The Legacy of Mies van der Rohe in Modern Movement and the Modern Architecture in Korea

BY JONG SOUNG KIMM

The following article is an edited version of the keynote presented at the 13th International **docomomo** Conference that took place in Seoul, Korea, on September 2014. The paper discusses how "Western" architecture was first introduced to Korean soil: a French Catholic missionary-architect built the Seoul Cathedral at the end of the 19th century. American and Canadian architects built educational buildings for the Protestant missionary-founded colleges in Korea. Japanese civil servant architects built some public buildings during the colonial rule. The work of two prominent Korean architects, Kim Chung-Up and Kim Swoo-Geun are discussed.

The author discusses his education at Mies van der Rohe's Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) in mid-1950s, his work for the Master during the 1960s, and his teaching at IIT 1966 and 1978. He describes how his dual position of teaching at IIT and working for Mies gave him the opportunity to work on three projects of importance: the *Mies Retrospective* in Berlin in 1968; the exhibition proposal for the extension of the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston of 1969; the Toronto-Dominion Bank executive floor and Banking Pavilion of 1966–1968.

The author discusses several works of Mies van der Rohe to "demystify" the general perception that Mies was a rigid aesthetician: how Mies van der Rohe would arrive at design decisions not always sticking to the module, grid and geometry, contrary to the conventional reading of his architecture.

The author then discusses five works from his three decades of practice with SAC International in Seoul, highlighting where Mies' influences might be found in these works: the Korea Military Academy Library of 1982; Seoul Hilton Hotel of 1983; the Weight-lifting Gymnasium for '88 Seoul Olympics of 1986; Kyongju Museum of Art of 1991; and the SK Group Office Building in Seoul of 1999. The paper also reflects on its relationship to the main theme of the recent International **docomomo** Conference in Seoul, *Expansion and Conflict*.

The Modern Movement challenged a millennium of classical values through a collective global revolution in technological, social, political and aesthetic spatial values. The magnitude and complexity of this confrontation between epochs multiplied when modernity's Western values expanded into the Asian sphere.

The 13th International **docomomo** Conference in Seoul re-measured this expansion of the modern ethos within the wholly different context of Asia. Predictably, modernity in Asia grew and matured through the process of conflict and expansion, and intrinsically took on very distinct identities in different regions.

The theme of *Expansion and Conflict* fundamentally interrogates the values and relevancy of the Modern Movement through the extreme cultural lens of Asia. Conflict is not necessarily a pejorative, but maybe a challenge for the future. It signifies a vigorous recognition of each culture's robust and intrinsic values — the existing culture's and Modernism's *raison d'être*.

Looking back on how "Western" architecture made its appearance on Korean soil, it was a French Catholic missionary-architect, Eugène-J-G Coste, who built Seoul Cathedral at the end of the 19th century. American and Canadian architects built the first group of academic buildings for the Methodist missionary-founded Yonhee College and Ewha Women's College. Public buildings were built by Japanese colonial government architects during the thirty-five years of Japan's colonial rule which ended in 1945.

Of the two prominent architects who left significant imprints on the course of contemporary Korean architecture, Kim Chung-Up, born in 1922, was educated at Yokohama Higher Technical School. After teaching in Seoul, and then working in Le Corbusier's *atelier* for four years in the early 1950s, Kim established his practice, and also taught at Hong Ik University. The French Embassy and Chancery in Seoul (figure 1) of 1960 may be considered Kim Chung-Up's most important legacy. The second architect, Kim Swoo-Geun was born in 1931, worked in Tange Kenzo's office

01 Kim Chung-Up, French Embassy and Chancery, Seoul, Korea, 1960. © Kim Chung-Up Museum, 1969.

02 Kim Swoo-Geun, Space Group Building, Seoul, Korea, 1971. © J. W. Jung, 1977.

after his education at the Tokyo University of the Arts. In 1961 Kim Swoo Geun established the Space Group, built an impressive body of architecture, and endeavored to promote the general public's awareness of cultural issues through the monthly magazine *Space*. The Space building of 1971 (figure 2) could be singled out as Kim Swoo-Geun's masterpiece.It was my good fortune, indeed my destiny, to begin my architectural education at Mies van der Rohe's IIT when Crown Hall opened in the spring semester of 1956. I arrived in Chicago at night, and the taxi taking me to the IIT campus drove in front of Crown Hall. The first impression of the building, a sharp-edged prism of clear and translucent glass fully lit with eerie fluorescent lights, was unlike any "building" that I had ever seen in my life, and I felt a certain shiver inside me. I undertook the course that Mies had developed, and augmented by the first group of faculty whom Mies had assembled including Ludwig Hilberseimer, Walter Peterhans, James Speyer, Daniel Brenner, Alfred Caldwell, George Danforth, Reginald Malcolmson, Jacques Brownson, Howard Dearstyne and others.

