

Design history: Constructing a Korean identity in New Gwanghwamun Square

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ABSTRACT

This study explores and critically discusses Korean “design history,” in terms of landscape designers’ design strategies for constructing national identity using site history and memory. The achievements and limitations of the New Gwanghwamun Square (NGS) Project during 2016–2022 are scrutinized in this context. First, through a pilot case study, it examines the Seoul-specific socio-political contexts and categorizes the main approaches of design history, including imitation, materiality, form generation, and the function and principle of Korean tradition. Several strategies are observed in the main case of the NGS Project, such as the winning proposal of the NGS competition achieved to create a novel Korean identity through the restoration of a Korea-specific landscape, the reinterpretation of the structure and function of traditional Korean landscaping, form generation, and material exploration. The design history of the NGS Project included modifications during the post-design process for construction due to the opinions of different stakeholders, excavation and inspection of buried cultural heritage, and the election of a new Mayor of Seoul; thus, the initial design strategies were eventually not implemented. Instead, the constructed NGS renders the site’s history as a static spectacle and does not embody the physical landscape design, thereby limiting visitors’ experience to passive textual learning. Moreover, the picturesque visuals that represented the traditional Korean landscape in the proposal failed to be constructed and exclusively decorated long-existing statues with landscape elements, resulting in a Western-style indistinctive square. The present study can afford a case study for East Asian and international landscape and urban designers and administrators to construct their national and regional identities in open spaces.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Over the last five decades, landscape designers in South Korea (hereafter Korea) have explored various ways of projecting Korean identity onto open spaces. Since the early 1970s, when the professional field of Korean landscape architecture was established by embracing the practice and theory of American landscape architecture, many Korean landscape architects have tried to construct a Korea-specific identity on several types of open spaces, including urban parks and squares (Cho et al., 2018; The Korean Institute of Landscape Architecture, 2002, 2022). In the context of landscape architecture, Korean identity refers to Korean-specific characteristics represented in open space through interrelationships between “sameness,” which focuses on long-standing Korean cultural values, and “contemporariness,” which emphasizes openness to international cultures (Choi, 2008, p. 179). Specifically,

Korean landscape designers have created various design strategies to reinforce Korean identity in open spaces by drawing on Korean tradition and site-specific history as well as embracing contemporary Western design trends. In other words, the Korean identity in landscape architecture is not static and has changed and evolved over time.

Landscape historians tend to concentrate on the preservation and restoration of cultural heritage, including historic sites, buildings, ruins, and relic-containing strata. By contrast, landscape designers focus more on generating spatial design strategies, and creatively exploit them by considering the historic and academic values of archeological resources. In design proposals for open space competitions regarding cultural heritage, landscape designers often transcend the limitations of cultural heritage legislation to construct national and regional identities, thereby evoking the site’s past history and collective memory through alternative design strategies. (Cosgrove & Daniels, 1988; Pollak, 2007). “Design history”, which refers to landscape designers’ various design strategies and attitudes to create national and regional identities using site history

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and memory, can afford alternative opportunities to experience site history, and often raise social issues regarding inflexible cultural heritage legislation (Lee, 2022).

Most landscape theorists have treated open space design using site history in terms of preservation, practical use, and development. The first approach to design history is to explore the cultural heritage legislation system (Cho & Shin, 2014; Dai et al., 2021; Gil & Park, 2020; Korea National Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites ed., 2020; Li et al., 2021). Specifically, existing buildings and landscapes of sites have been evaluated in terms of their historic, cultural, and academic values, and novel standards have been proposed for their preservation, usage, and development (Gil & Park, 2020; Korea National Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites ed., 2020). Furthermore, alternative methods for regional revitalization and heritage management within the legislative system have been investigated, including architectural/structural remodeling, landscape improvement, cultural program development, and community participation (Cho & Shin, 2014; Dai et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021). The second group has treated design history in terms of the post-industrial landscape (Kang et al., 2003; Lee, 2019; Shin & Pae, 2022; Son & Pae, 2017). Specifically, most post-industrial landscapes in Korea are not officially designated as cultural heritage by the Cultural Heritage Administration of Korea (CHA). The subsequent lack of restrictions has allowed landscape and urban designers to explore creative design strategies using post-industrial facilities in public design competitions and urban regeneration projects (Kang et al., 2003; Lee, 2019; Shin & Pae, 2022). Furthermore, the aesthetic properties of industrial ruins, which possess a sublime and melancholic atmosphere, have served as a creative tool for the construction of regional identity (Lee, 2019; Son & Pae, 2017). Third, a few Korean landscape theorists have explored design history from an East Asian perspective (Choi, 2008; Kim, 2013; Lee, 2006; Lim, 2022). As the establishment and development of Korean landscape architecture have been highly influenced by Western perspectives, these theorists have highlighted the importance of representing national and regional identity in Korean open space design projects by incorporating Western design trends. Furthermore, they have examined alternative design strategies to embody Korean identity in open spaces. Their major points are discussed in the literature review in the following chapters.

Nevertheless, most Korean explorations have overlooked the influence of Western theory and practice on design history. In fact, as the Western landscape design has offered opportunities and limitations of Korean landscape design strategies for the construction of Korean identity in open spaces, its influence deserves to be fully discussed. Furthermore, Korean design history has rarely been explored in the English language. Recently, a few studies in English have discussed the relationships between the Korean and Western professions in terms of post-industrial landscape and ecological design (Lee, 2019, 2021). However, even they have rarely discussed the construction of Korean identity in open space design by exploiting site history and Korean tradition, especially those related to the historical Korean kingdoms of Goguryeo, Silla, Goryeo, and Joseon as well as the present Republic of Korea.

