

From Gyeongbok Royal Palace to the Chosun Exposition: A Transformation in Space

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Introduction

From their innate purpose, world exhibitions tend to stress universality, and are usually defined by following global scenarios that naturally ignore specificities of people and places. However, times are changing and so are our world views. It seems good to return to an understanding of people and place relations and realize what can be gained by researching what has been lost. Although, strictly speaking not a world exhibition, the Chosun Exposition (朝鮮博覽會) that was held in Seoul, Korea, may serve here to illustrate such a loss of specificity.

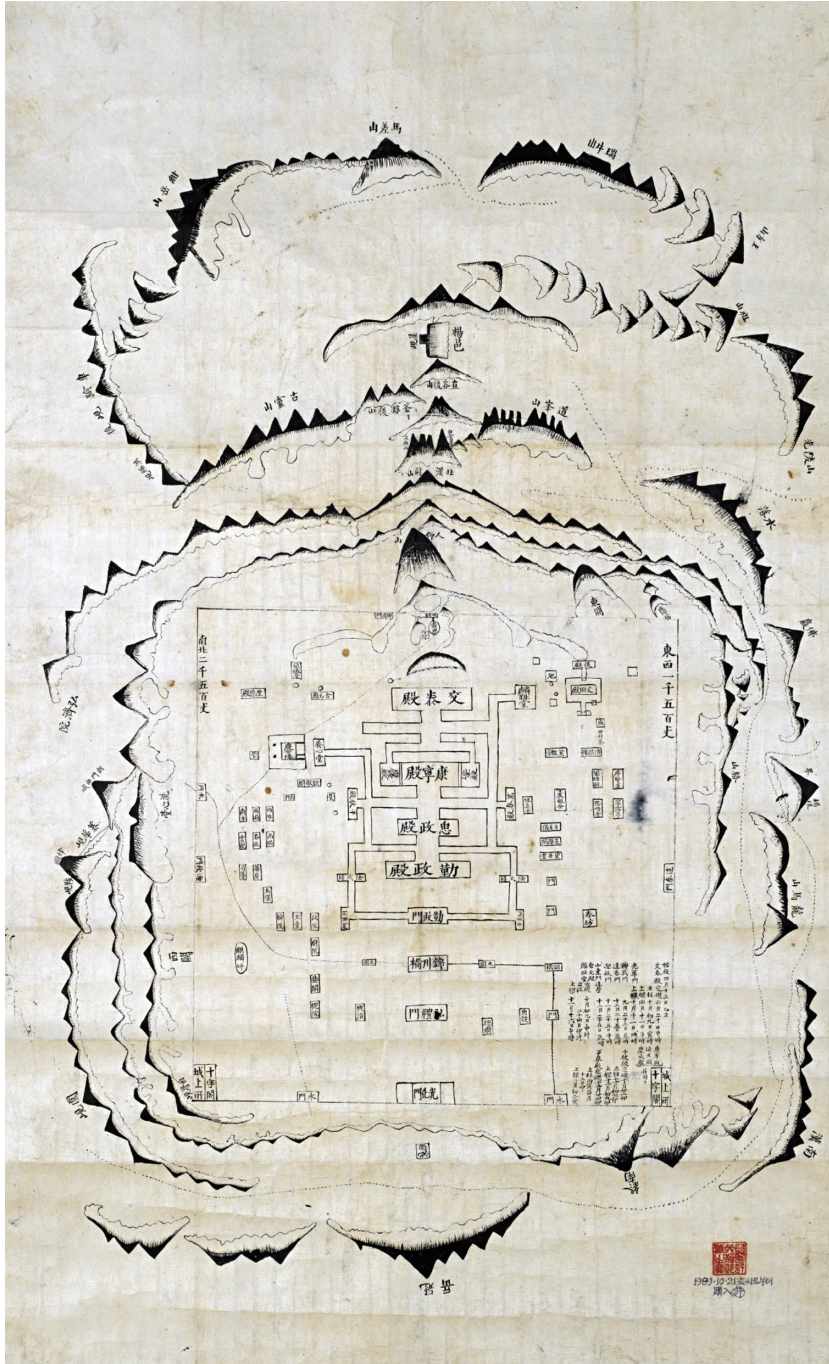
The exposition was staged on the site of the Gyeongbok Palace (景福宮). The specificity of this main royal palace of the Chosun kings lies in the careful planning of the site within the natural and manmade surroundings. Upon the founding of the capital city the palace was embedded in the urban topography to enforce the legitimacy of the ruling class through the use of *fengshui* planning theory. However, this spatial structure was later ignored and damaged as a result of various building activities undertaken by the last Chosun king who wished to modernize the palace. After various disasters such as fire and the assassination of the queen, royals left the palace; it became a deserted place until it caught the attention of the colonial Japanese government. A first business fair on the palace site in 1915 was projected to advertise the virtues of colonial rule, but it also cleared the way for the construction of a main colonial administration building. The Colonial Government Building (總督府庁舎) was just finished in the southern area of the palace compound when the Chosun Exposition of 1929 took place. This expo also provided an opportunity to promote the development of a high-class residential area north of the palace. The grading and road development undertaken at this time cut the palace site entirely off from its topographical context. In the event, a small number of remaining historical palace halls became part of the Disney-like spectacle of a fully modern international-style exposition that occupied the entire palace compound behind the government building.

