

The Samcheong Hanok

Subjects: Architecture And Design

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In Bukchon, the most representative hanok village in Seoul, there is a unique hanok, or traditional Korean house, which also looks modern. Originally built around 1940, the house underwent several stages of extension and repairs, and in 2000, was renovated by architect Wook Choi (born 1963) who called it “Samcheong Hanok” (or Samchung Hanok). Arguably, the evolution of the Samcheong Hanok illustrates a typical history of modern hanok in the past century. In the history, sudden increases in the number of hanok buildings were detected around two specific periods: first, approximately in the three decades from the early 1930s; second, in the past two decades from 2000. This phenomenon leads to classification of the hanok as urban-type or contemporary, according to whether they were built in the first or second period, respectively.

Keywords: Samcheong Hanok ; traditional Korean house ; evolution ; urban-type hanok

1. New Construction: “Open □-Shaped” Urban-Type Hanok (Around 1940)

The Samcheong Hanok was first built in Bukchon, specifically, 35-88 Samcheong-dong, Jongno-gu, Seoul. Although no direct record of the first construction is available, the construction time can be assumed based on the information regarding housing lot division in the area. One study shows how the housing lot of 35 Samcheong-dong was subdivided between the mid-1920s and early 1940s (**Figure 1**) [4] (pp. 252–253), and we can confirm that the site, 35-88 Samcheong-dong, had been realized by January 1939. The preparation of housing sites and the actual construction of houses in the sites could be separate issues. Nevertheless, it is very likely that the construction of houses followed soon after the housing site preparation, considering the housing shortage in Seoul in the 1930s and responsive active housing development [2][3]. Indeed, it was reported that 6000–7000 new houses were built in Seoul between 1933 and 1935, including approximately 4000 in Bukchon [4]. Therefore, we may assume that the Samcheong Hanok was most likely built in the late 1930s or, at the latest, very early 1940s. Additionally, it seems that the 35 Samcheong-dong area was developed as a residential district by developer Dae-gyu Jung, who owned the land [3] (pp. 17–18) [1] (p. 271 and 377). This implies that the Samcheong Hanok is a mass-produced *urban-type hanok* building, and its floor plan would be typical of such houses. One study illustrated various plans of houses located in one block south of Samcheong Hanok (**Figure 2**), which also belonged to 35 Samcheong-dong. These plans differ from each other in scale and room arrangement but have the typical characteristics of the *urban-type hanok*, as described in the previous section of the paper.

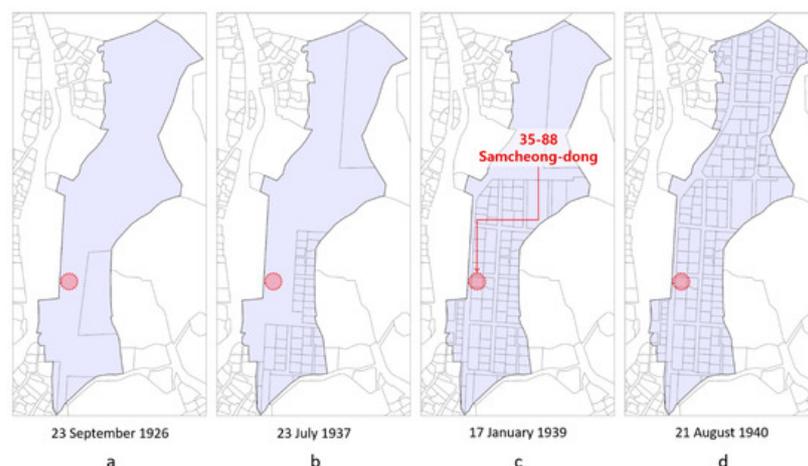


Figure 1. Several stages of housing lot division in 35 Samcheong-dong and the location of 35-88 Samcheong-dong, in which the Samcheong Hanok was built (Courtesy of Seoul Museum of History/redrawn by the author with the location of the Samcheong Hanok marked).