To fully understand the history of Korean designers' design history, this study focuses on the New Gwanghwamun Square Project (NGS Project, opened in August 2022). *Gwanghwamun Square* is a symbolic icon and popular open space in Seoul. It is located in front of *Gwanghwamun*, the gate of *Gyeongbokgung Palace* (built in 1395), which is main royal palace as the seat of power during the Joseon period (1392–1897) (Gwanghwamun Square Civic Committee of History and Tourism ed., 2020; Lee et al., 2020). Furthermore, as an internationally well-known site, the square has functioned as a public space in Korea where democratic movements, including the 2016 South Korean protests, occurred. Moreover, it is the location of the two statues of Admiral Yi Sun-sin and King Sejong the Great of Joseon, and serves as a hotspot for Korean and foreign tourists. More importantly, although overlooked by almost all

visitors, the square is a design work created by landscape architects. Considering the historical, urban, ecological, political, and social symbolic significance, the designers tried to construct a Korean identity. As the square was designed through two public design projects—design competition and actual construction for Old Gwanghwamun Square (OGS Project, opened in 2009) and New Gwanghwamun Square (opened in 2022)—changes in Korean design history can be observed through research on these projects.

1.2. Research objective and methodology

This study explores and critically discusses the design strategies of Korean landscape designers that have been employed for public open space design that expresses national identity. In this study, “Korean landscape designer” refers to practitioners working on open space projects in Korea at international and Korean design firms. The achievements and limitations of the NGS Project are critically discussed in this context. First, it examines Seoul-specific conditions regarding public design projects using site history and Korean identity in terms of legislation, history and environment, administrative agencies, and the professional field of landscape architecture. Second, a pilot case study of significant open space design projects in Seoul during the last five decades was conducted; subsequently, the projects were categorized according to the four main design history approaches: imitation, materiality, form generation, and the function and principle of Korean tradition in relation to historical Korean kingdoms. Third, the specific design strategies of the NGS Project for constructing Korean identity were critically examined (Fig. 1); this process involved observing similarities and discrepancies between the competition-winning proposal and the constructed square, if needed, including the OGS Project, to critically discuss the achievements and limitations of the NGS project.

Methodologically, this study consisted of literature reviews, case studies, and site visits. First, to fully understand Seoul's contexts and major attitudes toward design history, it conducts a literature review and pilot case study by examining existing knowledge, including competition proposals, scholarly research, official reports, articles, and interviews published in magazines and news. Second, it scrutinizes the main case study conducted by the NGS Project through a second literature review regarding the project, and several site visits for the collection of visual materials.

2. Seoul contexts

2.1. Heritage legislation

Design strategies for Seoul's public design projects for the



Fig. 1. Distribution of case study sites in Seoul. (1: Paris Park, 2: Yeouido Park, 3: Seonyudo Park, 4: Yongsan Park, 5: New Gwanghwamun Square; 1–4: Pilot study sites, 5: Main study site).

Source: Author's drawing based on a digital map from the National Geographic Information Institute of Korea (NGII)

construction of Korean identity are inevitably influenced by a wide range of Seoul-specific contexts. First, Korean heritage legislation requires administrative procedures that will preserve and develop cultural heritage sites. Specifically, according to the ‘Cultural Heritage Protection Act’ enacted by CHA, in ‘State-designated cultural heritage’ and surrounding ‘protection zone,’ as well as local governments’ ‘City/Do-designated cultural heritage’ and surrounding ‘historic and cultural environment preservation areas,’ any acts of development project including installation, removal, and relocation are restricted. The State and local governments that promote development projects within these areas should adopt concrete deliberation procedures in altering the current state and construction works by CHA and the local government (Cultural Heritage Protection Act).

Furthermore, the Korean ‘buried cultural heritage’ which refers to ‘buried or distributed underground or underwater’ is legally preserved. Specifically, the ‘Act on Protection and Inspection of Buried Cultural Heritage,’ enacted by CHA enshrines that ‘area of buried cultural heritage,’ which denotes ‘an area in which buried cultural heritage is recognized to exist shall be protected so that the original form is not to be damaged (Act on Protection and Inspection of Buried Cultural Heritage).’ The implementer who plans to promote construction work shall carry out a ‘ground surface inspection’ to verify current burial and distribution states within the construction area, by entrusting inspection to a specialized institution. The construction work will begin after completing the relevant measures for heritage preservation ordered by CHA. Within heritage legislation, designers have unfolded design strategies for the preservation and practical usage of the cultural heritage of the design site, often transcending the limitations of the system.

2.2. History and environment

Another important aspect is Seoul’s complex history, and its consequent physical environment. In particular, inside the Seoul City Wall, also known as Hanyangdoseong, the cultural stratum of sedimentation of the Joseon period was chronologically buried almost 5-m depth underground (Seoul City Wall Museum, 2019). Beyond the buried cultural heritage, cultural landscapes after the twentieth century, including the Korean Empire (1897–1910), the period of Japanese colonial occupation (1910–1945), and the Republic of Korea (1945–present), are intertwined (Fig. 2). Moreover, Seoul’s dynamic mountainous geography, including the four main inner mountains surrounding Hanyang, encourages landscape designers to create design strategies that consider

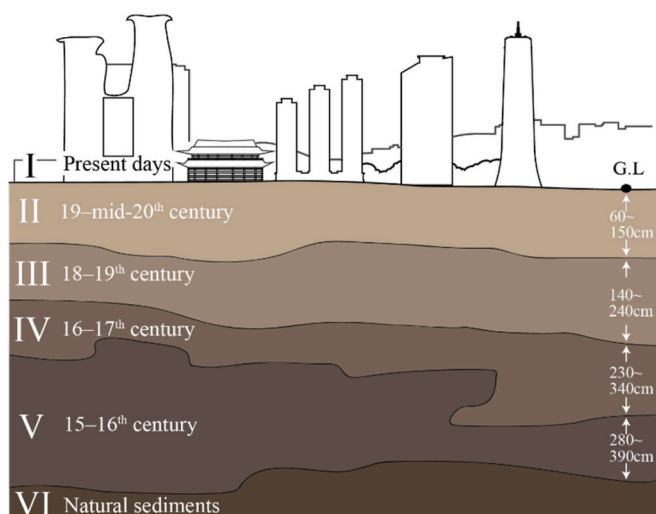


Fig. 2. Sectional surface of cultural stratum at Gongpyeong-dong of Seoul. Source: Author's drawing based on exhibit object of Gongpyeong Historic Sites Museum

the historic and environmental conditions of Seoul (Lee, 2019, 2021; Zoh, 2010, see Fig. 3).

