

# DESIGN POLITICS: CONSUMERIZATION OF POST-INDUSTRIAL SOUTH KOREA

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, design has become a main theme in administration of Seoul, the capital of South Korea. Under this theme of design, many projects have taken place, including a number of public constructions. While the purpose behind supporting “design” as the symbol of Korea is to promote a new national image of post-developed nation, some of the Seoul government’s design projects yielded unintended side effects. This paper analyzes the discrepancy between the professed rationale of these projects and the actual consequences through the case of Gwanghwamun and Dongdaemun, and suggests a possible direction for the future of design in Korean politics.

## DESIGN AND THE CITY OF SEOUL

In 2005, the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) announced an initiative called World Design Capital (WDC) at a convention held in Copenhagen. According to the initiative’s architects, WDC was to be an opportunity for cities to present their innovative design accomplishments and celebrate their successes in urban revitalization, with a focus on the broader impact of design on urban spaces, economies, and citizens. While recognizing design’s role in making a space more habitable and efficient for its local residents, WDC also emphasized design as “an economic development tool” in a global sense. Furthermore, WDC suggested design as something that should foster a partnership between “developed countries and emerging economies”<sup>1</sup>. This statement revealed the ICSID’s understanding of the status of design in the global time line of development. Design represented the importance of soft power, moving away from the twentieth-century developmental paradigm.

As a nation that had for some time sought global recognition of its status as a developed country rather than an emerging economy,<sup>2</sup> South Korea pounced on the opportunity offered by the WDC initiative. After the announcement in 2005, the metropolitan government of Seoul hurriedly put together a bid to be selected as a World Design Capital, a bid that was ultimately successful when the ICSID selected Seoul

as the WDC of 2010. As part of the WDC launch, the city sponsored international events and created institutions that could help implement various design-related projects in the capital. The city’s active sponsorship of design-related events and institutions would eventually pay further dividends, and Seoul was designated the 2010 “City of Design” under the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, supplementing its earlier selection as WDC 2010.<sup>3</sup>

Taking advantage of growing publicity both at home and abroad, Seoul’s government actively promoted the image of Seoul as a sophisticated, cosmopolitan center with ambitions to become “the hub of global design.”<sup>4</sup> When the promotion of this image gathered more attention, Oh Se-Hoon, the mayor of Seoul from 2006 to 2011, adopted “Design Seoul” as the new slogan for his administration. A savvy politician, Oh saw that design could be the point of distinction for his administration, similar to the “Green Growth” (*nokssaek seongjang*) heralded by predecessor, Lee Myung-Bak. The metropolitan government then launched two large-scale public construction projects that would become the hallmarks of the new Seoul: Gwanghwamun Plaza and Dongdaemun Design Plaza.

One of the most historically rich sites in all of Korea—enduring from the Joseon Dynasty through the years of Japanese colonial rule and American military occupation to authoritarian and post-authoritar-

ian eras –, the Gwanghwamun area of Seoul has long been considered a spatial symbol of political power. In turning this politically contested site into a symbol of “Design Seoul,” the Seoul Metropolitan Government sought to create a space explicitly dedicated to cultural events and leisure activities. At the same time, the government revised an existing ordinance to prohibit political gatherings in the space, prompting civic organizations to criticize the government’s vision of the new Gwanghwamun Plaza as an attempt to disempower politically minded citizens. The process leading up to the building of the Gwanghwamun Plaza raised an important question about the nature of citizens’ participation in a public space at the heart of Seoul. While the metropolitan government defined accessibility as the openness and availability of more leisure and cultural spaces to citizens, the citizens foregrounded political participation as an integral part of what it means to have access to public space. The tension between these two visions shaped the debate surrounding the success of the metropolitan government’s urban renewal campaign.

If the question of citizens’ access became a point of contestation in the building of Gwanghwamun Plaza, the question of history emerged as the lightning rod for concerns about the relationship between local specificity and “globality” in the building of the Dongdaemun Design Plaza (DDP). The Seoul metropolitan government launched DDP as an ambitious global landmark, intended to symbolize Korea’s status as an advanced, post-industrial nation. National achievement was to be reflected in the sophisticated and cosmopolitan design of the plaza. The landmark would also serve as a tourist attraction, signaling a shift away from manufacturing industries and toward service industries. A couple of years into the planning, however, historical remains from Joseon Dynasty were found at the site. The discovery resulted in the addition of a “historical park” to the original design. The city declared that the purpose of the DDP was also to serve as a memorial to the richness of Korean history and culture, but to achieve the seemingly conflicting goals of DDP as both a global landmark as well as a memorial to Korean history, the blueprint of the DDP had to be modified considerably. The resulting layout placed small history museums in the shadows of the main structure designed by a world-renowned architect Zaha Hadid, an Iraqi-British architect known for her abstract, futuristic designs. The resulting debate

surrounding DDP thus interrogated the relationship between local history and global design.

This thesis explores the efforts of Seoul to become a city represented by the theme of design by examining these two projects. What were the stated objectives and rationales for each project? What contestations and negotiations took place in the process of their construction, articulated by the state and various civil society groups? What were the consequences of their construction? In answering these questions, this thesis pays particular attention to the political implications of the active governmental promotion of “design” as a tool for creating a new national, post-industrial image of South Korea. I have coined the term “design politics” to encapsulate these dynamics. In addition to consulting political scientific and architectural literature, I incorporate interviews and contemporary media coverage of the construction projects in order to capture the voices of people, both from producer and consumer perspectives.

