

The Development of the Environmental Movement and Open Space Planning and Design During the Democratic Period in Korea

Mintai Kim

ABSTRACT

During the last few decades, Korea experienced rapid economic growth and has achieved full democracy. Along with these changes, the successful introduction of the discipline and profession of landscape architecture and the subsequent creation of environmental NGOs all worked together to impact Korean society in positive ways. This paper examines literature and newspaper articles to document the changes in the environmental movement from the perspective of landscape architecture. The goal is to document and understand the phenomenon of the very active environmental movement there and draw from it lessons that might be useful for other countries.

INTRODUCTION

In the developing world the earliest stages of modernization typically concentrate almost solely on economic growth often at the expense of the environment. Over a relatively short period since the 1950s after the Korean War and ensuing decades, Korea achieved remarkably rapid economic growth. Fueled by this, Korea has undergone many socio-cultural changes. For decades, the predominant focus of the society was economic development. It generated national wealth but also generated environmental challenges.

Korea has gone through phases of compressed modernization. Compressed modernization refers to accommodation to drastic economic change, rapid adjustment to technology, rapid degradation of the natural and built environments, dramatic social and political change within short periods of time, and accelerated escalation of cross-cultural influences since the mid-twentieth century.

Concomitant to the period of economic development has been the process of democratization. People could not express their opinions publicly during the long lasting military regimes that ended in 1993. With full democracy the society became more open and the public began to voice demands for a better living environment. These demands are expressed in terms of the creation of many non-government organizations (NGOs),

at the center of which are environmental organizations. Compared to contemporary NGOs in other Asian countries these environmental organizations are very influential, moving (sometimes manipulating) public opinion and often blocking government development projects. They are in fact often criticized for being too biased toward the protection of environments and not allowing necessary development.

The discipline of landscape architecture was at the heart of the environmental movement in the 1990s and played a key role in educating people about the environment. It provided theoretical backing for the environmental movement from the study of ecology. The power movers in Korean environmental NGOs are said to be landscape architecture scholars.

The field of landscape architecture was introduced in the early 1970s. It matured during the 1980s and started to produce major design products such as the Olympic Park (1988). Many of the landscape designs promoted environmental protection and sustainable development. With the new open space development, people learned the value of natural resources. Local residents after seeing the ecologically sensitive developments in other areas asked the same in any development in their local jurisdictions. For any major design projects to be approved today, it seems every design must have some environmental or ecological themes or components for its justification.

PRE-1972

Traditional Korean landscape architecture cherished and protected the natural landscape and emphasized harmony between nature and its dwellers. Many of the traditional landscape architecture works, from such small-scale works as gardens to large places, employed ecological principles.

That tradition was discontinued during Japanese colonial rule from 1910 until 1945. The Japanese used the Korean peninsula as a stepping stone to invade China. The natural landscape and environment was devastated due to war preparations. When the colonial rule was over, mountains were bare without large trees or any sustainable vegetation. The outbreak of the Korean War five years later made the devastated landscape even worse. At the end of the war, Korea was in ruins.

As soon as the war was over, the first national priority was given to economic recovery and growth. Rapid economic growth produced massive environmental pollution and has led to environmental crisis. However, environmental problems were set aside except for nationwide re-forestation of the bare mountains.

1972 - 1982

This is still the period when economic development was predominant. The Korean economy grew rapidly and Koreans

started to accumulate wealth. Systematic national land management and development was initiated in 1972 and as a result, in the ensuing three decades the quality of living improved significantly. The population grew from roughly 32 million to 48 million; urbanization from 50% to 86%; highway 3.1 times. The potable water supply from 35% to 85%; sewage treatment capacity from nothing to 66% in the late 1990s. However, along with this came the deterioration of the environment.

Dictatorial government suppressed any form of social-political movements including the environmental movement. The government considered the pollution issues as anti-government strife because they considered it to be an impediment against economic growth, and strongly oppressed and jailed environmental activists together with other political opponents. For this reason, the Korean environmental movement worked in tandem with political democratization movement.

1972 also marks the dawn of modern landscape architecture in Korea. The Korean Institute of Landscape Architecture was formed that year. Landscape architecture programs were established in two universities in 1973. Over the next decade, ten college-level programs were established.

Historic landscapes, such as historic gardens and palaces, were restored by landscape architects, national parks were established, national park related facilities were developed, and highway landscapes were constructed. Most of the works were government initiated and monopolized and carried out by the Landscape Architecture Corporation.

As can be expected in a young profession, the landscape designs and products, however, were a pre-mature imitation of western landscape design. The majority of educators were US educated and they were eager to apply what they learned directly to Korea without cultural considerations. Little attention was given to the environmental issues.

1982 - 1992

Once relative economic wealth was achieved in the 1980s, people's attention has moved to other issues, such as environment, education and social welfare. A strong public sense of urgency regarding the environment and the political freedom to voice that urgency grew.

In 1982, the first environmental NGO was established, Korean Research Institute of Environmental Problems in response to widespread pollution as a product of rapid industrialization. Other NGOs were formed soon after and they raised such environmental issues as nuclear waste, air pollution, golf courses and protection and reclamation of coastal wetlands. The movement was, however, limited still because ex-military president Roh ruled the country, although he was less oppressive compared to his predecessors. The environmental movement was considered a part of political movement because it was

mainly carried on by politically-charged students and religious people.

Landscape architecture started to mature. More landscape architecture programs, including graduate programs, were established. The depth and breadth of the profession grew to include ecological and environmental issues in education and in practice.