As Mies was no longer teaching undergraduate classes when I began my study at IIT, I had set a goal to work for the Master when I completed my studies. Mies resigned from IIT in 1958. My teacher and mentor Alfred Caldwell recommended me to Mies's office when I finished my junior year at IIT. In early 1961 I began my eleven-year stint at the 5th floor loft office of Mies van der Rohe at 230 East Ohio Street in Chicago.

George Danforth, who succeeded Mies van der Rohe as director of the School of Architecture at IIT, recruited me in 1966 to teach the 4th year design studio. It was my dual position of teaching at IIT and working at Mies's office that eventually led me to three assignments of importance and a source of great personal pride during my work at Mies van der Rohe's office. The most important assignment was to design the exhibition installation of the 1968 Mies van der Rohe retrospective at the *Akademie der Künste* in Berlin on the occasion of the opening of the *Neue Nationalgalerie*; another was to produce the exhibition proposal for the new extension of the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston in 1969; the third was the Toronto-Dominion Bank executive floor and Main Banking Hall of 1966–68. My teaching encompassed taking students one on one, through the space problematic, one of the key components in Mies's IIT *curriculum*, prior to setting students independent design projects. The space problematic had evolved from Mies's own interest in exploring the potential in spatial modulation of planes, volumes, juxtaposition of different materials and textures going back to the Barcelona Pavilion, the *Tugendhat* House, the 1931 Berlin Building Exhibition House, series of court house studies and continued through Mies's American phase in the Farnsworth House, Crown Hall at IIT, the Toronto-Dominion Centre Banking Hall, and the *Neue Nationalgalerie* in Berlin.

Now I would like to discuss some aspects of Mies van der Rohe's architecture in a way not usually dealt with, or overlooked by most of the chroniclers of his work. I want to demystify the common perception that Mies van der Rohe was a rigid aesthetician, by highlighting some important instances of Mies, the "artist", not allowing himself to be bound by rules he had set up for himself, as well as to illuminate the fact that the essence of Mies van der Rohe's architecture was first and foremost an art of building, *Baukunst*, a spatial art. The conventional reading of Mies van der Rohe's architecture is the grid, module, and a strict adherence to geometry. Many architects who have adopted the Miesian language in their own work in the second half of the 20th century have indeed fallen victims to the trap of slavishly adhering to the module or what they would perceive to be Mies's architectural idiom, while Mies himself never let the module or grids dictate his "artistic" judgments. Mies van der Rohe was an artist of much more

03 Mies van der Rohe, Barcelona Pavilion, Spain, 1929. Reconstructed in 1986. © Jong Soung Kimm, 2011.

04 Mies van der Rohe, *Neue Nationalgalerie*, Berlin, Germany, 1968. © Jong Soung Kimm, 2006.

complex and unfathomable intellectual dimension than the clarity of his architecture would indicate.

"One evening as I was working late on the building I made a sketch of a free-standing wall, and I got a shock. I knew it was a new principle"[1].

The birth of free-standing wall in the Barcelona Pavilion (figure 3) was thus described by Mies van der Rohe. Mies's final plan for the Barcelona Pavilion called for one by three, 7.70 m square bays of thin, cross-shaped steel columns supporting the roof plate. Only after the excavation of the site progressed far enough, and the 110 cm² dimension of travertine paving slabs had been fixed, was it discovered that the east-west dimension of the site did not yield 23.10 m that was required, but was about 2.00 m short. Mies's on-site modification was to create 3 bays out of 19 paving grids, or 20.90 m between the outer columns. Had there been a little more time to finish the Pavilion for the opening date, Mies van der Rohe would probably have reversed his earlier decision, and had the travertine pavers cut to 110 cm by 99.50 cm in order to align columns on both longitudinal and transverse grids.

