Boundary and Sense of Place in Traditional Korean Dwelling

Rieh Sun-young*

Abstract: A place cannot exist without some kind of boundary and man’s essential relationship to places consists in dwellings, the basic property of human existence. Loss of the sense of place in our dwelling resulted from the negation of the meaning of boundary in our traditional dwelling. Traditional Korean residences have a strong sense of place with their layering of the boundaries. Investigation of the dialectical expansion of the boundary in Korean dwelling space will propose another approach for the discourse of connection between contemporary architecture and cultural tradition in Korea.

Keywords: sense of place, dwelling, boundary, traditional Korean housing

* Sun-Young Rieh is working as an Associate Professor and Director of program in architecture at the Department of Architecture, University of Seoul, Korea. She earned her B.S and M.S degrees from Seoul National university and Master degree in Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley. She taught at Prairie View A&M University in USA before joining the University of Seoul. She is an officially registered architect in both United States and Korea. She is currently a member of American Institute Architects and Architectural Institute of Korea.

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Introduction

The encounter of man and environment creates ‘place.’ Only when place is created can man identify and orient himself in the world. Heidegger has written: “spaces receive their being from places and not from ‘the space....’ Man’s essential relationship to places and through them to space, consists in dwelling... the essential property of human existence.” I believe that dwelling is the most basic and most intimate category of place. Gaston Bachelard’s insight on childhood memory provides a revelation of dwelling as a place of memory. He described the memories of childhood as something always related with particular places in a house, such as nooks and special corners. These corners of cherished memories, if not of the whole house, are not abstract combinations of space but concretized places. If we accept this notion, it will be possible to count spatial elements within the memory of childhood as a meaningful feature that enhances the sense of place. Though we may assume several spatial concepts in traditional Korean dwelling that create sense of place—such as entrance transition, center, edge, sequence, and so on, boundary is the most basic feature that can give birth to a place. In Korean culture, dwelling as a reflection of the relationship among man, culture, and environment is critical to the theme of sense of place.

The question of the shift from ‘space’ to ‘place’ is a question of boundaries, that is, the differentiation and qualification of space. My position is a phenomenological approach, one that presupposes that there is no world prior to our lived experience of it. A phenomenology of space entails the primacy of lived-space over abstract conceptions of geometric space. Therefore phenomenologists focus their

attention on what the home reveals about culture and environmental relations. In a sense, they are interested in using the dwelling as a ‘window’ to see how different cultures relate to their physical environment. The boundary is a frame through which ‘space’ becomes ‘place’ and the goal of this paper is to investigate the role and special characteristics of boundary in traditional Korean dwelling. The first part of the paper will investigate the expansion of the boundary in traditional Korean dwelling. The second part will describe its dialectics of boundary in terms of several basic concept generally found in various cultures.

Expansion of Boundary: Macro to Micro, Micro to Macro

The location of our existence can be explained as a series of places. Orientation or identification is experienced sometimes from macro to micro scale and sometimes from micro to macro scale. In Korea, the most important and largest boundary related with a dwelling is the mountain. This originates from the fact that the Korean peninsula is a mountainous country, with mountains taking up about 70% of its territory. Naturally Korea’s perception of the world has always been related with this particular geographical feature. Everywhere in Korea, sight lines terminate with mountains except along the water horizons of the sea. The theory of fengshui, a traditional ordering system for the selection of dwelling sites, is based on the physical features of the mountains. Mountains are composed as multiple layers in a distance and are visible from the inside of the house. Natural boundaries perceivable from within the house generate a strong sense of place, making the dweller the center of the world.

Christian Norberg-Schulz has provided a formal analysis of the structuring of existential space, identifying several of its levels. The widest and most comprehensive of these levels is that of ‘geography’- the level at which meaning is given to nations, continents, and
regions beyond direct experience. The next level is that of the ‘landscape,’ the background to man’s actions and a reflection of his interactions with environment on a major scale. Below this is the urban level; differing from that of landscape in that it is almost entirely a built space created through human effort and purpose. The next level is that of the street, the basis of our experience of cities; and below that is the house, or more precisely the home, the central reference point of human existence; “our house is our corner of the world.... It is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the world.” In this sense, traditional Korean dwelling can be applied to this structure system. The mountainous geography of the Korean

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peninsula made it possible to divide its regions along the spine of large mountain ranges that created strong geographical boundaries and unique landscapes. This kind of natural boundary and landscape generates settlement patterns and built space that adjust to their environment.

