Choi Won-joon
Mokchon Architecture Archive, Seoul

Documenting Architectural Modernity of Korea

Growth of unprecedented speed and concentration is what often characterizes the history of South Korea from the 1960s to the end of the last century. With an economic growth-rate often exceeding 10%, the rapid industrialization of Korea was accompanied by accelerated construction boom and urbanization, making Seoul the fourth largest metropolitan economy of the world, its population growing from 1.6 million in 1955 to over ten million today. During these times of swift social, political, economic, and technological changes, Korea had its share of diverse threads and trends of modern architecture—from artist-architects to large-scale design firms to practices that defy the usual professional categorization of architect, engineer, and constructor, various agents participated in the building of monuments and everyday environment for the developing nation. However, historical account of this modern development remained rather obscure. Narratives of Korean architectural history often did not go beyond the early twentieth century, and when they rarely did, their focus was limited to works by just a handful of architects, thus unable to generate a framework with which the general achievements of this era can be historically and theoretically assessed. Partially due to the absence of academic interest on our ‘recent past’, but perhaps more due to the lack of research materials, intellectual discourse on the modern progress of architecture and its significance within a broader socio-cultural milieu were scant.

It was under these circumstances that recognitions to build an archive for Korean modern and contemporary architecture, based on which an objective historical account can be written, were raised. Finally, in the last years of the first decade of the twenty-first century, this growing consciousness led to a number of materializations—a preparatory research on architectural archives by AURI (Architecture and Urban Research Institute) was closely followed by the establishment of the archive section at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (architecture claiming a significant portion) and the founding of Mokchon Architecture Archive. AURI's project has since been discontinued, but another national institution, the Asia Culture Center of Gwangju, is preparing its own archives and collections.

Mokchon Architecture Archive, established in 2010 by Mokchon Kimjungsik Foundation, a private, non-profit cultural institution, is the only non-governmental organization among these early movements. Located in the old center of Seoul overlooking Gyeongbokgung the Royal Palace, the Archive, under supervision of an active committee consisting of leading historians and architects, collects and preserves important architectural records of Korea from the twentieth century to today, and makes them available to both experts and the general public through
various channels. Within the discipline, Mokchon’s aim is to build up a fertile resource of archival materials that can diversify and thicken the history and historiography of Korean modern architecture, and to promote design practices based on clear historical perspectives. Furthermore, understanding that public awareness on the values of architecture is crucial in obtaining a better living environment for the society at large, the Archive also strives to create an on-going dialogue with the public through its rich array of collections, publications, and events.

**Oral History Programs**

The core project of Mokchon Architecture Archive is the oral history recordings of important practitioners from Korean modern architecture. Oral history is a valid method to approach Korean architecture’s modern development since, in the absence of a culture of archiving, many physical materials are unfortunately already lost. In addition, a microhistorical viewpoint can aptly explore a historical fabric dense with informal yet vital stories. Currently the list of interviewees consists of the first generation of post-war architects, including Kim Jung-sik (b.1935, founder of Junglim Architecture), Ahn Young-bae (b.1932, architect and educator), Yoon Seung-joong (b.1937, founder of Wondoshi Architects), and Won Chung-soo and Chi Soon (b.1934 and 1935, co-founders of Gansam Architects), all who received education under the reformed university programs in the 1950s and started their professional careers in the 50s and 60s to make significant contributions to the development of modern architecture in Korea. Most recently, Korean-American architect Kim Tai-soo (b.1936, founder of Tai Soo Kim Partners based in Hartford, Connecticut) was interviewed, expanding the scope of Mokchon’s oral histories to include the experience and vision of a designer who constantly worked in both continents, thereby bridging and weaving architectural ideas derived from different cultural and social circumstances.

The undertakings of fourteen architects known as the Group 4.3, active in the early 1990s, were also documented through Mokchon’s oral history program. As part of the Archive’s aims to seek alternative narratives in Korean modern architecture, this was an experiment to look into a certain period from multiple points-of-view. The collection of interviews on fourteen members created a *Rashomon*-like collage, individuals looking back from their own perspectives with different comprehensions on a critical moment of not only the architectural discipline but also the nation, as it was when Korea finally gained political freedom and cultural diversity.

Upcoming candidates of oral history include not only architects but also historians, educators, and preservationists of architecture, to address broader issues pertaining to the construction and administration of Korea’s built environment. All of these interviews lead to a series of publications, to be accessed by students, researchers, designers, and historians of architecture, as well as the general reader.

Oral History Project on Group 4.3 (2012)
Collections

Through the oral history programs and through other channels, Mokchon is building a collection of important historical documents on Korean modern architecture. Currently, the collection comprises the lifetime works of architects included in the oral history series, as well as selected works by Jung In-kuk (1914-1974), Kim Jung-soo (1919-1985), Aum Duck-moon (1919-2012), Kim Chung-up (1922-1988), and Jang Suk-woong (1938-2011).

The collection of Kim Jung-sik, who in 1967 founded Junglim Architecture, one of the first large-scale design firms of Korea, is most expansive with 15,000 drawings and documents. It was this collection, along with case studies on foreign architecture archives, that helped Mokchon to build its own categorizing system for a wide range of archival materials.

However, Mokchon's filing system retains a certain level of elasticity. Since some architects had their own way of organizing their materials, and such organization is also representative of their creative minds and processes, the original structure is preserved as much as possible. This is where the use of digital medium becomes most useful—by creating an interface between physical materials and computerized database system, it enables each collection to maintain its independent filing structures without affecting searching and managing efficiency.