1 Palace and Topography

Seoul was founded as the capital of the Chosun dynasty in the late 14th century and was origi-

nally named Hanseong (漢城) or Han-yang (漢陽). After Chinese-style geomancy practice, the city was situated in a valley surrounded by mountains, north of the Han River. In line with Chinese city-planning models, all of the buildings for new state institutions, such as shrines for ancestors, offices of government, and palaces for the king were situated on higher ground in the northern half of the city, overlooking the south. The main palace, the Gyeongbok Palace, was built first; it was located in front of the most prominent mountain, Bugaksan (白岳山), which lay just outside the palace walls. This mountain formed a visual backdrop and its foot stretched over the ground where the palace stands, extending into the city. In fact, the planning of Han-yang relied on the larger topographic structure of the landscape and followed the contour lines of the area; the Chosun kings never imposed a strict grid pattern of streets and never leveled the land, as was customary for a Chinese capital city. The mountain Bugaksan, behind Gyeongbok Palace is, in turn, at the end of a set of mountain chains that cover the entire Korean peninsula. As a result of the location of the palace, it was perceived that all of the force of this mountain system flowed into the palace where the king was reigning in his halls, thus visibly enforcing perceptions of the strength of the state. Such a vision conformed to the Chinese *fengshui* principles of geomancy, which were seriously studied in Korea and considered important for the new Chosun dynasty and its state. On a micro scale, this topographical system guaranteed the personal health of the royal family, who lived in the residential quarters at the back of the formal halls, where the flow of mountain force came in direct contact with the family's daily lives. In front of the palace was a wide street leading to its main gate, Gwanghwamun (光化門) and this street was lined on both sides with government offices. Therefore, the topographical system of the palace symbolized spiritual legitimization from the other world at the back on the north side, made visible through the layers of the mountains, whereas in the south, within the city, the tools of bureaucracy legitimized the ruling royals in this world. Having functioned for almost two centuries, the royal palace was set on fire by an angry crowd who burned several other palaces in the capital as well, together with the offices where slave records were held, profiting from the political instability that came with the invasion of the armies of the Japanese general Hideyoshi in the 1590s. Ever since that time the Gyeongbok Palace site remained mostly empty and rarely used.

The most pressing claim to restore and reinforce the traditional conception of the palace as a geomantic place was made by Daewongun, father of the 26th king of the Chosun dynasty, Gojong (高宗, 1852–1919). Daewongun (大院君, 1820–1889) was a powerful regent, being the natural father of the king, although not in the official lineage of royal heritage. Daewongun feared the Western powers that were now encroaching upon East Asia; ever since 1864, when his son was chosen to become the king, he set up a policy for suppressing Christianity, in which thousands received death penalties, including a number of foreign priests who were executed in



The *Fengshui* map for the reconstruction of Gyeongbok Palace, 1860s. (Collection Seoul History Museum, from カウテルト 2015).

1866. His conservative, but passionate efforts in regard to the restoration of the former symbolical function and political glory of the palace can be seen in a map of these years.

