

Experiencing the Soul of Seoul – Inspirational Museums as Symbols of a Rapidly Changing South Korea



Author Junko Iwabuchi

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Unexpected Invitation from the National Museum of Korea

One afternoon in mid-April this year, I noticed a message with Korean Hangul characters that looked rather suspicious in my e-mail inbox. I hesitated whether to open it and check, or delete it as trash, because normally I just delete everything when I see something unfamiliar in a message from abroad. Then my assistant told me that someone from the National Museum of Korea had tried to get in touch with me earlier by phone while I was out for a cup of coffee. Convinced then that I seemed to have a legitimate reason to receive a message from Korea, I opened the message and found it was an invitation to speak as a guest lecturer at the National Museum of Korea in Seoul on “International Museum Day”, which was set on May 18 this year.

International Museum Day is designated by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), a cultural organization under the auspices of UNESCO, to celebrate the purpose of museums in society in our time. The objective of this day is to raise awareness that “Museums are an important means of cultural exchange, enrichment of cultures and development of mutual understanding, cooperation and peace among peoples.” The celebration seemed to go on for a whole week in many museums in Seoul, but ICOM Korea was to sponsor a conference with speakers invited from all over the world, with “Hyperconnected museums: New approaches, new publics” as the topic set for this year. The invitation was sent by Dr. Bae Kidong, the director general of the National Museum of Korea, in conjunction with ICOM Korea and the Korean Museum Association. I was thrilled to accept this invitation and immediately sent a message saying that I was more than happy to go to Seoul and speak at the conference.

I actually felt relieved to find the name of Dr. Bae as I had fond memories of him from one conference that I organized while I was tenured at Keio University in Tokyo nearly 10 years ago. He was professor of archeology at Hanyang University in Seoul at that time and I was very much involved in research in the area of so-called digital humanities at Keio University, conducting collaborative experiments in digital methodology with museums both locally and internationally. I was slightly puzzled at first about what to say at the conference, but after we started talking about the theme of the conference I began to understand why Dr. Bae and the organizers had thought of me as a speaker. After three days of exchanging

ideas, I made a proposal to give a presentation titled: “Planning a Museum on Mars: Year 2050 — Imagine the World Beyond *Ready Player One*”. I will talk about that presentation later, but first I would like to describe the amazing new architecture, museums and young academics working at cultural organizations in Seoul.

Beautiful Museums & Inspirational Young Koreans

Within a week or so, I received the itinerary for my visit to Seoul and learned that the speakers were to take a tour of four different museums as part of the organizers’ hospitality program on the day before the conference. After a short flight from Haneda airport in Tokyo, I arrived at Gimpo airport in Seoul on May 16 in the early evening and was greeted by Yeakoo Lee, a youthful staffer working for ICOM Korea. She seemed very professional and extremely fluent in English, but in the car that she was driving to take me to the hotel she suddenly started speaking in Japanese to my surprise. It turned out that she studied art in the United Kingdom, but had lived in Kyoto for a few years when her husband was living there on a business assignment. She was much younger, but we shared the same interest in food and culture in Kyoto and we kept a lively conversation going until we finally arrived at my accommodation. The organizers booked us into Novotel Suites, a stylish hotel in a newly completed hotel complex in Dragon City, Yongsan-gu district. The view from my room on a high floor was spectacular, but I could tell that the immediate surrounding area is still under development.

Next morning, Ms. Lee came to pick us up at 9:30 a.m. with a young intern, Hyeji Kim, who turned out to be an aspiring novelist. I met with my colleague from Osaka and we were both introduced to the keynote speaker from Cleveland Museum, Jane Alexander, who is the chief information officer of their digital program. We were all taken into a van and the driver started our journey towards the first museum on the itinerary, the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (MMCA). There are three branches of the MMCA and the facility we visited on this occasion is the newest one opened in November 2013 in the north of Seoul and very close to the historical palace of Gyeongbokgung, the largest of the Five Grand Palaces built by the Joseon dynasty. Part of the architectural frame of the museum was borrowed from the former military hospital during the Japanese occupation (1910-1945), but the superb renovation and new additions have created a beautiful atrium full of light. In the enormous three-story building, with one underground floor, there are



Photo: Author

Digital Archive, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea

seven exhibition galleries, an auditorium, library, digital library, shops and restaurants. They organize temporary exhibitions with various themes at this museum frequented by young people, but since we were given only one hour to stroll around, we had to run through large-scale installations of works by artists from all over the world, including a few Japanese. Since this was “International Museum Week”, admission was free and we ran into a lot of young people even though it was Thursday. We were able to tell already how seriously Koreans consider modern and contemporary art by watching people reacting to the exhibitions.

