

Some Design Approaches for Practical Use of Small Urban Spaces

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ABSTRACT

Today, the availability of usable pieces of land in urbanized areas is very limited. Specifically, it is very difficult to secure a piece of land to be used as a park for the public, mainly due to the high price of land in cities. However, the City of Seoul has carried out three action plans to secure land deemed for insufficient parks and to vitalize these small pieces of land in downtown areas such as following:

1. Ssamzie-park(Korean version of a 'vest pocket park')Development Plan in 1990 through 1991
2. Modernization Plan for Children's Parks since 1994
3. Maeul-madang (Korean version of 'community garden') Development Plan since 1996

The purpose of this study was to present some design approaches for practical use of small urban spaces by articulating the concepts of Modernization Plan for Children's Park and Maeul-madang Development Plan of the winning entries and by describing how the concepts were actualized in reality.

Key Words : Design approaches, Small urban spaces, Ssamzie-park, Children's park, Maeul-madang

I. INTRODUCTION

As of the end of December 1993, the projected area for parks in the City of Seoul is 150,361,379m²(1,351 parks), which is 22.58% of the city planning area, 24.84% of the administrative district area, and 42.74% of urban district area. Among these, the area for developed parks is 103,466,304m², which is 68.81% of the total city parks. However, national parks and city nature parks that are located on the outskirts of the city occupy 83,939,488m², which is 81.13% of all furnished

parks. Hence, the furnished area for neighborhood parks and children's parks in the urban area is merely 11,840,792m², which is no more than 11.44% of the whole area for furnished parks in Seoul(Park, 1993). The park area per capita is 13.76m² and exceeds the 6m² level which is set by the regulation for the city parks, and the area for furnished parks reaches 9.47m². However, the legal area for the furnished city parks is 5.41m², which is lower than the standard.

On the other hand, the area for neighborhood parks and children's parks that function as 'urban

parks', is only 1.08m² per person, and it is never sufficient. Even though the area for city parks as a whole per capita in the City of Seoul as of 1994 ranks relatively highly compared to other cities abroad, the actual park ratio is much lower because of the unbalanced distribution of parks. Therefore the City of Seoul has devised and carried out three action plans to land considered secure insufficient for park land and to vitalize these small pieces of land in downtown areas since 1990.

The first one is "The Construction Plan for Ssamzi Parks", that was planned in 1990 and carried out in 1991, jointly with the Ministry of Culture. "The Modernization Plan for Children's Parks" in 1994 was the second, and "Maeul-madang Development Plan" carried out since 1996 is the third. Nowadays available land resource in a highly populated modern city is very limited, and it is very difficult to secure new pieces of land for construction of municipal parks because of high price for land.

In this paper, we suggest concrete plans for efficient utilization of small urban spaces scattered in various parts of a city, based on the concepts of the prizewinning designs for the "Modernization Plan for Children's Parks" and the "Maeul-madang Development Plan".

II. PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS AND EXPERIENCE

1. Importance of Small Urban Spaces in a Large City

It is very difficult to find new urban spaces for parks in a large highly-populated city like Seoul, and nearly impossible to secure a piece of land of moderate size even if the high price is paid. Even though the minimum size for the children's parks,

which is the smallest among that for city parks, is 1500m² by the current regulation for city parks, what's important seems to be the location of such parks rather than the size as we observed from the utilization habits of the general public.

However small pieces of urban spaces scattered over the city have until now been used for building sites, parking lots, *et. al.* exclusively for economic gains. The same thing happens to the management of the land owned by the government or the public, and a lot of useful pieces of land owned by the districts of Seoul or the Korean government has been sold.

It's time to think of better utilization of such small urban spaces, since a green and comfortable living environment is needed more than ever before. We would visit and enjoy beautiful parks in the vicinity of our home any time and more frequently, even if they are small, rather than larger parks far away(hence inducing heavier traffic and parking problems) from our work or home. It will be quite helpful in the formation of an open space system in the City of Seoul, if such small pieces of land are developed into small parks scattered over the city. Small, but well designed parks can contribute to a better landscape of the city, and will be the place where the general public can enjoy a wider green tract of land.

