

Utilization of Modern Buildings for Urban Regeneration in Gunsan City: Opportunities, Challenges, and Future Prospects

Tae-Hun Kim¹

Abstract

Urban regeneration initiatives have become instrumental in rejuvenating declining cities with Gunsan City to serve as a notable success story in effectively leveraging modern buildings. Distinguished by its vibrant history, Gunsan boasts a unique architectural landscape that sets it apart from other regions. However, despite various policy endeavors aimed at capitalizing on these distinct characteristics, limitations have surfaced due to inadequate awareness, limited regional publicity and a lack of well-defined urban regeneration strategies. The purpose of this paper is to examine the Gunsan's modern and contemporary history, explore its architectural heritage and propose actionable steps to address these limitations within the framework of the modern cultural city project. By conducting comprehensive research, this paper expects to harness the potential of Gunsan's modern history and culture as catalysts for regional revitalization, ultimately enhancing the quality of life for local residents and propelling policy initiatives in Gunsan forward.

Keyword : Urban regeneration, Modern buildings, Urban projects, History and culture

1. Introduction

Urban regeneration has emerged as a prominent subject of inquiry while focusing on revitalizing cities experiencing decline. Among the notable examples of successful urban regeneration projects is Gunsan, They has gained recognition for its effective utilization of modern buildings [1]. The city has captured considerable attention due to its urban renewal endeavors and possesses a distinct appeal, primarily attributed to its unique and differentiated modern architecture. This distinctiveness finds its roots in the eventful history of Gunsan where the convergence of Japanese, American and local cultures has engendered a truly exceptional character. In addition, the region was presented as a compelling target for economic development, cultural tourism and innovative business endeavors. This led to enhancements in infrastructure for both tourists and residents such as the revitalization of spaces and the creation of cultural routes. In addition, initiatives were implemented to support the growth of local businesses including the establishment of a business incubator and a training program catering to young entrepreneurs [2].

¹ Korean Natural History Museum, Chungcheongnam-do [Curator]
e-mail : kth0798@naver.com

Received(September 9, 2021), Review Result(1st: October 5, 2021), Accepted(December 3, 2021), Published(December 31, 2021)



© 2021 The Authors. Published by NCISS.
This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.
To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the concept of modernity to explore the modern and contemporary history of Gunsan, while investigating the influence of its modern architecture on regional revitalization efforts. Moreover, the paper provides an overview of diverse projects associated with the Gunsan modern cultural city initiative, aimed at regenerating the original downtown area of Gunsan.

2. Modern buildings in Gunsan and policies for regional revitalization

2.1 Modernity and city building

Modernity refers to the cultural, intellectual, economic and social conditions that emerged in Europe following the Enlightenment in the late 17th and 18th centuries. It is characterized by industrialization, secularization, rationalization, the development of the nation-state system, capitalism, democracy and the belief in progress and reason. City building in the modern era underwent radical transformation due to technological advancements, population growth, economic change and evolving societal needs. As societies industrialized, cities expanded and became more organized with distinct residential, commercial and industrial zones. They became centers of economic activity and cultural exchange. The use of new materials including steel, glass and concrete and the introduction of architectural styles such as modernism profoundly changed urban landscapes. Modern city building also includes the concept of urban planning which involves the technical and political process concerned with the development and design of land use in an urban environment. Urban planning in the modern era has tackled issues like housing affordability, sustainability and urban regeneration. This approach seeks to create more inclusive, efficient and livable cities that reflect the needs and desires of their inhabitants [3][4].

In the context of modern South Korea, city building has been influenced by historical events like Japanese colonization and rapid industrialization in the 20th century. This history has left a unique blend of architectural styles and urban landscapes that are now being reevaluated and reused in the process of urban regeneration [5].