The thesis will then conclude with a brief, preliminary discussion about a possible alternative to the coupling of design and an image of post-industrial Korea. This alternative termed “social design,” places the emphasis on the agency of people within urban design. If design politics focuses on the role of design in representing national advancement for both domestic and global consumption—paradoxically by making design the banner for depoliticizing the public and reconfiguring them as passive consumers as we will see in the section on Gwanghwamun Plaza—the concept of social design requires design to serve the needs of local people, increasing the habitability of the space and the quality of life.

## DESIGN POLITICS: POST-INDUSTRIALISM AND THE NATIONAL IMAGE

Mayor Oh Se-hoon, mayor of Seoul between 2006 and 2011, proclaimed the twenty-first century as the century of design.<sup>5</sup> Oh argued that because Korea was no longer an impoverished country, and because most Koreans are now able to meet their basic needs, it was time for Korea to join the global trend of expanding the paradigm of design from individual products and businesses to one that also included government policy.<sup>6</sup> In his acceptance speech for Seoul’s appointment as the World Design Capital, Oh declared, “Design is a growth driver of the Seoul economy. We have surprised the world with the Miracle of the Han River

and advancements in the IT sector. Now we would like to bring global attention to Seoul with strong design.”<sup>7</sup>

Oh’s speech reveals several conflicting associations with respect to the concept of design. On the one hand, focusing on design is a challenge to break out from the developmental paradigm. Design is taken as an indicator of how far Korea has advanced since the days of the “Miracle of the Han.” During this era of developmental dictatorship under Presidents Park Chung-Hee and Chun Doo-Hwan, GDP per capita in current U.S. dollars rose from \$155.21 in 1960 to \$4,465.67 in 1988, the year Chun stepped down.<sup>8</sup> Now coming out of this era, Oh here is attempting to move on with the new theme of design and take the first step in a shift toward modernity. At the same time, design is also understood as the next step in the developmental continuum that proceeds from manufacturing to information technology. Furthermore, design is also presented as a new way of “surprising the world” and bringing “global attention to Seoul.” Far from being antithetical to the developmental paradigm, design thus inherits the Miracle of the Han River, especially in the way it can generate a positive economic outcome reinforced by a new national image.

To understand why design came to be seen as the twenty-first century heir to the twentieth century economic development in Korea, we would need to place it in the context of Korea’s modern economic history. During the colonial era, Korea underwent extractive industrialization as the Japanese colonial government drained its natural resources. As Korea entered the 1960s, aggressive economic development policies pushed the nation into consumer goods and light manufacturing, for example, textiles and sneakers, which required both relatively low technological investment and skilled labor. The focus of Korean industrialization then moved towards heavy and chemical industries in the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> Although the economy suffered in the latter half of the 1990s due to an economic crisis, commonly referred to as the “IMF Crisis” in Korea, progress was still made in pursuing systematic information and communications technology policies. The result was a growing IT industry during the 2000s.<sup>10</sup> Now Korea is rubbing shoulders with the most developed economies in the world. The pace of this change has been one of the most rapid witnessed in world history. The per capita GDP of Korea was \$2,432 in 1970 and dramatically rose to \$10,910 in 1990, rising to \$18,730 in 2000 and again to \$27,540

in 2011.<sup>11</sup> While manufacturing continues to be an important sector of the Korean economy, Korea is rapidly moving toward service industries. The move has increased investment in high value-added industries as protections for cultural and intellectual property. Design has similar potential to be such an industry. Just as food consumption evolved from sustenance to culinary art in wealthier societies, spending on entertainment and leisure activities has increased in developed economies. Design belongs to the realm of intellectual property with maximum value added. These factors explain why design has become a buzzword for post-industrial societies of the twenty-first century.

With this embedded message, Oh and the city’s government sought to achieve a new image of Korea. The new image of Korea is of a nation with a globally renowned capital, a city of design that exemplifies Korea’s high level of development. However, the level of development is not the only part of the image that design promotes. While some people applauded Park’s leadership for laying the foundation for economic growth during the developmental era, many others criticized Park and Chun’s authoritarian rule “characterized by the brutal repression of political dissidents and labor activists, as well as the exclusion of the populace from politics.”<sup>12</sup> Hence, breaking out from the old developmental era is also associated with an end to the exclusionary political atmosphere that characterized it. The “brutal repression” and “exclusion of the populace” of authoritarian regimes heightened dissidence, often in the form of militant street protests. This link between protests and the legacy of developmental authoritarianism led the metropolitan government to distinguish the new image of a developed Korea from the protests and militant public that had helped define its past. Indeed, the vision of citizenry and civil society portrayed in the metropolitan government’s model of developed country does not foresee the necessity of dissidence. Determined to not allow protests, the government even filed a lawsuit against several protesters in 2010. The government claimed that protestors interrupted one of the WDC-related events Seoul was hosting, causing dissipation of more than \$0.6 million in wasted tax revenue.<sup>13</sup> In holding a select few of the protesters responsible for the collective action of a large mass of people, the Seoul government strategically used fear to discourage protests and various political assemblies. If Park and Chun used military force to suppress their dissidents

continued economic development, then Oh adopted measures to preclude protests to prevent the disintegration of the model society. Both stand as methods of muting popular voice.

