

# Historic Preservation towards a Critical Regionalism of Gil-ryong Park's Buildings: The Hwashin Department Store and the No-soo Park house

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**Abstract** This research examines the historic preservation of Korean modern architecture by applying Kenneth Frampton(1930-)'s concept of critical regionalism. It explores the representative Korean modern architect Gil-ryong Park (1898-1943) and two of his buildings: the Hwashin Department Store (1935) and the No-soo Park house (1937-1938). The former was in the hot spot on the preservation. There were plans to preserve this building but that it ended up being demolished in 1987. The latter building, however, has been preserved and is currently being used as a museum. These two Korean modern buildings are explored through the frame of Kenneth Frampton's critical regionalism, in particular focusing on three important concepts: "dialectical expression," "place-form," and "sustainability." In this sense, this research will provide pioneering research in understanding the preservation of Korean modern architecture through a representative Western modern theory. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Korean modern architecture, which was built during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945), could be interpreted as critical regionalism because it represented a dialog between the West and the East, in particular between Western modernism, Japanese modernity, and Korean tradition in the East Asian context. Understanding Korean modernism in this context of a cross-cultural perspective enables scholars to define both the origins and uniqueness of Korean modern architecture.

*Keywords: Critical Regionalism, Gil-ryong Park, The Hwashin Department Store, No-soo Park house*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

East Asian architecture experienced intense conflicts between tradition and modernity starting from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when Western powers established colonies in East Asian port cities. In an even more complicated fashion, Korean modernism evolved within the history of Japanese colonization during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After the Korea-Japan Annexation Treaty (or Japanese Annexation of Korea) was proclaimed in August 1910, Korean modern architecture developed along a different track

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from the architectural practices of China and Japan. Although the profession of Korean modern architecture seemed to follow global modernism, its development was skewed by Japanese influences insofar as Japan deeply affected modern culture in Korea. Meanwhile, Korean modernism strongly interacted with Korean tradition. Korean modernism not only emerged from conflicts between tradition and modernity, as was the case in other East Asian countries, but it was entangled with both Japanized modernism as well as adopting elements of Western modernism.

In this sense, Korean modern architecture, which was built during the Japanese colonial period, could be conceived of as a cross-cultural medium for critical regionalism insofar as it partook of Western modernism, Japanese modernity, and Korean tradition in the East Asian context. Although Korean modern architecture endeavored to identify Korean modernity, it does so through the filter of overlapping interactions between tradition and modernity, Korea and its East Asian neighbors, and East Asia and the West.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD AND FRAMEWORK

In order to identify the nature of modernism in Korean architecture, this research explores a representative native Korean modern architect, Gil-ryong Park (1898-1943), who practiced architecture and participated in Korea's social issues actively during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945) (Figure 1). Gil-ryong Park tried to integrate the influences of Western modernism into Korean architecture based on Korean traditional architectural practices. During the Japanese colonial period, most of the modern buildings

were designed by Japanese and Western architects. Gil-ryong Park was the first generation who received a modern education in Korea, and he actively designed Korean modern architecture with Western modernism in mind. Park was one of the representative architects who worked at the frontier between modernism and tradition in Korean modern society. This research focuses on two of his representative buildings: the Hwashin Department Store (1935), which was torn down in 1987, and No-soo Park house (1937-1938), which has been preserved and is still in use. Its preservation and utilization was a significant factor in Korean modern architecture because the preservation of this architecture is a critical argument which can be understood as a part of regionalism in the Korean context.



Figure 1. Gil-ryong Park's Photo.  
(Source: *The Dong-A Ilbo*, January 1, 1931: 7)

This research examines Gil-ryong Park's two building by means of Kenneth Frampton(1930-)'s critical regionalism, because Frampton's theory is a way to understand Korean modern architecture from an outside perspective, in this case, from the West. In particular, this research selected three key concepts of Frampton's critical regionalism to explore Park's buildings: "dialectical expression," "place-form," and "sustainability."

