

Comparison of The Role of Nature In Urban Environment As A Symbol between Korea And America

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I. Introduction

As the urbanization trends continue, the yearning for the nature in urban environment is increasingly demanding. This kind of trend is affirmed by Lewis Mumford's argument that, in the cities of the future, ribbons of green must run through every quarter, forming a continuous web of garden and mall, widening at the edge of the city into the protective greenbelts, so that landscape and garden will not be rural monopolies but will likewise be an integral part of urban life.⁽¹⁾ It is revealed that the local scenery, that is nature and garden, is one of considering factors in evaluating places in terms of their residential desirability.⁽²⁾

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(1) Lewis Mumford, "The Social Function of Open Spaces", *Landscape*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Winter 1960-61, p. 6.

(2) The amount and type of information, climate, local scenery, cultural and linguistic variety, quality of the local school and accessibility are among the factors to decide the residential desirability. Peter Gould & Rodney White, *Mental Maps*, Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1974, pp. 19-21.

Most environmental actions, whether they be the construction of a fence, the pruning of a tree, the building of a new city, or cutting of a forest, are overtly instrumental, intended to provide shelter, comfort, access, economic returns of pleasure, but they also have a symbolic dimension.⁽³⁾

Generally, gardens mirror certain cosmic values and environmental attitudes and also public open spaces reflect the common values and attitudes of the society. The best use of nature in urban environment can be attained by ascertaining and analyzing the every attributes of the role of nature including social and symbolic functions.

This study, based on the assumption that there are many distinctive differences in the environmental perception between different countries and that diverse environmental actions originate from the different cultural background and environmental perception, will deal with the comparison of role of the nature in urban environment between Korea and America in terms of environmental perception and symbolic meaning of nature. Special emphasis will be placed on the geomantic environmental perception of nature in Korea and comparison of garden between Korea and America.

II. Geomantic Environmental Perception of Nature in Korea

It is interesting that Koreans' perception of nature differs significantly from that of Americans. Regional natural landscapes, especially landforms and watercourses have often been perceived by Koreans as a system of animate or inanimate objects. This attitude has come about, at least to some extent, because of the influence of geomancy.

According to local legends and historical documents, there were a considerable number of changes made in house forms and road patterns in order to accommodate geomantic characteristics of the land. We find in the historical documents many examples of the closing of a road or the moving of someone's house to improve the geomantic quality of the city of Seoul. Auspicious sites are usually surrounded by auspicious mountains or hills, which was usually prohibited from building houses or construction of roads. The geomancy has influenced greatly in the selection process of the location of house site and road, direction of house, any kind of change in shape and form of mountain and stream, and grave location, and also still remains as a consideration factor in the decision

(3) Donald Appleyard, "Environment As Symbolic Action", IDS 230 handout paper, U.C. Berkeley, 1976, p. 1.

process of house and grave selection in Korea.

Historical documents have revealed the evidence that the selection of Seoul as the capital city of Korea in 1394 was based on the geomancy and the design of emperor's palace was influenced by the geomancy. Almost all administrative cities of Korea built before 1910 have their main offices, such as the royal palace and the local government offices located in the most auspicious area of the town. These cities are located where all the necessary geomantic objects are found, while most cities in the United States owe their morphology to the convenience of the survey grid and to the economics of growth along lines of transportation.⁽⁴⁾

There are still many professional and amateur geomancers who supply the consulting service on the matter of house location and direction, and the location of grave in Korea. But the influence of geomancy has decreased in the decision process and some people don't believe the geomancy by accusing it of Shamanism.

1. Geomancy on House

The basic question in house geomancy is: How can one locate an auspicious house site and dwell there in harmony with the natural and cultural environment and thus extract benefit from the location? In order to attain auspiciousness, the following five aspects have been most important in house geomancy:

- a. Selecting a favorable house location
- b. Choosing the direction a house should face
- c. Determining the spatial organization or form of a house
- d. Completing a surrounding fence
- e. Deciding what kind of person should live there

In examining a site, six geomantic aspects are especially important such as:

- a. The mouth of a watercourse
- b. The feature of the field
- c. The forms of mountains
- d. The color of the soil
- e. The availability of water flow
- f. The facing mountain and water

Based on the sitting and facing directions, all houses are divided into two groups: Eastern Four Houses and Western Four Houses.