Given this context, I argue that the deployment of design as the defining characteristic of Oh's metropolitan administration was political in two major ways. The immediate reason given for committing city resources to large-scale construction projects was that these projects would improve Seoul's citizens' quality of living, but many opponents worried these projects would turn out to be more monumental than practical, pointing to the city's great reluctance to expand welfare spending.<sup>14</sup> It was clear that design was tied to the desire to create an idealized image of Seoul to project onto the global arena, and an attempt to create new revenue streams by stimulating consumption and promoting tourism. Thus, the image, though seeming to move beyond the developmental paradigm of earlier administrations, actually continued that paradigm in a different guise. Secondly, design became political during Oh's term as mayor in that it led to politicization of public action. Because industrialization occurred in South Korea within the political context of authoritarianism, post-industrialization meant that the political practices associated with the earlier era, including the culture of mass protests against the government, would be seen as backward. In turning a place traditionally known as the center of mass politics into a plaza that permitted no political assembly, Design Seoul reconfigured citizens primarily as consumers rather than active participants in the political process.

Still, what did the implementation of design politics mean for the ordinary citizens of Seoul? Did they embrace the new image of their city and the reconfiguration of their relationship to public space? The answers to these questions can be found in the case of Gwanghwamun Plaza construction.

#### GWANGHWAMUN: THE MEANING OF MASS POLITICS

Gwanghwamun is the central gate of Gyeongbokgung, the main palace of the Joseon Dynasty. Because of its significance as the entrance to the seat of royal authority, Gwanghwamun became a symbol of political power. Every regime that has come to power in Korea since the end of the Joseon Dynasty has worked to appropriate this symbol, whether through

destruction, relocation, or augmentation. In order to undermine "Koreanness," for example, the Japanese colonial government physically tore down the gate to the house of the king, the symbol of Korean sovereignty, and repositioned it to make it the entrance to the Government-General Building. The gate burned down during the Korean War, but in 1968, Park commissioned its reconstruction as a metaphor of the rise of Korea he planned to achieve through economic development. Later, during Roh Moo-Hyun's presidency, the sign of Gwanghwamun, written by Park in vernacular Korean script, was removed and restored to a version of the Chinese original. The act was deeply symbolic. Not only did it remove the mark of an earlier dictator from a public monument, it also suggested that the authoritarian era when one person could wield the power to imprint history was over.<sup>15</sup> The newly constructed Gwanghwamun Plaza also established a political message for Oh and former president Lee Myung-Bak, who shared the same conservative political base. For these neoliberal conservatives, the Gwanghwamun Plaza would become a symbol of the post-developed nation, where design represents the level of economic advancement, and citizenry do not engage in militant protests.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, the metropolitan government attempted to redefine the political nature of the space. In addition to its political symbolism, the Gwanghwamun area was an important political center for civic participation. A major assembly point during the days of pro-democracy demonstrations in the 1980s, the area regained significance in terms of mass politics in the early days of Lee's presidency. When the Oh administration initiated its reconstruction plan in 2008, for example, Seoul was in chaos, with protesters pouring out onto the streets in an attempt to appeal to a government that had ignored public opinion. Sparked by widespread dissatisfaction over the Free Trade Agreement with the United States, primarily as it concerned the importation of beef from cows older than thirty months, the so-called "candlelight protests" lasted over one hundred days and involved an estimated one million frustrated citizens.<sup>17</sup> The Gwanghwamun area was a focal point of these protests. Even though most citizens respected the rule of peaceful assembly, the sight of a large number of discontented citizens alarmed the conservatives, including President Lee and Mayor Oh. Meanwhile, Gwanghwamun Plaza had been included as one of the two centerpieces for

Oh Se-Hoon's Design Seoul. Before the renewal project was undertaken, as the story of candlelight protesters reveals, the Gwanghwamun area was one of the most popular areas for mass rallies in Seoul. The gatherings were not always political in nature. For example, during the 2002, 2006, and 2010 FIFA World Cups, citizens came out and cheered on the Korean team, enjoying the festivities in the company of their fellow Koreans. In other words, Gwanghwamun functioned as a site of both civil activism and popular cultural expression. The city government explained that the construction was intended to enhance citizens' leisure and recreational life by increasing their access to public space. During a 2009 interview, Oh commented, "One of the goals we are pursuing through public construction projects as part of our 'design policies' is to respond to the public opinion that there are not enough public spaces where people can go to relax or to which they can bring visitors from foreign countries."<sup>18</sup> But how exactly did the metropolitan government go about expanding citizens' access to public space, and how did this seemingly rational effort dovetail with the conservatives' political agenda of curtailing the candlelight protests?

To find an answer, it is fundamental to understand the changes made to Gwanghwamun. The renewal plan divided Gwanghwamun into a "plaza" (Gwanghwamun Gwangjang) and the "Citizens' Open Ground" (Shimin Yölin Madang). Gwanghwamun Plaza was a new creation. The site where the plaza stands now used to be a sixteen-lane thoroughfare leading to Gwanghwamun, the main gate of Gyeongbokgung. The only additional monument in the area was the statue of General Yi Sun-shin rising above the busy traffic. The new plaza took over six of the original sixteen lanes. Open to pedestrians, the plaza is divided into four different zones, each with a different theme: Urban, Culture, Representation of History, and Restoration of History.<sup>19</sup> With five lanes to the left and five lanes to the right on this busy road at the city center, this space created has the appearance of a stranded island.

While the plaza was being created from scratch, the other site, the Citizens' Open Ground, was changed in focus. It had once been the hub of mass protests, together with Seoul Square and Cheonggye Square. The renewal, however, placed emphasis on culture. When asked about the purpose behind the creation of Gwanghwamun Plaza, Shin Hyun-Don, the landscape architect in charge of the project, answered, "Until

now Seoul lacked open spaces in the center of the city. Gwanghwamun Plaza will bring about the renaissance of Seoul's downtown. In addition to the 'hardware' part of the plaza, 'software' is very important. Gwanghwamun Plaza will be where this 'software,' that is to say, culture, is created."<sup>20</sup> For Shin, however, the creation of a space where "culture" can blossom meant restricting the political use of the space. Accordingly, the Gwanghwamun renewal project was accompanied by a change in the city government's ordinance regarding the use of public squares or open spaces to limiting mass gatherings for purposes other than culture.

