

**Hong Kong Arts Development Council
International Arts Leadership Roundtable 2016**

Plenary 2: The Change of Arts Spaces

**Full transcript of the speech by
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I would like to talk about the change in arts spaces in Korea from the angle of concentration, decentralisation, and expansion of arts spaces. How can we develop sustainable arts spaces in future? In the case of Korea, arts and cultural spaces were highly concentrated in Seoul by the 1990s. After the system of local autonomy was introduced in 1995, local governments have been building their cultural foundations, and now we have almost 52 regional cultural foundations such as the Seoul Foundation for Arts and Culture (SFAC) to support arts and culture. At the same time, the national government have invested in public arts facilities such as museums, art galleries, and performing arts centres throughout the country from the late 1990s to mid-2000s.

Twenty years have passed. It is now evident that an increase of facilities does not necessarily guarantee the growth of artists and creative activities in local communities. Arts facilities, suffered from a lack of suitable programmes, had failed to raise local artists. In the meantime, despite the fact that the Department of Arts, was being run by hundreds of local colleges most of their graduates ended up going to Seoul. In particular, performing artists flocked to the Daehak-ro district (the University Road, 대학로/ 大學路), a home for more than 250 theatre companies and 170 small and mid-sized theatre venues. Currently in Korea, more than 1,500 plays are presented annually, most of which are produced in the Daehak-ro.

Let me introduce Daehak-ro. It was the campus of Seoul National University, and it is also one of the most representative cultural areas in Seoul and in Korea. As a home of many arts agencies and venues, many shows of theatre, dance, and musicals are performed in the area every night. Following the official designation as a cultural district, the area has earned the reputation as a representative cultural street of the nation. The designation aims to make the neighbourhood as the hub of culture-related businesses. With stimuli such as financial incentives for operational costs, low-interest rates, and tax benefits, the district has witnessed a growth of small and medium-sized theatres. Yet, in the mid-2000s, we noticed the beginning of movement from Seoul, especially from Daehak-ro, among artists and arts companies.

I'd like to provide three different factors that could explain the movement: gentrification, active decentralization policy of government, and new regionalism among the artists.

Seoul has experienced a worsening of gentrification of cultural district, in particular Daehak-ro, an area where performing arts groups and facilities concentrated. It is also the favourite place of youth seeking romance, adventure and spirit of culture, and a highly commercial area. Corporate-owned franchise stores have been moving into the district, making the street the second most expensive real estate in Seoul. Far from the original intention of boosting performing arts, the main beneficiaries are landlords because they receive financial incentives by owning the buildings where theatres are housed. As rents are skyrocketing, small theatres have been replaced with pubs and karaoke lounges.

In response to this setback, the Arts Council of Korea (ARKO) tried to support performing arts by giving more spaces to artists. We implemented a “Rental Assistance Programme” and subsidised private theatres and dance companies up to 80% of the total venue rental, at most about USD 20,000 per production in other words. But the theatre owners raised the rental rate to the extent of our support accordingly, so the programme did not work as we expected. Subsequently, ARKO rented some entire theatre buildings in the district and re-rented them to performing arts companies at lower costs to encourage creative productions. However, it was very difficult to continue the programme due to complaints filed by local landlords. Although ARKO have achieved some success with these efforts, it was still insufficient to stop the rising rents in Daehak-ro. In fact, the profit from our programmes went to the landlords in many cases. The programme almost came to a halt.

ARKO, making every effort to protect arts companies from gentrification, developed active decentralization policy in the meantime. With the government’s support, ARKO took measures to promote the movement from Seoul to other regions with, for example, the increase of subsidies, arts-company residency programme, and the creation of funds and facilities such as small-sized museums and rehearsal venues, so as to facilitate the access of regional artists.

However, the deciding factor in the movement from Seoul to other regions seems to be the artists themselves. We noticed a kind of new regionalism among the artists in the 2010s. In the 1980s, some artists and companies moved out of the capital in search of low-rent studios. At that time, with the drop in population in rural areas, a lot of schools were closed. Visual artists and performing artists started to use abandoned school buildings as their studios, exhibition halls and theatres. However, their audience did not come from the local community but was brought to the region from Seoul. It was like a gathering of friends and acquaintances. They considered the local community to be uninterested in arts and therefore did not try to establish any relationships with them. When the artists used the local facilities, their approaches were very self-oriented. Their attempts turned out to be a failure in most cases, because they came across financial difficulties in running their programmes. Soon they returned to Seoul.

There was another factor that stimulated the relocation of artists: local governments’ initiatives. After the system of local autonomy was implemented, local governments have made every effort

to improve the quality of life and develop the local economy. In that context, they have been investing in arts and culture as a means to promote tourism in their regions. For example, some 70 museums dedicated to writers were opened in their home regions to commemorate them. Some regions organise and host local and international cultural festivals. As a result, various initiatives of local governments have aroused a lot of interests in arts among the communities, and also motivated artists and arts companies to relocate to the regions.

