

Revitalizing Historical Landscapes: An Examination of Gwanghwamun's Cultural Significance and the Proposal of the Gwanghwamun Belt

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Abstract

Cultural landscape refers to an man-made landscape constructed through the intricate interaction between a cultural group and the natural environment. As a meticulously designed landscape, Gwanghwamun and its adjacent square serve as a nexus of historical and contemporary interactions and revitalize the essence of the past while providing cultural enrichment and recreational opportunities. As such, they hold profound cultural value as a distinctive landscape. This study explores the historical background of Gwanghwamun and its square to examine their cultural significance in detail. In addition, in this study, it proposes the concept of a novel 'Gwanghwamun Belt' that connects the areas of Sejong, Chungmugong, and the cultural spaces surrounding Gwanghwamun. This proposed concept aims to optimize the efficient utilization of this prominent site in order to foster its multifaceted potentials as a cultural hub.

Keyword : Cultural landscape, Gwanghwamun, Gwanghwamun square, Application plan

1. Introduction

The cultural landscape, an amalgamation of human interaction with the natural environment, represents the intricate interplay between human life and the surrounding natural elements. It serves as a testament to the coexistence and mutual influence of cultural practices and ecological systems. Across various regions in South Korea, cultural landscapes have emerged over time, embodying the cumulative wisdom and intentional interventions of human societies. While these landscapes have often been regarded as repositories of cultural heritage, their transformative impact resulting from human activities has not always been fully recognized.

In this context, Gwanghwamun and its adjacent square serve as prime examples of spaces where the past and present seamlessly converge, revitalizing historical essence and providing opportunities for cultural enrichment and respite. As a cultural landscape, Gwanghwamun bears immense value in its

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capacity to encapsulate the collective memory and traditions of a society while harmonizing with the surrounding natural elements. Several research has been studied to highlight the importance and social role as a square that Gwanghwamun had played during the domestic uprising and democratic transformation in South Korea [1]. Lee focuses on the publicness of Gwanghwamun Square in the context of the social-distancing measures implemented worldwide. It suggests that South Korea should embrace the contested nature of this symbolic square rather than pursuing idealistic or unsustainable visions of 'emptying' or 'de-bordering' the space [2]. The use of joke flags in Gwanghwamun Square during the so-called South Korea Candle Light Revolution was examined to display how defying identity categorisation helps civic mobilisation by motivating individuals to organise beyond the rhetoric of traditional social membership [3]. Besides those socio-cultural perspectives, this study seeks to unravel the cultural significance embedded within this iconic site by critically examining the historical context of Gwanghwamun and its square. In particular, it aims to explore the concept of a new 'Gwanghwamun Belt,' a strategic framework connecting the areas of Sejong, Chungmugong and the cultural spaces surrounding Gwanghwamun. This proposed concept intends to maximize the efficient utilization of this prominent site, unlocking its untapped potentials as a vibrant cultural hub. Through this investigation, this paper aims to contribute to the deeper understanding and appreciation of Gwanghwamun as an invaluable cultural landscape in the context of Korean heritage.

2. Cultural landscape

The term 'culture' derives from the Latin word *cultura* that means 'cultivate' or 'grow' and it encompasses various facets of human life such as knowledge, technology, arts, religion and politics, all aimed at shaping the natural environment for specific purposes. In the context of anthropology, culture encompasses the entire spectrum of human existence and endeavors [4][5]. The concept of the cultural landscape emerges and represents the dynamic interaction between human life and the natural environment. It embodies the combined works of nature and human cultivation and results in a harmonious and balanced landscape. The cultural landscape showcases the transmission and integration of human knowledge, practices and values that are interwoven with the natural elements [6]. Recognizing the importance of such landscapes, UNESCO established the 'Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage' in 1972, which led to the designation and preservation of cultural landscapes as significant world heritage sites. Subsequent revisions and guidelines have further refined the understanding and management of cultural landscapes, resulting in the recognition of

numerous locations worldwide as cultural landscapes of outstanding universal value [7]. One of the examples is rice terraces in the Philippines as shown in [Fig. 1].