After the MMCA, we were taken for a lunch of traditional Korean food and then headed out to the Korea Furniture Museum in a hilly area of luxurious homes that are only familiar in contemporary K-drama. Several traditional aristocratic houses were relocated here to create the museum and the collection contains close to 2,500 pieces of valuable wooden furniture. We were given a tour in English — otherwise it would be too difficult to figure out the stories behind each item. Unfortunately, we weren’t allowed to take photographs inside this museum, but what surprised me most is that many of the items of furniture for the wealthy class looked very minimalist and modern.

Our next stop was the world famous Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art. I was very much looking forward to visiting this museum because Samsung is a well-known corporate sponsor of various exhibitions. I noticed digital numbers buried in the floor, an iconic piece by Japanese contemporary artist Tatsuo Miyajima, as we walked towards the entrance, and then once inside we were greeted



Photo: Takushi Tani

Entrance to the Furniture Museum

by another major piece by Japanese artist Kohei Nawa. This museum consists of three large buildings. Building 1, designed by Swiss architect Mario Botta, houses traditional Korean art; Building 2, designed by French architect Jean Nouvel, houses the collection of contemporary art; and the Samsung Child Education & Culture Center is an annex designed by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas. Each building is impressive as a piece of art by itself, but I was overwhelmed by the superb collection of historical porcelain in Building 1. I had thought the Leeum, Samsung Museum was all contemporary art, but the collection of traditional Korean art was vast and truly impressive. The audio-visual museum guide was beautifully compiled on a smartphone-like device and quite useful too. There was an attractive museum shop and the inviting smell of coffee filled the lobby, but we had to run once again to go on to the next museum.

The last stop on our itinerary was the Amorepacific Museum of Art (APMA), which is a corporate museum recently opened near Sinyongsan Station by a cosmetics giant, Amorepacific. The company’s headquarters were completed last year in November and the museum celebrated its opening in May with a major retrospective exhibition of works by Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. It was an amazing large-scale installation of interactive media art and I was impressed by the serious commitment of the sponsoring company. Then one of the young curators came up to speak to me, and to my happy surprise I learned that she had been one of my students in an art management course at Keio University nearly 10 years ago. I was extremely exhausted after visiting four

Photo: Author



Exterior of the Leeum

museums in one day and ready to collapse by that time, but Eunho Park was fluent both in English and Japanese, so I enjoyed the privilege of speaking in Japanese with her for a while.

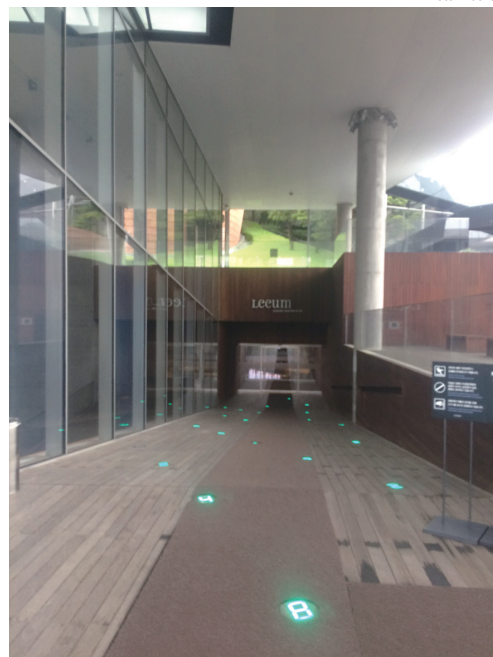
I was delighted to see a former student working as a young professional in such a good museum environment, but at all the museums I visited that day I had good conversations with young professionals, particularly women, including our escorts, Ms. Lee and Ms. Kim from ICOM Korea. I couldn't help wishing them well in their future careers, since in Japan I understand that museum positions are very limited and young people have been struggling to find any position at all. It was such an insightful day of learning about Korean museums and I felt happy and envious that they could afford to hire a large number of young professionals.

