Appreciating 'Ugly'
Late 20th Century Architecture in Korea

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Every building has its so-called "ugly phase" — old enough to be considered an eyesore by the general public, but not old enough in its life cycle to start being appreciated again. Vernacular *hanok*, colonial buildings, and post-war architecture have all passed through an "ugly phase." Some have become fine examples of high design, such as a luxuriously remodeled northern Bukchon home by Teo Yang. Others, like the swaths of mid-century concrete *jutaek* repurposed as cafes, embrace a gentrified and "sh***y-is-pretty" restyling, to borrow an audio-engineer idiom. Even controversial architectural examples from Korea's time as a colony of Imperial Japan, which had a relatively long "ugly phase" as a whole after liberation, have reached a certain level of acceptance or appreciation today.

Figure 1. The Millennium Hilton Seoul Hotel, closed on Dec. 31, 2022, hides behind the cityscape near Seoul Station.

Lack of maintenance arguably remains one of the most significant reasons a building or neighborhood becomes undesirable. Add to this the way in which certain buildings gradually lose their relevance to society, and the ways in which collective memory regarding such buildings fragments over time, and it becomes easy for such architectural examples to be poorly perceived.

A few structures, such as Yeouido's iconic 63 Square, seem to escape their "ugly phase" altogether by remaining notable to the public, while others, such as Kim Jong-soung's 1983 Millennium Hilton Seoul Hotel, are destined for demolition. It is buildings like this, which span the period of the 1980s-1990s, that are now in their "ugly phase". As such, if even historic buildings such as the Hilton can become victims of urban redevelopment today, will the lesser examples of architecture from this time have a chance for survival?

Such lesser buildings number in the tens of thousands all over Korea in the form of *jjimjilbang* (bathhouse), *yeogwan* (inn), *villa* (small apartment building), *jutaek* (detached house), and low-rise offices. Some of these buildings were the result of "New Town" suburban neighborhood developments. Others were simply single building projects. Looking back, as high-rise structures become the salient features that define the Korean cityscape today, there is a lot to appreciate with regard to pre-2000 architecture.

In the 1980s, many multi-story projects did not rise higher than five or six floors, allowing socially activated mixed-use neighborhoods to retain an attractive and low-slung human sense of scale. Concrete was the structural material of choice, and their reddish bricks and tiles (which were still being affixed directly to the exterior walls) came to define the urban feeling of the era.[1] While some were mere boxy efficiencies lacking any hint of thoughtful design, others were good examples of finely proportioned and tastefully detailed architecture. Such buildings were not traditional, yet some retained their Koreanness along with an ever-present degree of internationalism and foreign influence.

[1] Rainscreens, a final architectural layer in which the cladding is spaced away from the rest of the wall assembly, increased in the 2000s. This is common today in the form of large metal plating and large composite or stone tiles, for example. Prior to this, it was still common in Korea for tiles and face bricks to be directly cemented onto a building's facade.

Figure 2. A good perspective showing the architectural makeup of the red-bricked Hwanggeumjang yeogwan in Yong-dong, Incheon.

Figure 3. The windows of Hwanggeumjang *yeogwan* in Yong-dong, Incheon.

Hwanggeumjang *yeogwan*, built in Incheon's Yong-dong in 1986,

exemplifies this fusion well. The building is modern, its external form practically and attractively following the internal curvature of the stairs. It is Korean, its overhangs finished with new giwa and its sliding interior windows recalling vernacular hanok design. It is international, its boxy bay windows paralleling the same type popularly used in other East Asian countries at this time. Tower Villa, built in central Seoul's Huam-dong in 1984, similarly fuses Korean and international design.

Figure 4. Tower Villa in central Seoul's Huam-dong features Korean motifs and modern bay windows in a townhouse format.

In contrast, Baekhwatang *jjimjilbang*, built in 1987, is largely devoid of any vernacular Korean design motifs. However, its proportions, site orientation, massing, and facade all work together to demonstrate a thoughtfully planned and appealing 1980s building.

Figure 5. A full view of the red-bricked Baekhwatang *jjimjilbang* in Sujeong-dong, Busan.

Buildings in the 1990s continued to evolve along similar lines. Some examples leaned into the Korean pride felt in the wake of the 1988 Olympics, particularly through the use of iconographically imprinted face bricks. Others seemed to lean towards specific international trends, such as the Art Deco revivalism popularized around the world by the Italian Memphis Group during the 1980s. Color palettes varied as well. Reddish brick and amber-gray glass from the 1980s were still found in the 1990s, yet more progressive structures opted for blue and white tiles and turquoise glass — colors with enough staying power to later be implemented in buildings into the 2000s.

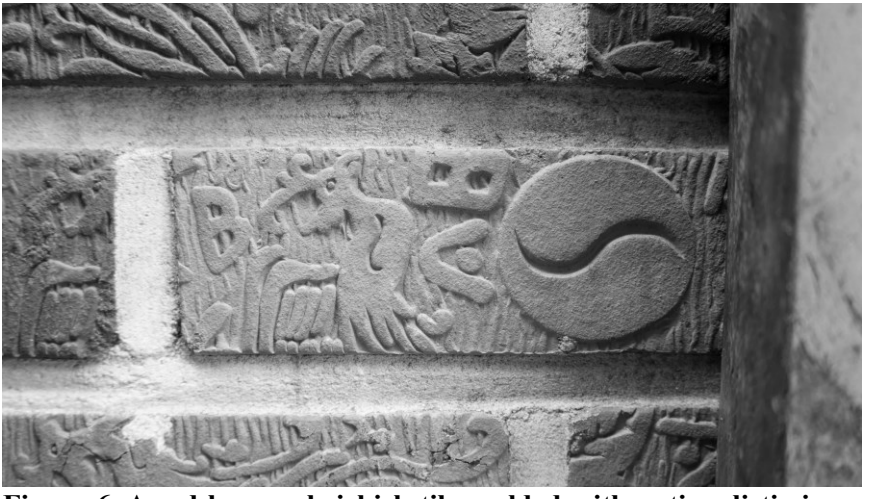

Figure 6. A red-brown, brickish-tile molded with nationalistic icons on a four-story multi-use building dating to 1995 in Yongsan-gu, Seoul. The building format is similar to the typical *villa* of the 1980s.