[Fig. 1] Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras

In South Korea, the concept of the cultural landscape has been observed throughout its history, albeit with a greater emphasis on natural elements rather than human interventions. However, as human wisdom and intentions gradually shaped the natural environment, cultural landscapes have come to be recognized as integral components of human heritage [7]. Gwanghwamun Square is a cultural landscape that embodies the intersection of history, symbolism, public engagement and cultural expression. Gwanghwamun Square underwent significant urban redevelopment in recent years to enhance its accessibility, aesthetic appeal and functionality. The redesign incorporated elements of traditional Korean architecture and landscaping, further enriching its cultural ambiance. The square hosts cultural activities that showcase traditional and contemporary Korean culture. Festivals, performances and exhibitions frequently take place in order to provide opportunities for visitors to engage with Korean art, music, dance and other cultural expressions. Gwanghwamun Square is a popular gathering place for both locals and tourists. It serves as a venue for cultural events, celebrations, protests and public gatherings. Its open design and spaciousness accommodate large crowds that making it a focal point for civic engagement and the expression of public sentiment. Thus, it reflects South Korea's rich heritage, serves as a platform for contemporary cultural activities and symbolizes the nation's collective identity.

This study focuses on Gwanghwamun and Gwanghwamun Square as exemplars of intentionally designed and created landscapes by human beings [8]. By examining these sites, it will uncover the

significance of Gwanghwamun as a cultural landscape and shed light on its intricate connections to human history, cultural values and the natural environment.

3. Gwanghwamun and Gwanghwamun square

3.1 Gwanghwamun

Situated at 161 Sajik-ro, Jongno-gu, Seoul, Gwanghwamun assumes its role as the southern gateway to Gyeongbok Palace, the primary palace of the Joseon Dynasty. Functioning as the principal entrance, Gwanghwamun was intentionally designed to possess a greater magnitude and formality compared to the front gates of other palaces. The construction of Gyeongbok Palace commenced in 1395 during the reign of King Taejo, with the fundamental structure established in 1399, accompanied by castle gates constructed on the east, west, and south sides. Initially referred to as Omun (Meridian Gate) without a specific name as shwon in [Fig. 2], it was officially designated as Gwanghwamun in 1426 during the reign of King Sejong.



[Fig. 2] Gwanghwamun in the Joseon Dynasty

However, the historical narrative of Gwanghwamun has not been immune to periods of destruction and reconstruction. The Japanese Invasion of Korea resulted in the devastation of Gwanghwamun, although it was later restored in 1865 during the reign of King Gojong. The Japanese colonial era introduced a policy of cultural obliteration, leading to the demolition of several structures within Gyeongbok Palace in 1927. Consequently, the area once occupied by Gwanghwamun was transformed by the construction of the general government building, while Gwanghwamun itself was relocated to the north of Geonchunmun Gate. The tumultuous period of the Korean War inflicted significant damage

upon Gwanghwamun, leaving the gatehouse shattered and marked by bullet scars.

Not until 1968, under the leadership of President Park Chung Hee, was Gwanghwamun reconstructed. This endeavor involved the meticulous restoration of the gatehouse, accompanied by necessary masonry repairs and resulted in its reinstatement to its original position. However, it is important to note that the reconstruction of Gwanghwamun at that time deviated from its original axis, prompting a relocation approximately 14.5 meters backward from its initial location due to a discrepancy of approximately 3.5 degrees. Thus, a subsequent demolition and reconstruction project for Gwanghwamun were undertaken in 2006, driven by the objective of rectifying this misalignment. Following a meticulous restoration process spanning 3.8 years, Gwanghwamun reclaimed its original appearance in August 2010 [9].

3.2 Gwanghwamun square

Gwanghwamun Square, situated in proximity to Gwanghwamun, holds historical and cultural significance in the urban landscape. During the Joseon Dynasty, Gyeongbok Palace was established, aligning with the capital's relocation to Hanyang. This region, referred to as 'Yookcho Street,' encompassed vital governmental institutions including Uijeongbu, positioned in front of Gwanghwamun, the principal gateway to Gyeongbok Palace. Under Japanese colonial rule, it was known as 'Gwanghwamuntong' and subsequently renamed Sejongro following independence.