2.3. Administrative agency

In promoting Seoul’s public design project, the roles and functions of administrative agencies provide both opportunities and limitations for the actualization of design strategies regarding design history. The Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG), the local government of Seoul, has been encouraging significant open space design projects that experiment with the construction of the Korean identity. Several early projects of SMG have been frequently mentioned and acclaimed for design quality by Korean landscape scholars, including the Seoul Olympic Park for the 1988 Summer Olympics (opened in 1986), and the Paris Park for the commemoration of the one-hundred anniversary of Korea-France diplomatic relations (opened in 1987). Also, the OGS and NGS Projects were carried out by SMG (Jo, 2022a; Kim, 2019; Pae, 2007a; Park, G., 2005; Park, 2005; Son, 2009). Furthermore, the Yongsan Park project’s long-term plan (ongoing project) transforming US Army garrisons into the first national park was promoted by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport of Korea (MOLIT) (Environment & Landscape Architecture of Korea Editorial Board, 2013; Lee, 2019, 2021; Ministry of Land, & Transport and Maritime Affairs, 2010). The national and local governments have carried out various procedures, including general basic plans, international competition, and post-design processes for construction, thereby stimulating designers to explore design history.

However, the Korean administrative agency often reveals the limitations of the construction of design history. Specifically, Korean scholars and designers have indicated the discrepancies between initial design proposals and constructed spaces, due to a reduction in budget, regulations following legislation, and acceptance of public voice. Furthermore, following the different interests of government ministries or the political opinion of the head of the administrative agency, initial plans have sometimes been modified and delayed (Choi & Seo, 2019; Lee, 2019; Nam, 2009; Shin & Zoh, 2013).

2.4. Profession of landscape architecture

Fourth, Korean landscape architecture has been influenced by that of Western countries in terms of theory and practice. Korean theorists and designers who studied and worked abroad embraced Western design theories and trends, including Landscape Urbanism and large park discourse from the 1990s onwards (Herrington, 2017; Lee, 2019, 2021). Furthermore, international design offices have collaborated with Korean firms to participate in international design competitions held by the state and the local governments of Korea. While Western-driven design theory and practice have rediscovered the potential of the Korean landscaping tradition, they have not fully reflected Korea-specific urban, historical, social, and cultural contexts (Pae, 2012; Zoh, 2010).

3. Strategies for design history

3.1. Imitation

The first strategy for design history is the direct imitation of the appearance and thought of the Korean traditions derived from the historical kingdoms of Goguryeo, Silla, Goryeo, and Joseon, as well as the present Republic of Korea. When designing park facilities and paving patterns, landscape designers have often copied or modified traditional Korean street furniture, patterns, and thoughts. This attitude toward the creation of a Korean identity frequently appeared in public design projects before 2000. The Paris Park has been hailed as one of early projects that successfully represented Korean identity. Specifically, while zoning the site, the designer moderately borrowed from and modified the *Taegeuk* pattern. The history of this pattern traces back to the kingdoms



Fig. 3. Distribution of buried cultural heritage and major historic sites of Joseon inside Hanyangdoeseong (1: Gyeongbokgung, 2: Changdeokgung, 3: Changgyeonggung, 4: Jongmyo, 5: Deoksugung, 6: Gyeonghuigung, 7: Sajikdan). Source: Author's drawing based on digital maps from the Cultural Heritage GIS Service and NGII

of Goguryeo (B.C. 37– A.D. 668) and Silla (B.C. 57–A.D. 935), whose artistic/aesthetic achievements have been highly acclaimed by Korean researchers (see Fig. 4; Park, 2005; Choi, 2008, pp. 101–102). However, some scholars have been dissatisfied with mimicking tradition, based on a resemblance in appearance. A prominent Korean theorist stated, “[I wonder] Designer’s initial design concept was suitably translated and actualized into moderated shapes [...] experiment of visible form not necessarily facilitates [construction of Korean identity].” (Pae, 2007a, p. 153).

Superficial uses of traditional thought have been questioned. Proposals for the Yeouido Park design competition, situated at the center of Seoul’s financial district (opened in 1999), revealed design strategies that represented traditional abstract thoughts and vocabulary, including

Yin-Yang, and the five elements for simple zoning of the large site, without consideration of site-specific conditions, that is, placeness (Choi, 2005; Zoh, 2000). Furthermore, replicas of traditional Korean landscaping elements, including pavilions, thatched houses, and lotus ponds, were criticized as clichés, without reinterpreting them through a novel design language (Fig. 5).

3.2. Materiality exploration

The second approach to evoking site history and memory is exploring the materiality of physical artifacts. Specifically, surviving architectural structures that maintain high historical authenticity are preserved as their original state, which are reused for exhibition galleries and community centers, thereby evoking a sense of site history. Existing buildings with relatively low historic value are instead partly reused in park facilities, and all others including street furniture, and structures without historic value are thoroughly demolished. This approach, which considers the materiality of buildings and debris as a medium for conveying memory, first appeared at the turn of the century in Korean



Fig. 4. Layout using Taegeuk pattern of Paris Park, 1987. Source: Landscape Architecture Korea



Fig. 5. Replicas of Korean traditional landscaping elements in Yeouido Park, 2022. Source: Author’s photograph

open space design. The Western discourse on Landscape Urbanism and placeness, concentrating on site-specificity and regional locality, was embraced by Korean scholars and designers who studied abroad. They actively promoted public design projects that transformed post-industrial landscapes into open spaces (Jeong & Corner, 2005; Kang, 2014; Lee, 2019; Pae, 2001).

