

An aerial photograph of the Dongdaemun Design Plaza and Park in Seoul, South Korea. The image shows the building's distinctive, flowing, and organic architectural forms, which contrast with the surrounding dense urban environment of high-rise apartment buildings and commercial structures. The park area is visible with green spaces and pedestrian paths. A multi-lane road with traffic is in the foreground. A semi-transparent rectangular box is overlaid on the upper portion of the image, framing the title text.

# **Contesting Korean Memory: Analyzing “Space of Places” and “Space of Flows” in Dongdaemun Design Plaza and Park**

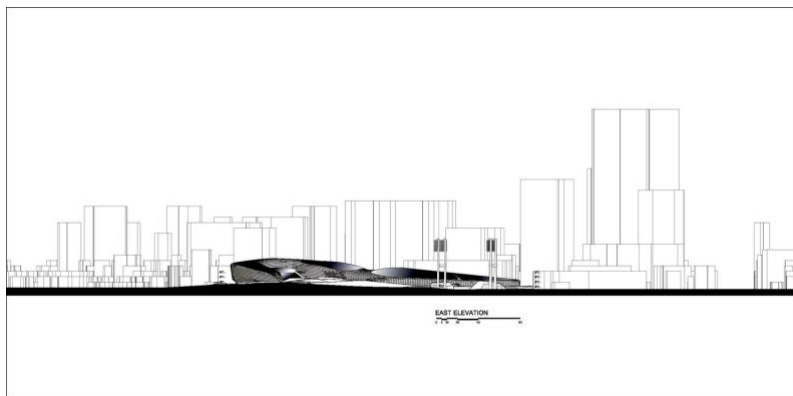
Sharon Nahm  
URBS/ART 272  
May 11, 2023



## Introduction

In August 2007, a competition was held by the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) commissioning eight architects—four Korean architects and four non-Koreans— to submit their designs for the “Dongdaemun Design Plaza & Park Project” (abbreviated as DDPP). Oh Se-hoon, the Seoul mayor at the time, envisioned the DDP to be a landmark that would serve as a central part of his “Clean, Attractive and Global City Seoul” plan. The government hoped that the DDP would support Seoul’s neoliberal ambitions by producing “53 billion dollars in productivity and 446,000 jobs”<sup>1</sup> over the course of the 30 years following construction.

At the conclusion of the competition, the government decided on the “metonymic landscape” designed by the renowned Iraqi-British architect, Zaha Hadid. The SMG deemed that Hadid’s version of the DDP was the most suitable for the state’s ambitions for the space. Hadid’s design, shown in **Figure 1**, was a computer-rendered (Building Information Modeling) design that consisted of a series of large, elongated, undulating structures enveloped in concrete, aluminum, steel, and stone.



**Figure 1** East Elevation Modeling of Dongdaemun Design Plaza and Park, Seoul, South Korea. 2014. Courtesy of Zaha Hadid Architects.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hwang, Jin-Tae. “Territorialized Urban Mega-Projects Beyond Global Convergence: The Case of Dongdaemun Design Plaza & Park Project, Seoul.” *Cities* 40, no. a (2014): 82.



This decision to select Zaha Hadid's design sparked massive backlash from the local Dongdaemun<sup>2</sup> community and the Korean architectural community, who saw Hadid's design as both out of place and out of context. Prior to submitting her design, Hadid had not even visited the site in Seoul. Yet despite Hadid's lack of local understanding, her design was chosen over the design of another architect who, according to architectural critic Lee Joo-yeon, had rented a motel room near the stadium for five months to talk to local merchants and closely study the area.<sup>3</sup> For many Koreans, the government's decision to choose a celebrity architect to design a major public landmark was indicative of top-down neoliberal agendas that threatened to eliminate the city's heritage in exchange for global, economic prosperity. Particularly, the fact that Hadid's design necessitated the razing of a historic stadium—that had existed since the Korean colonial period—was seen by many as an insensitive exercise of *neoliberal* state developmentalism.