The revised ordinance curtailed citizens' access to Citizens' Open Ground. Prior to the change in the ordinance, public usage of Citizens' Open Ground followed a reporting system that did not require the government permission. However, the new ordinance implicated that any application running counter to the stated purpose of the Gwanghwamun Plaza—leisure and culture—would be denied. The vagueness of language used in the revision further added to the problem and amplified the executive and discretionary power of the mayor, who could now decide single-handedly what threatened public security. The new ordinance began with language that specifically excluded political rallies from the type of activities considered appropriate for the space: "This ordinance intends to define the rules regarding usage and management of Gwanghwamun Plaza for recreational activities and cultural events of citizens." It then instituted a review process subject to the mayor's approval: "Application for the permission to use the Plaza will be reviewed by mayor of Seoul in consideration of the following: 1) Whether the event violates the purpose of the plaza; 2) whether the proposed use is restricted by other laws. If necessary, mayor can enforce additional regulations in order to secure public order." Even a peaceful assembly within the boundaries of the law, as was the case during the candlelight protests when citizens of all ages—secondary school students, moms with their infants, senior citizens, white collar workers—gathered in the Gwanghwamun area with candles in hand, would no longer be permitted if deemed "political" in any way. Moreover, the revised ordinance entitled the government to cancel the granted approval with a simple notification if the already-approved event was considered to pose a threat to the safety of citizens or the public order, or deemed to be in violation of "other regulations," broadly defined. In addition, the eighth

clause of the ordinance states, "The mayor can change the status of permission even after the permission is granted if the metropolitan government of Seoul needs the space in the interest of the public, or if the change of status is required to ensure public security and social order."<sup>21</sup> Again, the ordinance remains unclear about what kinds of situations would qualify as serving "public interest."

In response to dissatisfaction expressed concerning the restricted usage of Gwanghwamun Plaza, the government cited many reasons supporting their decision to revise the ordinance. The main reason was that the Blue House, the U.S. Embassy, and other national landmarks surround Gwanghwamun, making security an absolute imperative. Another reason presented was the protection of citizens' security and unrestricted flow of traffic from possible danger and chaos arising from protests and political assemblies. However, the argument regarding traffic appears invalid, because the government had reduced the number of traffic lanes from sixteen to ten in order to create the Gwanghwamun Plaza in the first place, leading to a perennial bottleneck in the area. In 2009, moreover, the city council gave permission for a soap opera to be filmed in the area for twelve hours from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., the busiest hours of the day, even though this led to serious congestion in the area. These examples suggest that the city council's justification of its decision to ban political rallies in the area on account of traffic is specious at best.

The revision in the ordinance can thus be seen as an indirect commentary on the legacy of mass politics in South Korea. At critical junctures during the era of developmental dictatorship, protesters poured out onto the streets, often risking their lives to voice their demands. The people's struggle to gain the power to express their voices and participate in the political process has been an integral part of modern Korean history. By proclaiming the new definition of a citizen as a consumer, the Design Administration is also suggesting that Korean society has moved beyond the stage of development when mass politics were needed to check state power. According to political scientist Stuart White, "The concept of economic citizenship has aspired to the universalism, embodying the rights to work and have the means to consume, to invest and be entrepreneurial, and the obligation to be taxed... The concept of economic citizenship has developed and solidified into an agenda for entrepreneurship,

wealth creation, and adaptability to economic and technological change."<sup>23</sup> According to this definition, the concept of economic citizenship developed with the economic changes of a society. Applying this concept to Korea, we can argue that along with the change of society from developmental dictatorship to post-industrial neoliberalism, there is also a shift in the definition of citizenship, from political citizenship by dissidence to economic citizenship by consumption. Oh focuses on this notion of citizens as consumers when he defines accessibility to public space as the ability to have more choices in consuming leisure activities. Now, the role of the citizens lies in their economic activity, primarily as consumers. In this government-citizen relationship, having more rights as citizens means having more opportunities to consume, and more access means more consumption choices.

Nevertheless, some civic groups have articulated definitions of citizenship that oppose Oh's perspective. Korean geographer Hee-Sun Chung interprets Harvey's theory of heritageisation( with respect to the case of Gwanghwamun, <sup>25</sup> calling it "a case where the state gets rid of remains of the negative past, sorts out glorious elements, and uses them to reinforce its group identity."<sup>26</sup> Government deliberately erased the remnants of the authoritarian regime by prohibiting protests, and at the same time pointed out the glory of development Korea had achieved. This political manipulation generated the new group identity of a citizenry whose role is to consume leisure services and leave the space of politics in the hands of trusted political leaders.

However, some civic groups, consisting mostly of left-leaning progressive organizations, but also including many Seoul citizens who share their beliefs, disagree with such normative model suggested by the design politics. One of these groups is the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, who are so concerned about the issue of Gwanghwamun Plaza that they are leading a campaign to reverse the revision of the protest ordinance. A part of their argument is that the revision of the ordinance constitutes an infringement on people's right to public assembly, which is guaranteed by the constitution.<sup>27</sup> For the civic group, being citizens mean being active participants of a political process, not merely spectators watching the political scenes unfold and consuming what is ready-made for them to use. Participating in

the political process entails playing a role in forming the choices themselves, not simply choosing between already determined options. This is where the definition of accessibility, as articulated by some of the civic groups such as People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, diverges from that given by the Seoul government.