Seonyudo Park (opened in 2002) was an early Korean ecological park that transformed an abandoned water purification plant into an open space. The designer partly preserved and modified the existing architectural structure to build a novel spatial framework of the park. The rough materiality of the industrial ruins effectively conveyed the sublime and melancholic sensibilities of the site's industrial past (ASLA, 2004; Lee & Pae, 2012; Pae, 2007b; see Fig. 6). Although the design quality was highly acclaimed for rediscovering industrial history by most international and Korean design critics, another design element that represented significant memory of the Joseon period was critically discussed by a few. Specifically, *Seonyujeong*—a traditional pavilion from the Joseon period on the banks of the Han River, which traverses Seoul—was implanted to evoke memories of the famous scenic location of the Joseon period. The replica of traditional facilities was critically discussed for its unsuitability for the overall atmosphere produced by industrial ruins and its direct mimicry of the Korean tradition (Pae, 2007b, p. 62). Ironically, the creative celebration of an industrial past conflicted with the representation of a historically significant site from the Joseon period. As this case demonstrates, landscape architects became anti-traditionalists who hesitated and avoided using the Korean tradition motif, rather than iconoclasts who creatively used Korea-specific traditions (Lee, 2022, p. 49).

3.3. Form generation

Third, designers have often creatively exploited the appearances and thoughts of the Korean tradition as design motifs for generating novel forms. Whereas the strategy of imitation tries to directly emulate the past without rediscovery, form generation requires actively reinterpreting and transforming Korean tradition related to site history into new visible forms. This strategy of Korean design history was ironically explored by international design firms in 2010. The foreign gaze facilitated a spatial experiment of Korean tradition in ways that creatively exploited Korea-specific historic motifs.

The winning proposal of the international design competition for Yongsan Park (held in 2012), *Healing: The Future Park*, unfolded alternative design history to moderately exploit traditional Korean thought as a design motif for novel form generation. Specifically, the team



Fig. 6. Rough materiality of the industrial ruins in Seonyudo Park, 2018. Source: Author's photograph

proposed a bridge named *Ojakkyo*, which appears in *Gyeonujingnyeo*, a traditional Korean fairy tales whose history can be traced back to the Goguryeo kingdom (Kim, 2013, p. 92; Lee, 2022, p. 50; Rosenfield, 2012). The visible artifact—decorated with numerous small bird features, was devised following the literal meaning of ‘the bridge made by crows and magpies,’ without any metaphysical interpretation of the traditional narrative (Lee, 2022, p. 50; see Fig. 7). Moreover, the recently renovated Paris Park's (opened in 2022) computational, autonomous, and productive paving patterns were designed borrowing the sixty-four hexagrams of *I Ching*, an ancient East Asian divination text (Kim, 2022; Lim, 2022).

3.4. Reinterpretation of function and principle

The fourth attitude toward design history is the reinterpretation of the invisible functions and principles of Korean tradition. Instead of superficial and direct imitation of the visible appearance of traditional Korean artifacts, contemporary designers often borrow design elements from traditional Korean artifacts and their scientific and practical function. Further, they use traditional principles when constructing spatial structures and open space landscapes. Both these trends result in the creation of a Korea-specific landscape.

Healing: The Future Park unfolded a design strategy that reinterprets the practical function of *madang*, the traditional Korean multipurpose open space, to create park facilities. Specifically, the proposal visualizes various types of multi-purpose *madang* constructed above the footprints of demolished buildings (Lee, 2019, p. 9). Furthermore, it exploited an East Asian traditional landscaping principle—*borrowed landscape*—that refers to a technique to incorporate distant external scenery inside garden settings, which affords several viewpoints for contemplating Seoul's popular landscapes, including Hangang and Namsan Tower. After the competition, the team used a bird's eye view similar to those in *sansuhwa* (landscape painting in the Goryeo [A.D. 918–1392] and Joseon periods), thereby symbolically proposing a new identity for the first Nation Park (Kim, 2013, Fig. 8). Although this attitude offers significant lessons to landscape design by rediscovering the potential of site history as a design motif, it often exclusively functions as a symbolic gesture and metaphorical expression in the rhetoric of design description, and fails to be constructed in actual space.

4. Design history of the New Gwanghwamun Square Project

4.1. Project background

The international design competition for the NGS Project was held by the SMG in October 2018. It searched for innovative design ideas to overcome the spatial limitations of the former *Gwanghwamun Square* and restore its historical and cultural symbolic significance (Fulcher, 2018;

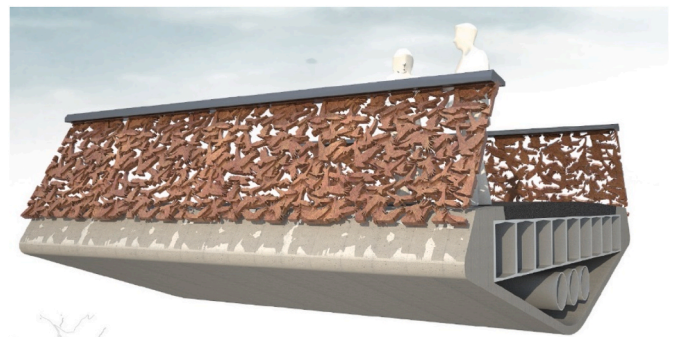


Fig. 7. Intuitive design of Ojakkyo in the winning proposal of Yongsan Park competition, 2012. Source: West 8 and Iroje et al.



Fig. 8. Sansuhwa-styled bird's-eye view produced by the winning team of the Yongsan Park competition, 2012.
Source: West 8 and Iroje et al.