In this sense, the analytical structure of this research is a comparative study not only applying Western modern architectural theory to Korean modern architecture, but also applying these concepts to preservation, demolition, and utilization of Korean modern architecture. Each culture can distinguish and realize its quintessence through comparing with other cultures and taking advantage of the best from each. The pioneering French philosopher Paul Ricoeur discussed "the encounter of other cultures," saying that if a culture wanted to sustain itself and survive, it should not only respect its origins, but also pursue creativity in art, literature, philosophy, and spirituality through encountering other cultures (Ricoeur, 1965, 283). In this sense, cross-cultural meeting will not only enable the original culture to sustain its originality, but also help the original culture to be redefined (Zou, 2012, 276). Also, as Heidegger noted in his discussion of the meaning of the Greek concept of *paradoxa* in his article "On the Essence of Truth," the essence of truth can be approached through the paradoxical gesture between two cultures (Heidegger, 1977, 276). Even though the *paradoxa* is unusual and contradictory to ordinary life, it is beneficial for us to find the essence of truth because this essence can be opened up through *paradox* and enables us to explore and

sustain the depths of poetical life. Therefore, applying Western concepts to Korean modern architecture helps this architecture find its origins, and enables the possibility of interpretation of the characteristics of Korean modern architecture in a different way.

### 3. GIL-RYONG PARK'S TWO REPRESENTATIVE BUILDINGS

Heidegger once wrote that "[truth happening in the work] does not at all mean that the work may also be a work without preservers" (Heidegger, 1977, 191). While many Western modern buildings have been preserved in their original states, a lot of significant modern buildings in Korea have been demolished. Regarding the buildings designed by Gil-ryong Park, several private historic preservation organizations and private preservationists have helped preserve the remaining buildings. Even if there were several preservation efforts, the Hwashin Department Store was demolished in 1987. However, the No-soo Park's house has been preserved: the government co-operated with the Cultural Heritage Administration and decided to preserve this building. Ultimately, this house was reopened as a museum in September 2013.

#### 3.1. The Hwashin Department Store (1935)

The Hwashin Department Store is a significant empirical case which demonstrates Western influences on Korean modern architecture (Figure 2). In terms of historic preservation movements associated with Gil-ryong Park's modern buildings, most of the buildings designed by Gil-ryong Park were demolished before the 1990s. Even Gil-ryong Park's representative building, the Hwashin Department Store, which was considered as an iconic building in Korean early modern architecture, was demolished in 1987, although there was indeed a strong movement to preserve it. In 1984, Jung-dong Kim, a prominent architectural historian in Korea, wrote a poem in the magazine *GGumim* (Decoration) arguing in favor of preserving the Hwashin Department Store. The poem is translated as follows:

Hwashin Department Store, Hwashin Department Store!  
Your life hangs by a thread.  
A memory that you have lived in this world dies out.  
What is the answer?  
My mind is confused.  
Time is approaching when a cold chisel and cold-hearted hammer  
begins to disassemble your body.  
Thinking about this, many people's hearts break.  
But nobody can save you.  
Unfortunately, people grieving for you are not the people who could  
save you. (Kim, 1984, 18).

In a changing world, a building should not necessarily be preserved in its original form, nor is the best thing for a culture to preserve its architectural heritage in a glass box like some sort of antique. A considerable number of historical buildings could be hermeneutically interpreted and actively reused for today's urban life, and this approach is more constructive for the present life than conserving them as heritage objects. In that sense, this attitude on historic preservation is more identified with the thoughts of Viollet-le-Duc. Le-Duc defined the historic preservation process as the

effort "to establish a completed state which may never have existed at any particular time" (Murtagh, 2005, 2). Thus, he recognized the change of architecture in accordance with a universal historicity.