A Museum on Mars in 2050

So the next day, I attended the conference "Hyperconnected museums: New approaches, new publics" at the National Museum of Korea and gave my presentation "Planning a Museum on Mars: Year 2050". What follows is an extract from it.

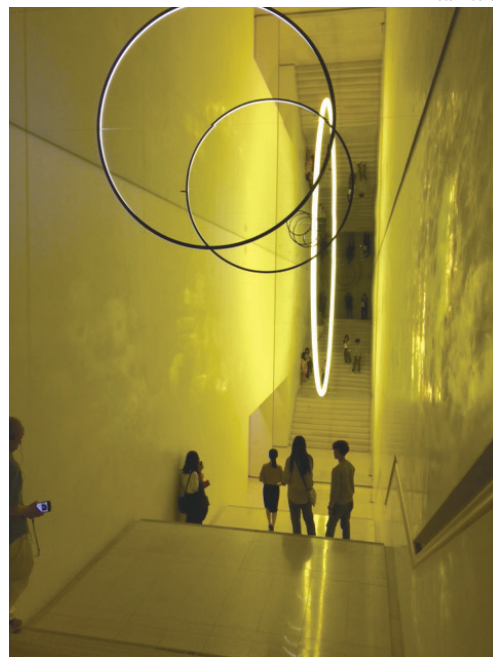
As crazy as it may sound, we are approaching an era in which we envision Mars as some kind of an experimental lab far away from home, with aspiring scientists conducting research; and then, a few decades from now, it will also become an attractive tourist destination. In fact, many scientists are already talking about manned flights to the Red Planet within 15 to 20 years from now, and maybe

Photo: Author



Tatsuo Miyajima's piece at the entrance to the Leeum

Photo: Author



"Gravity stairs" by Olafur Eliasson at the Leeum

another 20 years after that there will be regularly scheduled commercial flights for those men and women who are interested in taking a trip to Mars as a holiday destination. If so, it is difficult for me to imagine such a tourist destination, or even just a place for researchers to live, without any kind of facilities for intellectual entertainment, such as a museum.

About 10 years ago, with the introduction of equipment like pod-casting devices and smartphones, combined with fast connections to the Internet, we were awfully excited to see the capability of museums growing bigger in providing more and more information on their collections as part of the newer approach of out-reach programs for visitors. This was way before the exchanges between audiences through SNS and YouTube became so popular, but already many curators and museum educators came to notice the importance of communication with and among different groups. We realized then that new technologies help promote what museums have been always trying to achieve: to maximize the accessibility of visitors to the collections in an educational context.

During my tenure at Keio University in Tokyo, I tried designing various pod-casting programs and digital exhibitions online through collaborative experiments with museums. My mission at that time was to cater to the betterment of life for individuals with restricted mobility, for those in hospitals. I was particularly thinking of young children who have problems with their immune system and are not allowed to have contact with the world outside hospitals, and elderly people, or adults with the inability to drive or who are unable to take public transportation by themselves.

My idea at that time was to deliver museum content in a lively form for those who cannot physically go to a museum. I was determined to do something more than just putting up static images of museum buildings, galleries and collections on the web, or letting people outside use the audio tour equipment without actually seeing the objects. We had to find something to bridge these two. So naturally, we came to the conclusion that we should design something with video casting and developed a platform called the "VOLUMEONE". The idea was pretty much like YouTube with the specific use for museums and educational institutions that work in collaboration with hospitals and facilities for the elderly. But this was before 2010 and these experimental services were quite costly to implement, and we were only able to design a demo piece with a lot of technological restrictions.

But we are now living in 2018 and Internet speeds are much faster, and at most museums around the world, information on each collected object is already digitized with images and rich content. We can now deliver information on museum content in 3D with VR/AR

Photo: Takushi Tani



Entrance to the APMA

and holographic technology. We could soon invite our audience to communicate with SNS enhanced with these technologies as well.

There is a research facility in Utah called the Mars Desert Research Station (MDRS) owned and operated by the Mars Society, which is a space analog facility that supports Earth-based research in pursuit of the technology, operations, and science required for human space exploration.

My desire now is to start experimenting with the MDRS to explore the possibility of recreating an existing museum in duplication by using 3D printing, AI and holographic technologies because, even for museums, space exploration is not something we should avoid thinking about. We will be responsible for creating a decent museum for children who grow up on Mars very soon.

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