Feature Review and Discussion

The Special Issue
on Architectural Aesthetics in East Asia

Lee Sang-hae*

East Asia has a long tradition of unique architectural style. Apparently it has little changed in its style during the past thousand years. This does not mean that it has not changed at all or stagnated. Rather it stands for a great adaptability of traditional architecture to the changing conditions of society and life. However, traditional architecture of East Asia suddenly lost its relevance in our society after the rapid modernization during the last century.

This situation brought about a drastic change to the status of traditional architecture in modern society. Traditional architecture is a recent past, which remained relevant until recently and yet it has become a remote tradition. While being recognized as a universal architectural system and bearing little stylistic changes, traditional architecture has never emerged as an object for a conscious theoretical research in the meantime. Thus, neither its characteristics nor its meaning has been fully understood.

While traditional architecture still remains as a very rich and

---

* Professor of Architecture, Sungkyunkwan University.

© 2004 by the Sungkyunkwan University, The Academy of East Asian Studies
important cultural tradition in East Asian society, it has lost its connection with our contemporary architecture and life. Thus, the identity of East Asian traditional architecture in modern society has yet to be reconstituted. Its principles have to be understood more clearly and its symbolic meaning as well as technical knowledge has to be uncovered. Furthermore, its relevance to modern society should also be explored. In short, the gap between traditional architecture and modern society should be bridged both in theory and practice.

The five papers printed in the *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* are the ones related to the space and aesthetics of the traditional architecture of East Asia, published during the international conference under the theme of “Traditional Architecture in modern Asia (TAmA)” held in Seoul from October 17, 2002 till October 19, 2002 by Korean Association of Architectural History.

“Asia’s Diversity & Asia’s Dwellings: A Geographer’s Perspective” written by Ronald G. Knapp of State University of New York nicely delineates some of the essential geographic elements relating to Asia to map Asia’s vernacular architectural patterns with exquisite but selected reference materials.

The manuscript of the paper is well written and arranged in a style that sufficient and easily followed in terms of informative review of literature with short title, short abstract with several keywords, good introduction, and clear figures, generalizing about ‘time’ and ‘space’ that are both important to understand traditional architecture.

In particular, the author maintains that the old dwellings in Asia are not the product of a motionless traditional culture rather than revealing that traditions are recreated and re-modified as time passes and as building structures are brought from one place to another.

The arguments raised by the author also remind us to enhance heritage preservation efforts that are rapidly vanishing and to use the maps, the essential geographic elements, in order to raise questions, kindle insights, and stimulate thinking about Asia’s vernacular architecture.
Fengshui, which is usually defined as a theory practiced in traditional East Asia for selecting an auspicious site for dwellings both for the living and the dead, and for deciding important aspects of planning a dwelling. It is usually interpreted as a Chinese system of architectural design solution. Even though fengshui theory is believed to be the canonic sets of ideas of Chinese architectural planning, its evidence has been little proved. Furthermore, fenhshui practice has often been termed superstitious since the Chinese sought good fortune through it.

Within such a historical spectrum, Wang Qiheng of Tianjin University clarifies the evidence of fengshui practice for designing exterior design in his paper, “Theory of Modular Grid of Chinese Traditional Exterior Space Design.”

By thoroughly exploring historical documents, the author verifies the significance of xing-shi principle of fengshui theory and provides details of how the theory of modular grid system was carried out on the exterior design, that is, construction site.

Wang Qiheng maintains that the exterior space design module of Chinese traditional architecture is based on xing-shi principle: the distance of 1000 chi (1 chi ranging for 23-35cm) links to xing, and the distance of 100 chi links to shi.

According to fengshui theory, shi relates to visual perceptual effects of the far, big, total, general and profiled, and xing refers to those of the near, small, individual, partial, and detailed.

Even though xing-shi principle seems to denote opposite notions, its role designing exterior design is different: shi for the overall general planning, while xing for the individual, partial, and detailed things, thus to maintain architectural space in groups.

The paper gives concise and clear amount of new analysis of exterior space design of Chinese traditional architecture based on modular grid system from the historical documents and field surveys.