In this paper, I will critically analyze: 1) the history of the DDPP's siting, and 2) the postmodern monumentality of Zaha Hadid's design. Using Manuel Castells' ideas of "space of places" and "space of flows" to guide my paper, I will trace how the Seoul government and Hadid exchanged a dynamic and historic "space of places" for a neo-liberal, spectacular "space of flows" through the construction of the DDPP. Through this analysis of the DDPP, I argue that architecture designed for the "space of flows" is *political*, in that it erases the local memory of place; even if the deconstructivist forms attempt to incorporate elements of the local culture (like in the incorporation of the Korean landscape and 'heritage sites' in Hadid's designs), *place* is

---

<sup>2</sup> Dongdaemun-gu '동대문구,' meaning East Gate neighborhood in Korean, is the name of the architecture's surrounding neighborhood.

<sup>3</sup> Park, Soo-mee. "Local architects lash out as bulldozers raze Dongdaemun." Korea Joongang Daily, (January 24, 2008).



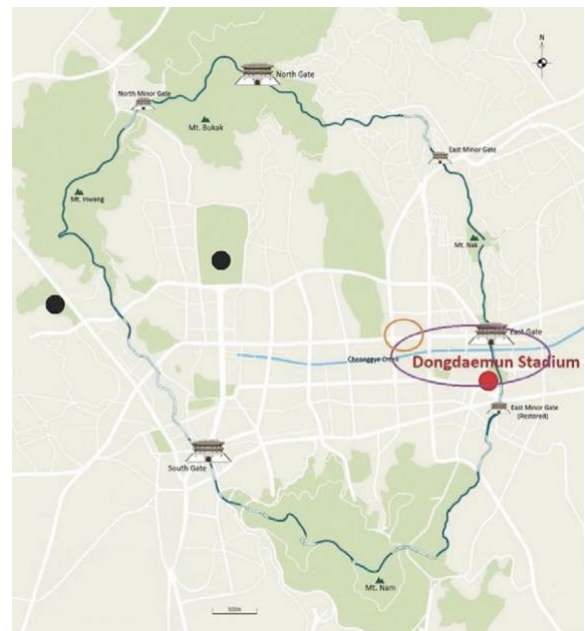
what makes space. Deconstructivist architecture, like Hadid's DDP that erases history of place, is not a way of *bridging* the old and new, but rather another way of erasing the old with the new, or a postmodern *tabula rasa*.

### ***Remembering: “Space of Places,” Dongdaemun Stadium and Dongdaemun-gu before Hadid's DDPP***

Dongdaemun-gu, the neighborhood in which the DDPP is located, is an area of Seoul with a rich Korean identity and history—that is still partially visible today with the continued existence of the Dongdaemun market (built in 1905) adjacent to the DDP site (Pre-DDPP Dongdaemun-gu shown in **Figure 2**). The history of the site of the DDPP can be evaluated in terms of two primary phases: the pre-colonial Joseon Dynasty phase and the colonial phase.

During the pre-colonial Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897), Dongdaemun-gu was used for both military and commercial purposes. *Hadogam* was a garrison in Dongdaemun-gu that was used for defending the kingdom. *Ihyeon* in Dongdaemun-gu was one of three main markets in Seoul, serving as the site of trading among merchants.

In 1905, Japan initiated its colonial rule in Korea; as one of the first colonial government's acts, Japan implemented a currency reform that, in effect, wiped out most of the



**Figure 2** The location of *Dongdaemun Stadium* (red dot) and the areas surrounding Dongdaemun Stadium showing the location of *Dongdaemun Market* (oval shape) and *Ihyeon* (circle). 2018. Courtesy of Hyun Kyung Lee; Map by Kim Jong-geun and illustration by Eom Eun-hye.



traditional Korean markets in the Seoul metropolitan area. In response, a group of Korean merchants established the Dongdaemun Market as a “permanent market aimed to protect native Korean capital and interests against Japanese merchants.”<sup>4</sup> As a result of the establishment of this permanent Korean market, the neighborhood of Dongdaemun would serve as a symbolic space of Korean identity within the Japanese colonial regime.

In 1924, the Japanese colonial government decided to construct a stadium in Seoul to commemorate the wedding of Crown Prince Hirohito. The site chosen for the construction of this stadium was a public park within the space of the Dongdaemun market (see [Figure 2](#)).