Korea’s perception of the world is consistent with this geographical characteristic of the landscape. An example reflecting Korea’s landscape oriented perception of the world can be found in the addressing system in Korea, one that goes from macro scale to micro scale. It is very interesting to compare the different systems of addressing. In some cultures, people write their addresses in the order of state, city, street, name or number of building or house. In other cultures, the order is reversed, starting from the number of the house and ending with the state. In this case, the name of the recipient is written at the top. This custom seems to originate from the perception of oneself. Western culture is associated with the latter method as it seems that the individual wants to be identified first. In cultures that emphasize collectivity the former method is used. The people in these cultures identify themselves through larger community groups to which they belong and orient themselves through a series of places in which they experience boundaries. Korea’s custom of identifying a space following this system reflects their perception of their existence related with the place and the world.

**Figure 2. Comparison of Addressing System**

Let me give one more example that is revealing of Korea’s strong affiliation to the dwelling place as a part of the larger world. The name of a place is an essential element in the association of
ideas to a particular place. As Robert Mugerauer points out, “one can show how language enables environment to emerge, which also enables us better to understand the places and manner in which we attempt to dwell.”\(^5\) The streets in both the Back Bay area of Boston and Sacramento in the United States are organized alphabetically; those in Boston are given a full name, whereas those in Sacramento are represented by a single letter. The name of the Back Bay streets gives a stronger image of the place (Fig. 5). In this sense, the perception of the environment with a definite name and hierarchy from macro to micro, forms a strong sense of place in Korean culture. Language and environment are always already given together. We always find ourselves in the midst of environment already given and interpreted by way of language.\(^6\)

When the name of a place originates from geographical characteristics such as mountains, valleys, meadows, rivers, wells, etc., common in the names of many regions in Korea, it concretizes the identity of the place and the process of identifying a place. From bigger regions to a particular district, the image of the place can be rooted down to a particular spot. Traditional Korean dwelling, as part of a strong geographical configuration, is associated with specific names that identify multiple boundaries. Meaningful boundaries implicate unique characteris-

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tics of a particular landscape that enhances the sense of place of the house. In the linear street oriented system, a street may extend to a point where the association of its name and its environmental characteristics is often diluted.

Let us now consider the expansion of the boundary in Korean dwelling in reversed order, that is, from micro scale to macro scale. In this case, the basic unit is usually a room. In traditional Korean dwellings, each room is used for multi-functions and becomes the center of the whole dwelling regardless of its location in the whole house. Koreans have used this basic unit as a bedroom, as a dining room; sometimes it is a study room and a place for family ritual.

This basic unit is where new life is born, grows to adulthood, and eventually dies. All related rituals can be contained in the same spatial boundary. This is a significant difference from western ways.
of living, which separates dining room, bedroom, and family room. Therefore, the room is the unique life stage for a person and the basis of his or her existence. Its strong sense of place originates from this kind of life affiliation, and is created and enhanced by the layers of various boundaries. The first boundary enclosing the room is a translucent paper door/window. The floor of this room is finished with glossy paper which reflects and softens sun shine or moon light penetrating through the framed paper. The paper opening is a sensitive transmitter in terms of acoustical and olfactory senses that enhance the sense of place. The sound of creek and rainfall, the smell of seasonal vegetation in the garden creates an intangible boundary for this basic unit of dwelling. It also acts as a sensitive canvas reflecting natural phenomena. People inside can feel the vibration of the tree branches and can ‘see’ the sound of the wind. Murray Schafer criticized modern space in terms of its lack of aural, tactile, and olfactory senses: “Glass shattered the human sensorium. It divided the visually perceived world from its aural, tactile and olfactory accompaniments. Or rather, it substituted new accompaniments to the accentuated habit of looking.” In this sense, the traditional

Figure 5. City Map of Boston (left) and Sacramento (right)

Korean house is a good example of space which sustains the validity of the human sensorium.

Boundaries, as a tool shifting from ‘space’ to ‘place,’ define inside and outside. Every boundary in our dwelling is related with this dialectics of inside and outside. The basic boundary which defines the room is not fixed but flexible enough to control the interaction with the outside. The expansion of the basic room creates another extended boundary. When the room is closed, all other parts of the house except this room becomes an exterior. When the door is open to the floor hall, a larger positive interior space can be made. The main floor hall is usually located between rooms. It functions as a living space during summer and provides a transition from outdoor to indoor. When the room is open, the room and hall are recognized as a positive interior space making the inner courtyard a negative outdoor space. During the summer, vertical bamboo mats are hung, which provide for privacy while still allowing the breeze to enter. Sometimes the door itself is hung on a hook. The wall, i.e. the boundary, is eliminated by hanging the door, enhancing the interpenetration between inside and outside. The inner courtyard is another flexible space in the traditional Korean house. With its deep eave it is perceived as a semi-interior space. In this particular place, the sky becomes a roof that contrasts with the void at the earth. When this inner courtyard is integrated with the floor hall and open room, this private place becomes another positive inside space compared to the outer yard which is a semi-public space facing the public alley.