SMG, 2018). SMG required a spatial strategy for the 'project site' of 126, 100 m² including the former square and surrounding roads, and the 'strategic area' consisting of its adjacent areas (SMG, 2018, pp. 7–8). Currently, important buildings—the Government Complex Seoul, U.S. Embassy & Consulate in the Republic of Korea, Sejong Center for the Performing Arts, and National Museum of Korean Contemporary History—are lined along two sides of the square, thereby functioning as one of the popular open spaces and landmarks, and the symbolic center of administration, politics, and culture of Seoul (Fig. 9). Situated in front of the main, and largest gate of the *Gyeongbokgung palace*, the square is known as *Yukjo Street*, which literally means six key government offices situated on both sides of the street during the Joseon period (Lee et al., 2020, Fig. 10). During the Japanese colonial occupation (1910–1945), the Japanese Governor-General building was constructed in the



Fig. 10. Miniature of Yukjo Street of Joseon period, 2023.
Source: Author's photograph at Seoul Museum of History

immediate vicinity of *Gwanghwamun* in 1926, and the gate was moved in 1927. In 1968, *Gwanghwamun* was reconstructed with a concrete structure, and the Japanese Governor-General building was completely demolished in 1996. The concrete structure was dismantled in 2007, and the wooden-structured *Gwanghwamun* was restored in 2010 to its original location (see Henry, 2016; Son & Pae, 2018). With the restoration project of the gate, the SMG began to promote the OGS Project in 2007. In the second half of the twentieth century, the site was used as an exclusive road for cars. The OGS Project aimed to create a symbolic Korean urban square by narrowing the 16 lanes into ten. Through a design idea competition and subsequent turnkey operation, the SeoAhn Total Landscape's design idea was constructed in 2009 (Shin & Zoh, 2013; Son, 2009, Fig. 11).

However, because wide roads for cars on either side of the square caused poor accessibility, OGS was condemned as an "isolated island" and "huge median strip" by citizens and critics (Nam, 2009, p. 178). Furthermore, the insufficient restoration of historic and cultural values has been criticized (Shin & Zoh, 2013; Son et al., 2009). To address these limitations, SMG began to promote renewal projects for the square—that is, the NGS Project—in 2016, by collecting the opinions of the public and experts in related fields. The international design competition for the NGS Project in 2018 provided rules and guidelines, including a spatial reconfiguration in which the roads for cars was to be narrowed and rearranged to the east side of the square, and the expanded space in



Fig. 9. Distribution of current main buildings and Joseon's historic sites excavated in 2020–21 inside the NGS Project area.

(1: Gwanghwamun, 2: Government Complex Seoul, 3: Sejongno Park, 4: National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, 5: US Embassy & Consulate, 6: Sejong Center for the Performing Arts, 7: KT Building, 8: Kyobo Building, 9: Samgunbu area, 10: Saheonbu area, 11: Hyeongjo, 12: Gongjo, 13: Private housing area).

Source: Author's drawing based on maps from NGS official homepage and NGII



Fig. 11. Bird's-eye view of Old Gwanghwamun Square, 2009.
Source: Landscape Architecture Korea

the west of the square to be directly connected to the surrounding urban surface, thereby restoring the organic flow of pedestrian networks for better accessibility (SMG, 2018). Moreover, the expanded NGS would be a canvas for the representation of a novel Korean identity, thus reconstructing its historical and cultural symbolic meaning. Thirty-eight Korean and 32 international teams' proposals were submitted, among which *Deep Surface: Awaken the Past and Future*, designed by the CA landscape, Yooshin Engineering Corporation, Kim Youngmin, and R.O. A. Architects Engineers Co., was selected as winning proposals in 2019 (Choi, 2019; Chung, 2019; Kim, 2019). *Deep Surface* was acclaimed for its creative reorganization of urban surfaces and structures, by actively developing underground squares and linking it with the main square above ground, where the newly created historical symbolic landscapes and everyday life activities would coexist (Choi, 2019; Pae, 2019). Subsequently, the design was developed in 2019–2020, the buried cultural heritage excavated and inspected in 2019–2021, the project constructed in 2020–2022, and opened on August 6, 2022 (Fig. 12).

4.2. Design history in design proposal

4.2.1. Creation of Korea-specific landscape

Deep Surface tried to construct a novel Korean identity in the square in ways that created Korea-specific landscapes, entailing the restoration of the site's historically symbolic values. The NGS is "the central space of Seoul, the capital of Republic of Korea, and iconic place that represents this country's identity" (SMG, 2018, p. 5). The winning proposal deployed a creative design strategy that afforded the actual experience of Korean identity by exploiting the medium of landscape. Specifically, the team explored Korea-specific urban squares in ways that created a main scenery, and considered the Korea-specific natural environment to loosely use the East Asian traditional environmental design principle *Feng shui*, literally meaning wind-water (Choi, 2019, p. 51; CA landscape et al., 2019, p. 16; Lee, 2022, p. 50). To create the main view, the team



Fig. 12. Bird's-eye view of New Gwanghwamun Square, 2022.
Source: Landscape Architecture Korea

moved the statues of Admiral Yi Sun-sin and King Sejong the Great of Joseon, which functioned as focal points of the square, to the western area of the square, thereby restoring the historical landscape of the Joseon period that links the sky, Bugaksan (Bugak Mountain), Gwanghwamun, and the square (Fig. 13). To overcome the spatial limitations of the asymmetry of the new square caused by the expanded western area, the designers effectively arranged urban forest and relax zones for daily pauses in that area, thereby affording a visual experience of a Seoul-specific main view, following the central axis of the site with a flexible environmental flow. In the process, they avoided the Western urban square's inflexible morphology encompassed by tree-lined streets following a geometric order.