Dongdaemun Stadium (at the time called Gyeongseong<sup>5</sup> Stadium) opened on October 15, 1925.

Lauded as “the second biggest stadium [in Asia] following the Goshien Stadium in Japan,”<sup>6</sup>

Dongdaemun Stadium housed an athletics field, ballpark, football field, tennis courts, swimming pool, horse racing tracks and greenery.

Throughout the course of the early twentieth century, Dongdaemun Stadium hosted numerous fixtures in various sports, including matches between local Korean teams and Japanese sides. Hyun Kyung Lee states that in these Korea-Japan sporting matches, “Korean sports players were equated with warriors: in the Japanese colonial context, playing sports matches against Japan could be seen as a form of Korean independence activity.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, although the Dongdaemun stadium was constructed by the colonial government, the space of the Dongdaemun stadium evolved into a space of colonial resistance. Within the space of

---

<sup>4</sup> Lee, Hyun Kyung. “Recreating Dongdaemun Stadium in South Korea: Beyond Japanese Colonial Memories and Towards a Global City.” *Seoul Journal of Korean studies* 31, no. 1 (2018): 106.

<sup>5</sup> The Japanese government referred to the area of Seoul as Gyeongseong, ‘경성,’ during their colonial regime.

<sup>6</sup> Kim Myeonggwon, and Pak Kidong. “Hanguk geunhyeondae seupocheu ui sansil, Dongdaemun undongjang” [The cradle of modern Korean sports, Dongdaemun stadium]. *Seupocheu illyuhak yeongu* 5, no. 1 (2010): 50.

<sup>7</sup> Lee.: 107.



Dongdaemun Stadium, Koreans living under the oppressive Japanese rule were allowed the rare opportunity of outwardly expressing national pride

When we examine the area of Dongdaemun-gu with consideration of its holistic history, we find that the neighborhood of Dongdaemun *evolved* into a symbolic space of Korean identity and local resistance *through* its experiences of colonial resistance under the Japanese colonial regime (1905-1945). In other words, the identity and history of the neighborhood of Dongdaemun is inextricable from its colonial legacy. Throughout the remaining course of the twentieth century, Dongdaemun Stadium continued to serve as a symbolic space for *contesting* national identity. Following the end of Japanese occupation, the stadium space not only continued to serve as a site for sports matches and national sports pride, but the stadium was also used as a site of direct political rallies of local people protesting against the Korean state (see [Figure 3](#)).<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 3** ‘동대문운동장 앞에서 열린 도시빈민대회를 전경들이 지키고 서 있는 모습’ ‘Police Officers Stand Guard in Front of Urban Poverty Citizen Rally Organized in front of Dongdaemun Stadium.’ 1987. Photo Courtesy of Park Young Soo (박용수), Korea Democracy Foundation’s Open Archives.

Manuel Castells defines “space of places” as “spaces that organize experience and activity around the confines of locality.”<sup>9</sup> Dongdaemun Stadium was a “space of places” for the neighborhood of Dongdaemun. Dongdaemun Stadium grounded the identity of the neighborhood as a space of local resistance and a space of Korean identity.

<sup>8</sup> Lee.: 108-111.

<sup>9</sup> Castells, Manuel. “Space of Flows, Space of Places: Materials for a Theory of Urbanism in the Information Age,” in *The Cyber Cities Reader*, ed. Stephen Graham (2003).: 85.



We can interpret the decision by the government to raze Dongdaemun Stadium as *political* because Dongdaemun Stadium throughout its existence was reclaimed by its users as a symbolically political space. The erasure of Dongdaemun Stadium can be interpreted as an act of political *forgetting*. Overwritten by a new “space of flows” designed by a star architect, the loss of Dongdaemun Stadium was not only the loss of a physical building but a loss of history and identity.