Major sporting events, such as Asian games (1986) and the Olympics (1988) brought huge number of projects to the profession. Sports facilities, Olympic village, and memorial parks were constructed. At the same time, new building projects as a result of rapid economic growth brought many new projects to landscape architects. Several arboretums were constructed. Former military bases were converted to public open spaces.

The sheer number of landscape architecture projects was remarkable and citizens started to notice the value and importance of the profession. Landscape architecture started to be recognized as a field with future. Getting into the landscape architecture programs in colleges became more and more competitive.

1992 - PRESENT

In the 1990s, Koreans saw democracy in full bloom. In 1995, local governments gained autonomy. Formerly appointed positions became elected positions. Politicians quickly learned the value and power of landscape architecture in gaining votes and presented many landscape architecture-related platforms. Since the advent of full participatory democracy, major open space projects have occupied central positions in the campaign platforms of the candidates for every mayoral race in Seoul.

Economic wealth, accompanying leisure, major sporting events and politicians demanded more from landscape architects. In the early 1990s, the field of landscape architecture started to actively participate in the environmental movement. Landscape architects were heavily involved in the initial stage of environmental movements.

Environmental Movement

By the 1990s, the environment became an essential issue in Korea society. The majority of Koreans expressed concerns about the environment. Hot issues, such as sustainability and conservation became the central issues and overrode economic development priorities. Responding to these concerns, in 1994 the Ministry of Environment was established initially to regulate pollution.

In 1992, the Korean Federation for Environmental Movement (KFEM) was formed, consolidating several independent environmental NGOs. It started to play a central role in the environmental movement. Many believe that the establishment

of KFEM was the turning point in the Korean environmental movement. The number of environmental groups exploded. At present, 250 environmental groups exist and over 200 of them have been estimated to have been established since 1990. Korean environmental groups can be grouped into three different categories: 1) groups closely related to governmental policy and initiatives (e.g., Environmental Preservation Association, Council for Environmental Science, National Movement for Environmental Preservation); 2) Social organizations that participate actively in the environmental movement (Korean YMCA and YWCA, Consumer Association, Press Association); and 3) Independent environmental groups organized by intellectuals and scientists (Alliance of Environmental Movements, Society for Environment and Pollution) (Peritore, 1999).

These environmental groups began to wield enormous power. Along with other political/economic NGOs, these environmental NGOs strongly influenced elections as well as playing a central role in the political reform movement.

The first true democratic government of 1993 brought changes to the relationship between government and environmental organizations. Government started to consider NGOs as a partner and worked together. Issues have changed, too. Industrial pollution issues gave way to trash and landfill, vehicle emission, non-point source water pollution. Around 1995, the number of members in NGOs started to double and triple. The NGOs mounted several successful endeavors to protect the environment, including preventing a dam construction on the environmentally sensitive Dong River.

Socio-Political Change and Landscape Architecture

Behind all the changes were landscape architects. Environmental awareness among citizens also grew partially thanks to landscape architects advocating and promoting environmental awareness through their work.

Landscape architecture expanded and shifted its realm from design of golf courses, ski resorts, other types of resorts and theme parks to ecologically sensitive and sustainable design. It seems every landscape architecture project needs to have some ecological or environmental elements in it these days. Major parks tend to include environmental education centers.

A particularly remarkable phenomenon is the conversion and rebirth of such disliked facilities as sewage treatment plants, trash incinerating facilities, and garbage dumps to parks and environmental education venues.

Such national-level projects as Incheon International Airport, ambitiously constructed to become East Asian hub-airport and World Cup Park, rejuvenated the profession. The World Cup Park launched landscape architecture in South Korea into the forefront of urban environmental design.

World Cup Park, completed in 2002, is a massive environmental design effort which converted a 90-meter-high toxic landfill into a huge, multifaceted environmentally-friendly park and sporting facility.

The present administration of Seoul Metropolitan Government is well into a complex, large scale project to uncover and restore the historically important Chonggye river presently obscured by a double-decker freeway through densely settled downtown Seoul. The project is estimated to cost over \$5 billion. The Seoul Metropolitan Government allocates approximately 10% of its annual budget for landscape architecture.

Through these highly visible projects, citizens became aware of the importance of the environment and the role landscape architects play. It was also said at one point that behind every important decision made by environmental organizations are landscape architects.

There exist almost 50 landscape architecture programs, approximately half the number of the programs in the United States. They all in one way or another emphasize ecologically sensitive and sustainable landscape architecture.

CONCLUSION

The trend of the environmental movement is changing from anti-pollution to ecological planning and sustainability. Participants changed from political movement leaders to public. Relationships between government and NGOs became favorable. The environmental movement became more participatory. It was all happening because the public was aware of environmental issues and was eagerly participating in the environmental movement.

The environmental movement in Korea was successful partially because of the discipline of landscape architecture. Landscape architecture educated the public about the importance of the environment. Because the field emphasized ecological and sustainable development early on, the field matured quickly, accumulated knowledge and was ready to influence and support the environmental movement.

REFERENCES

- Chung, B. 1999. Korean Society's Modernization and Incongruity. Koreaana. Spring 1999.
- Kim, M and E. Addison. 2003. Imprinting Landscape Architecture on the Developing World: The Role of the Academic Discipline in the Parks of Seoul. *CELA conference*.
- Korean Institute of Landscape Architecture. 2002. Korean Landscape Architecture: 1972-2002. (in Korean).
- Korean Federation for Environmental Movement (KFEM) website. <http://kfem.or.kr> (visited on April 2004).
- Peritore, N.P. 1999. Third World Environmentalism: Case Studies from the Global South. University Press of Florida.