The founder of the Joseon Dynasty, King Taejo, strategically positioned key structures such as Sungryemun, Gwanghwamun, and Keunjeongjeon within Gyeongbok Palace during its establishment. Notably, Yookcho Street, unlike straight thoroughfares in other countries, possessed a gentle slope and gradually curved from 130 meters in front of Gwanghwamun. Its width narrowed over time, reaching approximately 51 to 53 meters, three times the standard width of streets during the Joseon Dynasty. This unique configuration suggests its multifaceted role as both a garden and a square for various performances and festivals.

However, the Japanese occupation brought significant changes to the urban landscape. The construction of the Japanese Government-General of Korea and the establishment of the Seoul government office building (Seoul City Hall) disregarded the existing symbolic axis. After liberation, rapid economic development policies prompted the widening of the road to 100 meters. Consequently, a 14-lane T-shaped road extending from Gwanghwamun to City Hall and a 10-lane road from Anguk Station to Sajik Tunnel were introduced, creating a complex network of roadways. Furthermore, the reconstruction of Gwanghwamun after the Korean War involved concrete materials and a slight inclination of 5.6 degrees from its original position. Notably, a statue of Admiral Yi Sun-shin was added as a distinctive

feature.

The development of Gwanghwamun Square commenced in 1994, aiming to establish a pedestrian space at Sejongro Square to commemorate the 600th anniversary of Seoul's justice system and the 50th anniversary of independence. Initial plans proposed by the Seoul City government in 1995 encountered obstacles, leading to revised proposals in 2003 that aimed to divide the square on both sides of the road. However, this plan did not progress as intended. In 2005, the President of the Cultural Heritage Administration proposed an alternative plan, advocating for the removal of the road adjacent to the Sejong Center for the Performing Arts to establish the square. Subsequently, the Seoul City government confirmed the plan to situate the square in the center of Sejongro following a public opinion poll in the same year. Finally, in 2009, the construction of Gwanghwamun Square reached completion. Nevertheless, in 2016, seven years after its inauguration, a redesign proposal emerged and aimed to reconfigure the square by adjusting the road alignment of the Sejong Center for the Performing Arts and reducing it to six lanes based on the results of the Gwanghwamun Forum's design competition. The construction timeline is explained in [Table 1].

[Table 1] Gwanghwamun square construction timeline

Year	Main events
1994-1995	Discussion and planning for the expansion of Sejongro and the construction of pedestrian spaces to commemorate the 600th anniversary of Seoul Justice and the 50th anniversary of independence.
2003	Presentation of the plan to divide the square on both sides of the road.
2005	Proposal to situate the square laterally by eliminating the road adjacent to the Sejong Center for the Performing Arts.
2016	Introduction of a plan to shift the road and reduce it from 10 lanes to 6 lanes, based on the results of the

4. The significance of Gwanghwamun as a cultural landscape

Gwanghwamun Square serves as a significant convergence point for political, administrative and cultural activities in Korea. It represents a central avenue that integrates historical and cultural resources such as Gyeongbok Palace and the Sejong Center for the Performing Arts. Positioned in the core area of Seoul, it intersects major traffic routes from various directions, further solidifying its importance as a focal point [9].

Throughout its history, Gwanghwamun has held a prominent role as the political and economic center of Seoul, attracting both domestic and international tourists. During the Joseon Dynasty, Gwanghwamun

Square played a crucial part in political and administrative affairs. Unfortunately, Gwanghwamun and Yukcho Street endured significant damage during the Japanese invasion of Korea. However, Emperor Gojong initiated restoration efforts to mark a period of recovery. Subsequently, parts of Gyeongbok Palace and Gwanghwamun were demolished during the Japanese colonial era, leading to neglect and disrepair [10].