2. Vest Pocket Park in the U. S. A.

As the name "vest pocket" implies, small city parks that symbolize a small but vital and comfortable place, was first tried by the City of New York in the 1960s. Paley Park, designed by Robert Zion in 1967, was the first such one. The total area is 360m², and there is a water wall and small convenience stores with portable chairs and tables, with 17 honey locusts. It is noteworthy that the

design of such a small vest pocket park was the turning point for the New York City Park Department to discard their old mindset, “.....the smallest useful and manageable urban park could be no smaller than three acres.....”(Zion, 1991). The park is being considered as a successful example because of frequent utilization by pedestrians and those visiting and working at adjacent stores and office buildings. Since then, vest pocket parks spread countrywide very rapidly, and a number of such parks have been constructed in various forms on vacant lots and small urban spaces left by cities’



Figure 1. Paley Park, New York

urban renewal programs.

In Japan, small parks built under the administrative guidance of the City of Tokyo, on vacant lots left after construction of high rise buildings in Shinjuku district in the 1970s, obtained favorable reception, and since then such small city parks spread throughout out(City of Seoul, 1990).

3. Ssamzie Parks in Korea

In Korea, there was also a trend to build small parks on vacant lots left by urban renewal programs in the late 1970s. However most of them are located in business and commercial areas in the heart of the city, resulting in vacancies during the night(City of

Seoul, 1990).

The Korean government established the Ministry of Culture(currently, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism), and has tried to improve and spread culture, and to overcome uneven distribution. In accordance with such policy, the City of Seoul and the Ministry of Culture built Ssamzie parks(Korean equivalent of a ‘vest pocket park’) in a highly populated low-income residential area, as a convenient place to share public culture and welfare.

A plan for three Ssamzie parks has been devised and carried out experimentally, presenting a new model for Korean small city parks. However it is regretful that selection of sites is limited to hilly sections of the city, and potential visitors are mainly the low-income residents in the vicinity. The design seems to have tried to make the small city parks a more active space, since more than 90% of the whole area is covered by hard surfaced paving, which is too much considering its relative small size(108, 199, 288m² accordingly) and is rather too far removed from ‘green’ space.

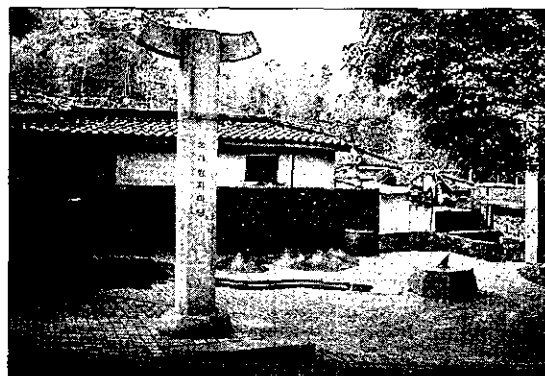


Figure 2. Nowon Ssamzie-park, Seoul

III. MODERNIZATION PLAN FOR CHILDREN'S PARKS

1. Overview of the Plan

There are 1,083 children's parks(1,648,273m²

in total) in the City of Seoul, and their average size is around 1,500m². However 63% of them were built more than 10 years ago and their facilities are of a very poor quality. The importance of children's parks, even though they are generally small in size, which enhances the potential for accessibility and frequency of visits by the general public since they are scattered over the city, have been ignored compared to other types of city parks. Moreover it is nearly impossible to secure enough urban spaces for parks, since usable pieces of land in modern cities are very limited and expensive.

In this respect, the City of Seoul collected designs of children's parks publicly, and selected two prize winners. The design of 'Wawoo Children's Park' was one of them. Construction of the two children's parks were completed at May 4, 1994 and the two prizewinning design offices laid out basic plans for 22 children's parks, one in each district in Seoul. Some of them are already completed or under construction, but the others still remain only as a basic plan for some reasons of district offices.

2. Concepts in the Modernization Plan for Children's Parks

Judging from the present situation, basic strategies for modernization of children's parks can be summarized as follows. A modernized children's park should function not just as a playground for children, but also as a comfortable place for rest and conversation between generations and family members, and as a public place for neighborhood events.