A Korea-specific landscape is reinforced by representing Korean tradition using new media technology. *Deep Surface* proposed media art that represents the inner mountains of Hanyang, on a façade of high architectural structures lining either side of the square. The bird's eye view of the NGS was similar to those in *sansuhwa*, such as the *Gyeong-gigamyeongdo* (Painting of Gyeonggi Provincial Office) and *Donggwoldo* (Painting of Eastern Palaces), from the early nineteenth century during the Joseon period, thereby conveying a novel atmosphere hybridizing Seoul's cityscape with traditional images of late Joseon period's Hanyang's landscapes (see Fig. 13). This research presumes that this visual was influenced by the *sansuhwa*-style bird's eye view used by the winning team of the Yongsan Park competition. Where the latter functioned as an idealized landscape creating a traditional Korean atmosphere after the competition, the former was definitely a design drawing included in the proposal that rendered the potential of what would be actualized (Lee, 2022, p. 55). The composite drawing that consists of



Fig. 13. Bird's-eye view of New Gwanghwamun Square in the winning proposal, 2019.
Source: CA landscape, Yooshin Engineering Corporation, Kim Youngmin, and R.O.A. Architects Engineers Co.

real landscapes, including Bugaksan and Gwanghwamun, and virtual landscapes representing the inner mountains of Hanyang were acclaimed by Korean scholars as an alternative experiment of landscape design, thus exploiting immersive media art technique (Lee, 2021, pp. 13–14).

4.2.2. Reinterpretation of traditional Korean landscaping

Another meaningful design strategy for expressing Korean identity involves the reinterpretation of traditional Korean landscaping. Instead of directly imitating traditional facilities in terms of their resemblance, *Deep Surface* exploited their structures and functions for the spatial construction of NGS. For example, *Hwagye* refers to a terraced flower garden, which is a traditional landscaping technique from the Joseon period. The team avoids the cliché—replicas of traditional Korean landscaping elements—and exploits the *Hwagye* technique to render the square's spatial structuring possible (CA landscape et al., 2019, p. 19). Specifically, *Hwagye* was reinterpreted as a sunken terraced garden to physically connect the underground square and above-ground's main space of NGS (Fig. 14). However, as discussed, it is difficult to create a traditional Korean identity. Specifically, *Hwagye* refers to a terraced flower garden decorated with traditional embellishments such as small water features, oddly shaped stones, and sundials. The winning team proposed a simple sunken terraced garden without any traditional embellishments; thus, without the design description, it is difficult to intuitively understand the team's design as the outcome of reinterpreting traditional Korean landscaping techniques. In other words, a design history that uses only the structure and function of Korean tradition without directly imitating the appearance of traditional embellishments results in symbolic design rhetoric.

Thus, a significant difference was observed between the design history of the *Deep Surface* for NGS and the design of the OGS. The OGS explored park facilities and entailed the direct imitation of traditional Korean landscaping elements in terms of resemblance. For example, granite-structured water outlets situated at the end of two lined water features, named *History Water Stream*, which flows on the surface of either side of the OGS, were devised by mimicking the appearance and materiality of water features in traditional Korean landscapes during the Joseon period, including the *Yeolsangjinwon Spring* (literarily origin of cold clean water) of *Hyangwonji Pond* in *Gyeongbokgung* and *Yeolcheon* (literally fiery cold spring water) of *Tongmyeongjeon Hall* in *Changgyeonggung Palace* (Nam, 2009, p. 179). This representation of historical objects enabled visitors to intuitively experience and associate it with the Korean tradition without a design description.



Fig. 14. Sunken terraced garden designed through the reinterpretation of the traditional *Hwagye* technique and material exploration of buried cultural heritage in the winning proposal, 2019.

Source: CA landscape, Yooshin Engineering Corporation, Kim Youngmin, and R. O.A. Architects Engineers Co.

4.2.3. Exploration of form generation and materiality

The rediscovery of Korean tradition, embodied through visible form generation, is clearly observable. The paving pattern of the square is generated through a creative visual abstraction of Korean historical, cultural, and political events (Fig. 15). The indeterminate paving pattern was motivated by the *Hundred Thousand Dots* of Kim Whanki, done in 1973, a pioneering Korean abstract artist (Choi, 2019, p. 48). The numerous tiny dots represented in the painting were designed to visualize the crowds of citizens gathered in the square. Second, the visible paving form symbolically embodies collective memory, including that of social events. The roundish forms of paving that functions as lighting was motivated by a recent Korean collective memory regarding the place—the 2016 South Korean protest—also popularly known as the Candlelight Vigil (CA landscape et al., 2019, p. 17, Hancocks, 2016). Third, designers hybridized these recent histories with those of the premodern Joseon period, in the paving pattern design. The differing sizes of the roundish forms arrayed in the square paving patterns are a reinterpretation of *Bakseok* (traditional open-square stone paving in the Joseon period), which can be seen in front of the throne halls of the royal palaces and the *Jongmyo shrine* (CA landscape et al., 2019, p. 17).

Furthermore, *Deep Surface* explored traditional Korean materiality. *Bakseok* was originally made of uneven granite stones with rough and law materiality. As most Korean bedrocks consist of granite stone, they invoke an atmosphere of Korea-specific materiality. Furthermore, *Bakseok* has practical functions; its uneven and coarse surfaces afford slip prevention, and perform anti-dazzling roles through light diffusion (Yoo, 2011, pp. 33–36). The gaps in the paving stones function as resilient rainwater drains. Although *Deep Surface* did not exploit these practical functions, the rough materiality was actively used as the main paving resource, thereby invoking a symbolic atmosphere of dignity (Lee, 2022, Fig. 15). Moreover, *Deep Surface* unfolded another material exploration for park facility creation, by revealing the rough sectional surface of underground intertwined by buried cultural heritage, soil, and rocks (see Fig. 14). The materialistic design thinking that renders visitors' phenomenological experiences of the cultural strata permeated the daily life history of Joseon and even Goryeo periods, and provided an alternative educational method.