2.2 Modern and Contemporary History of the Gunsan Area

The Gunsan area has long served as a pivotal maritime transportation center, strategically positioned for trade and communication. Throughout history, it has witnessed significant battles such as the Battle of Baekgang, the Battle of Gibeolpo and the Battle of Jinpo. During the late Joseon Dynasty, the largest naval base was established in Gunsan. Subsequently, under Japanese colonial rule, Gunsan

underwent transformation into a planned city intended to facilitate the Japanese invasion of the Korean peninsula with its port serving as a vital conduit for the transportation of rice and supplies to Japan. Gunsan officially opened its doors in 1899, benefiting from its proximity to the agriculturally fertile Honam Plain and leading to its development as a prominent rice harvesting and distribution center [6]. During this period, the cultural landscape of Gunsan was significantly influenced by Japanese culture as shown in [Fig. 1]. After the liberation, the city experienced the imprint of American military bases and it led to the emergence of a unique amalgamation of American-influenced culture. However, the 1980s witnessed a significant economic decline in Gunsan, primarily attributable to regional disparities resulting from the national heavy and chemical industry promotion policy initiated in the early 1970s, which emphasized development in metropolitan and Yeongnam regions. Consequently, Gunsan became a poignant illustration of a politically marginalized city undergoing developmental setbacks.



[Fig. 1] Pier of Gunsan Port in the 1900s

However, beginning in the mid-1980s, the government has implemented initiatives aimed at bridging the significant economic disparity and establishing a foundation for trade advancement which has presented an opportunity for Gunsan to transition into a capitalist city. However, the relocation of Gunsan City Hall to Jochon-dong in 1996 brought about substantial changes to the city center including the relocation of major administrative agencies, the development of residential areas and the establishment of industrial complexes. Thus, the city center lost its primary functions and roles and led to a heightened phenomenon of urban decay, an increase in vacant houses and a sharp decline in population [7]. Nonetheless, in recent times, Gunsan City has emerged as an optimal hub city for the West Coast development plan and has been considered a potential candidate for the central city of Jeonbuk. The significance of revitalizing the original downtown area has been emphasized with the initiation of the ‘Modern Cultural City Creation Project’ aimed at leveraging the unique modern

historical landscape of Gunsan as a pivotal aspect of the downtown's regeneration [2]. Leveraging its eventful history, Gunsan has harnessed its modern buildings that bear the remnants of the Japanese colonial period as new cultural resources and positioned itself with greater development potential than other cities in Korea.

2.3 Overview of modern buildings in Gunsan

At present, several modern buildings from that era still exist in Gunsan, although their presence is gradually diminishing due to ongoing urbanization. Notable public buildings that have endured include the Gunsan Customs House constructed in 1908, and the current Gunsan City Hall 3rd Office Building. Private commercial structures encompass the Gunsan Branch of the 18th Bank of Japan, the Kunsan Museum of Modern Art, and the newly constructed Chosun Bank branch in 1923. Other edifices with connections to religion, medicine and agriculture include the GeumGwang Temple commonly known as Dongguk Temple, the Okgu Joint Brewery and the Shimadani Farm Bank. Regrettably, it has been confirmed that educational institution buildings no longer remain.

During the modern era, there was a distinct separation between Japanese residential areas and those of the Korean population. Many modern buildings in Geum-dong, Myeongsan-dong, Yeonghwa-dong, Wolmyeong-dong, and Jang-dong were erected between 1920 and 1930. Representative structures from this period include the Korean Milling House and Gunsan Buyun's House, both completed in 1925, as well as the Lee Young-Chun House designed in the form of a villa and situated within Kumamoto Farm around 1920. Noteworthy modern buildings in Gunsan also encompass the well-known Hirotsu House and the railroad village, celebrated for its travel course as shown in [Fig. 2].



[Fig. 2] Japanese-style house in Sinheung-dong

After Korea's liberation from Japanese rule, Gunsan underwent several changes. The American

military bases introduced an American-influenced culture and architecture that added to Gunsan's multicultural identity. However, as the modern industrial facilities as symbols of Japanese imperialism began to decline, so did Gunsan's economic prominence. In essence, the history of Gunsan is etched into its architectural styles and urban design, each period shaping the city's identity in unique ways. The current efforts to repurpose the historical industrial facilities into cultural spaces show an understanding of the city's past to serve as an acknowledgment of its history, and as a commitment to sustainable future development.