This map served as a master plan for rebuilding state halls, private quarters, corridors and walls. All of this building work was to be finished within less than two years, as is clear from the calendar for the construction that can be seen in the lower-right corner of this map. Giving the year, month, and day in the 12 earthly branches of the zodiac, it shows auspicious dates for installing foundations, erecting pillars, and laying roof beams. All was calculated with precision in regard to auspicious timing, in accordance with *fengshui* belief. The map itself abounds in advocating a restoration of the flows of the *fengshui* force of the topographical system, indicating the mountains bordering the city at the edge of the map. However, not even the slightest hint of a built-up area, or even the presence of the city itself is given. All mountains and mountain ridges surround the palace closely, as if there are neither citizens nor city. The central part of the map is occupied by the palace only, with a remarkable set of mountain ranges at the top. Such a representation is typical in Korean *fengshui* maps, where mountains are usually indicated in ranges, each connected by a thin synaptic link. These links, called *ipsu* (入首), seem to connect the mountains as beads on a string that extends, in this case, to the gentle slopes within the palace walls. In this perception, the full power of the mountain ranges flows into (入) the palace compound; even more so because each mountain is in fact also symbolically representative of a previous generation of kings. Obviously, the intention was to restore conservative ideas on the king and state, in the face of the threatening Western advance. By demanding extra taxes at the gates of the city and even confiscating lumber from old trees at grave sites, Daewongun managed to finish his project in 1868. In that year, Daewongun's son, King Gojong reinforced his claim to lineage by installing an extensive ancestor shrine in the northwest of the palace compound.

2 A palace in transition and distress

Gojong had married a wife, Queen Min, who brought in a rival Min faction that was more and more involved in a struggle of life or death with the conservative faction headed by her father-in-law Daewongun. Finally, Daewongun left the palace for a retreat in 1873. The same year the king and queen moved to a set of new private palace buildings that had been constructed in the northeast corner. By the end of the year the quarters of the king's mother perished in a fire, though these were rebuilt the next year. Three years later a devastating fire destroyed all buildings in the inner court compound, among which were also important ones such as the king's office hall (Gangnyeongjeon 康寧殿) with its west annex; the queen's office hall (Gyotaejeon 交泰殿); the Buddha hall (Hamwonjeon 含元殿), a branch of the queen's office hall (Geonsungak 建順閣), a branch of the late queen's office hall (Hyeopgyongdang 協慶堂), and the astron-

omy pavilion (Heumgyeonggak 欽敬閣). Efforts to rebuild some of these were undertaken in later years, but the king left the palace again, only to return in 1885. A period followed in which a few building activities undermined the topography of the palace more fundamentally than fire. King Gojong, who had begun with a typical conservative policy, intending to demonstrate lineages of ancestors, was now strongly interested in modernizing his country, even having electricity and a first tramway installed by foreign companies. Within the palace, he invited a Russian architect to design a modern and becoming Western-style reception hall for foreign guests in 1891. Another set of buildings to receive and entertain foreign envoys was added in a Chinese Ching style of architecture. Using natural topography to support royal power was now an outdated idea. All of these construction activities, following the earlier ancestor shrine, took place in the northern section, along the wall that closed off the palace compound on that side. The smooth sloping topography of the foothills was quite severely cut into in several locations to accommodate several of these new buildings, thereby also severing the traditional connection between the palace and its *fengshui* topography. The mountains behind the palace that so far had supported and legitimized the ruling family's power, spiritually, philosophically, and also visibly—not in the least because the site represented the best favorable topographical choice—had lost this layered meaning.

Leaving the old world behind however, did not result in adding new meanings to Korea in face of the quickly changing world. Without any clear administrative structure in place, politics remained unstable with assassinations, riots, uprisings, economic dislocation, and armed soldiers of various factions and nations roaming the streets. Amidst growing Russian influence, welcomed by the Min faction, the Japanese Minister in Korea, Lieutenant-General Gorō Miura organized, without official consent from Tokyo, a group of Japanese extremists, policemen, and pro-Japanese Korean soldiers in 1895. They brought in Daewongun hoping he would join a plot to topple Queen Min. It culminated in the assassination of the queen, and a house arrest of King Gojong in the palace, fearing for his life. Early next year the king managed to escape to the Russian Legation and reorganized political forces, renaming himself Emperor in 1897 and moving to more becoming quarters in another palace close to the legation. Gyeongbok palace became deserted. Seen from the city, the palace retained its image of sturdiness. Behind the main Gwanghwamun gate every citizen still could see the soaring roofs of the palace buildings behind the walls, all beautifully set against the backdrop of the mountain Bugaksan, as photos show. However, inside, the palace fell into disrepair.