And indeed, every collection has its own idiosyncratic features and formats. The collection on Ahn Young-bae is an exemplary case. Ahn was not only an architect and educator but a prolific writer and photographer as well, and played a crucial role in shifting our understanding of traditional architecture from concerns of style to dramatic, processional planning of exterior spaces. His collection of 700 negatives and transparencies from the 1960s and 70s are important records of his readings on our traditional outdoor spaces, and this forms the major portion of his collection.

Mokchon’s collection also has a digital-only portion. In the case of Kim Jung-soo collection, Mokchon scanned and digitalized 1,200 architectural drawings and documents from Seoul Museum of History. As the Museum did not have a platform for providing online access to these materials, Mokchon gained the rights for their digital distribution and incorporated them into its own database for wider audience. This is one of the cooperative relationships that Mokchon has with other institutions, a factor that will further be elaborated below.

Besides the main collection line, Mokchon also runs the contemporary collections section. Whereas the main collection strives to provide an insight into the entire career of the architect through his/her oeuvre, the contemporary collection concerns the documentation of a single work that is deemed important for its aesthetic, social, and technological accomplishments, or embodying specific architectural concerns of a certain era. Ssamzigil (2002-2004) by Choi Moon-kyu (Ga.A Architects), Paul Smith
Flagship Store (2009-2011) by Kim Chan-joong (The_System Lab), Yoon Dong-ju Gallery (2012-2013) by Lee So-jin (Atelier Lion Seoul), and Daum Space.1 (2008-2011) by Cho Min-suk (Mass Studies) are recent notable examples that became part of Mokchon’s contemporary collections.

Since a significant part of the contemporary collections comes from a younger generation of architects who often employ novel design methods and procedures, each collection in turn gives Mokchon a unique chance to rethink its ways of collecting and archiving. A recent office building in Hannam-dong (2012-2014) by Kim Chan-joong, an architect who utilizes digital tools from very early stages of design, is such case. Mokchon used it as a pilot project for digital archiving, and worked in close collaboration with the architect to define respective roles of the archive and the architect in the comprehensive documentation of a work where a major portion of its creation process exist only in the digital realm. Still in experimental stages, and hence without a set standard concerning its formal structure or methodology, digital archiving is a realm that can greatly benefit from national and international cooperation and exchanges.

Either in digital or physical format, the contemporary collection strives to record the whole creative process. Mokchon tries to acquire the chosen works as “projects” and not “items”—not pieces of art but a record of the architectural creation in formation, from its inception stages in design to construction completion, and, furthermore, its use in the context of everyday life. Even technical documents are preserved whenever possible, since it is important not to limit present archiving activities to the standards and frameworks of what is deemed important by today’s curatorship, but be open to all potential research fields of the future. The preservation of technical documents can of course effectively utilize methods of digitalization in terms of sorting and storing.

Events and Co-operations

Mokchon Archive often holds public events and fora in connection with their collection and oral history projects. In the case of Mass Studies’ Daum Space.1, donation of the early and final models was accompanied by a series of events, starting with field trips with the architect and international critics to major Mass Studies works across the Korean peninsula, followed by an open symposium on the firm’s first twelve years of activities. Academic discussion on the works of a single architect, not only still active but also relatively young, was a rare occasion in the Korean architectural community but a much needed catalyst. This way of creating a space where the architects, historians, critics, and the public can engage in interactive discourses is to be expanded with the Archive’s upcoming membership program. On other occasions of bequeathments and oral history publications, meetings are organized where a wide spectrum and generation of people from the architectural and cultural community come together in an intimate atmosphere.
As noted earlier, efforts to build an archive for Korean architecture appeared simultaneously, and Mokchon is enjoying a cooperative, mutually complementary relationship with other institutions. In addition to exchanging information and ideas on archiving systems, each specializes in exclusive realms most suited for its organizational features. For instance, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, with its vast gallery spaces designated for architecture, wider potential audience, and in-house preservationists and spatial capacity to maintain large volume of archival materials, is running a back-to-back award-winning retrospectives on architects. “Figurative Journal: Chung Guyon Archive” (2013), an exhibition on the late architect who had an almost a Le Corbusier-like zeal for keeping his own records, as well as “Itami Jun: Architecture of the Wind” (2014) and “Harmony between Technology and Art: Architect Jong Soung Kimm” (2014), are such shows, resulting from archive-based researches where board members of Mokchon served as advisors. For the upcoming retrospective events on Kim Tai-soo, the MMCA is preparing a comprehensive exhibition on his works, while Mokchon implemented the oral history recordings.

Also, close relationship with the Research Society on Contemporary Architecture, a group of historians on Korean architecture, invites further scholarship and research into the archiving activities and their results. The aforementioned Group 4.3 oral history project was followed by a public forum where nine historians presented historical interpretations on the Group and the era, based on the findings from the Archive’s newly collected materials. The results of this collaboration are made into a set of publications, one for oral history and another with sections on criticism and archive materials.

Through these many activities, from oral histories to forum programs that link fieldtrip, symposium, and collections, Mokchon Architecture Archive is actively engaged in capturing important moments and achievements of Korean architecture from the twentieth century to today, and make them available to researchers and the general public. As a privately-funded cultural institution, Mokchon is able to avoid long and rigid bureaucratic procedures often required for government bodies, and grasp chances when a narrow window opens for new collections and novel experiments in archiving. Although Mokchon is a very young institution, its collections only starting to grow, it is in this realm of rigorous experiments where its strength lies. By creating new ways of gathering and disseminating architectural knowledge, it responds to the dynamism and diversity of situations and circumstances that often characterize the nation and its architecture.
Photo of Tongdosa, showing the exquisite arrangement of exterior spaces in Korean traditional architecture, from the Ahn Young-bae collection

From the contemporary collection: Ssamjigil (Seoul, 2002-04) by Choi Moon-kyu (Ga.A Architects)