Architectural drawing transforms 3D subjects to the forms of 2D representation integrated in certain artistic media. The paper, “Beyond Projection: A New Way to Understand Ancient Chinese
Architectural Drawing” written by Wu Cong of Tianjin University contributes to understand the methods of representing traditional Chinese architecture.

The author maintains that ancient Chinese tended to represent empirical space-time instead of physical, logical space-time, which showing the synthesis of meanings instead of universal principles. Wu Cong names ancient Chinese system of pictorial or graphic representation method as ‘Chinese representation methods.’

To maintain the Chinese method of standardization, differentiation, quantification the author finds the evidence from the historical practice of representation such as typical-sides method, which represents the scale and proportion of buildings in city design and architectural layout from Zhaoyutu (Map of a Graveyard) of the Warring States Period to the Lei Family’s architectural archive in the Qing Dynasty.

The paper has appropriate methods to deal with the issues that Chinese way of both perceiving and conceiving the world and natural phenomena is different from that of the West. In this sense, arguments raised in the paper are reasonable and persuasive. Nonetheless, additional literature review and examples found in the writings and architectural designs might be provided to cover the topic discussed in the paper.

Heidegger has contributed to the understanding of man’s essential relationship to places, which can also be applied to the understanding of traditional Korean dwelling.

Throughout the paper, “Boundary and Sense of Place in Traditional Korean Dwellings,” Rieh Sun-young of University of Seoul clearly maintains that traditional Korean residences have a strong sense of place with their layering of the boundaries, shifting the question of architecture from ‘space’ to ‘place’, that is, the differentiation and qualification of space.

The paper consists of two parts: the first part is on the expansion of boundary: macro to micro and micro to macro, in traditional Korean dwelling, and the second part is on the dialectics of boundary.
In fact, traditional Korean architecture can be verified in terms of a series of places, mountainous geography through landscape and settlement to the house, which is well summarized in the theory of fengshui, showing the Korea’s perception of the world.

Through the investigation, the author argues that traditional Korean dwelling has a strong hierarchy of privacy enhanced by threshold, gate, screen, and wall, demonstrating clear gender distinctions from Confucian ethical norms.

Nonetheless, contemporary dwellings have relatively weak sense of place with negation of door and threshold, causing a loss of person’s identity. Thus, the author maintains that the most urgent task for designers today is the recovery of the sense of place in our dwelling in terms of boundaries, which are found in Korean traditional dwellings.

The paper is well organized and easy to read. The proposed design method presented in the paper is effective and useful for contemporary dwelling. In addition, the interpretation of traditional Korean architecture appeared in the paper will contribute to the understanding of inside-view, one which is relevant to Korean traditional architecture.

Sarvimaki Marja of University of Hawaii at Manoa clarifies different spatial conceptions between Korean and Japanese aristocratic residences, Korean bangä· and Japanese shoin-zukuriä¸, built during a 250-year period since 1600 in her “Layouts and Layers: Spatial Arrangements in Japan and Korea.”

As the author has summarized in the paper, the topics discussed are the materials that surrounded the spaces, the elements that are not only space dividers, but also reflections of social order, and the layouts and spatial layers of Korean and Japanese houses, which attempts to shed new light on the interpretations of Korean and Japanese traditional architecture.

Through the paper, the author well summarize the characteristics of both Korean and Japanese architecture as well as the differences between them, such as spatial layers, divergent appearances,
inside/outside distinction, stages of entering, use of materials, papered doors, wooden floor and straw floor.

In addition, the author paid special attention to the continuous space of Japanese and Korean architecture, which appears in the distinctions of rooms, and private and public areas.

In sum, the paper presents good investigation results and useful for the general understanding of seventeenth century traditional domestic architecture of Korea and Japan.

There is a printing erratum on page 104 of the journal. “I would argue that at least the ‘flower stairs (hwagye) in the garden definitely are (fig. 13)” would be corrected as “I would argue that at least the ‘flower stairs (hwagye) in the rear garden definitely are, particularly from anchae’s daecheong (fig. 13).”