### ***Forgetting: “Space of Flows,” Hadid’s Dongdaemun Design Plaza and Park***

In this section, I will analyze aspects of the architectural design of Hadid’s DDPP that served to bolster the neoliberal political narratives of the state. The state and DDPP architects claimed that Hadid’s DDPP design maintained a “space of places” through its formal and historical references. However, I argue that deconstructivist architecture’s inherently fragmented and disorienting nature actually has the opposite effect: it destroys its context by creating instagrammable facades that exist for the “space of flows,” which Castells defines as: space that “links up electronically separate locations in an interactive network that connects activities and people in distinct geographical contexts.”<sup>10</sup> Although the Korean state media argued that Hadid’s design bridged the old and new through modern design that referenced Korean landscapes and incorporated historic artifacts, I argue that in practice, Hadid’s computer-modeled design transformed a “space of places” into a “place of flows.”

---

<sup>10</sup> Castells.: 85.





**Figure 4** Aerial View of DDPP from the outside, 2014. Photo Courtesy of Seoul Design Foundation.



**Figure 5** Interior Views of DDPP, 2014. Photo Courtesy of Seoul Design Foundation.

**Figure 4** shows an exterior view of the DDPP, while **Figure 5** shows an interior view of the DDPP. Both the interior forms—including the stairways and mezzanines— and the massing as a whole are composed of undulating, flowing forms. In a press conference, Hadid said “the building has become part of the landscape itself,”<sup>11</sup> referring to the way that the undulating forms of the DDPP were directly constructed using satellite data that observed the flow of water in the Han River.<sup>12</sup> Zaha Hadid architects used fluid simulation technology to create their architecture models, and as a result, their design directly “incorporates” the Han River, a significant feature of the Korean landscape. Additionally, the green roofs (as seen in the patches of grass embedded in parts of the buildings’s metal envelope in **Figure 4**) added on the top of the DDPP buildings’ referenced the greenery that runs alongside the Han River in Seoul. Using modern building information modeling techniques, Zaha Hadid architects directly incorporated portions of the Korean landscape into its deconstructivist forms.

Prior to the implementation of Hadid’s designs, but after the decision to demolish Dongdaemun Stadium had been finalized in 2008, the Korean government ordered for

<sup>11</sup> Zaha Hadid as quoted in Limb, Jae Eun, “Curved architecture merges with landscape,” Korea.net (2014).

<sup>12</sup> The Han River is a river that flows through Seoul, and through significant parts of the South Korean peninsula. It serves as the source of water for Seoul, and has played an important role in demarcating the geography of Korea from Korea’s early history.



archaeological investigations— looking for pre-colonial artifacts on the site of Dongdaemun Stadium— to be held from 2008-2009. The government used preservationist rhetoric to argue that the stadium’s demolition was necessary for a greater, nationalist agenda that would “preserve the greater traditional value of the site’s Joseon legacy.”<sup>13</sup> In these archaeological investigations of the site, the remains of 142 (out of 265) meters of the precolonial city wall (‘Yigansumun’) were found, and subsequently restored to their original state.

Within the DDPP design, Zaha Hadid incorporated the Yigansumun remains and two stadium floodlights from the Dongdaemun Stadium into the park landscape. Furthermore, per the request of the Korean Cultural Heritage Committee, Hadid also incorporated the Yigansum Exhibition Hall, Dongdaemun History Museum, and Dongdaemun Stadium Memorial into the DDPP (shown in the **Figure 6** map). Through this direct implementation of historical and cultural artifacts into Hadid’s designs, the Korean government could argue that Hadid’s overall architecture blended modern design and historic reference.



**Figure 6** Official Map of Dongdaemun History and Culture Park Station (DDPP).

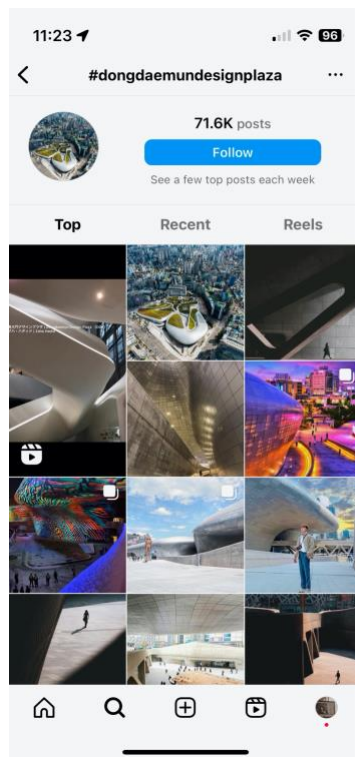
From the point of view of a user of the space, however, it is impossible to reconcile the monumental deconstructivist architecture of Hadid’s designs with the DDPP landscape’s