In this respect, children's parks should be distinguished from children's playgrounds, mandatory in each apartment complex, and the facilities in children's parks are not a optional condition but a necessary one. The image of children's parks that satisfy such a concept should be based on the characteristics and history of each district. Hence the playgrounds in large apartment complexes in a new town should be differentiated from the 1,083 children's parks in the old downtown area.

3. Wawoo Children's Park

1) Present condition

(1) Location : Mapo-Gu, Sangsu-Dong 72-7

(2) Total area : 2,924m²

(3) Overview of the present condition (Figure 3)

- The surrounding area is a slope, and there exists a large wall between the park and the Hongik University, functioning as strong visual element

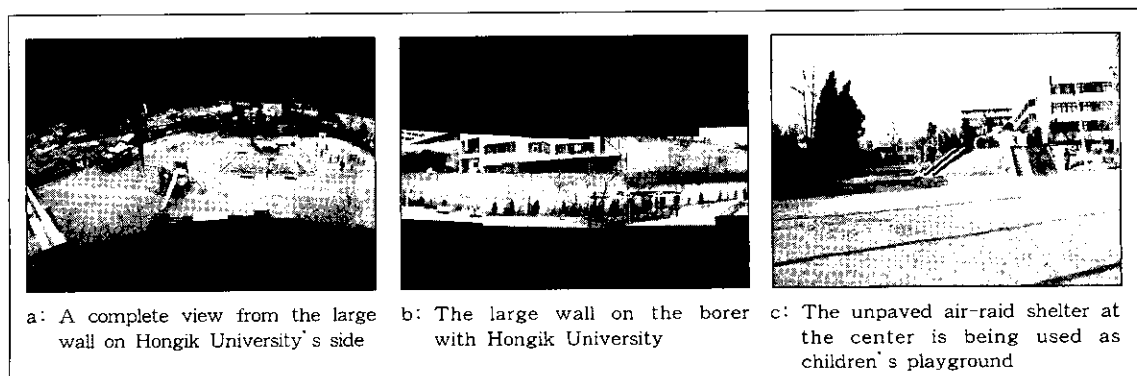


Figure 3. The existing condition of Wawoo children's park

- A stone embankment exists between the park and the detached housing area in front, and there is one entrance.

- Hongik University and Hongik Girls' High School are close to the park, and it is expected that the park will be visited by people of every walk of life.

2) Theme and image of the space

If we view landscape design as a process of transforming a certain space, various approaches may be taken according to the designer's concept oneself or the characteristics of the project, depending on the inherent nature of the work. It is a product of a series of composite but sometimes illogical processes, which arise from reinterpretation of characteristic physical or non-physical conditions that the site has, and from the idea on 'what' and 'how' a designer tries to achieve. If the 'what' we mentioned here is represented as the spatial theme on various behaviors that a designer tries to represent within the space, the 'how' can be seen as the overall atmosphere or image of the space.

The designer wished Wawoo children's park to be utilized not just as a playground for children, but as a comfortable place for the rest and conversation between generations and family members, and also as a public place for neighboring cultural, artistic, or educational events sponsored by the adjacent Hongik University. The designer tried to represent the old image of Mapo area(Figure 4), that can be summarized by Mapo Ferry and a yellow mast, and to use super graphic images on the subject of Korean traditional fairy tales as the park's background image, there loy making use of the existing wall.

3) Master Plan

The design concept lies mainly on the idea that the existing wall in the projected area is not a

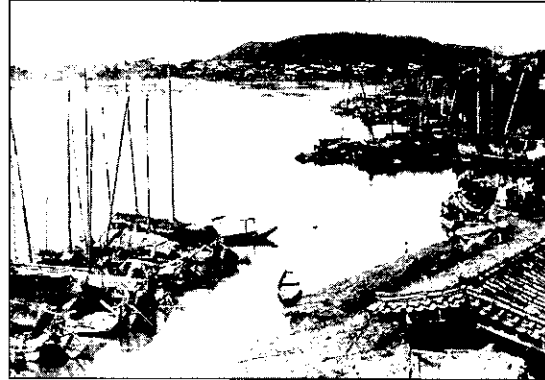


Figure 4. View of old Mapo Ferry

limiting factor but a starting point for the design process. That is, the design tried to integrate the vertical wall not only for the construction of facilities for children's playground but also for a background for a park 'setting'. The design also borrowed the old image of Mapo area, that can be summarized by Mapo Ferry and a yellow mast, for facilities in children's playground. This has been achieved by the children's composite play facility in the shape of a ship.

