



YOUIDO PARK:
the transformation of a space in Korean memory
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Youido Park, located in Seoul, South Korea, was the centerpiece of the first democratic election campaign for the mayoral post of Seoul. Completed in 1999, the park replaced the historically significant Youido Plaza and was intended to be the “Central Park” of Youido Island, Seoul’s financial and media district. The finished park, however, was disappointing both to the Korean public and to Seoul city administration. The following discussion suggests that the evolution of the park design and construction reflects important socio-economic changes in Seoul itself, and that the process was a catalyst for significant changes in design strategy within the city government.

The Urban Context

In order to gain a sense of the urban context which shaped Youido Park, it is worthwhile to spend a few words on Korean social and economic history. Seoul is the capital of South Korea, host to a population nearing 17 million if one includes the contiguous suburbs of Ilsan and Pundang¹. Until the 1960’s the city was bound on the south by the giant Han River and northward expansion was limited by the demilitarized zone between the North and South Korea. Since the sixties, however, the population has increased tenfold into one of the highest-density populations in the world, pressuring the city to expand southward across the Han. Youido Island was one of the first developments in this process of expansion. Today the Han divides the city approximately in half, and Youido thus sits at the very center of metropolitan Seoul.

Since the armistice of 1953 capitalist South Korea has developed economically into one of the so-called “Four Asian Tigers.” Although the country underwent a severe economic crisis in 1997, the *CIA World Factbook 2002* reports that South Korea “continues to make a solid recovery.” Economic and population growth have inevitably been accompanied by social change, which has in turn affected urban building patterns. In the 1960’s it was already evident that the traditional extended family structure was changing, and statistics gathered at that time indicated that the average household

¹ Korean is difficult to transliterate because of its complex vowel sounds: Youido, for example, is found also as *Yoido* and *Yeouido*. Here Korean names and words are romanized according to the McCune-Reischauer system, with the following exceptions: I have omitted diacritical marks for technical reasons; personal names are given in the western order, with family name isolated as one syllable; names of major public officials are romanized as they are most often seen in the western press.

numbered 5.5 persons and most households included at least three generations. By 1970 only 21% of households included three or more generations, dropping to 12.2% by 1990 (SMG 2002a). In 2002 the average number of people per household dropped for the first time below three, comparable to London and New York. To summarize, not only has the population of Seoul increased tenfold in fifty years, the number of *households*, i.e., dwellings, has increased by some twenty-fold.

The combination of economic growth, high density population and an intense demand for housing quickly consumed the agricultural lands which once surrounded the old city of Seoul. So it was that the issue of urban open space became an important issue in the first democratic elections for mayor of Seoul in 1995. The proposed Youido Park was formulated as an important part of Soon Cho's campaign platform, and he commenced planning for its construction immediately after he was elected.²

Youido Island, Youido Plaza, Youido Park

The construction of Youido Island was a result of some of the early attempts to regulate the flow of the Han River. In its natural course the river can fluctuate as much as 1,950m between the dry season and the monsoons, radically altering the contours of the many islands in the Han, including Youido (Cho 2002). Historically a rural island,



Figure 1: Youido Island, 1968 (photo courtesy of Seoul Metropolitan Government)

² Ha, JaeHo. 2003. Conversation with officials from Seoul Metropolitan Government parks administration in Seoul, 10 January 2003.

the island was first developed as an airstrip in 1916 during the Japanese occupation of Korea, and was later used by the United States and Korean air forces (Figure 1). After severe flooding in 1966 the island was surrounded by a 7.6 km perimeter dyke (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 74), constituting the area known as Youido Island today. The island was leveled and the dyke completed in December, 1967. In January, 1968, North Korea attempted a guerilla invasion of South Korea. The attack failed, but the event occasioned a period of intensive state-sponsored anti-communist propaganda. The mayor at the time, HyunOk Kim, proposed Youido as the site for a gigantic “national event ground” for the purpose of nationalist rallies (Cho 2002).

Youido Plaza was constructed under the succeeding mayor. President Jung Hee Park himself delineated the location and building materials for the plaza – 420,000m² of asphalt in a strip across the middle of the island (Cho 2002). The plaza (Figure 2) was suitable both as an emergency wartime runway or a congregating space capable of holding a million people: the biggest plaza in Asia (SMG 1984, 74). Completed in May 1972, it was christened the “May 16th Revolution Plaza.”



