

LIFE AS SPIRIT OF PLACE
In case of a Korean traditional village

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Abstract. This paper is to identify, 1) the way “spirit of life” is represented in a traditional village of Korea, and 2) the meaning of “life” as the spirit of place in modern times. A traditional Korean village called “Yang Dong”, located in southeastern part of Korea, will be discussed as an example of case study.

1. Life-oriented worldview (Introduction)

Man develops his places to live based on his own worldview- the point of view he sees the world through- and the view forms the root of a spirit of place. Every culture has its own worldview and it brings a distinct spirit of place. East Asian culture that includes Korea, Japan and China has had a worldview of its own and accordingly, architecture in this area was shaped by the same view. East Asian architecture reflects its own spirit of place, which is completely different from that of Western society.

I would represent the spirit of Eastern architecture as the term of ‘life’. It implies that traditional East Asian worldview is analogous to a life-oriented worldview. Therefore, creating places through architecture was based on the spirit of life-oriented worldview. Compared with Western culture, this stems from the uniqueness of cultural features of East Asia that sees the world as an organic whole and perceives it as a phenomenon of mutual functions of certain life energies. Two kinds of place spirit – ‘mechanical place spirit’ and ‘life-oriented place spirit’ - have existed in human life, and we need to find a new balance of the two for future architecture and city.

This article centers on how the life-oriented worldview of East Asia has become a reality in a village of Korea and its implication and distinctive features. The village is called “Yang-dong village”, which consists of a multitude of houses. In this article, I am particularly focused on observation of how a spatial plan of the village and a life-

oriented place spirit have been connected. In other words, I would like to discuss how life-oriented view has been reflected in architectural places in everyday life and what the results mean to us living in the present time.

Yang-dong village is one of the hundreds of traditional villages that exist in Korea. They were formed following the life-oriented place spirit, but each of them has its own way of representation. Yang-dong village is one of the representative traditional villages that have been preserved for more than 500 years since 1500. It is located in Wol-sung, North Kyung-sang province, near the historical city of Kyung-joo.

2. Life-oriented Place Spirit in Yang-dong Village

2.1 SKY AND EARTH

In East Asian worldview, any existence of life including man is originated from an encounter of sky and earth. The encounter does not portray a physical connection of sky in above and earth in lower one. Rather, it should be appreciated that every life phenomenon including that of man could exist with dynamic and mutual 'life-oriented relation' of sky and earth. In other words, every aspect of human life such as architecture needs to be approached with an understanding of 'life-oriented relation of sky and earth'. Eating earth and breathing sky implies that elements of sky and earth mutually function forming life-oriented relation, not just physically co-exist. Life could be sustained only by a continuous fusion of the elements of sky and earth with an aim of producing energy inside of body.

This also applies to architecture. Hard components of architecture are the continuum of earth and inner space is expansion of sky. This is somewhat parallel to how human body functions. Therefore, architecture is how sky and earth forms life-oriented relation. And the quality and quantity of life-oriented connection between architecture and man determine value of architecture. The life-oriented connection is inseparable from an entire frame of connection of sky and earth. For this reason, explanation of architecture begins with an appreciation of sky and earth and this idea should be also applied to arrangement of village.

Purpose of architecture is to create an artificial encounter of sky and earth and integrate a life-oriented reaction of the two in architecture. Sky and earth were regarded as an energy resource in human life and architecture, and architectural sites were designed with

a purpose of maximizing mutual function of life-oriented reaction. In this respect, purpose and motivation of architecture should be appreciated in the standpoint of life-oriented mutualism of sky and earth. Yang-dong village should be observed with a perspective that explains how this village integrated a life-oriented relation of sky and earth with its space.

2.2 LOCATION

Location is a matter of deciding where to build the houses of the village. It presents what to be considered first when selecting location of a village. Two factors are considered here: condition of sky and earth. To meet the condition of sky, wind needs to blow modestly so that flow of air should not be too fast. This is the most pertinent condition for man to live, and it is only possible when earth features as a form of basin with stable flow of air and appropriate direction. Valleys and top of mountains are not suitable for residential areas because they hinder stable flow of air. All the Korean villages, including Yang-dong village, are not sited in valleys or on top of hills.