The concept of inside vs. outside in dwelling has two different aspects. The home can be recognized as a room inside a house, the house within a neighborhood, the neighborhood within a city, and the city within a nation. Each experience is possible through the interaction between a place and its larger context. Another aspect of the dialectics of inside and outside is the boundary of home. Some

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cultures distinguish inside and outside clearly by boundaries and customs related with the action of entering the territory of the house: taking off shoes, removing hats, removing gloves, etc., are very critical acts as they imply an invasion of the other's own world. With the threshold, gate and partition wall, or building mass, the house becomes a restricted unique place- a positive inside in contrast to the neighborhood outside of the gate. Thus the home may be represented by the door and the window. Through the door, the visitor gains access either to the intimate realms of the home or to an indefinite outside. “Seeing without being seen” is one of the basic needs of human beings, and is only possible through openings. Openings make the passage into ‘another’ world possible. All dwellings are both closed and open, they conceal and show oneself. They distinguish one as a unique individual as well as a member of the community. A strong boundary distinguishes the inside from the outer

Figure 6. Expansion of Boundary in Traditional Korean Dwelling
-Yoonjeung’s Old Residence (17C)
community through the formation of a deep and indirect threshold. Both the flexible boundaries inside the house and the strong outer boundary bring about a strong sense of place in the traditional Korean house.

The boundary starting from a basic room expands into a higher hierarchy and eventually extends to an even larger natural boundary of the mountains, the most dominant boundary for every living space in the traditional Korean house. Each room in the house follows this pattern of expansion of boundary. This is the major feature of the strong sense of place in traditional Korean dwelling, one that makes every corner of the house a center of the world.

**Dialectics of Boundary**

Built environments make ideas visible, provide settings for activities, remind people what these activities are, signify power or status, express and support cosmological schemata, and encode value systems. They separate domains, i.e. they differentiate between here/there; men/women; private/public; inhabitable/uninhabitable; front/back; sacred/profane or secular.8 Every culture has their own unique boundary system in its dwelling. This tangible/intangible boundary reveals differentiated domains. In traditional Korean dwelling, we can find various boundaries that overlap and expand dialectically enhancing the sense of place.

The home is a place of contradiction between public and private. Because humans are by nature social animals, people cannot exist alone; yet at the same time they need privacy. According to culture and custom, the method of providing privacy varies. The buffer between public and private also varies. For example, front yard, front path, front porch is the typical buffer sequence from public to

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private space in American culture. To define public and private zones in outdoor space, people use elements such as fences, archways, porch overhangs, and steps. Sometimes they decorate these things with plantings to express their territoriality and to control unwanted invasion. In Islamic culture, the sequence from public throughfare to private patio also passes several buffer paths. They are called Hara, Darb, Atfa.

Traditional Korean dwelling has a strong hierarchy of privacy enhanced by threshold, gate, screen, and wall. Once one gets in, the concept of privacy dissipates as inner spaces are transparent, both visually and acoustically. The experience of transition from public to private is recognized in another threshold, between the male’s territory, located in the front and open to the public, and the female’s territory, located at the back and introverted towards the courtyard (Fig. 9).

Female vs. male is a strong boundary pair found in traditional Korean dwelling. In some cultures, the distinction of female and male dominate the entire structure of dwelling. For example, in Islamic culture the extreme need for privacy for women who are
cloistered dominates the entire dwelling layout and settlement form. In Egypt, men and women are always separated; rich people having distinct rooms and poor people using different corners of a single room. In Java, women are associated with the inner or rear portion of the house while men are identified with the front of the building. Darkness and shadow are related to the female, brightness and real things are related to the male (Fig. 8). Traditional Korean dwelling also has clear gender distinctions. Two separate territories are divided by wall and door. The door connecting and separating two distinct domains has unique features that provide for the spatial transition from the man’s world to the woman’s. One is not allowed to view the inside directly from the door. The screen wall is a visual buffer against the view and flow from the man’s territory. At the same time, it has openings at the top and bottom and communication is possible through these openings. The female’s territory, located in the deepest part of the house, is the informal part of the house where the cooking and maintenance of the house is done. The male’s territory is the formal part of the house where guests can stay and gathering is centered. It is located in the front, commanding the visually dominant part of the house (Fig. 10).