When citizens are merely consumers of leisure space, the government fulfills its duty of serving public interest when it increases the accessibility and availability of such leisure spaces. However, if citizens are seen not simply as consumers but as co-producers, accessibility becomes something more than individual enjoyment of a given space. In his examination of the discourse and practice of citizenship, political sociologist James Manor argues that what makes a citizen is whether he or she possesses "sufficient 'political capacity'—a term that implies political awareness, confidence, skills, and connections—to be able to operate effectively enough in the public sphere to qualify as a citizen rather than a mere resident or subject."<sup>28</sup> With respect to this idea of operating in the public sphere, citizens assume their rights to make modifications to the political outcome. Therefore, their definition of accessibility is closer to the accessibility to the process of producing these spaces in the first place, not simply consuming them once they have come into being. Citizens, who feel that they cannot operate in the public sphere because their voice is not heard or accepted by policy-makers, can turn to collective action to make their voices heard. It is precisely this dimension of collective civic action that the ordinance targets by removing the outlet of call for changes. The ambitious and forceful implementation of the post-industrial image has replaced the civil activism. The contradiction, however, is that Oh's ideal post-developmental society reflected in Design Seoul assumes no contention between the citizenry and the government. Rather, it assumes a place where the public does not feel the need to have its voice heard through protests.

If citizens indeed felt no need to continue their political struggle through visible, physical, public contestation, why did the Seoul Metropolitan Government revise the ordinance to prevent protests? If Korean society is truly post-industrial and post-developmental, as claimed in the government's rationale for design politics, why would people feel the need to protest in the first place? The renewal of the Gwanghwamun area and the ordinance regarding its public

use may be seen as an example of failed mediation between the government's goal of fostering a post-industrial national image and the civic groups' demand, which does not align with the pace of progress that the government suggests. Schot and de la Bruheze characterize mediation as "a process of mutual articulation and alignment of product characteristics and user requirements. In the process of mutual articulation and alignment (or mediation), product characteristics, the use, the user, and the user's demands become defined, constructed, and linked."<sup>29</sup> Producers and users have different sets of needs, and mediation is an important process to find a middle ground between two dissimilar, possibly conflicting interests. While it may be problematic to draw an analogy between the producer-consumer relationship in the market and the government-civilian relationship in politics, the narrow focus on the use of public space allows us to see the producer-consumer dynamic emerge in the debate over Gwanghwamun. According to Schot and de la Bruheze, a successful mediation is reached when there is a balance between differing opinions. If one side's interests are given more weight, a bias is created, and such a bias ends up furthering the divide rather than closing it. While the initial goal of creating a better public leisure space for citizens has been achieved, the government failed to take into consideration the voice of opposition. The opinion that welcomed the Gwanghwamun area's transformation into a leisure place was obviously well reflected, as it was constructed into a leisure place. On the other hand, the significant public voice that asked for a public space where freedom of speech and freedom of assembly could be exercised was neglected. Because citizens' interests were not considered to have the same weight as the ruling party's interests, mediation failed. In the process of designing the plaza, only the opinions of those experts and politicians aligned with the government came to matter.

#### DONGDAEMUN:

#### HISTORY AND CULTURE IN A GLOBAL WORLD

Dongdaemun has a long and rich history that goes back to the dynastic period. Dongdaemun literally means "east gate" in Korean and was one of the four gates surrounding Hanyang, the capital of Joseon Dynasty and modern-day Seoul. Near this gate, there were many historically important sites, including one of the capital's main sluices and the training ground of

Hadogam, the fortress guards of Hanyang. The area also served as the base for the Qing army brought into the country to suppress the Imo Mutiny of 1882. The mutiny was one of the many violent episodes that occurred as traditional Korea encountered the modern world. One of the rebellion's root causes was the grievances of the traditional military, which suffered discrimination relative to the new modern army at the end of the Joseon Dynasty.<sup>30</sup>

During the Japanese colonial period, the Dongdaemun area emerged as a site of national humiliation when it became the ground for a stadium built to celebrate the Japanese prince's wedding.<sup>31</sup> During the Park era, the Dongdaemun area witnessed the self-immolation of an uneducated and impoverished garment cutter named Jeon Tae-Il, who set himself on fire to protest the unjust treatment of workers. Dongdaemun Stadium also evokes the nostalgic memory of the high school baseball league that played there throughout the 1980s to the delight of Seoul's many students and baseball fans.<sup>32</sup> In the hands of dictators from the 1970s to the 80s, namely Park and Chun, baseball became an instrument for deflecting people's attention away from pro-democracy protests. Today, the name Dongdaemun indicates the shopping district near the actual Dongdaemun, or one of Seoul's twenty-five administrative precincts.

