



From left, Robert Fouser, Philippe Tirault and Peter Bartholomew. Shot by Dylan Goldby

THE HANOK DEFENDERS

WORDS BY ROBERT NEFF

Surprisingly, some of the most vocal advocates of preserving Korea's traditional buildings are not Koreans but foreigners living in Korean.

Seoul, which has been the capital of Korea since 1394, is an ancient city. It is also a vibrant city of constant change, and much of the old city has been lost through wars, disasters, arson, neglect and modernization. It is no longer a city of tens of thousands of small thatched and tiled *hanok* (traditional homes) surrounding magnificent palaces, but a city of towering apartments and office buildings that dwarf the regal remnants of Korea's past.

Palaces, gates, important personalities' homes and temples have been preserved while other landmarks, such as the city walls are being repaired or rebuilt. Even an entire stream (the Cheonggyecheon downtown) has been resurrected. But some people feel not enough is being saved; they argue that the hanok should also be preserved as part of Korea's heritage.

Up until the 1970s there were about 800,000 hanok in Seoul; today there are less than 5,000 and that number is rapidly decreasing. It may surprise many people to know that four of the most vocal and passionate advocates for the preservation of the hanok are long-term foreign residents. Peter Bartholomew, Robert Fouser, David Kilburn and Philippe Tirault all own hanok and have played a key role in raising awareness about the rapid disappearance of Seoul's hanok.

Understandably, their actions have been met with mixed responses. Bartholomew feels that his efforts have been taken seriously not only by government officials but by the general public as well. "The overwhelming reaction [has been] positive/supportive," declared Bartholomew.

Kilburn, on the other hand, insists that "officialdom sees these efforts simply as an annoyance by misguided foolish people" and that "there is no interest whatsoever in discussing or recognizing the issues raised." Kilburn's comments echo a comment made by a senior city official who declared that foreigners were too concerned with protecting old Korean buildings and should instead concentrate on the many modern improvements made in the city such as the efficient subway system, conference halls and, strangely enough, the fine French and Italian restaurants.

City officials are not the only ones perplexed and sometimes agitated by these hanok defenders' actions. Some of Kilburn's neighbors see him as a self-righteous interloper and Kilburn claims to have been physically assaulted a couple of years ago for his convictions. Despite the scorn that Kilburn and his wife have endured from some of their neighbors, others see them as heroes. Some have gone so far as to describe Kilburn as more Korean than native Koreans. "From time to time, ordinary Koreans stop me in the streets to thank me for my efforts, and to wish me well," relates Kilburn. "Some also travel from elsewhere in Korea and visit us to do the same."

Kilburn even made 50 videos of interviews he did with ordinary people asking them their views on whether or not the hanok should be preserved. "The people voted for preservation."



David Kilburn and his hanok
Shot by An Hyeong-jun



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WHY ARE SO MANY HANOK DISAPPEARING?

But with so many people voting for preservation, why are the hanok disappearing? Many associate the loss of Seoul's hanok with former President Park Chung-hee and his drive to modernize Korea. Bartholomew attributes it to "developing country syndrome" and feels that many "Koreans view old buildings as negative assets, wasting land and inappropriate for a country that is trying to develop into a modern nation."

But it isn't that simple. David Kilburn agrees that "Park Chung-hee's revulsion at thatched roofs played a part," but explains that more detrimental was "the need to house thousands of homeless people as quickly as possible" following the Korean War when so many buildings were severely damaged.

Phillipe Tirault points out that most of the hanok were built after the 1920s so "they are not regarded as very old" and they "remind Koreans of a time when Korea was poor." In an interview with the *Christian Science Monitor*, Kilburn echoed that sentiment: "The problem in Korea is that so many people no longer feel a strong relationship with their heritage or value it highly. This, in turn, leads to neglect, which inevitably becomes a pathway to decay and destruction."¹

Viewed as unsightly or dilapidated, they are torn down and, in the best-case scenario, are rebuilt as two- or three-story buildings that retain some of the flavor of the original hanok but are essentially modern buildings. More often than not, they are replaced with high-rises.

THE ECONOMICS OF REBUILDING AND RENOVATING

Economics also play a key role in the increasing loss of the hanok. Undoubtedly, a lot of people living in apartments, swayed by emotional sentiment and nostalgia, argue that preserving hanok is a good idea, but would they feel this way if they owned one?

