

A premature but significant birth: The beginning of Korean Pavilion at the Venice Biennale and its aftermath

Hyunah Lee

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Andres Lepik

Technical University of Munich

Department of Architecture

History of Architecture and Curatorial Practice

Abstract

Korean Pavilion is the last national pavilion at Giardini della Biennale in Venice, completed in 1995. This paper explores the unknown history of the pavilion that appeared in the 'year of art' of South Korea and the centennial anniversary of the Venice Biennale under the legitimated idealistic name of "Korean" Pavilion. It investigates the politics of the pavilion's beginning and argues its significance as a premature but the earliest platform of Korean architecture. Also, it observes developing discourse on architecture exhibition and its archive in contemporary Korean architecture reflected in the Korean Pavilion in the last decade. As a result, the paper discusses the pavilion's ironic contrast oscillating its start made in the politics of national pavilion at the Venice Biennale and its transformation being the oldest and representative architectural platform for Korean architecture.

Research Aims

- Discover the unknown history of the Korean Pavilion's birth
- Assess and compare the effect and the role of the pavilion in the past and present
- Understand the Korean Pavilion's importance in the history of Contemporary Korean architecture and its exhibition

Research Questions and Methods

- How could Korean Pavilion become the last national pavilion at the Giardini?, What were the motivations that drove the Korean Pavilion project?, What was the role of the Pavilion for Korean architecture back in 1996 and today?, What has been the aftermath of Korean Pavilion's birth?
- Case study on the official catalogs, publications and journal reviews + archival research from National Archives, Korea and The Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts, Venice

The Birth of the Korean Pavilion

The start of Korean Pavilion Project

- South Korea applied for a new pavilion since 1986 but was rejected many times.
- In 1993, Korean born video artist Nam June Paik won a Golden Lion Award at the German Pavilion at the Venice Art Biennale.
- The urgency of having Korea's own pavilion was re-highlighted and the South Korean Ministry of Culture officially took the project.

Korean Pavilion, symbolically built in 1995

- Due to the high competition for the narrow opportunity at the Giardini, the new pavilion required political legitimacy.
- South Korean government appealed the Korean Pavilion's timely appropriateness for the centennial anniversary of the Venice Biennale upcoming 1995.
- "It is unfortunate... At the Venice Biennial only the Japanese Pavilion represents Asia. As one of the major Asian countries, Korea should also be represented. This would support the theme of the 100th Venice Biennial 'Balancing the Culture of East, West, South and North.'" – A letter sent to the mayor of Venice, 1993
- South Korean Ministry of Culture declared the year 1995 as 'year of art' gave the project the utmost importance in Korea.

The "Korean" Pavilion

- The new pavilion promoted by South Korean government named not 'South Korean' Pavilion, but 'Korean' Pavilion on the hope for the two Korea's reunification.
- The name brought the pavilion another legitimacy for its erection, but the idea of reunification or the joint exhibition has never been realized.
- However, the 2014's exhibition which won the first Golden Lion Award at the Korean Pavilion displayed exhibition on both Korea's architecture successfully.



Korean Pavilion, 1996
Guide to the Pavilions of the Venice Biennale since 1887



Architecture Exhibition at the Korean Pavilion, 1996
Architect Magazine(Korea)



Architecture Exhibition at the Korean Pavilion, 2014
SPACE Magazine(Korea)

Korean Pavilion for Architecture Exhibition

A premature platform for architecture at the beginning

- The pavilion's birth enabled Korean architecture's first participation at the Venice architecture Biennale.
- Yet, Korean architecture still lacked discourse on architecture exhibition at that time.
- The first architecture exhibition at the Korean Pavilion in 1996 showed a simple display of two competition projects.

Grow of Korean architecture exhibition from mid 2000s

- Discourse on architecture archive and museum arose since mid 2000s in Korea.
- Within museums, Korean architecture exhibition exponentially proliferated in 2010s.
- The award-winning exhibition at the Korean Pavilion 2014 also made the apical point in the recent history of contemporary Korean architecture's exhibition.

Korean Pavilion transformed to significant platform

- In 2018, the Korean Pavilion held an architecture exhibition using the pavilion itself as an archival space.
- With development of contemporary Korean architecture's discussion and interest on architecture archive and exhibition, the Korean Pavilion also gained its internal significance.

Conclusion

The Korean Pavilion, the last national pavilion at the Giardini, Venice, was built first on political ambition from South Korea and Venice. As its outset wasn't purely from motivation on art and architecture per se, the pavilion was not ready for its architecture exhibition at the beginning. However, within domestic growth on architecture exhibition, the pavilion recently gained its importance. The trajectory of the Korean Pavilion resulted from its political birth bears its premature start but also signifies the involvement of Korean architecture and its exhibition discourse. In this context, the beginning of the Korean Pavilion that was initiated from the peripheral ambitions brought Korean architecture an accidental yet significant opportunity for having its first permanent standing architectural platform as the aftermath.