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Mr. Park Won-Soon
Mayor of Seoul
Seoul City Hall
Euljiro 1, Jung-gu
Seoul 100-744

Dear Mayor Park,

I first came to Seoul in 1987. At that time, I was working as a journalist in Tokyo for an American magazine. One day, as the Olympics grew closer, my editor asked me to go to Seoul and see what was happening there. And so, I did. I visited again in 1988 and on that occasion fell in love with a hanok in Gahoe-dong which my wife (Choi Keum-Ok) and I bought, and which has been our Korean home ever since.

At that time, Bukchon was the last part of Seoul where there was a high concentration of hanoks, mostly built in the 1920's and 1930's and generally in good condition. Hanok survival had been helped by classifying the district as a preservation area and placing restrictions on new building. Even so, the number of hanoks had been steadily declining and the long term outlook for those that had survived looked bleak.

All this began to change when, in 2000, the Seoul Government published the Bukchon Plan, a two volume publication that described in great detail plans for the conservation and restoration of the hanoks of Bukchon. The Plan offered financial help to residents to repair and improve their hanoks, with controls to ensure the money was properly spent. It sounded good news, but what has taken place is the opposite.

The key problems are:

1. Misuse of Public money

- 1.1. A budget of KRW 384.4 Billion of public money was provided to support the Bukchon Plan. Procedures, guidelines, and laws were laid down for the repair and restoration of hanoks, based on an architectural survey that was published as part of the Bukchon Plan in 2001.
- 1.2. However, in reality, the plan was ignored. City officials permitted illegal construction work, ignored illegal hanok demolitions, and approved the construction of two storey buildings which they then classified as traditional hanoks.
- 1.3. Grants and loans were provided to newcomers who were permitted to demolish hanoks that the government's surveyors had already said were in good condition. The newcomers were then permitted to erect new buildings using steel and concrete rather than traditional hanok materials.
- 1.4. Applications from some existing residents for the financial support offered in the plan to repair their own hanoks was denied – this is what happened to us.
- 1.5. All these practises were most common in Gahoe-dong 31, and continue even today.

2. Hanok Laws and Construction Laws Broken

- 2.1. There are many excellent laws that apply to the construction of new buildings. There are also laws that apply to hanoks. Construction companies and newcomers have been permitted to break these laws by city officials ever since the start of the Bukchon project.
- 2.2. Violations include
 - 2.2.1. New buildings are built higher than the law permits
 - 2.2.2. Laws that stipulate the distance of new buildings from the public street, and the distance between buildings are ignored.
 - 2.2.3. The use of bulldozers, excavators and heavy construction equipment

3. Document Forgery

- 3.1. Some of the new buildings differ greatly from their approved plans. City officials refuse to conduct checks of these buildings and knowingly accept fake documents. For example, city officials permitted the construction of a new building at Gahoe-dong 31-96 on our land without taking account of our *Minwon*. Later they inspected the site and said that everything had been properly done. This was a false statement and an illegal procedure.

4. Destruction of Heritage

- 4.1. Although Bukchon had been a preservation area for many years, by 2000 there were only three streets left populated entirely by hanoks, all built in the late 1920's or 1930's. These gave an authentic picture of how ordinary Koreans lived their lives and the ambience of Seoul's streets from a bygone age. In all major cities among the advanced nations, great effort is made to preserve such legacies of the past. Preservation is seen as important not only for historical reasons but also because such districts attract tourists and become economically valuable. In Seoul, all this has been destroyed and replaced by modern buildings that masquerade as hanoks.
- 4.2. There is nothing wrong with building modern a building in hanok style, what is wrong is demolishing the last original hanoks in order to do this in a hanok protection district where these hanoks are supposed to be protected by law.

5. Freedom of Information Laws ignored

- 5.1. Despite the pledge in the Bukchon Plan to make all details available to the public, city officials routinely refuse to provide documents or claim they cannot be found or are lost.
- 5.2. The Bukchon Plan itself was withdrawn from the public domain and city officials bought back all copies that had been distributed to bookstores.

6. Abuse of Human rights

- 6.1. Some former residents wished to remain living in Gahoe-dong and did not wish to sell their homes. Such people were bullied, harassed, and intimidated by construction workers. When they appealed for help from the police and city officials to protect their human rights, they were ignored. Eventually, the torrent of abuse became too unbearable that all eventually departed. Surprisingly, my wife and I are now the longest residents in our part of Gahoe-dong.
- 6.2. My wife and I were among those who did not wish to sell. When this became clear we were subject to a nightmare of attacks.
 - 6.2.1. One day, Urethane, a volatile waterproofing chemical and known carcinogen was intentionally pumped into our bedroom. When I protested this, the workers laughed and sprayed me directly in the face. Subsequently my wife developed cancer while I am now almost blind in one eye.

6.2.2. My mother-in-law was subjected to harassment and abuse almost every time she went outside the house. For a gentle old lady, this was truly a nightmare. One day, she suddenly died from organ failure brought on by the shock of events.

6.2.3. I was physically attacked in the street by a construction worker and was knocked to the ground unconscious. Subsequently I spent a month in hospital. Thereafter, I was accused and convicted of criminal assault. I appealed against this. However the court refused to accept any of my evidence, including evidence of my own medical condition which showed that injuries from a road accident years ago made it physically impossible for me to have carried out the claimed assault.

6.2.4. Government officials permitted construction work that directly damaged our house by excavating deep holes on our land that undermined the foundations of our house.

6.2.5. The damage to our hanok has been very severe and is the direct result of the actions of officials who should have been supporting the preservation of hanoks.

7. Widespread misuse and abuse of Government Power

7.1. Many things went wrong with the Bukchon Plan. It was conceived as vast project of a kind that had never been undertaken in Seoul. However the problems were not isolated mistakes or the occasional faults of well meaning individuals. The implementation of the plan was totally corrupted by senior political figures working hand-in-glove with officials in the Seoul government, and working against the interests and welfare of the ordinary citizens of Seoul.

7.2. The implementation of the plan created vast new wealth for people who were already wealthy to the impoverishment of society and ordinary citizens. This outcome was in fact the purpose of the plan, a crime against society.

7.3. These claims may sound extraordinary. They are, but we have evidence to support them.

8. The outcome

8.1. The result of all these activities is that Gahoe-dong has changed from a district where ordinary people could afford to rent or buy homes into a playground for speculators and wealthy people in search of second homes.

8.2. The number of homes has dropped since two or more original hanoks are generally demolished to erect each new building.

8.3. The vibrant community that used to live in Gahoe-dong has been totally destroyed.

8.4. A chapter of Seoul's history has also been destroyed.

9. Conclusion

9.1. Mr. Mayor, all these events took place before you came into office as a "citizens' candidate" aiming "to defeat an outdated era." A substantial part of the budget for the Bukchon Plan remains unspent and so there is still an opportunity to repair the damage that has been done both to society and to Gahoe-dong. **We are writing to you not only to draw the facts to your attention but also to ask you to start work to put matters to right.** It is almost eight years since we wrote to Mayor Lee when these problems appeared; we hope that this letter may help bring a just solution, and look forward to your reply.

Yours truly,

David Kilburn

Jade Kilburn