3 The Chosun Industrial Exhibition

In 1910, Japan annexed the Korean peninsula under an assimilation treaty that legitimized the

new colonial government and the capital was renamed Keijō, or Gyeongseong (京城) in Korean pronunciation. A few years after signing the treaty the new colonial government decided to stage a business fair. As a site to stage this exhibition the old palace was selected. In the very center of the new capital, easy to reach, and more than sufficiently spacious, it also promised easy control of visitors as the compound was walled and had few gates. Planning went ahead and, in July 1914, preparations began with the clearing of 25 minor palace buildings that had tiled or thatched roofs. These were auctioned together with their stone ledges and foundations; one of the buildings was bought by Kihachirō Ōkura, founder of the Okura Hotel chain, to serve as his private Chosun museum in Tokyo. This deconstruction of the palace and its buildings was first of all motivated by simple practicality as we can read from the reports. However, politically speaking it also signified a clear claim on the site by the new colonial power, effectively placing the royals out of reach.

The fair was announced in English as “The Chosen Industrial Exhibition in Commemoration of the Fifth Anniversary of Inauguration of New Administration in Chosen” (始政五年記念朝鮮物産共進会). In the five years since the annexation of Chosun, the new government wanted to spread the message that a “marked improvement has been accomplished in various branches of agriculture and industry of the Peninsula under new administration”. Therefore the exhibition was “planned with the object of encouraging the further improvement of general produce. The Exhibition may, it is hoped, serve to introduce the actual condition of Chosen to the general public, thereby promoting our mutual economic relations in no small measure” as stated in a promotional pamphlet in English.

Promoting the blessings of a new government, such industrial fairs were actually common throughout the world and had also been staged in Japan itself. Fairs in newly colonized Hokkaido had demonstrated the glory of exciting harvests of modern fruits and vegetables, such as potatoes and melons. Like in Hokkaido, the fair in Keijō was called *kyōshinkai* (共進会) meaning a competitive exhibition. The Chosen Industrial Exhibition must have had an extra competitive aspect because it also seemed to facilitate a competition between local Japanese and Koreans, who could exhibit together, increasing pride for both sides and enforcing the image of success of the new administration.

While preparations were ongoing in Keijō, the Tokyo Taisho Exposition was held in March 1914 in Tokyo and was a big success, attracting over seven million visitors. Celebrating the exuberant and self-confident mood of the Taisho era, this exposition featured a Taiwan Pavilion and a Korea Pavilion, both promoting colonization policies. In this flurry of imperialism the Keijō exhibition was staged as the first to ever be held in colonial territory. After the auction of the palace buildings in July, an exhibition council was set up in August and preparations came into full swing. Although everything was sponsored by the Keijō Business Association, a mixed group of

local Japanese and Korean businessmen, the president of the exhibition council was a commissioner from the Japanese office of the Governor-General, and the four other chief positions, accounting, civil engineering, security, and exhibits, were also all taken by Japanese. The exhibition would open its doors from September 11 until October 31 the next year, 1915. Regarded as an overture to the coronation of the Taisho Emperor, which was planned to occur only ten days after the Keijō exhibition had closed, the site was enlarged even further to double the size of the original planning schemes, allowing for a liberal number of many small enterprises. In the exhibition guide map this reflects in the numerous stands selling postcards or tobacco, and many *senjin inshokuten* (鮮人飲食店), Korean food and drink shops.

Differing from the Tokyo Taisho Exposition, which was held in three different locations, it was seen as a practical advantage that the site of the old Gyeongbok palace was large enough to stage everything in one coherent site. Moreover, the compound was already walled and easy to control because it had few gates, which altogether meant considerable cost saving. Moreover, the palace was, of course, a famous place that added status and elegance to the fair. In the reports we even read it has *fūchi* (風致) a new word illustrating the mounting awareness of scenic beauty as an asset in modern city planning. It is striking that the planners of the time fully realized the value of natural beauty, but disregarded it so easily in later planning. However, not only was the natural landscape an important asset, but so was the cultural aspect. The official reports note that the entire exhibition was an opportunity to have the general public visit such a historic site. The layered meaning here seems to be that one could widely advertise the message that the palace was no longer the Korean royal residence. In fact, this was rather obvious, as the buildings of the feudal ruling classes in mainland Japan were also confiscated and given a new function, fitting within the general modern use of urban space. As on the mainland, Gyeongbok Palace had also been cleared of minor buildings, but the main halls and corridors remained in place and were highly valued. In this way simple, rational urban planning was combined with the advertisement of a new social and political system that was based on still-visible traditions. It was indeed the old continental style of the palace halls, so different from the palace halls in mainland Japan that made the site into a setting with a profoundly felt, elegant taste, as we read in the reports.