According to the Huang-ti Tse-ching which may be the oldest Chinese textbook on house geomancy, there are five deficiencies and five fulfilling factors in the art.⁽⁵⁾ The five deficiencies are (1) having a big house for few dwellers (2) having a big main gate for a small house (3) having an uncompleted house fence (4) having no appropriate place for a well (5) having a small house with a big garden on a large site. The five fulfilling factors are (1) a small house for many dwellers (2) a small main gate for a big house (3) a completed house fence (4) the six kinds of animals for a small house (5) a water flow in the direction of Southeast.

The book states that if a man lives in a house having any one or more of the above five characteristics, he will enjoy wealth and honor. The principles recommend full or maximum utilization of a site; thus they encourage crowding.

The geomantic principle concerning the completion of a house fence may be the key element in understanding the nature and function of Korean house fences. Traditionally, cities in Korea have city walls, the palaces have palace walls, the government offices have office walls, while almost all private houses, whether the mansions of the wealthy or the thatched cottages of the poor, have fences. The Korean's habit of completely surrounding the homes with a fence has a long history which may have originated in the art of geomancy. A house fence can be considered as an imitation of an auspicious land encircled by mountains in three directions. The fence can be a reduced, small scale, and artificial Azure Dragon and White Tiger with the Main Mountain. In order to keep auspicious vital energy inside the house, it was necessary to prepare a surrounding fence with an open entrance, as taught by the principle of house geomancy. Although fences in cities are presently used for the prevention of theft, originally they had a more symbolic and geomantic significance.

Geomancers say that every man is assigned to any one of the eight trigrams, according to his birth year. The art requires not only harmony between the house structure and its environment but also between the house and its inhabitants.⁽⁶⁾

2. Geomancy concerning Vegetation

Many examples of the symbolic trees which have related the symbols of trees with the

(4) Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974, p. 198.

(5) Anon., Huang-ti Tse-ching, p. 3 5th case vol. 49 of *Chung-wen Shu-chu Hwei-ke Shu*, 1877.

(6) Hong-Key Yoon, *Geomantic Relationships between Culture and Nature in Korea*, Ph. D thesis in Geography, U.C. Berkeley, 1976, pp. 84—87.

special meanings can be found in the history. Few were the plants in ancient Greece that had no symbolic meaning or associations with god or hero. Greek symbols survive today in the associations of the laurel with victory, the olive branch with peace, the pomegranate with fertility, and the rose with love.⁽⁷⁾

According to another principles, a mountain poorly covered with vegetation cannot be an auspicious mountain in geomancy no matter how well shaped it is. To a geomancer, the quality and quantity of vegetation in an area are important criteria in determining the quality of a mountain; a mountain with thick vegetation is auspicious since the land has enough vital energy to support it. Geomancy has played a significant role in saving vegetation on the mountains because mountains surrounding cities were very important for the geomantic harmony of the area; if the mountains were denuded, the harmony would be broken, and the auspiciousness of the area would no longer be available to the city. People were very enthusiastic in conserving vegetation in auspicious places where cities and tombs were established. It is possible that geomancers advised the people to reinforce the growth of vegetation in certain areas in order to make them more auspicious. Such an area then became, in part, an artificially formed auspicious mountain. Geomancy has also had a significant impact on vegetation by encouraging the planting of a certain kind of tree in particular locations in order to either form or destroy the geomantic harmony of the area.

Another aspect of the impact of geomancy on vegetation is seen in the selection of plants for the house yard. According to the principles of house geomancy, a certain kind of plant can only be planted in a certain quarter of the house site in order to make the geomantic harmony viable. The following is a summary of the discussion on house plants:⁽⁸⁾

* *Date tree or jujubi*

Planting jujubi trees to the west of the house will be beneficial to cattle. Planting it in the southwestern corner or in the south is good. Planting two jujubi trees in front of the great gate is also auspicious.

* *Weeping willows*

If planted to the east of the house, it would make cattle and the household

(7) Margaret Fairbanks Marcus, *Period Flower Arrangement*, New York, M. Barrows & Co., Inc., 1952, p. 33.

(8) Manson Hong, *Sanrim Kyongje*, Handwritten manuscript, pp. 23-24.

prosperous. It is forbidden to plant a weeping willow at the gate or west of the house.

