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## Modern Architecture: A Critical History (5th edition)

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Hyon-Sob Kim

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# Review

Review by

**Hyon-Sob Kim**

Department of Architecture

Korea University

Seoul, South Korea

archistory@korea.ac.kr

Book

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## A Korean's point of view

A fifth expanded edition of Kenneth Frampton's *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, the bestseller textbook in schools of architecture worldwide, was published last year, exactly forty years since its first edition was released in 1980. According to Panayotis Tournikiotis, 'the additions and changes made to' earlier history books on modern architecture are considered 'of the greatest significance'. This is particularly evident in the case of Sigfried Giedion's *Space, Time, and Architecture*, of which the last version of 1967 'does not have the originality of the first' edition of 1941; yet, it formed our general understanding of the Modern Movement.<sup>1</sup> We could possibly say the same about Frampton's critical history.

Beginning with the inclusion of a celebrated new chapter on 'critical regionalism' in the second edition (1985), Frampton has consistently continued to add a chapter to the end of each updated edition, broadening his historiographical scope. Specifically, the chapter 'World Architecture and Reflective Practice' was added to the third edition (1992), and the chapter 'Architecture in the Age of Globalization: Topography, Morphology, Sustainability, Materiality, Habitat and Civic Form 1975–2007' was added to the fourth one (2007). Lastly, in the fifth edition, he newly introduced 'Part IV: World Architecture and the Modern Movement' with four chapters on transcontinental regions ('The Americas', 'Africa and the Middle East', 'Asia and the Pacific', and 'Europe') to demonstrate the diversity of world architecture, continent by continent and country by country. (The new chapters added up to the fourth edition comprised 'Part III: Critical Assessment and Extension into the Present 1925–2007'.) A total of 250 pages (pp. 367–616) were allotted to this new part, which occupies over 40% of the main text (pp. 13–642). In fact, Part IV is an aggressive expansion of the penultimate chapter 'World Architecture and Reflective Practice' of the previous edition, while the final 'Architecture in the Age of Globalization' is now presented as an 'Afterword' following Part IV with almost the same content. Furthermore, this edition includes two new chapters—on Czechoslovakia and France between the two world wars—in 'Part II: A Critical

History 1836–1967'. However, the changes in the 'Introduction'—which had been the same through the earlier four editions—are more conspicuous than the new chapters in Part II. This is because the introduction was completely re-written, indicating that this expanded edition is significantly different to the preceding ones. Regrettably, Frampton's well-known quotation from Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940), which critically interpreted Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, disappeared from the introduction, as did his acknowledgement of debt to 'a Marxist interpretation of history' and 'the critical theory of the Frankfurt School'. Nevertheless, Frampton appears to maintain a position similar to that of the earlier edition, albeit in an updated form, as seen in his replacement of Benjamin's theses with Guy Debord's critique of the present society of the commodity and the spectacle, despite his attempt to be more inclusive by embracing the architectures of diverse countries and continents. The rationale for the revision is provided in this new introduction: 'to widen the scope of the book in order to redress the Eurocentric and transatlantic bias of previous editions' (p. 10).

That this expanded history deals with Korean architecture is very encouraging, from a Korean's point of view. A section entitled 'South Korea' was included in 'Chapter 3: Asia and the Pacific' of Part IV, which covers another eight countries: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, China, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. Though a latecomer on the international architectural stage, Korea is now recognised in this renowned history of modern architecture, despite the short length of the related section—seven pages in total. Is this not what the Korean architectural community has been looking forward to for a long time? In retrospect, the recent interaction between Korean architecture with the world has been quite positive. Reflecting the mood of *Hallyu* or the 'Korean Wave' in pop culture in the last two decades, Korean architects and researchers have made various efforts to promote the country's architecture to the world through numerous international exhibitions, conferences, publications, and other events. The 2014 Golden Lion for best pavilion awarded to the Korean national participation, curated by the architect Minsuk Cho (b. 1966), at the Venice Architecture Biennale could be regarded as a symbolic result of these efforts. In addition, the UIA 2017 World Architects Congress in Seoul attracted the attention of international architectural professionals. It is expected that Frampton's book will function as a medium to further establish the position of Korea in the history of modern architecture.