After the liberation, Gwanghwamun underwent restoration when Park Chung Hee assumed power. However, the initial restoration project deviated from the accurate reconstruction, prompting a comprehensive restoration endeavor in 2006 that concluded in 2010. Concurrently, the construction of Gwanghwamun Square harmoniously blended the historical essence of Gwanghwamun with modern elements. With the presence of significant historical and cultural spaces in the vicinity, such as the National Palace Museum of Korea, the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, Seoul History Museum, and the Sejong Center for the Performing Arts, Gwanghwamun Square has transformed into a remarkable cultural complex, possessing immense cultural value.



[Fig. 3] Gwanghwamun square reconstruction

Gwanghwamun and Gwanghwamun Square stand as iconic tourist destinations, offering new cultural spaces and serving as a cultural landscape in Seoul. In 2009, the Sejong Belt project was initiated with the vision that the transformation of the entire Sejongro area into a world-class cultural street that features numerous concert halls, museums, art galleries and remnants of the old palace. The objective was to attract domestic and international tourists. However, due to challenges in engaging the public and achieving financial sustainability, the project faced setbacks and eventually ceased operations as shown in [Fig. 3]. The discourse surrounding the reconstruction of Gwanghwamun Square encompasses themes of historical restoration, modernization, symbolism, preservation concerns and public engagement. Advocates argue that the reconstruction is necessary to revive the square's original design and historical

significance, aligning it with the surrounding cultural heritage sites such as Gyeongbokgung Palace. They emphasize the importance of preserving and showcasing Korea's traditional architecture and cultural heritage. In contrast, critics of the reconstruction express concerns about the potential loss of authenticity and the erasure of historical layers. They argue that the reconstruction might sacrifice original elements and compromise the square's historical integrity. This discourse emphasizes the need to balance modernization efforts with the preservation of historical authenticity. It became evident that the anticipated tourist role did not materialize through ticket purchases or participation in performances. Instead, visitors were drawn more towards the historical and cultural spaces of Gwanghwamun itself.

Therefore, recognizing the need to generate public interest and optimize utilization, the development of a comprehensive utilization plan that connects Gwanghwamun Square with the surrounding cultural spaces is essential. Drawing inspiration from the historical significance of Gwanghwamun, the researcher proposes the creation of a new 'Gwanghwamun Belt' that intertwines the Sejong Story, Admiral Yi Sun-sin, the Old Palace Museum, Seoul History Museum, National Museum of Korean Contemporary History and the National Folklore Museum. Through the implementation of this plan, the researcher aims to meet visitor expectations and maximize the utilization of Gwanghwamun and Gwanghwamun Square. It is essential to consider a balanced approach that respects the historical and cultural significance of Gwanghwamun Square while adapting to the evolving needs and interests of the community. Public input and stakeholder engagement should be prioritized to ensure the successful utilization and preservation of this iconic public space. First, enhancing the square's green spaces and creating recreational areas would provide opportunities for relaxation and leisure. Introducing seating areas, walking paths and landscaped gardens would allow people to enjoy the surroundings and promote a sense of well-being. Second, Organizing periodic street markets or food festivals in the square would create a vibrant atmosphere and promote local businesses. It would provide a platform for artisans, craftsmen, and small-scale vendors to showcase their products and culinary delights. Third, Encouraging community-led initiatives, performances and activities would strengthen the connection between the square and its surrounding neighborhoods.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Gwanghwamun and its adjacent square as a cultural landscape embody a rich tapestry of historical and contemporary interactions to serve as a vital link between the past and the present. Their profound cultural value is derived from their distinctive landscape and their role as a hub for

cultural enrichment and recreational activities. The historical examination of Gwanghwamun and its square underscores their cultural significance and highlights the importance of their preservation and utilization. The proposed concept of the 'Gwanghwamun Bel' presents an innovative approach to optimize the use of this site and connect key areas such as Sejong, Chungmugong and the cultural spaces surrounding Gwanghwamun. This concept aims to foster the site's multifaceted potentials as a cultural hub and develop its role in the cultural landscape of South Korea.

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