The super graphic that makes the most of the existing wall consists of two parts. One is a painting that gives an image of old Mapo Ferry on the Han river, as a backdrop to the composite play facility symbolizing a ship. The other, at the entrance, is a painting based on Korean folk tales, that will give dreams and imagination to children, and remind grown-ups of fairy tales told by their grandmothers in their childhood, raising harmonious conversations between family members and generations.

A big tree, which is common to and symbolic of Korean traditional villages, has been planted at the entrance. Two rows of trees that symbolize 'village grove' were introduced not only as a buffer zone between children's play facilities and the multi-purpose plaza but also as a spatial constituent to enhance the pictorial image, emphasizing the main pedestrian walkway toward the small amphitheater.

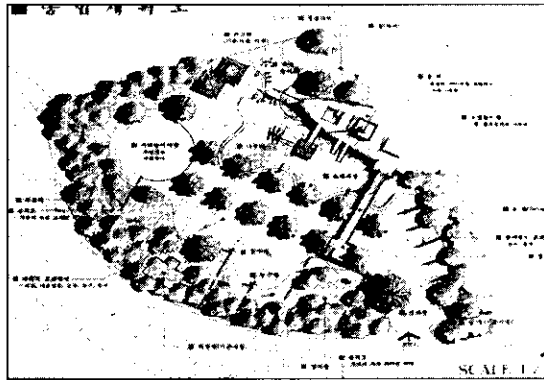


Figure 5. Master plan of Wawoo children's park

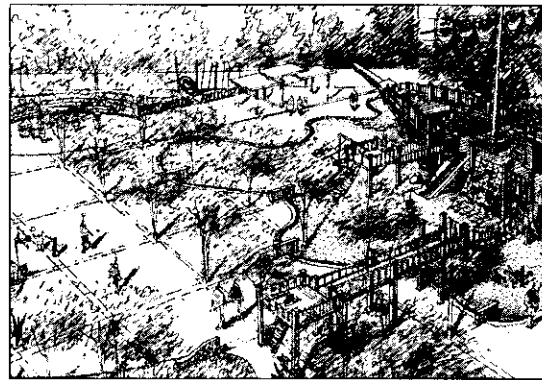


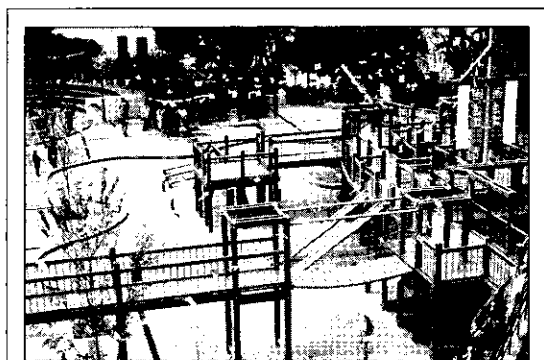
Figure 6. Bird's-eye-view of Wawoo children's park



Figure 7. The complete view after completion of Wawoo children's park.



Figure 8. Super-graphic based on Korean traditional fairy tale.



a: A composite facility of children's play in the shape of a ship



a: A composite facility of children's play in the sand, and a playground

Figure 9. Partial view after completion of Wawoo children's park

V. MAEUL-MADANG DEVELOPMENT PLAN

1. Overview of the Plan

The objectives of the 'Maeul-madang development plan' carried out in 1996, is to provide city residents with green space that can serve as a comfortable place for mutual conversation and a

break from city life. The city of Seoul selected 10 small experimental sites of various size between 290m² and 845m², and collected designs for three parks publicly. The remaining seven were also designed by the prize winner. After their completion in 1997, an additional 80 sites(30 in 1997 and 50 more in 1998) were selected. They are either under construction or still in the design state by several design offices making use of the basic design concept of the prize winners.