The primary concern of selecting locations of villages and houses is to find a spot where energies flowing under the ground are most vigorous. Revealing the flow of energy inside of it, features of land are used to read energy conditions underneath. The high-density area of good energy is the most wanted as residential areas for a village. Believing that good places have a great influence on human life, people have put much effort to find them. A high mountain behind, and a wide field and a low mountain in front a house are regarded as good conditions for the house. Ranges of the high mountain behind house encompassing left and right sides of it are also counted as a good point for the house. These features are believed to own concentrated energy of earth as well as to stabilize wind, and residential area meeting these conditions is valued as the most desirable place for living since it contributes to a life-oriented village. These are not the fixed conditions; however a basic concept. Actual features of earth are varied in different situations, and accordingly, each village should be arranged by its unique energy conditions.

Yang-dong village is located at the end of mountain ranges stretched from the Taebaek Mountains of eastern part of Korea. Extensive field is sited at southwest area of the village and water flows from north to south. The end of ranges is significant because energy is concentrated there, not passing by. The location of Yang-dong village is very different from that of other Korean traditional

villages. As mountains of Yang-dong village do not form basin-like space, site for the village is not a single flat field. Sited along small ranges of mountain formed inside of the village, houses are arranged with a shape of Chinese character ‘_’. In this respect, it can be viewed as an exceptional case, however, it still holds the common aspect with others that it seeks to maximize life-oriented conditions of its natural environment.



Figure 1. Location of Yang-dong Village

2.3 SITE ARRANGEMENT

Once location of a village is selected, arrangement of site plan follows. A village is arranged by arrangement of houses and adjacent roads. In Yang-dong village, each house makes use of its own earth condition. Every house is sited following life-oriented principles while making full use of features of ground where it is located. A few paths branch into several ways and houses are sited around the paths. Located on south-facing slopes of mountains, most houses are aligned with axis of Ansan (mountains behind and front of the house). Houses are favored to be built toward south, southeast or southwest. However, varied features of ground create unique directions of houses. Favoring south comes from a matter of how to manage sunlight more effectively in four seasons because the management of sunlight is directly related to life.

Structure of access also serves a critical role since each house should be reached through alleys. The majority of accesses have a branch-shaped hierarchical structure, but irregular than geometrical. Alleys of Yang-dong village are also formed as a shape of branch, following the features of ground. Consequently, features of ground and architecture seem to be attached together as one, giving a sense of impossibility to follow geometrical rules. Houses are arranged irregularly as same as features of natural ground is irregular. The

arrangement plan shows an attitude that artificial creature respects natural environments as they are and human architecture is willing to accommodate itself to features of natural ground. The arrangement plan of Yang-dong village should be approached with an understanding of how features of ground and village adapt each other. What may be considered as an integral peculiarity of this village could be the fact that self-regulating diversity and uniformity as a whole can



co-exist at the same time.

Figure 2. Arrangement of Yang-dong Village

2.4 ARCHITECTURE

The next step following the previous ones - sky and earth, location and arrangement – is the architecture of houses. Individual houses of Yang-dong village have their own styles of scale, arrangement and spatial composition. Here, observation of life-oriented features in a spatial composition shared by the houses is needed. With buildings and walls connected together, most houses shape a horizontal structure, not separated individually. At the heart of the structure is an empty Madang (courtyard). Buildings are not sited at the center of a house, rather encircle the empty Madang, which makes the structure that man naturally faces Madang while being in buildings. If a man stands in Madang, he becomes the center of the empty outdoor space. While quarters' for servant, woman and man serve distinct functions

and have different residents, and yet they are linked one another, centering on the Madang. Relation between Madang and buildings and the way man stands in Madang demonstrate a desirable spatial condition of life-oriented forces.