To accommodate the exhibition, only the foremost part of the palace site was used. Immediately behind the main Gwanghwamun gate, a large, temporary exhibition hall, “Building No.1,” was erected in a Western architectural style. This style was announced as renaissance-secession; however, it was not very renaissance-like but rather some kind of simplified Viennese Secession style. Agricultural, fishery, mining, and industry products were stacked on the shelves inside. In front of this main building was an obligatory fountain spouting water in a round basin, often seen in exposition sites in these days. Behind Building No.1, the main formal throne

hall stood prominently in the middle of numerous lower, temporary stalls and halls.

Building No.1 was to be removed after the exhibition was over, but another building, the Museum of Art, was to stay permanently. It stood on the site of the former East Palace, which had been completely dismantled. In front of the museum was a spacious western-style symmetric garden that enhanced the solemn quality of the architecture; the building style was announced as “renaissance”, whereas it was actually some kind of neo-classicism. The Museum of Art was, compared to the other buildings, a completely different exhibition space; rather than exhibiting produce or industries, it intended, by appealing to the identity of Chosun, to educate the masses by showing items of culture. Paintings, sculptures, embroidery, lacquer wares, and also smaller artifacts found in archeological excavations were on display. Replicas of iconic Korean art work from historic sites were shown: for example, the Shilla-period stone Buddha of Gyeongju’s Seokguram was remodeled in plaster and could be seen on the ground floor, where the flooring was made of asphalt. The upper storey had a floor of cement and on the ceiling an angel that was depicted in a Koguryo-period tomb in Uhyeonli at Gangseo had been recreated in oil painting. This peculiar strategy of exhibiting ancient heritage using avant-garde materials and techniques announced that tradition and history were part of modern culture, as promoted by the colonial government. The former East Palace that had once been the private residence of the former crown prince had made place for a public building, open to everybody and presented in a Western neo-classical style. Through the exhibition of Chosun history and culture, the message was clear that heritage was firmly anchored in modernity, supported by modern historiography and architectural style, all legitimizing colonial rule as a correct and modern understanding of society.

4 Cultural Policies and Authority

In the years following this exhibition, Chosun’s independence movement grew stronger, resulting in a display of open resistance on March 1, 1919. Colonial ruling policies needed to be revised from plain militarism to appeasement, which meant using softer tools such as cultural policies to support colonial rule. Concurrently, in the world of art and culture, on one hand Japan was coming closer to the West in regard to expression and critique, exemplified through the wave of Japonism, whereas Art Nouveau and modern design movements were beginning to value the arts and crafts of unnamed artisans, i.e. anonymous folk art. Inspired by such developments, Asakawa Takumi and Yanagi Muneyoshi came to the fore as two intellectuals who wished to promote Korean traditional crafts and present it as authentic folk art.

Asakawa lived in Keijō and was a collector of craft works, historic material and other memorabilia of traditional Korea. Concerned with tradition, he was quite alarmed by plans to dis-