3. Gunsan's Modern Culture City Project for Regional Vitalization

3.1 Overview of Gunsan City Project

The Gunsan Urban Regeneration Plan was initiated to revitalize the historic center of the city of Gunsan. In response to this, the Gunsan City Council proposed a project in 2009 to rehabilitate the old historic center. The goal was to transform it into a vibrant neighborhood capable of retaining its population and attracting innovative economic development initiatives. The project also aimed to take advantage of the Japanese cultural heritage as a focal point of tourist interest and historical memory, opting to conserve the Colonial legacy, a choice different from that of other Korean cities.

First, in its Modern History Belt Project, Gunsan endeavored to regenerate the original downtown area. This initiative involves the utilization of modern cultural heritage sites such as the Modern History Museum, Rose Gallery and Jinpo Marine Theme Park as spaces for cultural and artistic activities. The overarching goal is to transform Gunsan City into a hub of modern culture by developing a modern village and establishing prominent tourist destinations. To foster citizen engagement, an urban regeneration support center has been established as a bridge between the local administration and the community. As a result, Gunsan City has emerged as a renowned tourist destination to boast a dynamic learning and experiential street that draws visitors from far and wide [8].

Second is to preserve modern cultural properties. Recognizing the value of its modern cultural properties, Gunsan City has prioritized their preservation and exhibition. Notably, the Chosun Bank, which holds historical significance as the setting of Chae Man-sik's novel *Takryu* (Muddy Stream) has been repurposed from a former Bank of Korea branch into a modern architectural masterpiece and symbolized Gunsan's modern history. Similarly, the 18th Bank of Japan, previously used as the Gunsan branch of Korea Express, has undergone renovation and now serves as the Museum of Modern Art.

The Time Travel to Modern Gunsan initiative seeks to enhance the modern ambiance and trails of

Gunsan. Improvements including the maintenance of signage and building elevations are being implemented along the Taste Street and trail sections. This project has garnered recognition for its exemplary approach to cultural urban regeneration and received the 2015 Culture and Art Development Merit Awards, acknowledging its contribution to the local cultural brand project.

In the Wolmyeong-dong leased territory, a designated space for experiencing modern history has been established amidst the residential areas inhabited by foreigners. In addition, a modern history trail has been opened to enable visitors to delve into the historical narrative. The Gunsan City Government has undertaken restoration efforts to create a small park, an era-style accommodation experience hall and modern living facilities. This project has been selected as a neighborhood urban regeneration initiative supported by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport [9].

The Citizen Art Village focuses on the renovation of the Wooil Theater, a prominent landmark in the original downtown area, to provide a platform for local cultural artists. It aims to offer opportunities for creative activities in culture and art to local residents and to fulfill their aspirations for cultural engagement. By establishing dedicated spaces for artists and expanding cultural enjoyment for citizens, Gunsan City seeks to cultivate a distinct street that revolves around artistic expression [10].

As shown in [Fig. 3], the area was promoted as an attractive economic development hub for cultural tourism activities and innovative business activities. Infrastructure improvements were made for tourists and residents and initiatives were undertaken to boost the local business fabric such as the creation of a business incubator and a training program for young entrepreneurs.



[Fig. 3] The Saemangeum-Gunsan Free Economic Zone (SGFEZ)

The project successfully revitalized the old urban center of Gunsan and halted its depopulation and degradation. It saw a significant increase in tourism from 220,000 tourists in 2013 to more than 3.5 million in 2017 as well as the establishment of new business initiatives in the area with growth of over

200% between 2007 and 2017. In addition, the channels of citizen participation remain active and have become a key aspect of the community life management in the area [11].