* *Elm tree*

If planted in the back of the house, it was considered suitable.

* *Peach tree*

It is especially forbidden to plant peach trees around water wells.

* *Plum tree*

It is suitable to the east of the house but forbidden to the west, south, and north of the house.

* *Ginkgo tree*

It is forbidden to plant ginkgo trees in the east-southeast, but planting them to the north of the house is suitable.

* *Paulownia tree*

Planting three groves in the west-northwest and north-northwest would cause abundance of slaves, but it is forbidden to plant such trees in the north.

* *Lacquer tree*

It is suitable for planting on inauspicious land that is fated to harm one.

* *Leguminous tree*

Planting three groves of the tree at the middle gate can guarantee wealth and respect for generations. It is said that planting the tree in front of the house can bring much auspiciousness. And also planting it in the west-southwest direction can be auspicious for avoiding robberies.

* *The large yellow plum tree*

It is suitable for the north of the house.

* *Mulberry tree*

It is suitable for the east-southeast direction, but one should never plant it within the house fence.

* *Mountain mulberry*

It is suitable for the west.

* *Chinese plum tree*

It is suitable for the south.

* *Rose of Sharon*

It is forbidden to plant it within the house boundary.

* *Pomegranate*

Planting it in the front garden of the house will insure the birth of a good son.

* *Chinese Hazel*

It is suitable for the north.

Some plants were chosen for certain loctions in order to suppress inauspiciousness, while others were planted to extract the benefits of an auspicious direction or location. According to house geomancy principles, plants can also compensate or substitute for the lack of auspicious geomantic landforms, such as the White Tiger or Azure Dragon in a house site.

III. Comparison of Garden between Korea and America

A garden is a metaphysical symbol of man and nature. Although gardens at different times have been used for diverse purposes—production of fruits and vegetables, retreats from hot, crowded cities, places of public assembly and entertainment—their highest purpose has always been to make manifest a physical symbol of a particular view of nature. In ancient China, the garden was a cosmological symbol of the universe, providing for visitors an aid to contemplation for obtaining unity with the Tao, a force of life. This concept of man within nature finds its sharpest contrast in the works of Andre le Notre, where rigid geometry of canals, clipped hedges and parterres represent the supreme attempt of man to assert mastery over nature by imposing on it an alien order.⁽⁹⁾ As we see in the history, there are still several differences in the perception and use of garden which is the most intimate nature to the people between countries.

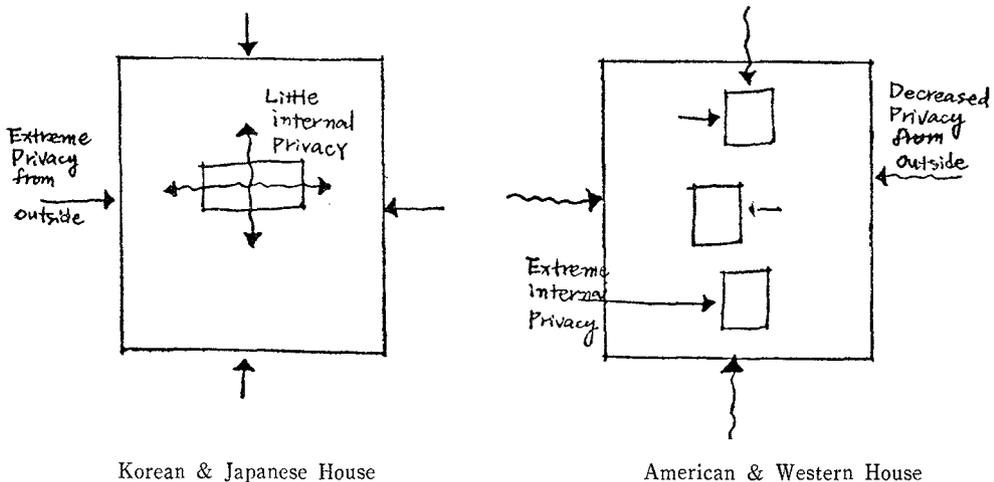
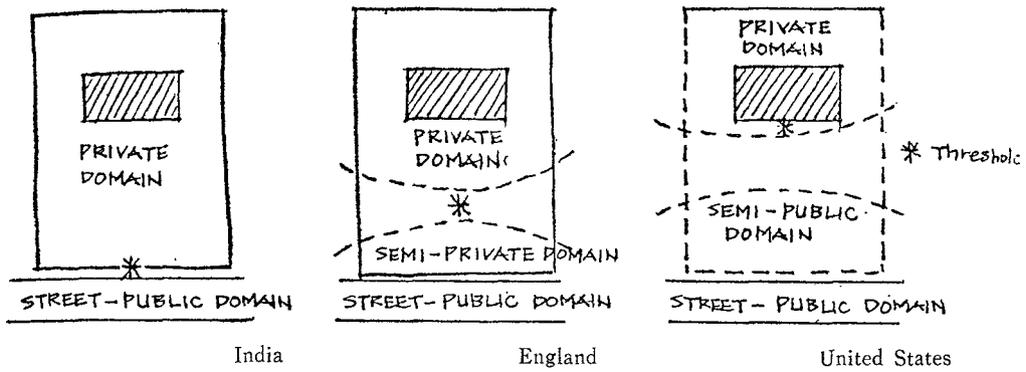
1. Territory and Threshold