Figure 2. Floor plans of twenty *urban-type hanok* buildings in 35 Samcheong-dong, near the Samcheong Hanok (Reprinted with permission from ref. [2]. Copyright 1987 Sun-jae Kim).

Based on the floor plans of neighboring houses—especially those of a similar size and context to the site—and the pre-renovation drawings made in 2000, this study reconstructed a plausible floor plan of the Samcheong Hanok when first built around 1940. In other words, this presumable first plan (**Figure 3**) resulted from the comparison and integration of its two conditions in the late 1930s and late 1990s. We can now re-examine the plan in reverse. The plan is “□-shaped,” or more specifically “open □-shaped (「」),” consisting of two “┌-shaped” units. Of course, the *madang* is at the center of the plan. Moreover, the building blocks themselves serve as outer walls, dispensing with the traditional independent walls. Hence, these features correspond to the characteristics of the *urban-type hanok*. However, the internal room arrangement is uncertain at this stage, and thus, the reconstruction plan inevitably follows the pre-renovation plan as a whole. The resultant composition is that four (*ondol*) rooms and the *daecheong*, or wooden-floored central hall (of which cool *maru* space contrasts with the floor-heated *ondol* rooms), along with the kitchen and toilet, surround the *madang*. Here, the kitchen was relocated between two rooms in the east wing, differing from the pre-renovation plan; in particular, the traditional type of kitchen with an *agunggi* fireplace (for cooking and heating) is situated there to warm the *ondol* rooms on both sides or, at least, the main room *anbang* on the left. A similar room-kitchen arrangement is found in the floor plan of 35-20 Samcheong-dong (**Figure 2**). The toilet beside the gate, or at one side of the (minimized) *munganchae*, must be an old-fashioned one and rather small in size. To understand details about service spaces such as toilets and kitchens, we could also refer to several contemporary houses with the Samcheong Hanok in 11 Gahoe-dong, located next to Samcheong-dong in Bukchon—the housing lots, and houses themselves, in 11 Gahoe-dong started being developed in 1935 [2] (p. 93) [2] (p. 229 and 371). However, it seems relatively easy to assume the first state of the house’s structure, compared with that of the spatial composition, because the Samcheong Hanok is a typical *urban-type hanok* of the time. It must have had the basic wood-frame structure to support the traditional roof.

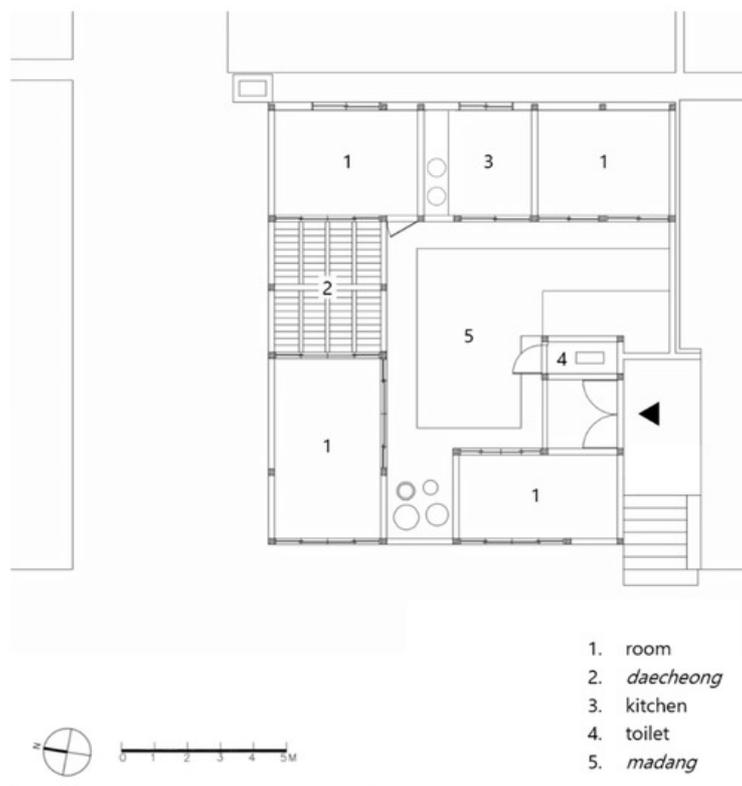


Figure 3. Plausible floor plan of the Samcheong Hanok when first built around 1940 (Drawn by the author).