Paul Ricoeur analyzes the importance of memory, which makes our life more meaningful and narratively bounded (Ricoeur, 1984). Life becomes a constructor and operator of memory in a historical context. Narrative is a messenger to connect to the other, and memory plays a significant role in communities seeking the reconciliation (Duffy, 2009, 46). In this sense, historic preservation is a meaningful approach to embody the "mimesis" of memory and history. As Ricoeur states, "[mimesis] is the operation of organizing the events into a system, not the system itself" (Ricoeur, 2004, 48). Historic preservation is an operator to construct narratives, and it helps people return to meaningful memories. Furthermore, a memory constructed by a narrative of historic preservation allows the community to reinforce its internal relations.



Figure 2. Gil-ryong Park, Hwashin Department Store, the 1940s. (Source: photo collected by the East Asian Architectural HistoryLab at Hanyang University, Seoul)

### 3.2. No-soo Park's house (1937-1938)

From the perspective that architectural preservation can act as re-presentation of memory through narratives, the No-soo Park (1927-2013) house becomes a significant case of historic preservation of Gil-ryong Park's buildings (Figure 3). No-soo Park, a prestigious painter in Korea and the last owner of this house, and Deok-yeong Youn, the former owner of this building, asked architect Gil-ryong Park to design this house for Youn's daughter and daughter-in-law. The house was built in 1937-38 on a site of 500 *pyeong* (approximately 1,652 m<sup>2</sup>) in Jongno, Seoul. No-soo Park purchased this house in 1973 and lived there for about 40 years until he passed away in 2013.

No-soo Park is considered a pioneer in the first generation of *hangughwa* (modern Korean painting). He was awarded many prestigious painting awards, such as the Republic of Korea Prime Minister's Award in 1953, the President's Award in 1955, and so on. He served as a professor at Seoul National University from 1962 to 1982. After his retirement, he spent most of his later years in this house in painting. He is well known in Korea for unconventional compositions and colors in his paintings. On Park's works, art critic Gyeong-seong Lee commented: "These works are filled with lingering imagination and the artistic sense of nobility"<sup>1</sup> The typical theme of his paintings is nature including mountains, flowers, waters, and landscapes. Park especially presented the beauty of

space or emptiness in his paintings, a concept that was one of the most important characteristics of Korean traditional paintings, which sought for the harmony between nature and human life (Figure 4). His painting method continued and developed Korean landscape painting tradition in which "Mountains were shown block-like against clouds....Mountains spring up from nowhere.... The artist goes directly, rapidly and efficiently to the point, abstracting and seizing the totality of the scene" (Cambon, 2006, 15).



Figure 3. (Left) No-soo Park's house in Ogin-dong, Jongno, Seoul. Built in 1937. (Source: photo by author, 2015)

Figure 4. (Right) No-soo Park's painting, "San" (Mountains), 1988. (Source: brochure of Jongno Pak No-soo Art Museum, Seoul)

The Chinese Taoist philosopher Laozi defined the existential significance of "emptiness (*wu*)" in *Tao Te Ching*.<sup>2</sup> The void, so-called Tao (Dao), is beyond nihilistic nothingness. It provides a primordial condition for creating shaped mass for use. Following this Eastern philosophy, the relationship between void and mass is significant in Korean traditional art because a shaped mass can have meaning only through its connection with void. In Korean traditional art, the dynamic balance between emptiness and mass on a painting canvas depends on the painter's skills and poetic imagination.

The best architect of the day in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Gil-ryong Park, tried to embody the Korean cultural tradition of house design into this building through modernized features and methods in an eclectic style. Park synthesized both Korean traditional architecture and Western modern architecture in creating this house. In particular, he paid much attention to creating an *ondol* [the Korean floor heating system] for this house. The first floor is equipped with *ondol* and *maru* (wooden floor), the combination of which is a unique system in the traditional Korean house, *hanok* (Jeon and Kwon, 2012, 97). The second floor is equipped with the *maru-bang* (wooden floor-room structure) with fireplace. The *maru-bang* is a typical Japanese housing style, using a fireplace originated from Western tradition. On the second floor, it is difficult to employ the *ondol* because it can be equipped only on the ground floor. At that time, modern houses tended to pursue Western-style heating system, such as fireplace, instead of using *ondol* (Figure 5).