Figure 7. A three-story mixed-use building of sky blue, cream white, and azure tiles in Busan's Choryang-dong appears to be a product of the reinterpreted Art Deco styling that came out of the 1980s and continued into the 1990s. The building dates to 1997.

Figure 8. Another view of the 1997 Choryang-dong building in Figure 7. Its colors and architectural lines are reminiscent of the Art Deco resurgence in the 1980s, particularly those found at Miami Beach.

Figure 9. A mixed-use building of the same style and materials of the building in Figures 7 and 8 is located in nearby Yeongju-dong. This building dating to 1996 still retains its turquoise blue glass that became popular in the 1990s.

Figure 10. A mixed-use building in Huam-dong dating to 1992 is transitional in features and materials. It uses the modern bay windows and amber-gray glass common in the 1980s, but adapts curtain wall glass and the pastel blue and white colors popular in the 1990s.

Figure 11. Another view of the 1992 building in Figure 10. The various features made popular in 1980s and 1990s architecture are clearly visible from this angle.

Figure 12. This mixed-use building dating to 1992 in Choryang-dong was somewhat progressive for its time. Its turquoise glass and blue and white tiles came to define the materials and colors of 1990s Korean (and international) architecture.

Figure 13. For comparison, these two buildings in Taichung, Taiwan, demonstrate similar international trends observed in Korea. On left is an undated red brickish-tile building similar to 1980s buildings in Korea and Japan. In center, a building dating to around 1994 leans heavily into the international Art Deco revival of the 1980s-1990s. Though lacking the dramatic curves found in other architectural examples, it uses the same design cues and blue and white tile colors as those in 1990s Korea.

Figure 14. The curvy Zeirishi-kai Building in Nagoya, Japan, dating to 1991, makes use of the same white and blue tiles and turquoise glass found in other buildings from this period.

Figure 15. For comparison, a curvy mixed-use building dating to 1989 that makes use of materials and a design language similar to the aforementioned Zeirishi-kai Building is seen in Jung-gu, Seoul.

Looking forward, there is a potential urban development trajectory in which these few-story buildings survive. As patronage dwindles at aging *jjimjilbang* and *yeogwan* buildings, detached houses become abandoned, and corporations increasingly seek to make the jump to skyscraper office spaces, some neighborhoods from the 1980s will become contenders for revitalization and adaptive reuse. To be sure, there are signs that it has already begun. According to the *Jungang Ilbo*, 66% of all housing sales in July 2022 were for villas, with major apartments trailing far behind at a meager 21.2% — reportedly the lowest number for apartment sales on record.[2] While these numbers do not account for all late 20th century architecture and speak more to the current state of housing affordability, real-world examples of revitalization are already visible.

[2] Eun-hwa Han, "Seoul billa georaeryang apateu 3bae…gangseo·yangseogu neun jeonche 80% isang," *Jungang ilbo*, Sept. 19, 2022. https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25102657.

Figure 16. A city block of red brick and tiled buildings built between 1990 and 1992 are seen in eastern Seoul's Seongsu-dong. Some are reimagined as cafes and others still used as residences. Neighborhoods such as these, unlike denser gentrified areas like Ikseon-dong, may stand a better chance of retaining their residents throughout gentrification. Essentially concrete shells, such buildings provide somewhat of a blank canvas for renovation.

Figure 17. The flagship store and cafe of Loeuvre, right, rests on the ground floor of an elegantly remodeled 1985 building in Seongsu-dong. On the left are the still-occupied low-rise apartments Daeseong Heights, built in 1990. Scenes such as this paint a compelling picture of city life on a human scale outside of the high-rise apartment complexes.

One of the more notable survivors, due to its location and association with the trendy Ikseon-dong area, is Nakwonjang, a 1989 concrete and brickish-tile-covered building formerly used as the Green Field Motel (unpictured). More to the point, over 20 city blocks of buildings dating mostly to the 1980s-1990s near Ttukseom Station on Seoul Metro Line 2 are already undergoing major gentrification. While it is unclear whether or not residents will be displaced or bought out en masse over time, housing options here remain relatively generous at the moment, resulting in a compelling example of locals and visitors interacting with, and contributing to, a dynamic neighborhood of revitalized 1980s-1990s buildings.

As small businesses continue to search for low-cost areas of doing business, these old 1980s-1990s neighborhoods may continue proving to be viable options. To be sure, given the present-day resurgence of 1980s-1990s pop culture, why couldn't the building in Figure 8 be successfully reimagined as a shop or cafe with redesign cues from *Saved by the Bell* or *Miami Vice*? Not every building is worth saving indefinitely, and gentrification may not be the best response to the question of how to revitalize a building, but many are worthy of appreciation and a second life. After being misunderstood, maligned, and ignored for years, perhaps some of these buildings will leave their "ugly phase" behind.

Figure List

All figures are from the author's collection. These were photographed in April 2023, with the exception of Figure 6, which was photographed in January 2021.

Nate Kornegay photographs and writes about early modern architecture in Korea. He is currently working on a number of projects, including the study of a particular ceramic tile trend found throughout the former Japanese Empire. Research articles and architectural photo essays can be found at his website, Colonial Korea*. Visit* www.colonialkorea.com.