aspects of that period because architecture is not just a product of individuals but a result of various social interactions. However, it is very different for an opinion to be just widely accepted or actually proven. I tried to prove

the proposition that 'architecture mirrors the time' by comparing the cases of two countries on the Korean Peninsula.

It is very difficult to prove the proposition in practice. To prove this, it is necessary to divide the population group sharing a homogeneous culture in the same region into several groups, change only the social system, and observe how architecture evolves in each society. However, it is almost impossible to perform such a test artificially.

This “almost impossible experiment” was done in the southern and northern parts of the Korean Peninsula. Germany and Vietnam are mentioned as other examples of divided nations, but the ‘cause of division and the continuation process of division’ were very different from the situation of Korean Peninsula, so there is a limit to revealing the correlation between ideological differences and urban architecture. On the other hand, in the two Koreas on Korean Peninsula, based on the hostility rooting from the experience of direct war, the leaders of both countries used each other's existence as an excuse of their long-term rule, and maintained an almost perfect division structure with as little traffic between each other as possible. This rivalry racing to prove superiority of their system lasting more than 50 years is well reflected in the architecture and Urbanism of South and North Korea.

It was in Venice in 2014 that I had the opportunity to articulate these thoughts. At the Venice Architecture Biennale 2014, which was held under the theme of 'Absorbing the Modernity, 1914-2014', I, as a co-curator, composed the exhibition contents of the Korean Pavilion under the theme 'How did differences in ideologies make architectures and Urbanism of the South(Seoul) and North(Pyongyang) so different?'. The theme seemed to fit well with the overall topic of 2014 Venice Biennale: how modernity has been accepted in each country over the past 100 years, from World War I, World War II and the Cold War system, and how modernity is reflected in architecture and Urbanism.

The result was the Korean Pavilion winning the Golden Lion Award, which was the first time for Korean architecture and the art world. This achievement was not only a chance for me to prove my hypothesis - the difference in ideology can cause a difference in the evolution of architectures and Urbanism: examples in South and North Korea, - but it was also an opportunity to confirm the necessity of my comparative research on cities of the South and the North Korea and claim for continuous support.

In addition, I thought a deep understanding of how the South and the North had changed would give answers to the question of how the South and the North can overcome the Cold War System and be socially integrated in the era of peace and cooperation.

The difference between the North and the South revealed through comparison and contrast between city and architecture is more than just a matter of architecture and city. There is a naive thought that South and the North Koreans can easily understand each other and be reunified with little pain, for they use the same language and share a long history. However, this is an illusion. Already, the framework of thinking between the South and the North are so different that interpretation is required. I have confirmed this through cities and architecture.

Although both South and North Korea want peaceful reunification, all we could do was to just write a vague roadmap for unification and no single specific time table could be suggested, due to the internal and external geo-political circumstances. Nevertheless, the South and the North share the desire and historic-calling for unification. A study of cities and architecture in the south and north is not a vague study in preparation for unification. It is a research field that can even suggest practical solutions. ‘Architecture and Urbanism’, a social product, contains more messages about the society that created it than does any other field. In order for us to reach unification, we must go through the previous stage of unification - the era of peace and coexistence. Architecture and Urbanism also have a role to play in

preparing for an era of peace and coexistence that the South and the North must face before the decisive moment of unification. We expect, one day, the military demarcation line, a symbol of division between the South and the North, will disappear, roads be connected, and a new city be created between the DMZ after unification. But will it really happen? When will the perfect conditions for unification be met? It is necessary to pay attention to the process of creating necessary and sufficient conditions for unification rather than just drawing possible dreams after the unification is done.

Even if we do not directly compare and study North Korean cities, studying the traces of wars (hot and cold wars) engraved in the architecture of Southern cities alone can still serve as a basis for creating cities and architectural models suitable for the era of peace and coexistence. One of the remains of the war is the 'Han River'. As long as the South and the North agree to coexist through peaceful cooperation, Han River can be made more useful. Last year, I held a design competition under the theme of 'Era of Peaceful Cooperation, Vision of the Han River', in which students participated with the Junglim Architecture and Culture Foundation.

The scenery full of apartments along the Han River in Korea is also a result of division. Comparing the 'Miracle of the Han River' and the 'Miracle of the Rhine', the Han Riverside functions mainly as a residential area, without logistics function such as 'port'. On the other hand, the Rhine riverside functions as an industrial zone and also has a 'port.' In general, rivers often have a function of logistics and transportation, but the estuary of the Han River is designated as a 'neutral water zone' between the two Koreas and the logistics and transportation function is prohibited, so the Han River is inevitably used only as a residential area.

If the two Koreas make a peaceful agreement to restore the logistics function of the 'neutral waters zone' at the mouth of the Han River, and if Seoul and Pyongyang are connected by a waterway, the distance between the two cities can be further narrowed than connecting via a road way passing through the Military Demarcation Line managed by the UN. Research on 'architecture and Urbanism of the north and the south after the division' will deliver practical solutions to overcome the division than just being a mere theory.

My research results are published in 'Architectural and Cultural Guide, Pyongyang' (Co-authors, DOM Publishers, German/English) in 2011. You can also refer to a column <Reading The Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the Kim Jong-un Era, Through City and Architecture = 도시와 건축으로 읽는 김정은시대의 조선민주주의인민공화국> which is published in 'Arts of North Korea in the 21st Century = 21세기 북한의 예술' published in 2020. ■

- **Changmo Ahn** received his master's and doctorate degrees from Seoul National University for "Changes in Characteristics of Korean Architecture Before and After the Korean War" and "A Study on Architect Dong-Jin Park". He is currently a professor of architecture at Kyonggi University, serving as a member of the National Architectural Policy Committee under the President, and a member of the Cultural Heritage Administration of the Ministry of Culture, and serves as the president of the Association for Research and Practice of Modern Urban Architecture. His books include "50 Years of Contemporary Korean Architecture=한국현대건축50년(1996)", "Deoksugung Palace - Standing at the Center of the Empire with the Destiny of the Era=덕수궁-시대의 운명을 안고 제국의 중심에 서다(2009)", "History of Seoul Architecture=서울건축사(1999, co-author)", and "Pyongyang Architecture and Culture Guide=평양건축과문화가이드(2011, co-author)". He is involved in research on the preservation and utilization of historical city Seoul and modern architectural heritage, including the Master Plan for Historic City Management, and co-curator of the Korean Pavilion, which won the Golden Lion Award at the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale.

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