2. Extension: Enlarged Space (Early 1960s)

For two reasons, we can assume that there was an extension work to the Samcheong Hanok, probably in the early 1960s. First, many *urban-type hanok* buildings in Bukchon underwent extensions to enlarge their interior spaces during this period [6] (p. 19). Second, the building register of 35-88 Samcheong-dong suggests that the owner of the house changed in August 1961, which was confirmed at Jongno-gu Office (23 April 2018). Therefore, it is highly probable that the Samcheong Hanok extension was carried out with its transfer to the new owner. (Even though the extension was made at a different timing, there would be no big difference in the extension method or the floor plan.) According to Gwang-no Lee et al., the most typical method for extension in Gahoe-dong houses was to broaden the space towards the street by building a new outer wall under newly added eaves [5] (p. 59). A similar method appears to have been implemented with the Samcheong Hanok (**Figure 4**). Nevertheless, this new outer wall was aligned with the end line of the previous eaves as the available street side space was very limited. This situation can still be confirmed at one corner of the present house (**Figure 5**).

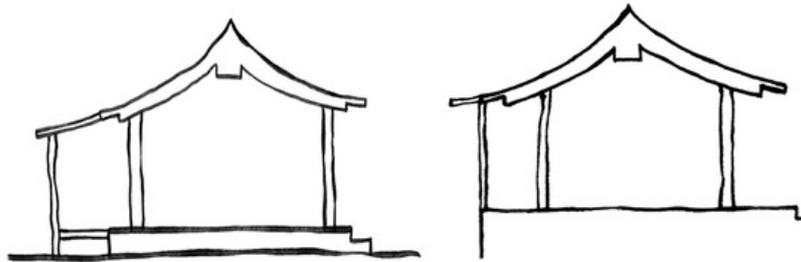


Figure 4. Typical method of outer-wall extension for the *urban-type hanok*, Gahoe-dong (Adapted with permission from ref. [5]. Copyright 2011 Gomsil Publisher), and the case of the Samcheong Hanok (Drawn by the author).

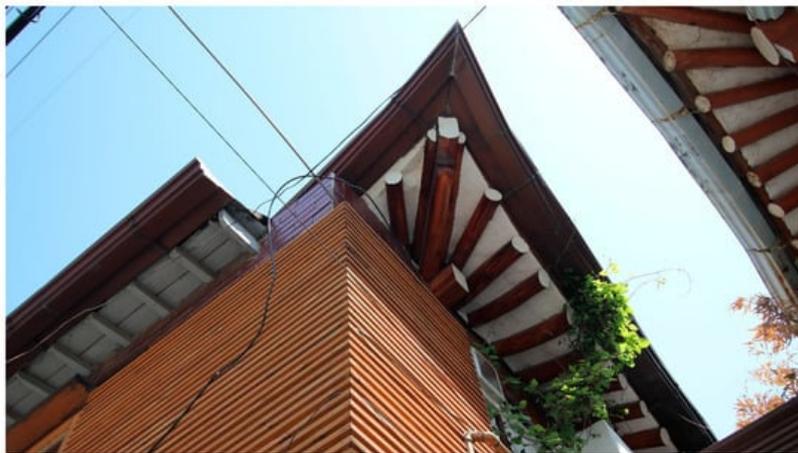


Figure 5. One corner of the present Samcheong Hanok that shows the added eave to the extended wall (Photograph by the author).