Figure 8. Boundary Pair in Traditional Korean Dwelling
-Yoonjeung’s Old Residence
The third distinct boundary pair in traditional Korean dwelling is the one that divides the ‘sacred’ from ‘profane.’ The prevalence of sacred or privileged corners and sides is almost universal. In Fiji, the east wall is for the chiefs. The Mongol Yurt is divided into 4 parts: to the right of the door the husband and wife, facing them the guest of the honor, and to the left the other guests in descending order of importance. The altar is always on the left side of the bed as one enters. In the Arab tent, there is also a ritual space distribution which differs among tribes. Javanese home rituals usually proceed at the center of the house, recognized as a sacred zone with its decoration and darkness. In China, although the whole house is sacred, the northwest corner is the most sacred. The tables for worshiping ancestors occupy the center of the sacred place. On the table a stove

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for burning incense is kept every morning by the housewife. Family members pay respect to ancestors or gods by bowing and offering food and wine.

In cultures where there is no established sacred place, the house itself is sacred. In earlier times, gateways and entrances to the places of rulers and to religious places were holy and sanctified. The entrances to such places were literal boundaries between the secular, profane world and the sacred, holy world. Entrances to homes also have had a sacred quality, as if they too are a separation between the “cold, cruel world” and the warm, protective haven of the home.10

10. Irwin Altman & Martin M. Chemers, Culture and Environment. Monterey,
When one’s dwelling is violated by burglary, people usually reveal more than anger, feelings of vulnerability, and grief for the lost things; they reveal the feeling of being defiled. This reveals the recognition of the entire home as a sacred space. In this sense the duality of the sacred and the profane is universal in dwelling. In traditional Korean dwelling, upper class families usually place their family shrine at the boundary of their residences. The shrine was somewhat separated from everyday-space by its location at the rear garden. Within this sacred boundary, disrespectful words and behavior are unacceptable. This place was kept calm and sacred. For screening unexpected intrusion, a separate gate was sometimes provided. With this gate and lock, the sense of the sacred is enhanced. For the lower classes who could not afford to build a shrine, one corner of the floor hall maintained a sacred atmosphere. Incense and portrait of the ancestors were usually placed on the table in that corner. They could also use one section of a closet. This can change the character of the room into a sacred place when needed. Whether it is a designated space protected by a permanent boundary or a temporary corner surrounded by an intangible boundary for the ritual, the distinction between the two different worlds was an important feature of traditional Korean dwelling.

**Conclusion**

Heidegger’s statement that “a boundary is not that at which something stops but from which something begins its presence” is manifest in the traditional Korean dwelling, especially in upper class residences. Korean culture has pursued the harmony of the coexistence of contradiction in the idea of Ying Yang, that is inside and

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outside, female and male, public and private, sacred and profane, and so on. On the other hand, these concepts have expanded dialectically into a broader scale through the play of boundary.

Contemporary dwelling has relatively weak sense of place which had been enhanced by the multiple boundaries in the traditional dwelling. The negation of door and threshold in crossing a boundary has resulted in a loss of the person’s identity as a center of the world. The contemporary door is a reflection and transformation of cultural intentions. In the past, the door marked in tangible form the passage from outside to inside, from public to private, from profane to sacred. It thereby reinforces the psychological shift, accompanied by a bodily transition, from chaos to a center of refuge. This is a shift across a meaningful threshold, thereby entering a place. Modern entranceways obscure psychological passage and contribute to a built environment which less frequently reflects essential qualities of human experience and meaning. Another concept of the contemporary house which has contributed to the loss of boundary is the free plan. Free plan as a new domestic typology originated from Wright’s destruction of the box which broke with the conventional use of paths and goals, in terms of passages and enclosed halls. Space becomes a flowing continuum without clearly defined zones. The free plan degenerated into a unidentifiable openness resulting in alienation from the unfulfilled eternal need for recognizing our orientation. Lacking figural quality, contemporary dwelling cannot contain meaning. Negation of a sense of place has jeopardized humane modern life. Without the recovery of boundary, our daily life has little chance of taking hold of meaningful roots. The most urgent task for designers today is the recovery of the sense of place in our dwelling in terms of boundaries, which we have wonderful trace in Korean traditional dwelling.

References