In 2007, Oh unveiled his grand plan of demolishing the old stadium and constructing a design plaza on the site. His justification for the demolition was that the dilapidated facilities, combined with street vendors crowding the area, were hindering the Dongdaemun area from growing bigger as a global shopping mecca.<sup>33</sup> Many civic groups opposed the proposed demolition. Heo Jeong-Hun, Secretary-General of Citizens United for Sports (Chaeyuk Shimin Yeon-dae) said, "As the first modern sports facility in Korea and a structure built by imperial Japan in 1925, Dongdaemun Stadium is a symbolic cultural asset." Hwang Pyeong-U, the chair of Cultural Action, echoed the sentiment: "Dongdaemun Stadium is worth registering as an official cultural asset. It should be managed at the national level."<sup>34</sup> Despite its dilapidated exterior, many people recognized the value of Dongdaemun Stadium as a site rich in historical memory, not only for the residents of Seoul, but for Korean citizens at large. In spite of these voices of resistance that recognized the value of Dongdaemun Stadium as a historical artifact, if not as the site of livelihood for the flea

market vendors, Oh was excited to redevelop the site as a different kind of landmark. He made his ambition explicit when he said that he planned to "make a number of landmarks during his term, with the Dongdaemun Design Plaza as the representative landmark out of all the landmarks to be built in Seoul."<sup>35</sup> This statement conforms precisely to the idea of design politics—promoting a national image of a highly developed society with sophisticated landmarks that would become known worldwide and attract tourists from all over the world.

With the beginning of the building of Dongdaemun Design Park in 2010, the development faced some unavoidable changes when a substantial number of Joseon Dynasty historical artifacts were found during the initial stage of construction. In an interview with *The Korea Herald*, Oh explained the change of plan in the following terms: "Shifting from the original plan of design facilities and green areas, the design park is now going to be a place where the history and culture of Korea co-exist."<sup>36</sup> The statement highlights a new emphasis on commemoration of Korean history and culture, while keeping the initial goal of creating a global landmark.

The final blueprint settled upon by the Oh Administration thus added "History and Culture Park" to the design plaza that was the original focus of the project. In this blueprint, half of the Dongdaemun Design Park is dedicated to a large main structure, and the other half of the site is dedicated to be the "History and Culture Park." The History and Culture Park itself has three main features: Dongdaemun Stadium Memorial, devoted to the demolished stadium and heyday of high school baseball, the History Museum that presents the long history of Dongdaemun and its surrounding vicinities during the Joseon Dynasty, and a couple of exhibition galleries that display the historical artifacts unearthed on the site. According to Seoul Design Foundation, History and Culture Park is intended to serve as a "living place of history education."<sup>37</sup>

These facilities of History and Culture Park, however, are dwarfed by the giant structure that is to be the home of Dongdaemun Design Plaza. Designed by Zaha Hadid, the large metallic structure takes on the shape of waves with green patches of grass covering them on top.<sup>38</sup> The structure's lack of straight lines, its curved shape and metal silver appearance, combined with its unusual size, are reminiscent of a



large UFO. Calling it “Metonymic Landscape,” Hadid tried to symbolize historical, cultural, urban, societal, and economic elements of Korea all united metonymically in a landscape.<sup>39</sup> However, the aspect of scale and visibility makes readily obvious the uneven relationship between the design plaza and the History and Culture Park. The “Metonymic Landscape” is not only too large to grasp its look from the ground, but it also blocks the view of other components of the park. The museums are much smaller in scale and arranged to one side of “Metonymic Landscape,” and would be completely invisible from the side where most tall buildings from which people can look down on the park are located. Despite the Seoul government’s repeated insistence that the entire project is supposed to celebrate the past, the present, and the future, the blueprint of the design plaza area celebrates only the future as it pushes the History Museum and Dongdaemun Stadium Memorial to one side and into the shadow of “Metonymic Landscape.”

Marginalization of historical memory can also be seen in partial restoration of the remains of the fortress and training ground of Hadogam, the special fortress guards during the Joseon Dynasty, and Igan Sluice Gate, a crucial part of the capital city’s infrastructure remaining from its days as Hanyang. But even when 31,000 square meters out of 61,585 square meters of the site designated for the construction was further excavated for precious remains underneath, the recovered sluice gate was sandwiched right in the middle of the whole park. When the whole park was viewed from the side where shopping mall buildings are concentrated, the recovered remains are mostly hidden behind “Metonymic Landscape.”<sup>40</sup> Looking at the effort that was put in to help this park somehow serve the function of “living place of history education,” it seems apparent that the objective of commemoration would be achieved only minimally at best. One might even conclude that the History and Culture Park side of the construction was built for the sake of being able to claim that the new design park is also serving the role of a memorial, when in actuality, that role has been subjugated to the goal of erecting a globally recognizable landmark. English cultural geographer David Harvey also supports the idea that history is more than merely a consumable entity, saying, “Heritage must be allowed a wider scope than simply being portrayed as something that people do to fill their free time, or as a hostage to the whims of

leisure fashion.”<sup>41</sup> Strictly structured into the most consumable shape, only the Joseon Dynasty part of the history is chosen and displayed at the site of Dongdaemun, despite the value of Dongdaemun Stadium as a cultural asset that survived the history of colonization by Japan. Dodging the controversial elements instead of leaving the history to be shown naturally, at the site of demolished stadium, the city government dug up even older history, Seoul Fortress and Hadogam from Joseon Dynasty, both of which date well before the construction of the stadium. Too concerned with the park’s ability to be consumed, Oh and the city government sacrificed the centuries of history and culture.

The decision reveals the government’s reluctance to confront any history that has the potential to be politicized, as there still are many ongoing political issues regarding the legacies of the colonial era. Joseon Dynasty, on the other hand, is safe from contestations of this kind. Why was there this shift in focus away from the still present colonial history? I argue that depoliticization of history was a step toward molding the past into a consumable product.