We are all familiar with the phenomenon of territoriality, though we may not recognize it by that name. It is the name given by naturalists and anthropologists to a tendency on the part of organisms to establish boundaries outside their physical confines, to lay claim to the space or territory within these boundaries and to defend it against outsiders. The pattern of territoriality is an important characteristic of any environment. There are four different types of territorial occupancy such as (1) personal

(9) David Streatfield, "Standards for Historic Garden Preservation and Restoration", *Landscape Architecture*, Vol. 59, No. 3, April 1969 p. 198.

occupancy (2) community occupancy (3) occupancy by society (4) free occupancy. Personal occupancies are likely to reflect most closely the identity of the occupant—his tastes, standards, values, affiliations.⁽¹⁰⁾

The territory of private garden surrounding house is very clear and definite in Korea while American garden or yard doesn't have concrete territory, and is mixed with the street territory. In America the threshold of home begins from the entrance of building in contrast with the threshold of house in Korea is located at the entrance of fenced house. This kind of difference has already been discovered among India, England and America as shown the following diagram.⁽¹¹⁾



The territory definition and the location of threshold of the house are closely related

(10) Sidney N. Brower, "The Signs We Learn to Read," *Landscape*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Autumn, 1965, pp. 9-11.

(11) Amos Rapoport, *House Form and Culture*, Englewood Cliffs., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969, p. 80.

with the privacy of the house. The Korean privacy realms in the house is extremely kept from the outside and little internal privacy is permitted inside the house, similar in Japan while the decreased privacy from the outside and extreme internal privacy are the characteristics of American house as shown in following diagram.⁽¹²⁾

The differences in territory and privacy are caused by the presence of high fence or a blank facade of walls and further it can be traced back to the linkage with the geomancy. Recently, the increasing trend of vegetable garden in America makes another kind of domain inside the garden or yard by establishing the fence around the vegetable garden to protect the vegetable from the dog or other animal's intrusion.

The private garden has great importance in the private house in view of the fact that it provides the manageable territory for the resident to build one's self-image comparing to the apartment building. The high-rise apartment building is rejected by most Americans as a family home as well as Korean because it gives one no territory on the ground, violates the archaic image of what a house is, and is perceived unconsciously as a threat to one's self-image as a separate and unique personality.⁽¹³⁾

2. Shape and Size of Garden

Generally speaking, the size of garden is bigger in America than in Korea because of the difference in land use intensity arising from the different size of country.⁽¹⁴⁾ The shape of garden is also more rigid and rectangular in America while the more flexible and curvilinear shape is typical pattern of garden in Korea. The mania for bigness in America reached its peak at the turn of the century. And Americans still build as though bigger were always better. The prevailing grid-iron pattern with straight streets at right angles, also accentuate size and space.⁽¹⁵⁾

Traditional patterns in road layout and village configuration in Korea is typified as curvilinear, irregular and more natural form, which could be originated from the I-Thou

(12) *Ibid.* p. 63.

(13) Clare Cooper, "The House as Symbol of the Self", Jon Lang, Charles Burnette, Walter Moleski and David Vachon (ed.) *Designing for Human Behavior*, Dowden, Hutchinson & Ross, Inc., 1974, p. 134.