If so, how well does the Korean section of the book describe the development of modern architecture in the country? Unfortunately, it is rather disappointing. This judgement is based on Frampton's unbalanced selection of architects as well as various errors in the text. The British historian selected Swoo-Geun Kim as the first 'post-war master' in Korea after briefly depicting, in two sentences, the historical background—the Japanese colonial era and the Korean War. Swoo-Geun Kim (1931–1986) was undoubtedly one of the most prominent architects in postwar Korea, but Chung-Up Kim (1922–1988) should have also been mentioned, if not briefly discussed.<sup>2</sup> Once a mentor and later a rival to Swoo-Geun Kim, Chung-Up Kim had started pioneering

Modern architecture in Korea more than a decade before the rise of Swoo-Geun Kim in the 1960s. In particular, his apprenticeship at the Atelier Le Corbusier in Paris for several years in the 1950s (from October 1952 to December 1955) allowed Korean architecture to directly communicate with the world and laid the foundations of the Corbusian pedigree in Korea.<sup>3</sup> The French Embassy in Korea (1959–1962) designed by Chung-Up Kim is always presented as the most representative Modern building in Korea, together with the Space Group of Korea Building (1971–1975; 1976–1977) designed by Swoo-Geun Kim. As unexpected as Frampton's omission of Chung-Up Kim is his discussion of Byoung Cho as 'the next architect of stature to emerge' after Swoo-Geun Kim. Indeed, Byoung Cho (b. 1957) is an outstanding architect, but his education and career in the USA and Europe kept him at a distance from the complicated (but eventually fruitful) dynamics in the Korean architectural community before his return to Korea in the early 1990s—even if 'there he would meet Seung Hyo-Sang [H-Sang Seung] and Min Hyun Sik, members of the avant-garde 4.3 Group, who, after [Swoo-Geun] Kim's untimely death in 1986, came to the fore as the next generation of modernists' (p. 510).

Certainly, H-Sang Seung (b. 1952), rather than Byoung Cho, has been at the forefront of the scene thereafter. Until recently, Seung's theory of 'Beauty of Poverty', originating from the 4.3 Group's exhibition in 1992, epitomised the mainstream architectural discourse in Korea—although some dispute it owing to its ascetic and moralistic tone—and his Sujoldang Residence (1992–1993) is counted as the best embodiment of the theory.<sup>4</sup> (Additionally, we cannot ignore his recent achievements as the first City Architect of Seoul Metropolitan Government, Director of Steering Committee of Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism, Chief Commissioner of Presidential Commission on Architecture Policy of Korea, among others.) In contrast, Cho's architecture looks more intuitive and sensual than that of Seung—as hinted, for example, in a photo of the Hanil Visitors' Centre and Guest House (2009) included in Frampton's book (p. 510)—and the phenomenologically strong imagery it evokes would be the reason that he was chosen by the foreign historian. Nonetheless, perhaps the more practical reason is that his monograph *Byoung Cho* (2014) published by Thames & Hudson is much more widely circulated in the West than Seung's monograph *Sensuous Plan* (2007), which was brought out by a Korean publisher, although it was published as a Korean-English bilingual edition.<sup>5</sup> Byoung Cho's monograph is listed in Frampton's bibliography for the Korean section along with a short interview text on Minsuk Cho,<sup>6</sup> who is the third architect he introduces in the last paragraph. Minsuk Cho, the above-mentioned winner of the 2014 Golden Lion in Venice, is one of the most promising architects of the next generation and deserves to be further discussed. As a whole, however, Frampton's selection to focus on these three architects does not seem soundly balanced but quite random, possibly based on his existing knowledge and access to sources at hand. In particular, the Korean section appears almost like a dedication to Byoung Cho. Consider the disproportionate allocation of pages to his works. Focusing on the illustrations, eight among a total of fourteen are from Byoung Cho, while the other six cover the work of

the other two architects—four for Swoo-Geun Kim and two for Minsuk Cho. Although history is fundamentally selective, Frampton's understanding of 'an inescapable subjectivity determining one's choices' as 'the ultimate meaning of the term "a critical history"' (p. 11) sounds more like an apologia—as well as a retreat from an earlier, sharper criticality.