In response to the selection of Hadid’s “Metonymic Landscape,” several South Korean architects denounced the government’s insistence on a global landmark. Well-known for prioritizing her own distinctive design style over local specificity or architectural context, Hadid is unapologetically abstractivist.<sup>44</sup> This is despite the attempt by the Seoul Design Foundation to argue for a degree of local context in her commissioned work: “What Ms. Hadid intended was to create a landscape by metonymically integrating the various historical, cultural, urban, societal, and economic features as exhibited by the Dongdaemun Design Plaza.”<sup>45</sup> Architect Yang Sang-Hyun called Hadid’s work “an extreme of morphological experiment” and claimed that “the annelid-looking structure has no relation to the memories we have about this site [Dongdaemun].”<sup>46</sup> In Hadid’s structure, “various historical, cultural, urban, societal, and economic features” that are local to Korean history and to the site itself appear only “metonymically”. The nebulous word “metonymy” in this case is synonymous with the absence of local specificity. “Metonymic Landscape” can probably be built anywhere on earth and still remain the same, since the specificity of Korean culture and of the site of Dongdaemun itself is very lightly, perhaps even negligibly represented.

In another set of commentaries about DDP, Seoul Design Foundation actually seems to negate its earlier claim about the embeddedness of Korean history and culture in Hadid's futuristic design. According to these comments, the DDP buildings and their arrangement in the park is meant to resemble the wave of water, representing flexibility of the space. Embodied in "Metonymic Landscape" is the philosophy of using architecture to enable people to think about something that was not imaginable in the past.<sup>47</sup> In such a characterization of DDP, the emphasis is on the future rather than on history as a lived reality in the present, despite the governmental rationale of creating a "living place of history education." While it may be possible to "metonymically" see the wavelike appearance of the buildings as a reference to Igan Sluice Gate, it is clear that the structure makes no recognition of the lived and living history of the Dongdaemun area.

This is precisely the problem singled out by Korean architects. Yu Gul and Seung Hyo-Sang, who participated in the International Invitational Design Competition, have expressed their disappointment in the lack of cultural consideration evident in Dongdaemun Design Park.<sup>48</sup> Seung Hyo-Sang points out that Hadid claims that her style of architecture is independent from the site of construction. Seung laments that an architect who has no intention of reflecting the significance specific to a locality is designing a structure of a historically charged site. In fact, Seung's entry for DDP followed a direction opposite from that of Hadid's. Seeking to fully engage the historicity of Dongdaemun, Seung's design recovered the submerged fortress walls completely (rather than only partially), left the stands of Dongdaemun Stadium intact, and symbolically recreated the mountain that once existed at the site.<sup>49</sup> Because the government valued the attractiveness of a showy design, which is something more suitable for a landmark, Seung's design did not win. However, considering the long-lasting effects of the environment on the residents, unrepresented history may eventually lead to history in oblivion. Global recognition may be achieved through the splendidness of the current design of DDP, but only at the expense of remembrance of history. Moreover, from the perspective of the national interest as well, it would be more meaningful to spread the fame of Korean history attached to the DDP than to spread the fame of the DDP building itself as a brainchild of the designer Hadid.

For architect Moon Hoon, "Metonymic Land-

scape" is simply "Zaha's Crap." With this name, he mocks the structure's lack of local specificity and sarcastically describes the actual look of the building from a bird's eye view. In fact, many architects have expressed growing worries over the trend in creative façade design, free from the composition of interior space: "Façade designs that represent the purpose of the architecture and composition of the interior are losing popularity despite the praise given to the 'honesty' of the design."<sup>50</sup> This trend, they fear, challenges and reverses the principle of "form follows function," famously articulated by the American architect Louis Sullivian.<sup>51</sup> Public space has increasingly become exhibitionist, but upon the shiny silver exterior of Dongdaemun Design Plaza and inside its glittering surface, living history and local culture are nowhere to be found. The aspiration toward a global landmark may remain an empty dream when it fails to capture what makes the site locally specific and meaningful in the first place.

## CONCLUSION:

### THE FUTURE OF DESIGN POLITICS

So far we have looked into the cases of public construction projects carried out in Seoul by the Design Administration of Oh. Built to promote the new national image of Korea as a post-industrial country, the projects highlighted design as a symbol of Korea's advancement but also revealed major contradictions. In the case of Gwanghwamun Plaza, the metropolitan administration and civic groups collided on the question of what it means to increase citizens' accessibility to public space. While the government viewed citizens as consumers of leisure spaces, civic groups demanded that they be recognized as active participants in the political process. In the case of Dongdaemun Design Park, a site rich in living history and local culture, the site is decontextualized and depoliticized in the process of creating a global landmark.

Under the grand ambition of fostering a new national image, these design projects together furthered the consumerization of Korea, its people, and its culture. At the heart of the debates surrounding their construction may be the question of agency and the status of human lives that unfold within these spaces. Taking pride in what Korea has achieved differs from the phenomenon of consumerization in the way it positions people and what they mean in the society. If the national pride is the focus, people are the subject

of achievement and the driving force that made things happen. But when the nation becomes a consumable product, people are the objects of consumption. Is there any possibility that the theme of design could change such dynamics of subjectivity?

Ironically enough, a partial answer may be found in a close examination of the vision statement of “Design Seoul.” This vision is divided into design strategy and design principle. Design strategy is citizen-first design, and design principle is “emptying, merging, cooperating, sustainable design.” Along with these mottos, the Design Seoul Administration also suggests its ambition of bringing about “Designomics,” by linking public design and design industry together to promote Seoul’s competitiveness as a global city.<sup>52</sup> If citizens’ satisfaction is one of the foci in this vision and economic advancement is the other, in the middle lies the principle of “emptying, merging, cooperating and sustainable design,” even though that seems far from what was actually done. There appears to have been some confusion within the ranks of the city government about the exact direction the Design Administration should pursue.