4.3. Design history in spatial construction

4.3.1. Discrepancy between design proposal and constructed space

Although the main vision of the winning proposal remained during the post-process for actualization, critical differences in the specific design details were observed between the original proposal and constructed space. After accepting the opinions of various interested parties, including SMG, Ministry of the Interior and Safety, civic groups, and experts in related fields, the initial proposal was modified during the



Fig. 15. Paving pattern derived from form and materiality exploration of *Bakseok* in the winning proposal, 2019.

Source: CA landscape, Yooshin Engineering Corporation, Kim Youngmin, and R. O.A. Architects Engineers Co.

post-design process for construction. First, the original strategy that linked underground and aboveground spaces was altered to an aboveground-oriented square, with the sunken open spaces largely reduced (Jo, 2022a, p. 36). As the designer stated, in terms of landscape urbanism, urban surfaces of the square need to be reorganized into an above-ground square, exploiting the medium of landscape (Jo, 2022b, p. 46; Waldheim, 2006). Furthermore, after considering the opinions of the NGS committee, Ministry of the Interior and Safety, and some civic groups, the construction cost of the NGS Project was reduced, which resulted in a smaller remodeling than was originally proposed. The two statues of Admiral Yi Sun-sin and King Sejong the Great of Joseon were also not moved, based on their opinions (Jung, 2022). Second, according to the cultural heritage legislation, SMG conducted exploratory trenching in 2019, and an in-depth excavation and inspection in 2020 by entrusting specialized inspection institutions, before the construction of NGS (see Fig. 9). During this process, the remains of *Samgunbu* for three army headquarters, *Saheonbu* for inspector-General, and several ministries of Joseon, including *Hyeongjo* for law enforcement and *Gongjo* for public works, were excavated on the west side of the square (SMG, 2023). Third, the election of a new Mayor of Seoul in 2021 influenced the modification of the SMG project. The SMG of the former Mayor Park Won-soon (1956–2020) rendered the design monotonous by evading complicated social issues. However, the SMG led by new Mayor, Oh Se-hoon (1961-present), encouraged creative design ideas; therefore, various park facilities were constructed on the square (Jo, 2022b).

Nevertheless, *Deep Surface*'s initial design history was rarely realized. First, the construction process failed to actualize the grounded-constructed rough materiality and dignified atmosphere of *Bakseok* pavement. As paving material is common in Korean open spaces, it is difficult to embody *Bakseok* materiality and, consequently, the NGS-specific identity (Lee, 2022, p. 54; Fig. 16). Second, sunken terraced gardens borrowing traditional *Hwagye* and cultural strata's unique materiality are not constructed because of design modification toward the above-ground square (Jo, 2022b, p. 46). Moreover, the buried cultural properties excavated through two inspections were covered with soil for preservation according to heritage legislation, thereby failing to achieve materiality exploration.

4.3.2. Clichés of the superficial use of history

In the NGS Project, several clichés and the superficial use of design history were clearly observable in the post-design process for construction. First, the design history was actualized using a stereotypical method commonly observed in public design projects, which renders the historical remains as static spectacle. For example, a part of the

excavated *Saheonbu* site was preserved and framed in its original state and used as an exhibition hall (Fig. 17). This strategy does not allow visitors to actively intervene and experience historical sites, and render historic landscapes as exclusively static observation objects for contemplation. Another cliché of the constructed NGS is in the use of traces of historical remains. To represent the memory of traditional Korean street markets during the Joseon period, part of the paving pattern and material is constructed differently from those of the main square. However, the difference between the two parts is barely visible; thus, visitors are unable to learn design intention except through text descriptions on the signage.

Second, the NGS mostly employs history telling based on text descriptions rather than through physical landscape design. Twelve memorial stones were installed on both sides of the Admiral Yi Sun-sin statue, where a historical narrative regarding his naval warfare is inscribed (Fig. 18). Furthermore, the NGS created shallow water streams named *History Water Streams* that pass through both sides of the square. The bottom stone surfaces are inscribed with major historical events from the 1392 Joseon foundation to the present (Jo, 2022a, p. 40). In other words, the constructed NGS guides the visitors' textual reading of history, rather than the spontaneous and intuitive experience of an embodied history permeating the park facilities. As Elizabeth Meyer argued, landscape designers need to explore creative design strategies for educational functions, including ecological processes and history content, through physical landscape and facility designs, so that visitors are able to experience such content as embodied knowledge instead of the textual literacy of signage (Meyer, 2008).

4.3.3. Insufficiency of the novel Korean identity

Deep Surface explored Korean identity by exploiting huge media art representing the traditional Korean landscape, whose *sansuhwa*-styled bird's-eye view provided the potential for actual construction (see Fig. 13). However, the huge media art combining the façades of several buildings has not yet been constructed. Instead, visitors are able to encounter a few buildings' media façades, and media features on tiny parts of the cut slopes of the square. The plan for constructing a Korean identity on the actual NGS, using delusive images, has not been achieved. As some scholars have commented, deceptive photo-realistic or picturesque depictions of idealized landscapes that are represented in design proposals have frequently failed to be actualized in ways that exclusively function only in the designer's imaginative expression (Kingerly-Page & Hahn, 2012; Kullmann, 2014; Lee & Pae, 2018).