Also, we need to note the erroneous information found in the paragraphs on Swoo-Geun Kim (p. 506), whether big or small, in order to correct some of the inaccuracies in this important book. The official English name of this architect's office was the 'Space Group of Korea'; thus, the name of the building is the 'Space Group of Korea Building' or 'S. G. K. Building'. (The coinage was deliberate for the initials 'S. G. K.' to also allude to the architect's name.) The magazine that Swoo-Geun Kim published from 1966 onwards, which is still in print by a different publisher, was entitled *Space*. However, Frampton mistook *Space* magazine for '*Space Design (SD)* magazine'. The latter is a Japanese magazine that featured the Space Group of Korea Building in its special issue of August 1979, which was republished as a standalone book entitled *Gendai-no Kenchikuka: Kim Swoo-Geun [Modern Architect: Swoo-Geun Kim]* a month later.<sup>7</sup> This confusion is reinforced when the Space Group of Korea Building (or shortly 'Space Group building' as Frampton put it) is misspelt as '*SD* building'. Another error is related to the project year attributed to this building. Here, it is necessary to note that the building is composed of two parts: the first, or original, building was constructed between 1971 and 1975, and a huge extension to the smaller first building was then added in 1976–1977. Frampton's two illustrations (one section drawing and one interior photo) of the building show the extended building, but the project year is incorrectly presented as '1971' in the captions of the two illustrations. The two parts of the building were closely interrelated, but each has its own unique characteristics; thus, it is also very important to understand them independently, as I recently argued in an article on the first part of the building.<sup>8</sup> In the same vein, Frampton's phrase of 'his 1971 concrete-framed Space Group building in Seoul' in the main text is not correct; the original building had a masonry structure using different types of bricks inside and out, and this elaborate brickwork is one of the most impressive characteristics of the building. While Swoo-Geun Kim adopted the concrete-frame structure in the extension, its brick cladding made the whole building look consistent.

The imbalance and inaccuracies revealed in Frampton's critical history when dealing with the less-known country's architecture suggests several obvious but crucial points. First, 'history writing', especially that of 'world architecture' or 'global architecture', is indeed a difficult task. Did Frampton not study a comprehensive history of Korean modern architecture before writing the Korean section? That his bibliography of Korean architecture lists only two references—Byoung Cho's monograph and Minsuk Cho's interview—indicates a gap in his literature review, although it is clear that he also read the recent special issue of *The Architectural Review* on Korea (February 2018).<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, Korean sections in the world architecture

books listed in his bibliography of 'Asia and the Pacific: Introduction'—'K. Frampton and Z. Guan, eds., *World Architecture 1900–2000: A Critical Mosaic/Vol. 9, East Asia* (2002)' and 'L. Fernández-Galiano, ed., *Atlas: Architectures of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century/Vol. 1, Asia and Pacific* (2010)'—proved to be of no help. I thus maintain that he was unduly ambitious for the impossible project to embrace all the continents and major countries within a single book. The second point is that no history books are free from fallacy, and we have to 'critically' read histories, including the 'critical history' written by the internationally esteemed historian and critic. As we can understand from the critique and counter-critique of Frampton's 'critical regionalism' that was published for the first time in 1983,<sup>10</sup> his writings and arguments are also open to critique. The same is the case for this (expanded) critical history. In fact, the first edition of the book was harshly reviewed by the younger historian William J. R. Curtis (b. 1948) in 1981,<sup>11</sup> a year after its publication and a year before Curtis himself published the first edition of *Modern Architecture since 1900* (1982), another bestselling history of modern architecture. If the imbalance and inaccuracy is easily discernible in the Korean section of this expanded edition, similar fallacies may possibly be traced in other sections related to other countries, in particular, the newly included so-called 'third-world' countries. The last point is a lesson for the Korean architectural community, which must acknowledge that Korean architecture is not yet sufficiently recognised internationally. Consider, for instance, the list of publications, country by country, in the bibliography for Part IV. The (English) publications on Korean architecture available to Frampton were extremely limited, compared with those on other countries. This is partly owing to a gap in the historian's research but, in a strict sense, it also demonstrates the present reception of Korean architecture in the rest of the world. Although the recent diverse efforts made by Korean architects and researchers are not reflected in this volume, there still appears to be a long way to go.