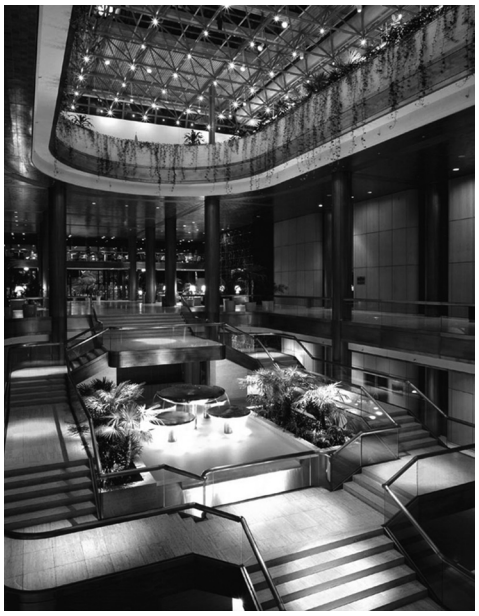
For the Tugendhat House, which was designed concurrently with the Barcelona Pavilion beginning in 1928, Mies again set up squarish bays, but the final dimensions of the structural frame turned out to be 5.50 m north-south, and 4.835 m east–west. It would be reasonable to assume that Mies considered such factors as the visual relationship of a pair of columns to the free-standing onyx wall, as well as that of another pair of columns to the Makassar ebony-paneled half-round wall for the dining area, and finally, the physical distance between the onyx and ebony walls in arriving at the shorter spacing of the columns in the east-west direction.

Not long after he accepted the directorship of the Architecture School at the Armour Institute of Technology, the predecessor of IIT, Mies van der Rohe was commissioned to produce the new campus master plan for the university. After an intensive analysis of the academic program requirements, he arrived at 24 × 24 ft, 12 ft high (approximately 7.20 × 7.20 m by 3.60 m high) unit as the planning "module". However, as he set out to study the actual placement of the first group of three academic buildings, the Chemistry Building, the Chemical Engineering & Metallurgy Building and the Alumni Memorial Hall, Mies found that the distance between the parallel three-story Chemistry Building and the two-story Chemical Engineering & Metallurgy Building would be too far apart at 48 ft, yet too close at 24 ft. His decision was to place the buildings at one-and-a-half "modules", 36 ft apart.

In planning the Chemical Engineering & Metallurgy Building, Mies's studies led him to a two-story, rectangular volume 5 bays wide, 12½ bays long, with outer bays accommodating small laboratories and research offices, and the middle three bays given over to the main lobby, an auditorium, and a suite of offices around a courtyard. Mies van der Rohe concluded that the main lobby at the southern end of the building would require a space wider than one 24 ft bay would yield. His decision was to place the columns one and a half "modules", 36 ft, inwards from the exterior columns, deviating from the "principle" which he himself had established to guide the planning of the IIT campus.

For Crown Hall, the home of the Architecture and City Planning Departments and the Institute of Design at IIT, Mies van der Rohe set out to create a clear-span pavilion above an English basement. The limit in the width of plate glass with which Mies intended to sheath his revolutionary structure led him to a planning and design module of 10 ft, a departure from the 24 ft square module for the campus. The width of Crown Hall at 120 ft still respected the multiple of 24 ft, whereas the length of 220 ft was independent of the campus module.

The design for the week-end house on the Fox River for Dr. Edith Farnsworth was begun in 1945, and was finally



05 Jong Soung Kimm, Seoul Hilton Hotel, Seoul, Korea, 1983. Main Lobby. © C. E. Lim, 1983.

06 Jong Soung Kimm, Korea Military Academy Library, Seoul, Korea, 1982. © H. K. Park, 1987.

built in 1950. In the much celebrated Farnsworth House, who would have thought that Mies placed the entrance door slightly off centre in the 28 ft expanse of glass? He did, so that the dining table and chairs would have ample space around than if the door were placed in the exact centre for symmetry's sake.

The 28 ft span Farnsworth House was the first of a series of "pavilion" concepts Mies had investigated during his American phase. He went on to realize the 120 ft span Crown Hall in 1955, and proposed the 80 m (262 ft) span design for the Mannheim National Theatre competition project in 1953. Parallel to his investigation of one-way frame pavilions, Mies had produced designs for a series of two-way frame pavilions, starting with a 50 × 50 ft house of 1951, the 720 ft square Chicago Convention Hall project of 1953, the 54 m (177 ft) square Bacardi Office Building project of 1958, and the 64.80 m (213 ft) square *Neue Nationalgalerie* in Berlin of 1968 (figure 4).

At this point, I would like to turn to my work in Korea. The architectural discourse during the 1970s in Korea was centered on three main themes: *Gestaltung*; exploration on the use of new materials and techniques; and most of all, how to express tradition in contemporary architecture. The annual conference of the Korean Institute of Architects in 1974 was devoted to the theme of "Expression of Tradition in Architecture". An essay I contributed to *Space* magazine in 1975 recorded the general background of the architectural discourse during that period:

"In my opinion, the discussion on the issue of expression of tradition in contemporary architecture should be given a low priority, and I think concentrating on improving the overall quality of architecture will take us to our goal sooner than any attempt to graft elements of historical architecture, or an anxiety to formulate a 'Korean architecture' in a hurry"[2].