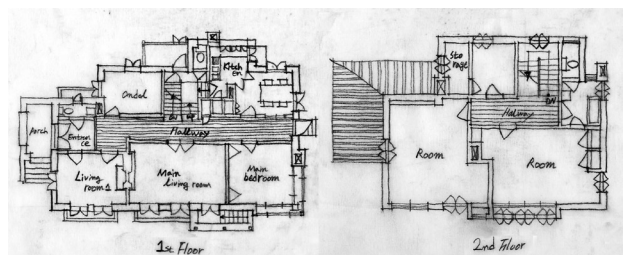


Figure 5. Plans of No-soo Park's House. (Source: drawn by author)



The No-soo Park house's two-floor exteriors are made of bricks and Korean roof tiles. In particular, the gabled roof, with the triangular end showing the rafters to the outside, reproduces the atmosphere of Korean traditional houses. Although bricks were considered a Western material at that time, the architect tried to introduce a traditional Korean atmosphere through some physical details such as star-shaped windows, round wood rafters, and roof tiles. Such details demonstrate that Park tried to modernize Korean houses by incorporating some traditional symbols (Lim, 2011, 320). Architectural historian Chang-bok Lim commented, "The most significant meaning is that this house demonstrates the ceaseless efforts of Korean architects, who sought to modernize houses in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and this building was the final success of their striving endeavors" (Lim, 2011, 316).

In particular, Gil-ryong Park's modern ideas about housing were well embodied by this painter's house. The structure of the building is Western like. Park designed modern facilities and installations in the kitchen and bathroom with a careful consideration of hygiene. He used a traditional *ondol* heating system for the first floor and a Western heating system on the second floor. He wanted to preserve traditional values not only through the traditional mechanical system like heating, but also through the created atmosphere of the building. The atmosphere is generated through the Korean-style gable roof, exposed wood rafters, and window patterns (Figure 6). He clearly differentiated the exterior wall texture between the first and second floors: the first floor was applied with bricks and the second, white-wash plaster. The textural contrast between rough bricks and smooth plaster reminds us of the interaction between massive mountains and expansive emptiness in the house owner No-soo Park's modern landscape paintings. Meanwhile, the use of bricks and white plaster certainly presents an influence from Western modernism architecture. The house is a masterpiece of Park's integration of tradition and modernity during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.



Figure 6. Elevations of No-soo Park's House. (Source: drawn by author)

No-soo Park's paintings are strongly related to his house as well. As he stated, "Art goes beyond a canvas and can be realized through human life."<sup>3</sup> In his paintings, he emphasized landscape and the beauty of space (void). Park cultivated a garden by collecting various *Suseki* (scenic stones or symbolic rocks) and orchids. Besides the small landscape in the front yard, he also put a great deal of effort into collecting antique furniture and ancient artworks to decorate the house interior. As he said, his art works are not just on a canvas, but also go beyond the canvas to encompass the domestic garden, furniture, and art collections. Therefore, the house is a correspondence to his paintings, and his painting style is embodied by his life in this house.

No-soo Park's house was registered and preserved as Cultural Heritage of Seoul No. 1 in 1993, the Korean government began to consider the preservation of this house. In November 2011, No-soo Park donated this house to the government of Jongno, Seoul, including his 500 paintings, antiques, and furniture. Finally, the Jongno Borough Office decided to preserve this building and reprogrammed it as the Jongno Park No-soo Art Museum, which opened to the public in September 2013. As the curator of the museum introduced, "The house, cultivated front-yard garden, ancient artworks, and antique furniture, let alone his paintings, are what the artist carefully preserved and cherished for almost 40 years."<sup>4</sup>