(14) The densest in America are the metropolitan areas along the Boston—New York—Washington axis; the 150 counties that make up this Atlantic urban region contain 67,690 square miles and 43 million people. If this region was developed to the same average density as the western Netherlands, the number of people would be tripled. William H. Whyte, *The Last Landscape*, Garden City, Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1968, pp. 9—11.

(15) David Lowenthal, "The American Scene", *The Geographical Review*, Vol. 58, No. 1, Jan. 1968, p. 66.

relation attitude based on geomancy.

In Berkeley, United States, I find that the size of garden is one of the primary cues for distinguishing income class level. The size of garden is much bigger in high income community than in low income community. And also the varieties in the garden in terms of color, vegetation type and shape of garden can be one of the cues for differentiating the class level. There are more varieties in the high income class garden than that of low income class.

3. Vegetation Type

High use of lawn and ground cover is the distinguishable characteristics of American garden in comparison with Korean garden. High maintenance cost and picturesque landscape taste of Korean people can be described as one of reasons why the lawn and ground cover are not so popular in Korean garden. Conifer trees are more widely used for the private garden and dominate the Korean landscape with sculpturesque mountainous area. In America, the deciduous trees constitute the major landscape pattern and are influential in garden design.. This phenomena in America is much similar to English landscape which is characterized as the deciduous landscape. Appropriate description for English landscape taste by David Lowenthal and Hugh C. Prince suggests several reasons of this deciduous landscape taste as following: "Deciduous trees please the English because they are delicately patterned, softly outlined, varied in form and color, scumbled in texture, seasonal in foliage, tolerant of undergrowth, and generally older than conifers. Conifers are considered gloomy, harsh and oppressive, partly because many of them are strictly commercial."⁽¹⁶⁾

In Korea, bamboo and pine trees are perceived as the symbol of longevity and were widely drawn as an emblem in Korean traditional landscape painting.

4. Use of Garden

Most of gardens in America can be classified as the participation type garden because people can get into the garden and enjoy various types of recreations at the garden. The garden is a part of living environment to be able to touch with and to be adapted to the living pattern. Simultaneously, it has also symbolic meanings as a symbolic expression of self toward the public. In high income community which is located in the

(16) David Lowenthal & Hugh C. Prince, "English Landscape Tastes", *The Geographical Review*, Vol. LV, No. 2, pp. 186—189.

highly visible sites, it seems that building is a part of garden and a part of natural wilderness. The increasing trend of vegetable garden can be also regarded as the demand for a typical participation type garden. The vegetable garden might be a symbolic garden arising from the longing for the wilderness and the distant environment.⁽¹⁷⁾

The oriental garden was not conceived as a place in which to take exercise; it was designed as a series of set scenes, one succeeding the other as on a landscape scroll.⁽¹⁸⁾ In contrast with American garden, Korean garden is a type of more aesthetic garden to be able to enjoy the beauty of garden at a distance. Generally, the garden is a type of the sacred place not to be intruded in. It is a tradition that garden is always kept the people off. Therefore, the garden in Korea is more beautified, elaborated and artificial than the garden in America.

The frontyard and entrance are key areas for self-expression in America but it is not true in Korea because the frontyard and entrance are absolutely protected and screened from the street and public domain by the high fence. In America, it is easy to distinguish the high income community or house from those of low income community by judging from the aesthetic quality and cleanness of the entrance and frontyard of the house. Interestingly enough, we can occasionally see the nice Cadillac or Benz car in front of junked and ugly house in the black community. This represents that some of black people are more concerned about the car rather than the house as a symbol or expression of themselves.

(17) I had an interview with the person who is a member of community garden project at People's Park in Berkeley, U.S.A. He suggested several reasons why the members like the wild garden which is far from the artificially designed gardens as following:

1. It is easy to grow and maintain the garden. It doesn't require any kind of careful maintenance and design.
2. He argues that several thousand years ago, human beings ate wild flowers, wild herbs or weeds as a food. He is longing for the wild and primitive life which might have been happened several thousand years ago. He can also remind the childhood age from the wild garden.
3. He is enjoying to look at and investigate the growth of plants

(18) Derek Clifford, *A History of Garden Design*, London, Faber and Faber, 1962, p. 114.

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