Figure 2: Youido Plaza, 1970's (photo courtesy of Seoul Metropolitan Government)

Within a few years of its construction Youido Plaza was flanked by ranks of monumental buildings: the world's biggest church (the Full Gospel Church), the Korean National Assembly (at the time the largest structure in Asia), the first high-rise housing development in Seoul, the headquarters of the Korean Broadcasting System, and the national stock exchange. Although it seems ironic now, in the 1970's Koreans were reticent about living in the unconventional high-rise apartments. The city government offered tax benefits and education subsidies as incentives for people to move into the development, and designated Youido a "curfew-free zone." Thus Youido Island became one of the first intellectual, middle-class enclaves in Seoul – 70% of the original inhabitants had college degrees or better (Cho 2002).

By the 1980's Youido had been solidly dubbed the "Manhattan of Seoul," because it had come to house the financial center of Korea – the stock exchange, National Economics Center, and most of the bank and brokerage headquarters in Korea. In 1985 the "63 Building" – at 63 floors the tallest structure in Asia at the time – was built on Youido. While ideologically oriented state events continued to be held in the plaza, they came to be balanced by media-and consumer-focused events which were, in turn, broadcast to the other 44 million Koreans who couldn't make it in person. The scale of these events was consistent with the past: among innumerable examples, the Full Gospel Church serves seven one-hour Sunday masses at 20,000 faithful per mass; a live television show intended to last one night lasted almost a month and aired over 100,000 participants, a five-day Gospel revival led by evangelist Billy Graham drew over two million participants, the Guk Poong mega-events drew crowds of over half a million for pop concerts combined with festival-like food stalls and markets. This gradual shift in character from state-coordinated to consumer-oriented events parallels the economic growth of Korea during the same two decades.

With the advent of democracy in 1995 came a call for a new kind of space on Youido Island. Rapid growth in the academic disciplines of environmental planning and landscape architecture,³ combined with a steep trajectory of social, political and economic change brought the issue of accessible open/ green space into acute focus

³ According to Dr. SangSok Lee, of the Department of Landscape Architecture, SunCh'on University, the first two Korean academic departments of Landscape Architecture were established in Korea in 1973. At the time of writing (January 2003) there are forty-three.

(Figure 3). A prominent feature of Soon Cho's bid for the mayoral post was the promise of more public open space, with a new Youido Park as its centerpiece. Upon assuming office Cho initiated a five-year "green area expansion plan" (SMG 2002b) including the replacement of the old asphalt expanse with a green park, "in order," states the planning document, "to reply to the diverse demands of Seoul's citizenry" (Cho 2002).

Seoul's Central Park

The "Manhattan of Seoul" now has its "Central Park." Flanked on the east and west by massive urban structures, Youido Park is a conventional, romantic-style park. The overall design is characterized by gently rolling topography, lightly wooded with groves of indigenous Korean tree species. The entire space is threaded with sinuous, paved footpaths and surrounded by a two-lane bicycle path. This circulation system is lined generously with seating benches.



Figure 3: Youido Plaza, 1980's, looking north (photo courtesy of Seoul Metropolitan Government).

The long, narrow space (185m x 1,230m) is divided into four "theme zones:" "Ecological Forest," "Cultural Plaza," "Traditional Garden," and "Green Park" (Figure 4). The Cultural Plaza is the focus of the park, with a concentration of uses – sports facilities, bicycle and skate rental, snack bars, restrooms and a staffed information kiosk – clustered



Figure 4. Youido Park, January 2003. This is the same space shown in Figure 3, but looking north.
(photo by the author)

there. The main entrance walks on the east and west sides of the park lead into a large, asphalt-paved court with a raised stage area at the south end. This court was a conscious effort to preserve some of the important congregational function once served by the old Youido Plaza. JaeHo Ha, Deputy Director of Seoul Metropolitan Government's Parks and Landscape Management Office, remarked that the matter of retaining a "gathering ground" or significant collective space, and how much to retain, had been one of the major issues in the park's design (Ha 2003).

Each of the other three zones contains a freshwater pond. On the southern end of the park the Ecological Forest is accessible by means of a raised wooden boardwalk and mounted interpretive material regarding plant species and wildlife. At the opposite end the "Green Park" contains a traditional octagonal Korean pavilion (*palgakjong*) surrounded by a patio and groves of indigenous trees, shrubs and flowers with identifying plaques.