Such extension is accompanied by some transformation in the appearance of the house, and we can trace these changes on the basis of the pre-renovation photographs and drawings, as well as a close observation of the present wall. Arguably, the outer wall of the extended side was a masonry structure of brick (or cement block) as this was the typical method in Gahoe-dong, and the wall was drawn thick enough for the masonry wall in the pre-renovation plan. (Otherwise, it might have been a wood-frame structure with the wall plastered white, and the present wall was a later alteration.) The architect noted that the wall was covered with brick-patterned tiles [7], which lets us presume that its internal structure forms a load-bearing wall. However, it is not known when the tiles covered the wall—possibly, not certainly, at the time of the extension. In any case, in the reconstruction plan of this stage (**Figure 6**), the outer wall of the extended side was considered identical to that in the pre-renovation plan, and it is assumed that there was no critical change except the enlarged space. This plan illustrates that the original plan of the new construction stage extended space toward the north and west sides—in the street-facing directions. Specifically, the extension was carried out facing the outside from the line of columns, and the width of the extended space seems to be approximately one meter (if relying on the scale), resulting in an increased floor area of approximately 25 m². On the south and east sides, adjacent to other houses, there was no room for extension. However, as aforementioned, there may have been no significant change in the basic structure of the house at this stage; instead, relatively minor alterations were certainly made, such as improvements in building equipment and

interior fittings. (Considering the context in Korea at the time, coal briquettes were possibly used in the *agung* inside the kitchen for cooking and heating. The toilet must also have been improved. However, it would not yet have been a flush toilet even though the modern toilet was introduced in Korea in the 1950s.)

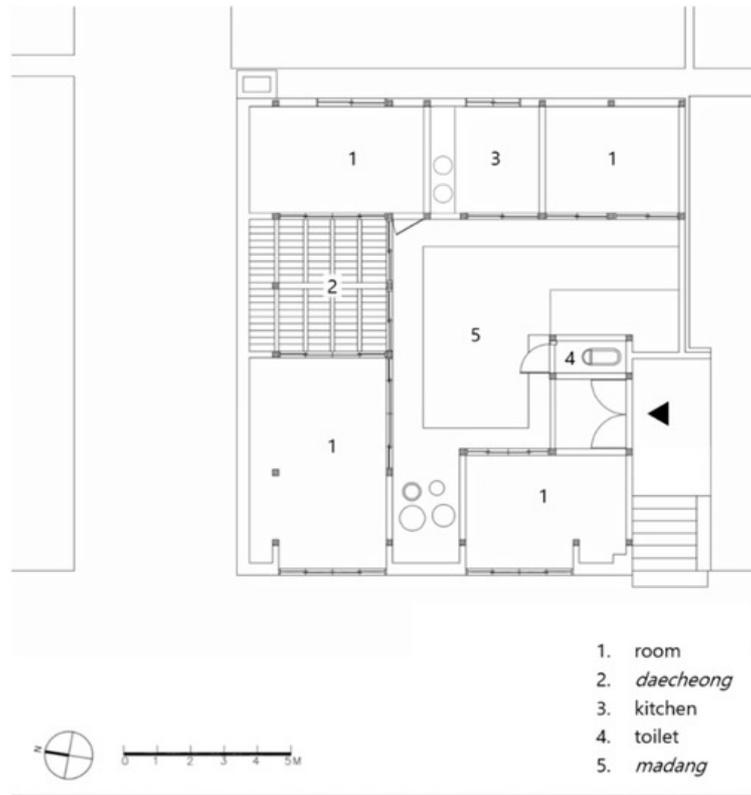


Figure 6. Plausible floor plan of the Samcheong Hanok after extension, probably carried out in the early 1960s (Drawn by the author).

3. Repairs: Modernization of Building Equipment and Interior Design (1960s–90s)

For approximately 40 years, between the extension and renovation in 2000, the Samcheong Hanok undoubtedly underwent diverse external and internal changes. Although details of these changes are unknown, the key alterations certainly involved modernization of building equipment and interior design. As its macroscopic background, we may consider the spread of modern housing, described in [Section 2](#), of which relatively anonymous practice was, in fact, led by various experiments with residential design by progressive architects. In this period, Westernization and modernization of housing was accelerated with the rapid economic growth in Korea. Microscopically, we may refer to the context of neighboring houses in Gahoe-dong, as aforementioned. Field research conducted between 1985 and 1986 reported that building equipment and interior design of most *hanok* buildings in the area had already been modernized [8]. Typically, they were equipped with a modern kitchen and flush toilet. It is certain that the Samcheong Hanok simultaneously experienced a similar modernization process.