mantle the main Gwanghwamun gate of the Gyeongbok Palace, as we can read from his diary of 1922. Demolishing the gate was ordered by the Governor-General, who wanted to build a new official government building that would be in full view at this end of the palace site when seen from the city, if only not blocked by this gate. His friend, Yanagi, was also concerned and managed to organize a protest movement that was successful insofar that the Gwanghwamun gate was not demolished but moved to replace a gate in the eastern wall of the palace. The two had higher ambitions when it came to traditional crafts and were not satisfied with the rather simplistic Museum of Art that had been installed at the previous exhibition, as its main focus was on archeology and heritage. As the Secession in Vienna had hastened the rediscovery of folk arts in Europe and had made it meaningful to modern society through the form of mass-produced handicrafts, they also wanted to elevate Korean traditional crafts to a similar international level by establishing a proper Chosun Folk Art Museum. This must have seemed like a good idea to the colonial government, as it could be expected that evaluating and acclaiming the art of the Chosun people would have a softening effect on colonial politics. Adding to the Museum of Art, the new Chosun Folk Art Museum was created inside the palace; it would open its doors in 1924 in two existing halls inside the palace that were allocated to it by the colonial government. Located in the back garden of the palace, the museum was in an upscale environment; however, the garden was also tucked behind many other halls and buildings, and was actually difficult to find and reach. However noble the idea may have been to exhibit the folk art of the Chosun people, the most important thing the Colonial Government wanted to show was authority. The new government building took the best location; the Gwanghwamun gate that had been facing the city as the southern façade of the palace was now replaced by the Colonial Government Building, actually on the site where Building No.1 of the business exhibition had once stood in 1915. The new Colonial Government Building was finished in 1926 while the Gwanghwamun gate had been moved to the eastern wall of the palace compound. When seen from the city, instead of the gate, now the government building stood monumentally with its towering four-storey white granite wings stretching on both sides at the end of the wide street. This street was still called Gwanghwamun Street, or *Kōkamon-dōri* in Japanese pronunciation. The ministries and offices of the Chosun kingdom that had lined the street on both sides in earlier times were now replaced by modern office buildings for newspaper companies and other business. Against the backdrop of Bugaksan mountain, the central image of the city was completely changed, posing a clear message to everyone that the colonial government was now in charge of modern times.

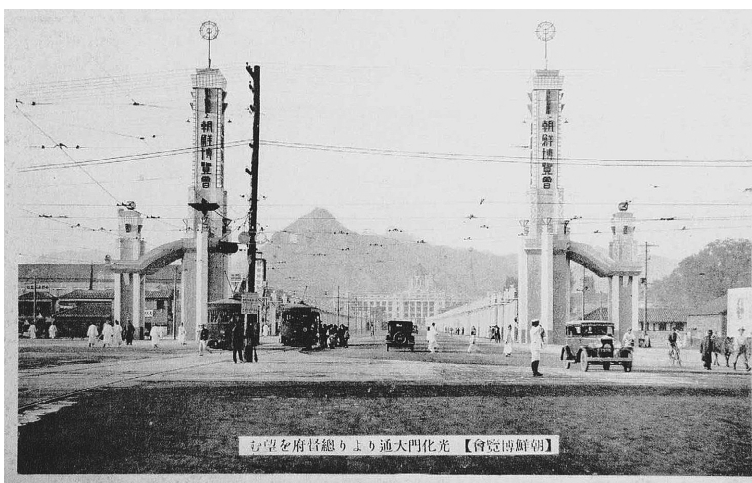
5 The Chosun Exposition

Not long after the new Colonial Government building was finished, and fourteen years after the

first business exhibition, the large Chosun Exposition was announced to take place. It was to be a project to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the annexation treaty and was clearly proposed to be a continuation of the ceremonies celebrating the accession to the throne of the Shōwa Emperor that had taken place in 1928. In April 1929 the Emperor made his first official visit to the Yasukuni Shrine. This shrine was an imperial institution where the Meiji Emperor had performed rituals to bring solace to the souls of the ones who had sacrificed their lives for the imperial cause. Though the meaning of the Shōwa Emperor's visit is far from clear, it was exactly one year after the Jinan Incident (済南事件) in China that had seen Japanese casualties. Within such an atmosphere of adding meaning to a novel form of imperialism with dangerous policies towards the continent, the Chosun Exposition was planned to take place the autumn of 1929, from September 12 to October 31.

Again, the site of the Gyeongbok Palace was used. The aim was to further industries and produce as before, but also to introduce the industrial development policies of colonial Korea and foster tourism, including spreading propaganda aimed at foreign countries. In line with the economic growth of the 1920s, the atmosphere of the Chosun Exposition was extravagant and dazzling when compared to the previous exhibition. The tramway, now in place, was adjusted to carry visitors to the site, radio broadcasting was used for advertising, and the illumination this time was luxurious, encouraging night visits all in a joyful and merry mood. It was an amazing experience of extraordinary technological progress, with a large number of pavilions with eccentric forms and shapes not seen in daily life covering the site evenly while also cleverly utilizing the characteristics of the space.