Madang is where sky and earth encounters, holding air in it and reaching into sky at the same time. Therefore, man enters house from outside through Daemoon (gate), reaching Madang first and Daechong (main living room) through Teotmaru (wooden verandah), and finally Anbang (main room). The unique access of a house in Yang-dong village reduces the distinction of inside and outside even to the point that man cannot distinguish the two with repeated process that inside becomes outside and vice versa. As this process is repeated, man is led to more private and stable space. Spaces are distinguished by process of approach and way of connection, not divided by their functions. In terms of approach process, movement of man brings changes of inside and outside, which eventually unites the spaces. What is an important element in Korean traditional house is way of spatial units are connected and the movement of man. Spatial connection and movement of man construct a life-oriented structure of air flow and spatial experience of man.

Connection between man and air and the management of flow are significant since it allows life-oriented connection of elements and eventually unifies them as an organic whole. It is hard to verify this in a scientific way, but it is obvious that everything, including understanding of energy of sky and earth, location, arrangement and every part of architecture, is governed by consistent life-oriented thinking and at the core of it stands a purpose of rich life-oriented connection.



Figure 3. Sangchungotaek (Left) & Mucheomdang (Right)

3. Meaning of life-oriented place spirit

3.1 DUALISTIC BALANCE

A habit that categorizes things into two contrary groups such as ‘good and evil’, ‘beauty and ugliness’, ‘heaven and hell’, and ‘god and devil’ justifies our action that takes one and denies the other. This dualistic distinction is grounded on a premise that one would be chosen and the other would be refused. However, dualistic distinction such as ‘yin and yang’, ‘sky and earth’ and ‘son and daughter’ means dualism that considers harmony of the two without an intention to refuse one of them. If we see the first as ‘selective dualism’ and the latter as ‘balanced dualism’, we could find that the difference comes from distinct ways of thinking deeply rooted in Eastern and Western cultures. Yet, it is obvious that each continent has its own cultural tendency or way of thinking and these have a great impact on it. What is important is the fact that life-oriented view requires balance between two elements more than choice between the two. While it is possible to refuse ugliness and take beauty, in some cases, ugliness could be needed for beauty. It gets importance that life phenomenon is based on dynamic relation between two contrary elements for survival. This way of thinking directly affects architecture. In houses of Yang-dong village, we could see an effort to realize balanced dualism in architecture in a floor system which is composed of Ondol (stone) and Maru (wood), distinction of man’s quarter and lady’s quarter, as well as roof and body of a building. This is not only due to such Yin-Yang theory, but life-oriented worldview that sees mutual relation of two contrary components is essential. In the flow of modernization, we are getting more accustomed to selective dualism, and this also yields influence on architecture. For more life-sensitive future, we need to focus on the meaning of balanced dualism or dualistic balance.

3.2 INTERACTIVE RELATION

Our modern architecture is more concerned with existence than relation. Visible being is more valued than invisible one and individuality is more important than mutuality. However, life is sustained by interactive relation of individuals, not by physical existence of them. Individuals have no value if they become beings without mutual relation. It is synonymous with a human body where

esophagus or small intestine is meaningless without stomach or large intestine respectively. This issue may have already reached at a serious level in modern architecture or city. Yang-dong village demonstrates how individual beings are closely linked, forming an organic relation among houses or inner spaces of a house, as well as a house and sky and earth. Compared to our modern architecture, architecture of Yang-dong village should be called as ‘architecture of mutual relation’. A house where a family resides is divided into quarter of man and woman, but they are closely related, and the house is deeply connected with air and terrain. The house is also related with an adjacent one, and these houses are organized as a village. Structure of the relation is interconnected with life-oriented network, rather than being a functional organization.