2. The Concept of Mauel-Madang Development Plan

Korean traditional 'madang' was a space of great variability. Not only a vacant lot at the center of a village but also the forest at the entrance of a village and the riverside sandy beach played a role. It has been the place for work, amusement, and ceremonial occasions. Traditional 'madang' has changed in shape and scope, becoming plazas in modern cities, multi-purpose open space in city parks, or a paved public square. However they do not fulfill the function of 'madang' satisfactorily, which is inevitable in this industrialized information society.

Good public morals and manners such as working together and having good times with neighbors have been a long tradition in Korea, which has been a farming society. However it is a matter of fact that such mutual consciousness gradually weakens as industrialization and urbanization proceed. Cities have been formed for the convenience of its residents, but they have some defects. High walls exist between houses, and it is not easy to have a garden of moderate size. Narrow roads in villages are full of parked cars and discarded trash bags. Cutting down trees to provide parking lots is an example of negative effects arising

from the conglomeration of a city. Hence it is quite meaningful to have a well-designed 'mauel-madang', regardless of its size, in such a hard city to live in.

In this respect, judging from the small scale of the sites, the 'mauel-madang' to be built in downtown of Seoul cannot be a restoration of Korean traditional 'madang'. However, it should not be just a modern paved desolate plaza left behind when there is no special events or public programs. It should be a place that can give images of 'mutual consciousness among neighbors', 'conversation with neighbors', 'a nice place to gather', 'affinity for natural environment', 'an open space where we can have serenity of mind', and 'a place to be taken care of by joint efforts'. The author suggests the following motto for an objective of the 'mauel-madang' plan so that it can function as a community garden the whole villager can enjoy and take care of together.

- In quest of the lost garden of mind -

The traditional concept of 'madang' which implies both work and amusement, seems to have changed and fixed to a more dynamic one. That is, its cultural concept has been emphasized more than the traditional spatial concept, because the word 'madang' has been misused too often as a terminology for dynamic activities like 'madang-guk(play)', 'madang-nori(drama)', 'madang-gut(exorcism)' since the 1970s.

But the chosen sites seem to be too small to be developed as a hard-paved place to accommodate such dynamic activities in today's 'madang'.

In the urbanization process, one of what the moderns really miss is a dreamy garden, where birds sing, trees shed their leaves in fall, and flowers bloom - rose mosses, magnolia, and other flowers in

front and back yards.

The author wishes each scattered small urban space left as it is to be reborn as a characteristic community garden, that can function as the lost dreamy garden of mind - a place where we feel preciousness of nature and thank for the green natural environment. Also as a very pretty garden that each of the villager is eager to take care of

3. Tongeu-Dong Maeul-Madang

We suggest, as a model for utilizing a small urban space in a city, the maeul-madang that was constructed on a site of 425m² at Tongeu-dong, Jongro-gu, which is one of the 10 experimental sites in accordance to the design direction of the Maeul-madang development plan under the slogan ‘In quest of the lost garden of mind’.

1) Analysis of the current situation(Figure. 10; 11; 12)

(1) current use of land unoccupied ground but in use for vegetable cultivation

(2) topography
a square flat area

(3) surroundings

The site is in contact with a road on one side and detached housing on the other three sides

Kyungbok Palace is on the opposite side of the road and the site faces ‘Youngchu-moon’

(4) accessibility

Hyojaro which leads to ‘Chungwa-dae(the Presidential Office)’ is close

Good accessibility since the site is on the road

2) Design ideas

It is often said that the moderns living in a city represented by a forest of concrete, miss a lot of important things. Various favorable images - like green thick forests and clear streams, a cumulus

cloud and the setting sun, or the landscape of our native place - always come with the natural scene in background. Everyone yearns for such a familiar and sentimental Korean common landscape(Figure 13) but it is hard to come in touch with it. Especially