In regard to the management of the masses of expected visitors, a problem was posed by the



Chosun Exposition entrance space in front of the Colonial Government Building, against the backdrop of Bugaksan mountain. Postcard 1929 (from カウテルト 2015).

Colonial Government Building which occupied the full southern end of the palace compound, while the main gate, the Gwanghwamun, was now on the less-easily reached eastern side. To allow for a smooth flow of visitors, many plans were developed before a final solution was found. First, the entire Gwanghwamun Street was transformed into a wide entrance space with temporary arches and decorative streetlights, welcoming visitors from deep in the city under a sensational, gossamery web of tramway and electricity lines. In front of the Colonial Government Building one turned right, and proceeded along the southern and eastern wall before entering the site through the Gwanghwamun gate. After such a detour, psychologically stressing the presence of the Colonial Government, it was of utmost importance to have a clear and unambiguous route through the site behind the government building. To this end, an innovative design was proposed that involved changing the previous north-south axis of the palace site to an east-west one. In this way, the main, east-west entrance plaza, lined with pavilions became the start of the expo visitors' route. Prominently at the head of this street sat a large palace hall, the Gyeonghoe-ru Pavilion (慶會樓). Not many of the old palace buildings were left, but on this occasion the peculiar elegance (*shumi*, 趣味) of the Gyeonghoe-ru Pavilion was cleverly used to enhance the monumentality of this axis of the exposition site. It came into full view at the end of the main entrance plaza, which was lined on both sides with large exposition halls in a symmetrical arrangement.

This Gyeonghoe-ru Pavilion had been the festive hall for the royal family and was a large, two-storey building, standing on granite pillars on an island in a square pond. Now, this spectacular building was open to the public to either sit and rest or listen to one of the many performances that were being held under the large sweeping roof. Continuing one's visit from here, the other pavilions were a sensational mix of cutting-edge art styles and care was taken to have a route in place that zigzagged the palace compound in order to give the visitor a chance to see as much as possible.

Reaching the very rear end of the former palace compound, visitors came upon a peculiar staircase with a roofed footbridge that brought them over the wall and outside the compound. Here, beyond the wall, the woods had been cleared and an extensive plan for residential development was in place. This location was planned for the residences of government officials and most of the grading of the land had already been finished before the expo. However, for the moment, this site was being temporarily used for the expo. Having crossed the palace wall using the footbridge, one could enter this new site to see pavilions from mainland Japan's Shiga, Nara, and Mie prefectures, mixed with stalls and shops of the Keijō Business Association. Having visited these, one could finally leave the site at the northwest corner. At that point was a newly constructed terminal station for the tramway. A streetcar would be waiting to take people back to the city center, although certainly not each and every visitor would have been able to get on the

one-car, single-track tram. As a planning strategy, the entire expo site, with its one-way route through the site, was well planned, and cleverly combined the dynamics of various other city development projects. Therefore, the expo was a convenient tool for easing the introduction of modern city planning at the cost of demolishing natural and historical structures. Indeed, completely forgotten was the topography and natural beauty that previously formed the back bone of the palace landscape and, in fact, had been one of the very reasons why this site was chosen in 1915.

Conclusion

The Chosun Exposition of 1929 was staged to promote Japan's new colony, Chosun. Set on the site of the former royal palace of the Korean kings, it seems that colonial power was enforced by means of this exposition. More precise research shows a complex range of motivations and historical facts that indicate an added dynamic. Basically, it was the bland rationality of modernism, apart from colonial power play, that formed the major motivation to dismantle the old palace while, in the process, people and place relations were wiped out. A final culmination in a process of inconsiderate planning, the exposition was a convenient tool for muffling specificities and optimistically promoting the universality of new powerful rule. History had become part of modernity, topography had become town planning, and people and place relations were lost.

Account and acknowledgments

I gratefully acknowledge the comments of one anonymous reviewer and several symposium participants. A paper in Japanese has the full bibliography and footnotes with source quotes to the present abbreviated article: ウィーベ・カウテルト「景福宮から朝鮮博覧会場への空間変貌」, 佐野真由子編『万国博覧会と人間の歴史』思文閣出版, 2015, pp.235-266, 口絵6 (ISBN 978-4-7842-1819-6)

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