There is very little incentive to renovate. According to Bartholomew, once a low-rise or medium-rise building is built, it begins depreciating so that after twenty years it has no financial value—only the land does. Therefore, it does not pay to remodel or maintain old homes, and so hanok are often knocked down and then

rebuilt into hanok-like homes, sometimes two- or three-stories tall. Obviously, multi-story buildings bring in a much greater income than a small single-story building.

As architect and hanok owner Hwang Doo-jin told the *New York Times*, "people here would willingly destroy these houses to build up, higher and higher, to increase their floor space and get higher rents."²

Economic reasons are not the only threat to hanok. Plagued with the reputation of being uncomfortable due to their draftiness and lack of modern conveniences, many people cannot imagine living in a hanok. To a degree, these are legitimate problems, but ones that can be solved. In fact, most people end up modernizing their hanok by renovating their kitchens, bathrooms, laundry and heating facilities in order to provide "creature comforts."

Bartholomew suggests that a lot of foreigners might welcome the opportunity of living in renovated hanok. "Once you modernize the heating, bathroom, kitchen and laundry facilities there is no real discomfort. It is a different style of living from a concrete apartment, but

not necessarily less 'comfortable.' A lot of the so-called inconveniences are exactly the same for any single-family residence, be it hanok, brick, concrete or wooden Western-style." Along with Bartholomew, Kilburn, Fouser and Tirault all live in renovated hanok with modern amenities such as central heating, satellite TV and broadband internet.

Part of the controversy, however, centers on how much renovation is too much. Some people advocate that the building should be left in its original state but Tirault disagrees. "Keeping hanok the way they were in the past is condemning them as nobody wants to live without what is considered normal comforts." Hwang, the architect, also insists that sacrifices have to be made: "You can't preserve everything on every level. That kind of symbolism doesn't work for us anymore in Korea."³

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO LIVE IN A HANOK?

Tirault describes his hanok as "a very private and discrete place... completely insulated from the noises and disturbances of the modern city." Fouser says that "the natural materials create a nicer, healthier feeling environment compared to apartments" and adds that his "courtyard gives a sense of openness—light and air flowing into the living space—that few apartments can match."

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Above: New apartments under construction in Seoul.



Right: Robert Fouser's hanok in Hyeonwa-dong

Kilburn's hanok was built in 1929 on land once owned by the family of Queen Min. It is a place with a strong sense of history and it seems somewhat fitting that his answer is poetic:

"I particularly enjoy listening to the wind in the leaves of our maple tree, the tinkling of the wind chimes in the garden, the sight and sound of the magpie that flies down from the roof to drink from the fish tank. I like stepping directly out of my study to prune the roses, and trim the vines. In the evening, I enjoy the shadows fading into twilight while the candles in the garden come to life. The constant interplay of light and shadow on the woodwork and paper windows is an endless source of fascination. The proximity to a natural world and the surrounding of natural materials, mainly wood and paper bring a sense of peace that concrete cannot create. To an apartment dweller, all these experiences may represent inconvenience or discomfort, but to me they do not."

Despite the positive responses, Tirault cautions that living in a hanok is not for everyone. While there "is good harmony in the size of the rooms" they are, nonetheless, small, and hanok generally do not have parking or garages. "It should fit your life style," he cautions.

NO EASY ANSWERS

The hanok issue is a complicated one filled with contradictions and ironies. Several years ago, I had a conversation with Bartholomew concerning the destruction of Japanese-built buildings in Seoul. When I pointed out that it seemed a paradox to destroy a historical remnant, regardless of who built it, in order to restore a more cherished past, he merely shook his head and reminded me that all things change and not everything can be saved.

Kilburn deplores the Korean government for pursuing "policies that are leading to the disappearance of hanok in Korea while simultaneously promoting their merits overseas as part of a new *Hallyu* [Korean wave]."

But what about the owners of these hanok? Don't they have the right to sell or modify their property however they like—even if it does mean that a part of history is lost forever?

1 Bryan Kay

"The fading remnants of South Korea's traditional buildings," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 15, 2011.

2,3 Mark McDonald

"Saving a Korean District," *New York Times*, December 13, 2010.



What You Can Do to Protect the Hanok

Some readers may be convinced that hanok are worth preserving but aren't quite sure exactly how they can get involved. The people we interviewed provide some concrete advice for those interested in the issue. Bartholomew is convinced that more articles (in Korean) have to be published in order to inform the Korean public of the importance of preserving this aspect of Korea's past. Kilburn also emphasizes informing the public and encourages people to directly contact him at his site, kahoidong.com. Fouser suggests that people "buy or rent a hanok to help show that they are appreciated and, if you buy, to prevent them from being destroyed."



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