The Samcheong Hanok of this stage can be clearly understood from the pre-renovation drawings and photographs and, in particular, the floor plan (**Figure 7**). Though the floor plan directly refers to the layout of the house in the late 1990s, it certainly illustrates one of the most typical layouts of the house for the past four decades. The most remarkable observation in this plan expectedly involved the kitchen and the toilet, though the installation of an exterior gate on the entrance stairs, as well as the addition of a space (probably a storage area) facing the exterior gate, is also conspicuous. This paper proposes that the kitchen was relocated from the central space of the eastern wing to the neighboring room in the south for the following reasons. First, a wider room may have been required to combine the kitchen with a dining space and rationalize the spatial arrangement for housework. This is related to modern furnishings in the kitchen, including the sink, as the plan illustrates. Second, a modernized heating system may have obviated the need for the *agung* in the kitchen, which was located between the two rooms (and also on a lower floor-level than the *ondol* rooms) in preceding stages. Meanwhile, the toilet was also doubled in size and equipped with modern facilities such as a flush toilet and wash basin; the floor was tiled, reflecting significant advances in terms of hygiene. The changes in kitchens and toilets typically reveal how the *urban-type hanok* responded to modernization of the time. Moreover, other

building equipment and interior fittings, such as windows/doors and water/sewage systems, must also have been modernized or repaired. While it is likely that there was no critical change in the other spatial organization and the building structure as a whole, the spatial or structural details, and the interior design may have varied with owners' preferences.

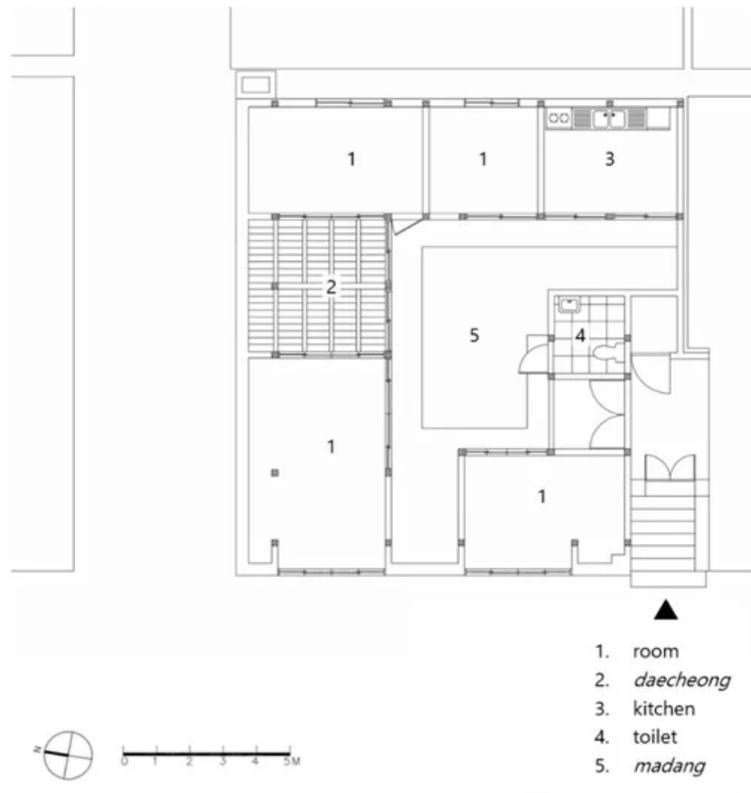


Figure 7. Floor plan of the Samcheong Hanok before renovation in 2000 (Courtesy of One O One Architects).