#### 4. CRITICAL REGIONALISM AND ITS HERMENEUTIC DISPUTES ON GIL-RYONG PARK'S BUILDINGS

Critical regionalism is revealed and defined through modern architecture. Kenneth Frampton advanced the concept of "critical regionalism" in modern architectural history, presenting the concept in his two articles in 1983 (Frampton, 1983a, 147-162; 1983b, 16-30). In these articles, he dealt with the identity of regional culture in the conflicting environment between "universal civilization" and "regional culture" (Frampton, 1983a, 147-162; 1983b, 16-30). As demonstrated in his book *A Critical History of Modern Architecture*, Frampton's "regional criticism" (Frampton, 1992, 314) concept was borrowed from French hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur's work "Universal Civilization and National Culture" (Ricoeur, 1965). In his articles, Frampton pointed out some characteristics of critical regionalism. In order to explore and apply Frampton's ideas to Korean modern architecture, this research chose the three key concepts of "dialectical expression," "place-form," and "sustainability" among Frampton's arguments about critical regionalism because these three key concepts represent the core arguments of Frampton's critical regionalism and could serve as a bridge between the West and East and the past and present.

To begin with, Frampton argues that critical regionalism should be a "dialectical expression." Critical regionalism deconstructs general modernism through images and values that originated from regional culture. At the same time, outer paradigm, which could be the new influences or models, will be amalgamated with regional components mainly led by regional values (Frampton, 1983a, 149). Not only that, but regionalism is different from the vernacular because the vernacular is classified as the "general" and represents a kind of "restricted regionalism". As an example of the "dialectical expression" of critical regionalism, Frampton pointed to architect Renzo Piano's Tjibaou Cultural Center (1998). This building successfully embodied the concept of "dialectical expression" because it combined the present and past using hi-tech material, which is the present-day technique, and a wooden structure, which is the traditional material. Moreover, this building preserved and respected the traditional residential structure of the Kanak people (Frampton, 2002, 15).

In terms of Frampton's "dialectical expression," the No-soo Park house is the representative building which revealed this concept of critical regionalism. This building synthesized not only tradition, but also modern value: for example using the *ondol* system is a good example of "dialectical expression." In other words, in order to

synthesize the traditional and the modern, Park used two different structures on the first and second floors: the first floor used the traditional underfloor heating system, called *ondol*, and the second floor used the Western modern fire heating system. Moreover, this building used both traditional and modern material. However, Park mainly tried to preserve the traditional components because he believed that modern architecture should be represented based on Korean tradition. In this sense, this building can be understood through the concept of "dialectical expression" which was the major argument of Frampton's critical regionalism.

Second, Kenneth Frampton's main argument for the concept of critical regionalism is "place-form." He argued that our urban city has lost the true value of "place" and relied instead on mega structures. In support of his opinion, he used Heidegger's concepts of 'Spatium' and 'Raum': 'Space' or 'Spatium' is just the Cartesian system. It is a very scientific continuum, which does not take into account the uniqueness of its location (Frampton, 1983b, 25-26). On the other hand, 'Place' or 'Raum' is very detailed and clear in order to represent the uniqueness of its location (Frampton, 1983b, 25-26). In other words, the place itself has its own characteristics, which are differentiated from those of other places.

Frampton's concept of "place-form" echoes modern philosophers' ideas about human memory. As philosopher Karsten Harries has argued about preserving the past: "What does history matter? Genuine community requires both a shared past and a hoped-for future" (Harries, 1997, 267). Our community needs the connection between the past and future. It is important to preserve modern buildings in order to trace the origins of our lives and embody the public's memory. The historic preservationist Daniel Blunstone said that the preservation of modern buildings has a stronger relationship with "stakeholders' memory."<sup>5</sup> Modern buildings shape our lived environment, and thoughtful buildings occupy the memory of our lives. As revealed by historian Frances A. Yates's pioneering work on the art of memory in Western traditions, the preservation of architecture is not only significant in terms of the historical and cultural identity of a modern building, but it also recalls the collective memory of its residents and visitors because it embodies their poetic lives through reflecting on the fundamental meaning of human existence.

The preservation efforts of Gil-ryong Park's buildings can be understood by Frampton's concept of "place-form." In preservation, the most important factor is a building's origin of place. Specifically, the Hwashin Department Store traces Frampton's "place-form" concept. Preservationists had tried to preserve this building because it had meaning not only in the tangible building itself, but also in the memories of the people who lived and visited there. Demolishing the iconic building not only destroyed its architectural values, but also the memories of the location itself.