<sup>13</sup> Lee.: 114





**Figure 7** View from inside Dongdaemun Design Plaza, 2014. Photograph by Virgile Simon Bertrand.



**Figure 8** DDPP: a monument for Instagram, the “space of flows”? (71.6K posts), 2023.

historical and referential intentions. The aluminum that encases the building’s structures makes the building stand out from its surrounding urban context; its giant, curved metal facades make the structure seem like an out-of-place space ship in the urban Seoul landscape. Furthermore, the sheer height and volume of the DDPP’s curving forms create spatial voids where the space’s users can get lost in between. **Figure 7** shows a person in proportion to the scale of the Dongdaemun Design Plaza. The architecture, with its silver, glimmering aluminum panels and giant concrete flooring and structures, is meant to disorient you and take you out of your place and into the “space of flows” that the star architect, Zaha Hadid, has created (Instagram “space of flows” screenshotted in **Figure 8**).

### ***Forgetting to Remember?***

Perhaps if Dongdaemun Stadium did not have its colonial legacy, the Korean government may have deemed the site a heritage architecture worth preserving. The South Korean state has a history of uncritically condemning anything referential to Korea’s colonial past, as demonstrated



with the condemnation of the Buyeo National Museum (1967-1968); its design was criticized as “too Japanese” by the Korean public. ‘

Throughout this paper, however, I argue that Dongdaemun Stadium’s colonial legacy is precisely what makes its “space of places.” Throughout Dongdaemun Stadium’s history, the stadium space was reclaimed as a space of local resistance and national pride by its Korean users. The Dongdaemun Stadium’s legacy in national memory was not one of oppression but one of *resistance*, resistance that extended throughout the course of the twentieth century, past colonialism to state developmentalism and later oppressive neoliberalism.

When the Korean government razed the stadium in 2007, the state participated in a *politics of memory*: the Korean state dictated what national spaces are *worth* remembering through a top-down, superficial analysis of architecture and objects. Ironically, this analysis was devoid of the *people* that are the active agents of memory.

In Zaha Hadid’s deconstructivist design, there is so much history lost in the shiny, disorienting forms. People and people’s past, present, and future experiences of the space are lost in the spectacular “space of flows.”

Throughout this paper, I criticize the state’s decision to demolish a “space of places” to build anew. All that remains of Dongdaemun Stadium are two stadium lights left unscathed as well as a small Dongdaemun Stadium memorial within the park (pictured in **Figure 9**). But I question: is there a need to *forget* in order to *remember*?





**Figure 9** Dongdaemun Stadium Memorial building and two remaining stadium floodlights, 2021.

Photograph by 뽀티

<https://www.doopedia.co.kr/travel/viewContent.do?idx=210529000126748>



## Bibliography

Castells, Manuel. "Space of Flows, Space of Places: Materials for a Theory of Urbanism in the Information Age," in *The Cyber Cities Reader*, ed. Stephen Graham (2003): 85.

Hwang, Jin-Tae. "Territorialized Urban Mega-Projects Beyond Global Convergence: The Case of Dongdaemun Design Plaza & Park Project, Seoul." *Cities* 40, no. a (2014): 82.

Kim Myeonggwon, and Pak Kidong. "Hanguk geunhyeondae seupocheu ui sansil, Dongdaemun undongjang" [The cradle of modern Korean sports, Dongdaemun stadium]. *Seupocheu illyuhak yeongu* 5, no. 1 (2010): 50.

Limb, Jae Eun, "Curved architecture merges with landscape," *Korea.net* (2014).

Park, Soo-mee. "Local architects lash out as bulldozers raze Dongdaemun." *Korea Joongang Daily*, (January 24, 2008).