As ideas, the vision statement contains many things that appear promising. Had they been developed creatively with deep and equal consideration for every element that makes up the whole, the Design Administration may not have garnered a far less attractive nickname, Exhibitionist Administration. But without the process of careful refinement of goals, and with the chaos resulting from conflicting visions, the slogan of design became a way of creating a façade around the hollow core.

Bringing the idea of design into the political scene was a brilliant start of a creative and flexible political culture. However, the politicians who initiated this process still seem to sport tunnel vision. In order for design politics to be a genuine innovation, it cannot simply borrow something already established and force it into a new framework. The application of design into politics needs to be different than the application of design into the commercial architectural industries. Creating a prettier public space is not the role of design in politics. A public construction is a public possession that serves the citizens’ needs, considered in a multi-faceted and holistic way, before it is an architectural project run by the government.

In order for this custom-made adaptation of design to politics to succeed, the very possibility of what

design can mean must undergo expansion as well. Design, rather than representing a static, preestablished concept, should be explored for all its creative potential in all kinds of new directions in order to find the right shape for its use in politics. In Oh’s Design Seoul, design simply meant aesthetics. The projects undertaken with the slogan of design were limited only to the visual medium, such as public construction, or a design fair. The term design, however, means much more. Though the Korean loanword “design” refers mainly to the action of sketching or planning a product’s look or form, the general meaning of design includes the action of crafting a purpose, which refers to the planning or intention behind an action or a fact.<sup>53</sup> Within this broader definition, appearance is only a part of what constitutes design, not the whole. Illuminated in this light, the idea of social design can be an alternative framework of design politics capable of achieving the government’s initial vision of putting citizens first.

In exploring the concept of Social Design, we can take inspiration from the work of New Urbanists. According to architect Ellen Dunham-Jones, New Urbanists see the current post-industrial landscape to be regressive, promoting diverse, mixed-use, mixed-income communities instead.<sup>54</sup> Succeeding Oh, Seoul’s current mayor Park Won-Soon has embraced Social Design in the New Urbanist sense as the design that changes life, society and people, a smart design that can reflect the thoughts, habits, and culture of humans in a comprehensive way and upgrade their quality of life as a whole.<sup>55</sup> At the core of this design philosophy lie people. The philosophy is simple and modest; things around people should be transformed to meet the needs of people, rather than transforming people to fit the government-dictated changes.

One step toward achieving this goal of people-centered politics is simply to open ears to listen. The new administration of Seoul under Mayor Park has hosted regular workshops called “Cheongchaek Workshops” to gather public opinion. “Cheong” is a Chinese character that means “to hear or listen” and “chaek” signifies “policy.” A neologism, “Cheongchaek” is just one letter different from “Jeongchaek,” the Korean word for policy.<sup>56</sup> The name of the workshop suggests the new administration’s determination to bring public opinion into the policymaking process.

An important facet of social design and people-centered politics is the question of welfare. The under-

lying philosophy behind social design is the collective well-being of the society. The notion is to create a city or a nation where citizens of all different backgrounds are happy together by providing more welfare benefits to support citizens of lower socioeconomic strata. To Mayor Park and the supporters of social design, closing the gap of socioeconomic status by strong welfare is the way to achieve “Sangsaeng,” or “co-prosperity.”<sup>57;58</sup> And as a support to their belief, the Legatum Prosperity Index, used by Forbes to rank the happiness of countries, ranked four out of the five Scandinavian nations – Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland – within the top ten, and the remaining Scandinavian nation Iceland fell just short of the top ten, ranking as thirteenth.<sup>59</sup> Considering that Scandinavian nations have reputations for their emphasis on social welfare, their high ranking as the most prosperous and happiest countries in the world proves that social welfare is a way to achieve national well-being. Furthermore, it makes social designing through providing social welfare more promising for the future of Seoul. As opposed to Oh’s professed goal of creating a new revenue stream with designing the outlook of the city, stimulating the consumption of citizens by providing leisure opportunities and promoting tourism by constructing landmarks is the better alternative.

To be sure, there are concerns about the philosophy of social design. Because the value of social design lies in meeting people’s needs and wants, it may lead to populism and fiscally irresponsible promises made to the voting public in order to buy their political support. Even though people of higher socioeconomic status, whose lives are less affected by welfare, most often voice fear of populism, these people nevertheless comprise a segment of the citizenry, and their voices should not be neglected. Taking the fear of populism to an extreme, the right-wing media has called Park’s social design “dictatorship through populism.”<sup>60</sup>

Another criticism of social design is that paying such attention to meeting the current needs and wants of the people of Seoul mortgages the city’s future competitiveness. Kim Myung-Soo, the head of the Seoul City Council, has charged that building landmarks and promoting tourism are important investments in growing the economic pie for the city of Seoul, and that this is a part of the equation that social design neglects.<sup>61</sup> Even though civil engineering and construction are not the only ways to increase the city’s competitiveness, they do indeed contribute to the growth

of the competitiveness of a city in a nation, if pursued in a balanced way.

Despite these concerns, social design does seem to offer an important corrective to the design politics of the former administration by refusing to sacrifice the content for form, and paying greater attention to the lived reality inside rather than seeking to manufacture a national image for the consumption of the outside world. Currently, the manifestation of social design in Seoul’s administration under the new mayor has its own problems. But the essence of social design remains people. A balanced approach to put this fundamental insight into practice will bring the definition of design one step closer to becoming aligned with the ideal development of a healthy society. Politics is the governance of people. When people who make up the nation are adequately cared for, the desired national image will come in time.

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