4. Renovation: Transformation into Contemporary Hanok (2000)

The Samcheong Hanok, which had gradually evolved since it was first constructed around 1940, experienced the most critical change during the renovation in 2000 (Figure 8, Figure 9, Figure 10 and Figure 11). Considering that architect Wook Choi had already renovated one *urban-type hanok* for use as his own office (2000) in the same Samcheong-dong area right before this project [8] (pp. 306–315) [9], it is indubitable that he was very familiar with the local context at that time and ready to experiment with new possibilities of the *urban-type hanok*. As one of the most distinguished Korean architects in his generation, Choi has carried out diverse kinds of projects for the last two decades. In his early career, however, the *hanok* renovation was a very important category of works to him. The defining characteristic of his *hanok* renovation was a bold addition of modern elements to traditional ones, often challenging the tradition: “When repairing a *hanok*, ... I boldly removed [existing elements] or made [new elements]. However, I tried to emphasize aesthetic elements typically found in the *hanok* space” [8] (p. 607). This attitude was well illustrated in the work for Samcheong Hanok.

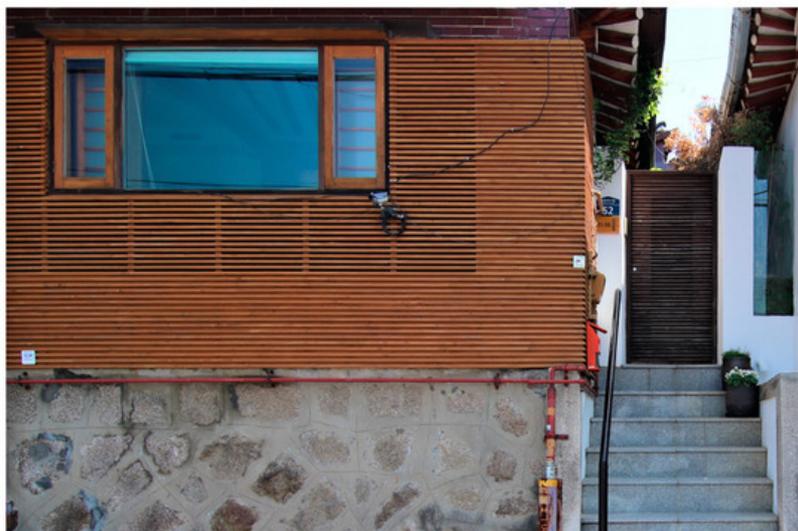


Figure 8. Unique exterior cladding of the Samcheong Hanok with repeated horizontal lines (Photograph by the author).



Figure 9. Maru-like wooden deck on the madang of the Samcheong Hanok (Courtesy of One O One Architects).



Figure 10. Interior view of the Samcheong Hanok (Courtesy of One O One Architects).