Figure 5: Park sign with the four “theme zones” clearly demarcated; the “cultural plaza” is marked in yellow.

The Traditional Garden is the largest section, located between the Green Park and Cultural Plaza. While the smaller *samojong* pavilion, fronted by a pond on the west, is one element of Korean garden tradition (Figure 6), little else about the space reflects this theme. Also incorporated in to this zone is a handsome granite-paved plaza framing a huge, elegant bronze statue of King Sejong and bordered by interpretive plaques and smaller bronzes representing significant Korean scientific and cultural achievements from the medieval period.



Figure 6: Samojong pavilion and frozen pond, with major broadcasting headquarters in background, January 2003. (photo by the author)



Figure 7: Statue of King Sejong, Youido Park, January 2003 (photo by the author)

While there are a number of worthy elements to the design – e.g., the rich variety of plant materials, *palgakjong*, the small King Sejong plaza – the overall feeling of the park lacks coherence. There are no vistas from which the length of the park can be viewed: trees and berming create visual obstructions so that the visitor has little comprehension of the broad plan of the park or of its size. Neither is there, however, any sense of intimacy to these sub-spaces, as no design element embraces or defines them.

The circulation works well and the park offers much-needed recreational space in the middle of the city. On weekdays and weekends, even in the bitter cold of January, the space seems well-used. In general Youido Park is pleasant and unremarkable (Figure 8) .

Developing Design Process

There was considerable voiced dissatisfaction with Youido Park when it was completed in 1999. Its actual design and construction took place in three phases: initially the project was given to a Korean engineering firm, a typical practice in Korea until 1998. Dissatisfied with the designs submitted, Seoul Metropolitan mounted an international design competition in 1997. The project was awarded to the SWA Group of Dallas, Texas,⁴ but once park construction was underway the SWA design was largely abandoned. A second competition was held amongst Korean firms and the contract awarded to Hanwood, another engineering and construction firm. While Hanwood employs landscape designers, much of the final plan for Youido Park was developed onsite during the construction process. Ha points out that this was the typical *modus operandi* for park design and construction until 1998. Though there was an advisory committee (“Green Vision 21,” a UN-affiliated board of academics, civic representatives, citizens, landscape architects, et al.), as well as a system at Seoul Metropolitan for conducting user surveys, significant steps in the design process were skipped in order to fit the park’s construction into Soon Cho’s term of office.⁵

In an important way the course of the park’s development mirrors the condensed process of development in Seoul. Of the two years required for the construction of

⁴ “Yoido Park Competition,” 2002. SWA Group also won an Award of Excellence from the Texas Chapter of ASLA for the Youido Park design.

⁵ This appears to be common knowledge within the city administration, but interviewees were reluctant to be cited.