Will Frampton be able to revise the imbalance and inaccuracies raised in this review? Born in 1930, the old historian—who turned ninety years old in 2020—may well regard this fifth edition as the last version of his critical history. In 2016, his enormous research resources were handed over to the Department of Architecture, University of Hong Kong to form 'The Kenneth Frampton Architecture Book Collection', consisting of roughly 10,000 books.<sup>12</sup> If that is the case, the required revision to the Korean section—and possibly also to the other sections—may remain an incomplete project. Do we have to be content with the fact that the Korean translation of the critical history published in 2017 was luckily that of the fourth edition? Regardless, this study of Frampton confirms that even a critical history should be read critically.

### **Funding**

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## Notes and references

1. Panayotis Tournikiotis, *The Historiography of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 16.
2. For a comparative introductory reading of the two Kims, see Hyon-Sob Kim, 'Representing Korean Architecture in the Modern West: Two Korean Pavilions from 1960s International Expositions', *Architectural Research Quarterly*, 21.2 (2017), 155–70.
3. Hyon-Sob Kim, 'Le Corbusier and Modern Architecture in Korea', in *Kim Chung-Up Meets Le Corbusier*, ed. by Eunmi Ko and Hyuk Joon Kim (Anyang: Kimchungup Architecture Museum, 2018), pp. 214–33.
4. For a critical review of the 'beauty of poverty' and its derivative 'landsript', see Hyon-Sob Kim, 'DDP Controversy and the Dilemma of H-Sang Seung's "Landsript"', *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering*, 17.2 (2018), 205–12.
5. Soon Chun Cho, *Byoung Cho* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014); Hyungmin Pai, *Sensuous Plan: The Architecture of Seung, H-Sang* (Paju: Dongnyok, 2007). The latter includes a new English translation of Seung's *Beauty of Poverty*, which was first published as a standalone book in a bilingual edition of 1996. See H-Sang Seung, *Beauty of Poverty* (Seoul: Migeonsa, 1996).
6. Minsuk Cho and Kyung Park, 'Architectural Heterogeneity in Korean Society', in *Architect 00: Mass Studies* (Seoul: Space, 2007), pp. 122–25. Frampton simply cites this as 'M. Cho and K. Park, *Architectural Heterogeneity in Korean Society* (2007)'.  
7. *Gendai-no Kenchikuka: Kim Swoo-Geun [Modern Architect: Swoo-Geun Kim]*, ed. by SD (Tokyo: Kajima Press, 1979).
8. Hyon-Sob Kim, 'Revisiting the First Space Group of Korea Building: "Our Home—The House of Space"', *SPACE*, 638 (2021), 124–31.
9. Not coincidentally, this issue includes related articles on, or by, Swoo-Geun Kim, Byoung Cho, and Minsuk Cho, among others, and Byoung Cho's concepts of 'mak' (imperfection) and 'bium' (emptiness), which were mentioned by Frampton but were not included in *Byoung Cho* (2014). See Byoungsoo Cho, 'Imperfection and Emptiness', *The Architectural Review*, 1448 (2018), 44–51. For Cho's acquaintance and correspondence with Frampton, see Wook Choi's interview with Cho in the founding issue of *Domus Korea*, 00 (November 2018), pp. 182–91.
10. Kenneth Frampton, 'Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance', in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 16–30; 'Prospects for Critical Regionalism', *Perspecta*, 20 (1983), 147–62. Among various critiques of this concept, see Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 129–205. For Frampton's response to Jameson, see Kenneth Frampton, 'Towards an Agonistic Architecture', *Domus*, 972 (2013), 5–8.
11. William J. R. Curtis, 'Modern Architecture by Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co; Modern Architecture: A Critical History by Kenneth Frampton', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 40.2 (1981), 168–70.
12. See 'The Kenneth Frampton Architecture Book Collection', *Faculty of Architecture, The University of Hong Kong* <<https://www.arch.hku.hk/resources/the-kenneth-frampton-architectural-book-collection>> [accessed 27 July 2021].