3.2 Limitation and Future directions of Gusan City Project

The city of Gusan has undergone significant transformations throughout its history from its establishment in 1899 to its elevation as a city in 1914. Despite its high urban density during the colonial period, Gusan faced challenges in aligning with post-liberation economic development policies. However, recent initiatives focusing on regenerating the original downtown area through the utilization of modern buildings have positioned Gusan as a noteworthy exemplar in this domain. Nevertheless, limitations persist in terms of public awareness and understanding of these projects both within the city and beyond. The lack of widespread knowledge among residents and the rigid nature of the regeneration plan contribute to a perceived sluggishness in the pace of progress. In order to overcome these challenges, it is imperative for Gusan City to prioritize active promotion and effective public relations efforts, targeting both the local region and a wider audience. In addition, the establishment of a comprehensive and long-term plan for the development of the cultural landscape encompassing modern buildings will contribute to the restoration of the essence of the downtown area, facilitating the integration of modern history and culture into the fabric of residents' lives. By undertaking these measures, Gusan can further enhance its identity and ensure a prosperous future characterized by continued growth and revitalization.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, urban regeneration initiatives have become instrumental in rejuvenating declining cities with Gusan City serving as a notable success story in effectively leveraging modern buildings. Distinguished by its vibrant history, Gusan boasts a unique architectural landscape that sets it apart from other regions. However, despite various policy endeavors aimed at capitalizing on these distinct characteristics, limitations have surfaced due to inadequate awareness, limited regional publicity and a lack of well-defined urban regeneration strategies. This paper delves into Gusan's modern and contemporary history, explores its architectural heritage and proposes actionable steps to address these limitations within the framework of the modern cultural city project. By conducting comprehensive research, this paper aims to harness the potential of Gusan's modern history and culture as catalysts for regional revitalization, ultimately enhancing the quality of life for local residents and propelling

policy initiatives in Gunsan forward.

References

- [1] H. Y. Jin and H. S. Shin, “A Basic Study on the Characteristics of the Modern Garden in Gunsan during the Opening Period-Focused on Sagawa House-”, *Journal of Korean Institute of Traditional Landscape Architecture*, vol. 10, no. 11, 2020, pp. 42-49.
- [2] J. Franquesa, “On Keeping and Selling: The Political Economy of Heritage Making in Contemporary Spain”, *Current Anthropology*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2013.
- [3] J. S. Do, “The time frame and debate and its changes in North Korean historical academia”, *YKSA WA HYMSIL : Quarterly Review of Korean History* 1, May 1989, pp. 154-180.
- [4] *Quarterly Review of Korean History* 1, 1989, pp.154-180.
- [5] E. J. Oh and J. O. Lee, “Research on the utilization of modern cultural heritage reflecting regional identity”, *Global Cultural Contents Association 2018 Summer Conference Archives*, vol. 1, 2018, pp. 167-170.
- [6] S. K. Song, “A Study on the Modern Architecture in Kunsan”, *Journal of the Architectural Institute of Korea Planning & Design*, vol. 20, no. 10, p. 241.
- [7] S. H. Kim, “Reconstruction of the colonial town and the creation of new communication - focusing on Gunsan”, *Journal of North-east Asian cultures*, vol. 1, no. 36, 2013, pp. 9-10.
- [8] D. H. Kim, “A Study on the Characteristics and the Social Stratification of Sea Port City ‘Gunsan’ in 1928”, *CISSPC*, no. 14, 2016, pp. 223-260, doi: 10.35158/cisspc.2016.04.14.223.
- [9] Y. J. Kim, “Regeneration of the original city of Gunsan using modern cultural heritage”, *Korea Research Institute for Human Settlements*, pp. 88-89.
- [10] Y. H. Kim and I. H. Park, “A study of Oeam folk village Cultural landscape and Policy”, *Journal of Digital Art Engineering & Multimedia*, vol. 2, no. 2, December 2015, pp.111-121,
- [11] K. S. Ywang, “Gusan: Urban Regeneration Plan of the Historic Center”, *International Association of Educating Cities*, <https://www.edcities.org/en/proyectos/gunsan-urban-regeneration-plan-of-the-historic-centre/>, (accessed August 25, 2021).