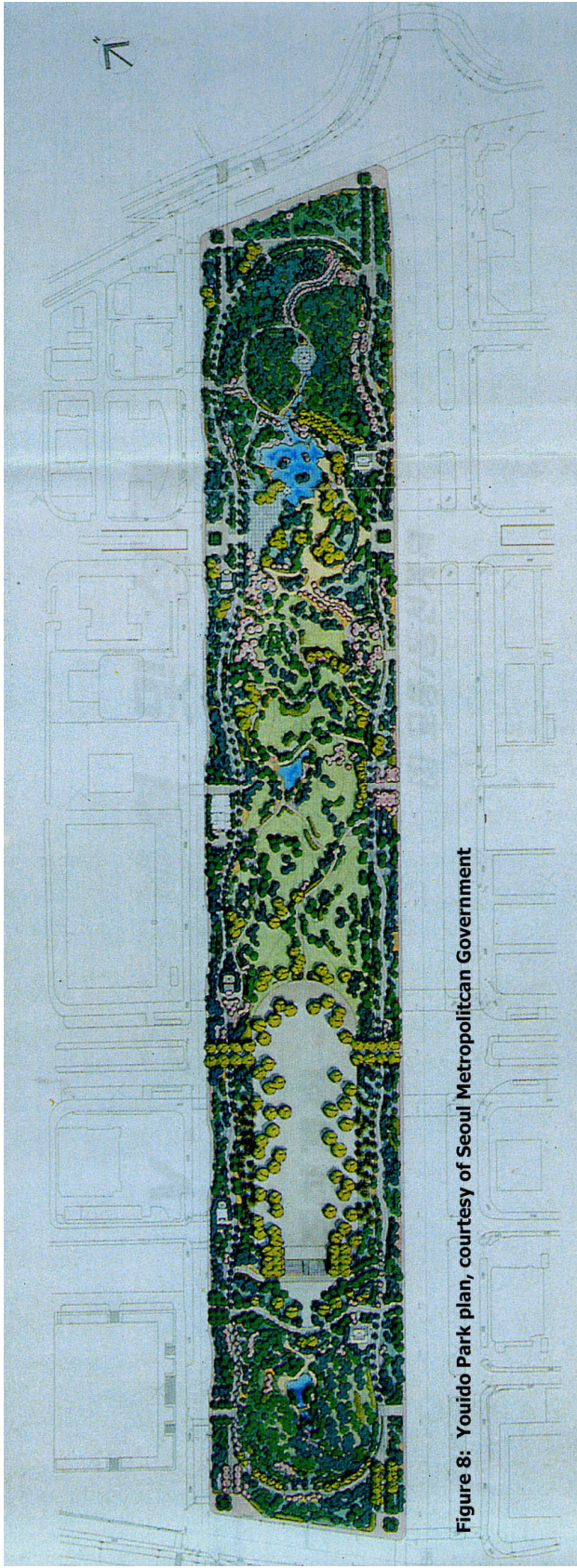


Figure 8: Youido Park plan, courtesy of Seoul Metropolitan Government

Youido Park, one was spent removing the half-million square meters of asphalt (Ha 2003). After a long agrarian period the uses of the Youido site evolved in a mere generation through foreign military occupations and service to the authoritarian Korean regimes into a frenetic venue for consumer capitalist extravaganzas. Compressed into the development of the new Park itself is a two-year struggle to come to terms with post-modern issues such as environmental awareness, democratization in a collective culture, and the alchemy of Korean and western identity in this most westernized of Asian countries. Half the process involves disinterring the past, the other half gropes toward the creation of a complex weave of memory, development, tradition, nostalgia and change.

Ultimately Youido Park has been an unspectacular disappointment. The choppy process of its design and construction is reflected in the incoherence of the created space. The attempts to integrate Korean identity and newly high-profile ecological concerns into a western style park flounder. The park provides only a pale shadow of the historic, collective, congregational space most adult Koreans remember. But perhaps more important is the process by which a relatively young city infrastructure attempted to come to terms with such complex issues.

The disappointing product results from both practical problems in the design process and a more abstract problem of grasping social identity in a space heavy with cultural memories and expectations. But the practical and abstract issues reflect each other in an important way: both involve the phenomenal rate of social, political and economic change that typifies the megalopolises of the developing world. Seoul – and thus the lifeways of fully one third of all South Koreans – has transformed at a pace nearly incomprehensible to Europe and America.

It is important to imagine the space which the old Youido Plaza occupies in the collective memory of Seoul. Keeping in mind the brief remarks on social history at the outset of this discussion, consider that the scope of social transformation which has taken place in Seoul in one generation took over a century in Los Angeles, and far longer in the major cities of Europe. Youido's asphalt expanse was quite literally the central stage on which those historical processes were played out in both media representation and the direct, physical experience of millions of Koreans between 1972 and 1997. And yet the "Green Vision" of Seoul Metropolitan reflects a felt need for open space in the huge city,

and an enormously active popular interest in environmental issues. It would be a delicate design feat to capture, in such freighted locale, this complex and reflexive relationship between cultural memory and expectation.

This story of compressed modernization is also replayed in the development of the discipline of landscape architecture in South Korea. Youido Park was a coming-of-age experience for Seoul Metropolitan: officials and academics at every level of Parks Management agreed that as a direct result of the Youido project landscape architects were fully integrated into the process of design *and* construction of World Cup Park (2000-2002), which has been a hugely successful endeavor.

The transformation of Youido Plaza into Youido Park suggests the importance of integrating academically trained landscape architects into the processes of “Third World” development. At the same time the story of Youido cautions us that those processes are complex and many-layered, and require research and insight into the cultural matrices within which they take place.

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