In the midst of this pivotal period in the development of modern architecture in Korea, I set up my practice with Seoul Architects-Consultants (SAC) International in 1978. The general climate of architectural profession was on the upswing: architects who, until then, could not freely travel outside of Korea due to the government's restriction on converting currency, began to travel abroad to visit important works of architecture; private sector clients, increasingly becoming more knowledgeable and sophisticated, demanded a higher caliber of design from their architects; Korean investors and construction companies who had been working abroad in places like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait created a market for Korean architects in their increasingly complex and large-scale projects. Soon after I began to work in Seoul, I found it necessary to bring the general level of all staff to a higher, common base. I and my colleagues trained the new crop of our young architects almost as an architecture school would. We would engage a new group of entry level staff by assigning a two-week design project, then critiquing their work as if in a graduate design studio. We would also hold weekly lunch-hour lectures and workshops in order to expand architectural awareness of our staff.

Of the architectural output of importance during the last three decades by SAC, I would like to discuss five projects, and highlight where Mies's influences might lie: the Korea Military Academy Library of 1982 (figure 6), Seoul Hilton Hotel of 1983, the Weight-lifting Gymnasium for 1988 Seoul Olympic of 1986, Kyongju Museum of Contemporary Art of 1991, and the SK Group Office Building of 1999.

The Korea Military Academy campus is located on the north-eastern edge of Seoul. The Academy desired an open-stack library with only a limited area of closed stacks for reference books. I seized upon this "open" arrangement to produce a large, open reading room of 42 × 66 m on the upper floor, with the central 12 × 30 m given over to an atrium stair hall. It is based on 3 × 5 bays of 12 m square concrete structure, with a 3 m cantilever on all sides for the upper floor. Transparent ground floor enclosures are

07 Jong Soung Kimm, Weightlifting Gymnasium for '88 Seoul Olympics, Seoul, Korea, 1986. © H. K. Park, 1986.

08 Jong Soung Kimm, Wooyang Art Museum, Kyongju, Korea, 1991. © H. K. Park, 1992.

pulled back from the edges of the upper floor to the outer columns. An acute observer of Mies van der Rohe's oeuvre would notice a certain similarity of the plan organization of the Library to Mies's Bacardi Building in Mexico City. The decisive difference between the two buildings, however, lies in the introduction of daylight from above for the atrium.

The Seoul Hilton Hotel is situated on the western edge of Namsan hill where the Namsan scenic drive completes its loop. As the hotel is entered from the higher frontage of a steeply sloping site, the podium block containing the public functions is placed to the rear, and the pilotis at the ground floor of the tower stand directly on the main entrance level. The tower floor is arranged as a double loaded plan. In order to avoid the visual tedium of a long corridor, and also in order not to create a slab-like mass, the plan is refracted 30 degrees at about 16 m in from both ends, resulting in a triptych-like shape for the tower block. As a visitor enters the building through the main entrance facing east, he or she passes through a relatively shallow entrance zone defined by a mezzanine above, then walks into a 6 m high main lobby. Progressing further inside, a large atrium with grand stairs connecting the lower lobby level below, and a generous opening at second floor level with a skylight at the roof, together create an 18 m high vertical expanse of space (figure 5). The spatial interpenetration of three levels was the object of a concentrated design study for the Seoul Hilton project. My life-long lessons from Mies van der Rohe are not present so much in its spatial organization, but are stamped everywhere in the choice and detailing of the major materials; in how a few expressive materials enhance the architectural character of major spaces. Sometime after the project was finished, I was quoted in a weekly Japanese architectural journal in 1985 thus:

"When the circumstances allow, I want to create a heart-soaring space using good materials and the most advanced technology"[3].

The Weight-lifting Gymnasium for '88 Seoul Olympics is organized within a vast single space measuring 59.40 x 79.20 m. A concrete seating "shell" for 1,000 spectators is placed at one end of the rectangular gymnasium. U-shaped, telescoping bleachers for an additional 2,500 spectators step down from the entrance level to the competition arena 5.40 m below. The main focus of this project was the structural concept for the space. Mies van der Rohe's long-span designs, such as the Chicago Convention Hall and the Mannheim National Theater, projects were dutifully studied, and after some contemplation, it was decided to frame the gymnasium by a skewed-chord space truss, recommended by the late David Geiger. In this structural system, the bottom chords are laid out diagonally to the building axis at 1.4 times the orthogonally placed top chords, rendering them into spider-web like, almost immaterial presence (figure 7).

