

Traditional architecture threatened by controversial 'restoration' efforts

By Jane Cooper and Jin Hyun-joo

While Seoul Metropolitan Government has been basking in the success of the restored Cheonggye Stream, some residents across town say that traditional buildings are being lost, ironically under a scheme to "preserve" them.

Grants from the city council are available to owners of one story "hanok" or traditional homes for restoration work. Hanok with their tiled roofs, wooden beams and stone-block construction are a precious and picturesque reminder of Korea's past.

But a resident of Bukchon village, a traditional district nestled between Gyeongbok and Changdeok palaces, alleges that the government money has been used to knock down an original hanok to build a modern alternative made of concrete and steel with aluminium window frames.

British expatriate David Kilburn alleges that his neighbor received a grant of 30 million won from the government. This money, Kilburn says, was then used to demolish a hanok that was not beyond repair and build a two-story building in its place. This both concerns and puzzles Kilburn because he says there is "no such thing as a two-story hanok."

Kilburn also says that the owner of the house was issued with a business license that would allow a wine bar in the residential area.

The owner, Hakan Borin from Sweden, said "we followed the rules 100 percent" and that Kilburn's allegations against him and his wife are "wrongful." He said that Kilburn has been an active campaigner, but there are "two sides of the story" and that he is only willing to comment once a court case with Kilburn is over.

The builder Lee Mun-ho of the Jaho construction company received permits from both the Jongno-gu Office and the Seoul Metropolitan Government. In response to Kilburn's allegation that the house is two-stories, Lee replied, "In the eyes of nonexperts in architecture, the building may look like a two-story building, but in fact it is not."

Kilburn maintains the building is not a hanok, but both Lee and the government are more flexible in their definitions.

The Seoul City official in charge of the area, Roh Gyeong-rah, said, "To my knowledge, there are no two-story hanok in the Bukchon village."

"There is controversy over the definition of tradition. Some say tradition means something which is exactly the same as the past, whereas others consider tradition as something inherited and constantly developed," Roh said. He also said that the original hanok needed to be expanded because people are bigger nowadays and cannot live in such a small space.

The Korea Herald obtained official documents that list the property as having a basement and a first floor. However, the basement is not underground and the building is much taller than the original hanok either side of it. It is also registered as a hanok and the property has been identified as being used for business purposes. Seoul Metropolitan Government and the Jongno-gu Offices approved a general business license, which permit a range of business activities.

Choi Keum-ok, Kilburn's wife said, "The government said it would preserve the Bukchon village, but why did they issue a business license in an area which should be preserved?"

Seoul Metropolitan Government responded that "there is no proof that it will be used for other purposes such as a wine bar."

The Korea Herald also obtained copies of the owners' application for a government grant to restore the original hanok, which has since been knocked down.

Local government literature describes Bukchon village as a sightseeing destination where tourists can get a taste of Korean culture from the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910). It remains a residential area and the restoration grants are part of efforts made to preserve its character.

Kilburn says that because the area is designated as a Korean-style House Preservation District, the property is relatively cheaper than other areas in Seoul. Kilburn says that people are taking advantage of loopholes in the law and are buying the cheap land, knocking down the original hanok, then building much larger houses, which he says are not authentic.

The local government said that this is merely a dispute between two neighbors. Kilburn is one of the last residents in his street that has remained since the building work by the Jaho construction company began. Most of his former neighbors have sold



The house on the left has been tastefully restored in keeping with the step-like line of the roofs of the one-story hanok on either side of it.
Jane Cooper/The Korea Herald

their property and moved out of the area, leaving only owners of renovated property.

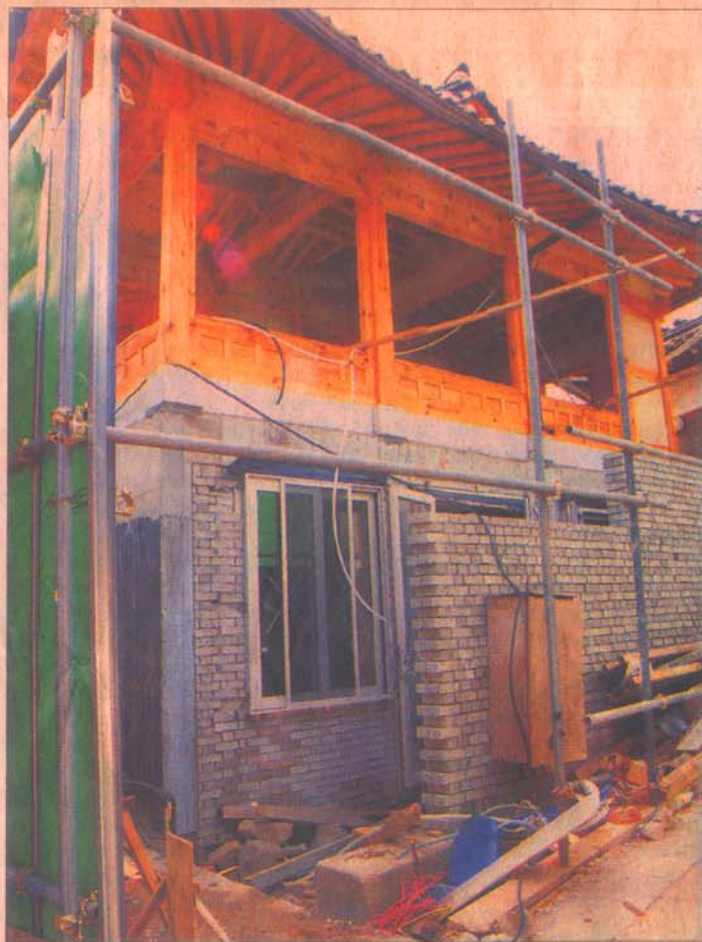
"I could see Namsan from the living room of my house before the house was built," said one former resident Jung Taebong.

When Jung and other residents filed a civil appeal to the local authorities against the alleged illegal construction in 2001, the Jongno District Office admitted that the house, at that time, did not have a permit and said it would take action to fix the problem. This was written in an official document sent from the Jongno District Office to the residents.

However, the residents lost a civil suit and have since appealed to the Seoul Metropolitan Government, the Board of Audit and Inspection and Cheong Wa Dae, with no success.

"At first, I was in favor of the government plan to renovate the Korean style houses because some houses were worn out. But they knocked down houses and built new ones which are not real Korean houses. The government has to preserve them properly," Jung said.

Jung said he had to leave the area because of the stress that this situation caused him. Kilburn, however, remains active in challenging the government's restoration efforts in Bukchon. His motivation, he says, is that the hanok are a treasure and are being demolished without any public



"In the eyes of nonexperts in architecture, the building may look like a two-story building, but in fact, it is not," says Lee Mun-ho of Jaho construction company. Some residents say that this is not a traditional hanok, which have only one story.
Photo provided by David Kilburn

awareness. Coming from Britain, which values its heritage and has strict and transparent laws about renovation to old buildings, Kilburn is

frustrated and saddened by the changing landscape of the Bukchon village.

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