3.3 AUTONOMOUS ORDER

We think that architecture is the one to be created by man. This implies that man as a subject give an order, distinguishing himself from objects who is given the order. Modern architectural design, too, is based on this idea and no one casts doubt on it. Architecture becomes an object that receives order given by man outside the architecture. Modern architecture that features as rational and reasonable is justified in this way. However, life is autonomous and gives an order by itself, not only receives it. A question might be proposed at this point: How can architecture have autonomous order? The essence of this question is what attitude man takes about the orders that already exist in nature. It also asks whether man is willing to ask nature or architectural materials about an order he is about to give so that he would respect order of nature and features of materials. Taken a step forward, this deals with an issue that man could be humble in his attitude towards nature and life so that he could be humble in his architecture. It asks if he could respect life-oriented orders, abandoning his position as a self-centered and omnipotent creator. Before man gives an order to nature, there had already existed life-oriented orders in nature and the same order still exist. Man was also created by the same order and can survive only when he follows it. The order is autonomous and the autonomous order should be respected in architecture. The action of going against the order brings about damages that will directly harm man. Yang-dong village and its houses are a good example of an architecture that follows autonomous order of nature.

3.4 UNITY AS A WHOLE

Unity and wholeness are the ones to be discussed here. Separation from autonomous order and weakened mutual relation make it impossible for a whole body to be united. It is very natural that individuals could not be united as a whole in a situation where individuals are not related and a controlling order of the relation of individuals is not respected. Natural world is already united, and man is the only one who is accustomed to being in a disunited state. Consequently, only man would ask about the necessity of unifying individuals as a whole. Human body, however, is an example of united body. Nature, earth, and even universe are united. Being united is an indispensable, not optional, element to all living beings. Only self-centered and individual-focused man feels it difficult to be united. Architecture reflects this difficulty. Every city and architecture in history might be judged by a perspective to what degree it is united or divided individually. The judgment also enables us to measure a degree of life-oriented possibility of it. What we could learn from cases such as Yang-dong village is that numerous houses form a united village while each house possesses its own autonomous solution. The unity encompasses sky and earth, trees, wind, and the moon as well as buildings. Disability to be united might be considered as a weakness of man, but it is not acceptable in life-oriented world. Only man is not familiar with being united.

4. Machine and life (conclusion)

With more than 100 years have passed actualizing Western modernization in our society, the 21st century has come a few years ago. In the meantime, our cities and architecture have already become those of mechanical view. The main theme of this international conference is 'spirit of place'. Focusing on 'life' in a discussion of the place spirit in a traditional village of Korea is important as well as natural because we who live in a city and architecture based on mechanical thinking discuss an issue of 'life' that is originated from a completely different worldview.

Yang-dong village demonstrates how a village could be formed with life-oriented view. What is most significant to us living in the present time is the fact that worldview that created the village is based on life-oriented values. We must learn life-oriented spirit from how

the village has accepted sky and earth, how the village selected its location and how architecture and arrangement was managed with a life-oriented view. We must learn the spirit of life from an empty space of Madang, selection of putting a rock in back yard, and the way of making a view of the moon rising on the wall. We should observe these in Yang-dong village and learn from it.

However, it is hard to actualize the methods conducted in Yang-dong village in future architecture and houses since system and concept of architecture is different from those of Yang-dong village. It would be advisable to find values to be pursued in an environment of life-oriented view like Yang-dong village and realize the values in modern architecture. Those spiritual values may be summarized as follows: 1) Shift the way of thinking from taking only one while refusing the other among two contrary elements to making a dynamic balance by recognizing and sharing values of the two with a purpose of realizing life, 2) Emphasize mutual relation of individuals and life through the relation, not just focusing on individual beings and their visible features, 3) Change behaviors of man from giving an order as a subject to objects to respecting existing orders, following the autonomous features of them and cooperating with them, 4) Unite and connect all individuals to make a whole through network structure with an understanding that physical collection of individuals and parts is not desirable. These four lessons are essential for survival of life. It applies to man in the same way. 'Life' is not restricted to a spirit of place of a Korean village. Man should anchor his hope in 'life' for his own survival.

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