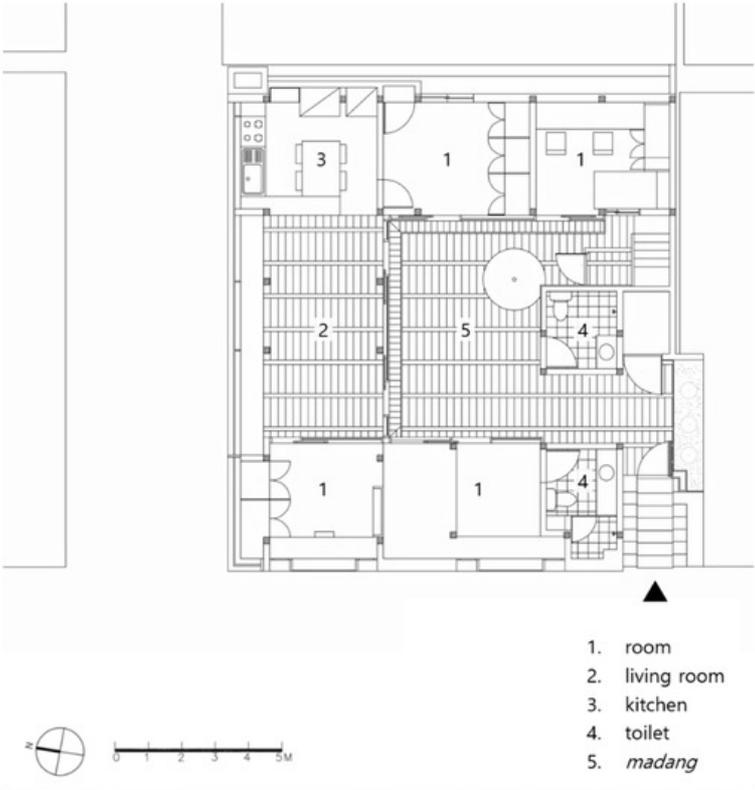


Figure 11. Floor plan of the Samcheong Hanok after renovation in 2000 (Courtesy of One O One Architects).

The renovated Samcheong Hanok is replete with unconventional features as compared to other *contemporary hanok* and previous *urban-type hanok* buildings, starting with its appearance. The repeating pattern of thin and rectangular timbers, which clothe the existing outer wall, form a unique surface with horizontal lines, which continues on the exterior gate (main gate). The windows on the wall were also not traditional. Without the traditional roof, there would be no reason for this house to be considered a *hanok* from its external appearance. Similarly, changes inside the outer wall were as drastic. The middle gate that used to be situated on the left after passing the main gate was lost. It signifies a disintegration of *munganchae* and an expansion of *madang*. Moreover, the total floor area increased as the empty space between the two rooms on the west side was incorporated into the indoor space. As verified in the floor plan (**Figure 11**), the “ Γ ”-shape” or “open \square -shape” of the plan, which had been maintained since it was first built, shows a subtle variation. In this process, the living room—equivalent to the *daecheong* in the traditional *hanok*—was extended westwards up to the same width as the *madang*, and rooms on the opposite sides of the living room came to face each other. The arrangement of rooms was also changed; for example, the kitchen/dining room was now relocated at the northern corner, and a second toilet (now a proper bathroom) was added to the room near the gate. Within these changes, however, the existing wooden structure was maintained as far as possible. The living room showcased the beauty of tradition through four independent square columns and, in particular, the wooden frame of the roof that reveals the original composition of the girder, beam, and rafter.

Arguably, the most remarkable attempt in this renovation was the creation of a type of wooden deck on the *madang*. This wooden deck is reminiscent of the *maru*, where the floor pattern was intended to be same as that of the living room, hinting at the traditional *daecheong* or *daecheong-maru*. Its installation reduced the gap in height between the living room and the *madang* by raising the level of the latter and facilitated the floor material (red pine) and pattern to continue between the living room and *madang*. Indeed, the *madang* is not only an exterior space, open to the sky, but also an interior space as an extension of the living room. This kind of continuity was further enhanced by the whole-glass wall installed between the two spaces, eliminating the visual boundary between the inside and outside. Meanwhile, two challenges to tradition can be noted here. The first is the white-colored northern wall inside the living room, where the white plane continues to the ceiling just above it. Though possibly reminiscent of a white-papered room in a traditional house, it is highly reminiscent of the vocabulary of Western modernism characterized by white and planar surfaces. The horizontally long clerestory window in-between the living room wall and ceiling also assumes the typical image of modern architecture. The other challenge is the unfamiliar pattern on the sliding doors, which critically differs from the traditional Korean style. In fact, it even embodies a certain Japanese nuance due to its simplicity and repeated pattern of horizontal lines. Although such impression might not be universal, the possible Japanese implication is still a sensitive issue in Korean architecture—particularly in buildings directly related to tradition, such as this house. However, architect Wook Choi, who was more sensitive to modern function and aesthetic, kept a distance from such issues.

In short, this renovation stage, in which the architect boldly transformed an *urban-type hanok* into a *contemporary hanok*, is surely the most salient stage in the Samcheong Hanok history.

References

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