Finally, Frampton's concept of "sustainability" argued and extended the problems of urban life through the frame of critical regionalism. Frampton developed the concept of "sustainability" in the 1990s. Using the concept of critical regionalism, he has criticized the architectural culture of current modern life, which has pursued only the spectacle of structure over everything else (Frampton, 2005, ix-xviii). For him, the matter of "sustainability" is the most important factor, superseding any other practical restriction (Frampton, 1999, 41).

Frampton's argument on critical regionalism regarding "sustainability" could be applied the preservation and utilization of Gil-ryong Park's buildings. Park's two building, the Hwashin Department Store and No-soo Park house, had been discussed in terms of their preservation, demolition, and utilization. As noted above, the Hwashin Department Store was ultimately demolished in 1987 and the No-soo Park house was transformed into a museum. In Frampton's terms, sustainability relates to cultural sustainability, thus the preservation of a building is a way of promoting people's poetical dwelling. As Martin Heidegger said, "Preserving [of] the [art] work does not reduce people to their private experiences, but brings them into affiliation with the truth happening in the work" (Heidegger, 1977, 193) suggesting that sustainability enables people to maintain a healthy environment for promoting and stimulating a more meaningful life. This does not refer to the modern concepts of technical sustainability, which in current practice refers generally to sustainability in the context of energy saving. Frampton's concept is deeper: a cultural sustainability that enables people to live richer and more poetic lives. In this sense the perseveration of modern buildings is the most important way to open up our recognition of sustainable humanity (Seo, 2014, 135). Moreover, the No-soo Park house has changed, and the contemporary historic preservationists and the architect of the current museum respected the changes to this building, and this philosophy was reflected in its preservation. Therefore, accepting the changes in historic buildings was reflected in the process of restoring this particular building. In this sense, the preservation efforts of Korean modern architecture could be understood through the concept of "sustainability", which was the main argument of Frampton's critical regionalism.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Gil-ryong Park is the representative modern Korean architect, and his design of the Hwashin Department Store and the No-soo Park house demonstrate an interweaving of modern architecture as the interpretation and representation of Korean early modernity. The interwoven unity thus forms a preserved origin of Korean modernity.

Historic preservation represents a return to the origins in architecture, and the preservation of buildings demonstrates their historical significance. As Karsten Harries discusses regarding the significance of modern buildings, preserving significant modern buildings is a way to trace the origins of our lives because it embodies the public's memory (Harries, 1997, 267). In this sense, preservation retrieves and returns to the origins through architectural creativity and our current life because these are circumscribed by a horizon of our historicity (Seo, 2016, 110). Therefore, preserving the modern building designed by Gil-ryong Park represents a dialogue not only between Korean traditional and modern architecture, but also between the East and the West.

Moreover, exploring the historic preservation of Korean modern architecture by using Frampton's critical regionalism can reveal the origins of Korean modernity. Korean modernism is a cross-cultural medium of Western modernism, Japanese modernity, and Korean tradition. Kenneth Frampton's critical regionalism thus functions as a framework with which to bridge Eastern and Western architecture in order to understand the origins of each.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Cited from the brochure "Jongno Pak No-soo Art Museum."
- <sup>2</sup> Laozi, Ch. 11, *Tao Te Ching*.
- <sup>3</sup> Cited from the brochure "Jongno Pak No-soo Art Museum."
- <sup>4</sup> Cited from the brochure "Jongno Pak No-soo Art Museum."
- <sup>5</sup> Daniel Blunstone, qtd. in Derek Worthing and Stephen Bond, *Managing Built Heritage: The Role of Cultural Significance* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 131; and Daniel Blunstone, "Challenges for Heritage Conservation and the Role of Research on Values," *Values and Heritage Conservation, Research Report*, ed. E. Avrami, R. Mason and M. de la Tóree (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2000).

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