Let me introduce four good cases of artists' relocation and the transformation of cultural spaces in regions after the mid-1990s. Their approaches were quite different compared to the artists in the 1970s. In the 1990s, the artists strived to develop good relationship with the local communities.

The first example is the Street Theatre Troupe (연희단거리패). It had difficulties in finding rehearsal spaces because of rising rents in Daehak-ro. As a solution, they built the Miryang Theatre Village (밀양 연극촌) in a shut-down elementary school in Miryang. In the beginning, they only had an outdoor theatre named the “Forest Theatre” and a studio. Since then, they put up three more indoor theatre venues and various residence spaces for actors and guests surrounding the original school. In 2010, they constructed an outdoor venue called the “Castle Wall Theatre” with 1,500 seats.



(Photo: A venue in the Miryang Theatre Village)

The theatre design reminds us of an Italian outdoor theatre. The picture shows you how it looks like and the kind of performances they are doing. To our surprise, they built all of the facilities and venues on their own with the help of residents and volunteers.

The key to the success of the Miryang Theatre Village for more than fifteen years is their community-based programmes. Since its inception, the annual “Summer Performing Arts Festival in Miryang” has played a significant role as the cultural hub for the community. Along with performances in the festival, various cultural programme are provided, such as weekly theatre and education programmes for children in the local community.

The second example is the Potato Blossom Studio. It was initiated by an individual arts producer who received financial support from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism and local government when they built the Studio. The aim of the Studio is to provide cultural education for

local residents. Its regular programmes include Korea's traditional percussion music (Samulnori, 사물놀이), bands and brass ensemble classes, afterschool programmes, club activities and others. At every end of May, the Potato Blossom Village Festival is held for the locals. The Potato Blossom Studio also provides a venue for community festivals, summer camps, autumn sports competition, and Christmas events. To promote tourism and exchanges between villages and cities, its programmes focus on experiencing local culture such as farmers' music, traditional games and authentic local food. The Studio does not offer accommodation so as to avoid competing with local businesses.

The third example is the “Manjongri Daehak-ro Theatre”. They tried a different approach. The catchphrase of this theatre company is “farming in the daytime, playing theatre in the night time”. Their venue is the nation's first “greenhouse theatre” with 100 seats, and they use the greenhouse for growing herbs during the farming season. They have been trying to build a strong relationship with community members by running a theatre programme for local youths, offering complimentary tickets to local residents, and inviting them to after-parties. Also, they invite local residents to perform together as actors and launched a “Manjongri Daehak-ro Theatre Novel Reading” with a flexible schedule to encourage greater participation of the locals.

The fourth example is a case of visual arts. The Masan Art Centre was constructed in a shut-down school in a beautiful village of Masan for the sake of more nature-friendly spaces in the suburbs. It is a multicultural space with galleries, studios, pottery studios, sculpture parks, art book cafes and guest houses. In the remodelling stage, they collected opinions from local residents. The Centre invites local residents to every exhibition, concert, workshop, symposium, and some other first-hand experience programmes. Moreover, they take advantage of their residency programme for visual artists. They recommend artists-in-residency to offer free, private lessons to local students for six months as a way to contribute their professional skills. Local residents help artists from cities to farm in exchange for the free arts education.

Let me analyse the factors of success. First, I'd like to point out the “diverse use of places”. By using spaces for education and entertainment, they could draw more participation from local residents. Second, the range of stakeholders who operate the arts spaces have broadened from artists to arts event programmers, producers, and theatre companies. I think this diversity of people involved in the relocation and transformation gives inspiration to the change of arts spaces. Lastly, arts spaces have spread from mountain villages to the vicinity of larger cities, which is partially caused by gentrification.

Once the abandoned spaces, closed-down schools and factories become a cultural hub for local communities, artists, theatre companies, producers and curators in the region could get involved with the community by encouraging active participation of local residents. The best way to attract audience is staying relevant to the daily life of local residents.

Arts companies newly rooted in the regions are not only satisfied with finding new audiences for their artistic activities, they also want to become self-sufficient economically. Although currently they are supported partially by local government subsidies, in the long run, I believe, they will become completely self-sufficient. Why could I make such a bold statement? Because I see there is an enormous support for the artists from local communities, and there is also a strong interest in arts across the country. The people and local governments firmly believe that the development of arts and culture is critical to the socio-economic development in their localities. We talked a lot in the morning about the cultural ecology. I think, to cultivate a sustainable arts ecosystem, the development of arts space is crucial. By cultivating a mutually supportive relationship between artists and local residents, sustainable arts spaces could be constructed and expanded. Thank you.

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