The dominant Korea-specific identity of the constructed NGS is embodied by two statues, which have existed for a long time. In recent



Fig. 16. Unfulfilled *Bakseok* materiality for a constructed pavement, 2022.
Source: Author's photograph



Fig. 17. *Saheonbu* gate site functioning as an exhibition hall, 2023.
Source: Author's photograph



Fig. 18. Admiral Yi Sun-sin statue and memorial stones inscribed historical narratives, limiting visitors' experience to passive textual learning, 2023. Source: Author's photograph

public art, high monuments and statues tend to be denied, thereby exploring novel forms of counter monuments that challenge traditional imposition and authoritative structures (Jin, 2019; Young, 1992). However, the two statues of the square became symbolic landmarks that evoke collective memory, including the 2002 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 South Korean protests (Lee, 2022). Owing to these two factors, the Korean identity barely remains in the constructed NGS. Water features such as the Hangul Fountain using the Korean alphabet, which King

Sejong the Great of Joseon created and promulgated, as the main design motif; and the *Myeongnyang* Fountain, which remembers the Battle of *Myeongnyang* led by Admiral Yi Sun-sin, are devised from historical narratives of these two popular monuments (see Fig. 18). Thus, this research opines that the Korean identity of NGS is neither novel nor a result of creative exploration by the designer. The design team avoided a directly visible imitation of traditional Korean artifacts, and chose a design strategy of simple form generation influenced by the Western-driven square design trend, where the novel Korean identity is rarely invisible.

5. Conclusion

Since the NGS was opened to the public on August 6, 2022, the square has been widely praised by Korean and foreign visitors (Ko, 2022; Park, 2022). In particular, the urban forest gardens and newly constructed park facilities, including various types of benches and water features in the expanded western area, provide a naturalistic lifestyle inside downtown. However, in terms of professional landscape design, the design history of the NGS Project and other public design needs to be critically examined. As suggested by the pilot case study and literature review, attitudes toward design history and Seoul's socio-political aspects, including heritage legislation, historical and environmental conditions, administrative agencies, and the profession of landscape architecture, have been closely intertwined. The pilot case study classified Korean identity in open spaces according to the following specific strategies: imitation, materiality exploration, form generation, reinterpretation of function, and traditions from the historical Korean kingdoms of Goguryeo, Silla, Goryeo, and Joseon as well as the present Republic of Korea. Several opportunities and limitations of the strategies were observed in the main case of the NGS Project. The winning proposal represented several professional achievements to project a novel Korean identity onto NGS through the restoration of a Korea-specific landscape, the reinterpretation of the structure and function of traditional Korean landscaping, form generation, and material exploration. The opinions of different stakeholders, excavation and inspection of buried cultural heritage, and the election of a new Mayor of Seoul resulted in design changes during the post-design process for construction; thus, the initial design strategies were not implemented. Instead, the constructed NGS renders the site's historical narratives as static spectacle not permeating the physical landscape design, thereby limiting visitors' experience regarding site history to passive textual learning (Table 1). Most importantly, the picturesque visuals in the proposal for the creation of a Korea-specific landscape identity failed to be

Table 1
Major strategies and elements of design history.

Research flow	Project	Design strategies	Design elements	Historical elements
Pilot case study	Paris Park (1987)	Direct imitation of tradition	Zoning, paving	Taegeuk pattern
	Yeouido Park (1999)	Direct imitation of tradition	Zoning	Yin-Yang and the Five Elements
	Seonyudo Park (2002)	Material exploration	Spatial structuring	Industrial ruins
	Yongsan Park (2012)	Direct imitation of tradition Novel form generation Reinterpretation of function and principle	Park facility Park facility Park facility View creation	Traditional pavilion Ojakkyo from the Gyeongju Madang Borrowed landscape
	Paris Park (2022)	Novel form generation	Paving	Sixty-four hexagrams of I Ching
Main case study	NGS Competition (2019)	Korea-specific landscape creation	Spatial structuring, view creation	Feng shui, sansuhwa
		Reinterpretation of function and principle Novel form generation Material exploration	Spatial structuring Paving Paving Park facility	Hwagye Modern painting, candlelight vigil, bakseok Bakseok Buried cultural heritage
	Post-design process for the construction of NGS (2022)	Display of historical remains Material exploration History-telling with text descriptions	Park facility Park facility Paving Park facility	Buried cultural heritage Buried cultural heritage Yukjo Street Admiral Yi Sun-sin, Korean history from the Joseon period to the present
		Creation of park facilities using the history of existing monuments	Park facility	Hangul created by Sejong the Great

constructed and exclusively decorated two long-existing statues with landscape elements, thereby resulting in a Western-style indistinctive square.

To address the problems exemplified by the NGS Project, Korean landscape architects need to explore and actualize design history for designing public open spaces that express national identity. First, the tendency of Korean designers to reject the visible imitation of Korean tradition needs to be modified. When constructing national identity using traditional motifs, autonomous form exploration via creative mimicry often enables visitors' intuitive understanding and experience of Korean tradition and site history. Second, it is necessary to formulate Korea-specific landscape design strategies for public open spaces that fully consider and reinterpret Korean traditions in the cultural, social, environmental, and urban contexts of the present. Third, the representation of national identity should be extended to and included in design ideation and development and the post-design process for construction; this would help Korean designers and governments address long-standing issues of discrepancies between design proposals and constructed open spaces in public projects involving national identity. The former may visualize design ideas that could be fully actualized in the real world, while the latter can support the successful embodiment of the designer's original idea considering and, sometimes challenging, requests of various interested parties. Fourth, creative strategies of embodied history creation through physical spatial design, including landscape and park facilities, need to be tested. As the professional identity of landscape architecture is the creative generation of actual environments, landscape designers need to create novel strategies to construct a Korean identity by locating site history in physical landscapes rather than exploring history content using text.

This study also has several limitations. As the present study was mainly conducted from the perspective of the profession of landscape architecture, the gap between public taste and scholarly critical judgment and strategies to narrow this gap need to be fully explored. Furthermore, as it exclusively addressed a public design project in Seoul, further research needs to explore other regions' open spaces in Korea to understand the design history of Korean identity. Contemporary landscape and urban design in East Asian countries and the Global South has attempted to challenge blindly followed Western design trends and explore design strategies for constructing national and regional identities in open spaces by acknowledging historical and cultural contexts. Although the present study critiques several Korean case-based design issues, the findings can contribute to similar case studies in East Asian and international contexts and inspire landscape and urban design practitioners and administrators.

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

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