The Wooyang Art Museum in Kyongju is a private museum for contemporary art, located in the historical ancient capital of the Silla dynasty. It is planned on two levels, one above grade and the other a basement: the upper floor is entirely dedicated to gallery space; the ground floor to main lobby, additional gallery spaces, and support functions. Mies van der Rohe's two important precedents, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and the *Neue Nationalgalerie* in Berlin were obvious guide posts for me on this project. In Kyongju, however, the focus was put on the gallery space on the second floor, which was an attempt to fuse the fluidity of a Miesian space and the possibility for an enfilade plan when it was required. The decisive factor which separates the Kyongju Museum from either the Houston or Berlin buildings is, again, the natural light from above (figure 8).

The SK Group Office Building (figure 9) is situated on Chongno, the main east-west axis of the historic core of Seoul. Its landscaped plaza to the south faces the newly resurrected Chung-gyechun stream. The typical floor is

09 Jong Soung Kimm, SK Office Building, Seoul, Korea, 1999. © H. K. Park, 2000.

10 Mies van der Rohe, Seagram Building, New York, USA, 1958. © Jong Soung Kimm, 1967.

planned as 33 × 51 m rectangle, the middle 9 m accommodating the core, and the outer 12 m, lettable space. The structural concept is based on a tubular steel frame with verticals at 3 m centers. The cladding expresses the tube, as well as the sharp-edged characteristics of steel with "flanges" to enhance its expression. It goes without saying that I carefully studied the Seagram Building (figure 10) and the Toronto-Dominion Center towers when the SK Building assignment was handed to us. The choice of the tubular frame concept as opposed to the rigid frame, and adoption of the 3 m module in the SK project, in contrast to the half-as-wide modules in either the Seagram or Toronto, led to a markedly different proportion of the cladding, and the overall architecture.

I wish to conclude my paper by examining the theme of the paper in relation to the 13th International **docomomo** Conference theme, *Expansion and Conflict*. To be sure, it is a significant measure of "expansion" to build some important structures inspired by Mies van der Rohe at a turning point in the development of modern architecture in Korea. As new designs by "Mies's student" were built one by one, and became part of the Seoul cityscape, the buildings were met with honor awards, and attracted friendly press[4].

My graduate seminars at Seoul National University for a decade have also helped me to illuminate in plain words the philosophy and architecture of Mies van der Rohe to a younger generation of future architects and academics. For some of my realized projects, the construction industry provided a hitherto unavailable capability by developing new finish materials, or upgrading its technological knowhow, thereby "expanding" the horizon of modern architecture in Korea. It should be noted, however, that it was not smooth sailing throughout either. It entailed an abundance of "conflict", not so much on any ideological grounds, but due to the gap between what was available locally and what was possible elsewhere in terms of materials and construction technique. Even today, many tasks that required resolution of "conflicts" remain unresolved.

It was inevitable, a matter of course in a historical context, that the legacy of Mies van der Rohe should be introduced to the Korean architectural profession. It was a privilege to have played a part in personally illuminating his philosophy. The influence of Mies's legacy on contemporary Korean architecture would never be easy to quantify. While I do not believe that it could be measured in terms of form, it is my hope that the architectural profession and construction industry have matured over the decades to embrace the principles the Master had set forth, in tune with a renewed interest and reappraisal of the legacy of Mies van der Rohe worldwide. ■

Notes

1 Mies van der Rohe: "6 Students Talk with Mies", *Master Builder*, School of Design, North Carolina State College, Vol. 2, No. 3, Spring 1952.
2 "Architecture and Tradition: Viewpoint U.S.A.", *Space*, May 1975.
3 *Nikkei Architecture*, July 1985.
4 "Kimm Jong Soung and Evolution of Modernism", *Space*, June 1985.

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(b. 1935, Seoul, South Korea). Studied at Seoul National University and IIT in Chicago. Kimm has worked for Mies van der Rohe during the 1960's, taught at IIT 1966–78. He established SAC International, Architects in Seoul in 1978. Kimm has been a speaker or panelist at UIA Congresses in Montreal, 1990 and Tokyo, 2011; the Getty Research Institute for the History of Art & Humanities, 1998; the CTBUH congresses in Melbourne, 2001 and in Seoul, 2011. Kimm was the jury president for the Grand Egyptian Museum competition in 2002–03, and the Museum of Polish History in Warsaw in 2010.