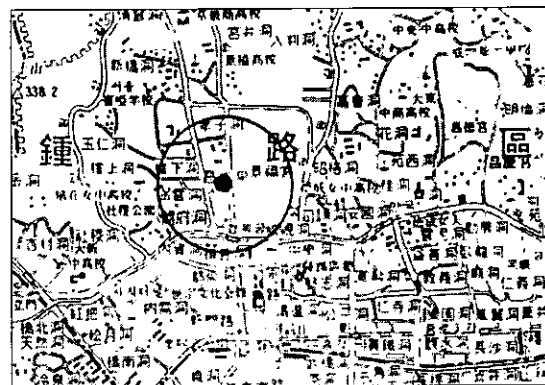


Figure 10. Location map

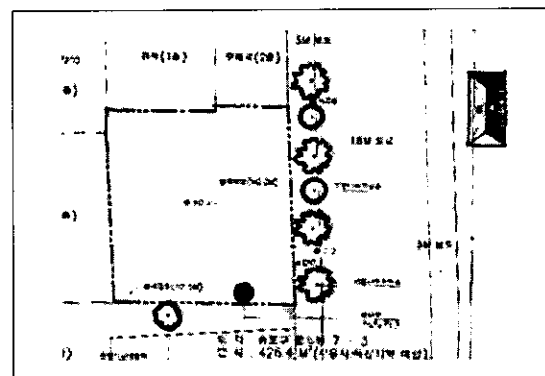


Figure 11. Site analysis

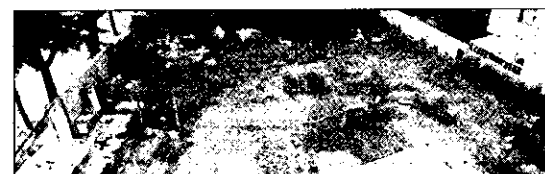


Figure 12. Before construction

the children residing in cities do not have such a chance. Hence the designer tried to introduce, even partially, such traditional and familiar landscape to every ‘mauel-madang’ to be built later on.

At the site near Kyungbok Palace, the designer

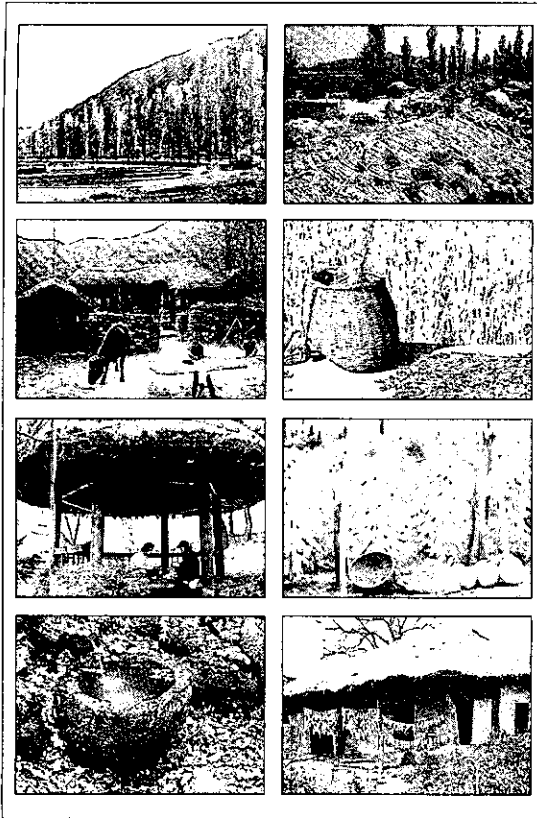


Figure 13. Korean common landscape

tried to produce an atmosphere of a nostalgic and sentimental garden in a private house to give an image of 'countryside', 'home town', and 'agrarian landscape', in contrast to the royal garden in the palace

VI. CONCLUSION

The City of Seoul has devised and carried out three action plans to secure previously considered insufficient park land and to vitalize small pieces of land in the downtown area since 1990. The first one is the construction plan for Ssamzi parks, that was planned in 1990 and carried out in 1991, jointly with the Ministry of Culture. The Modernization plan for children's parks in 1994 was the second, and Maeul-

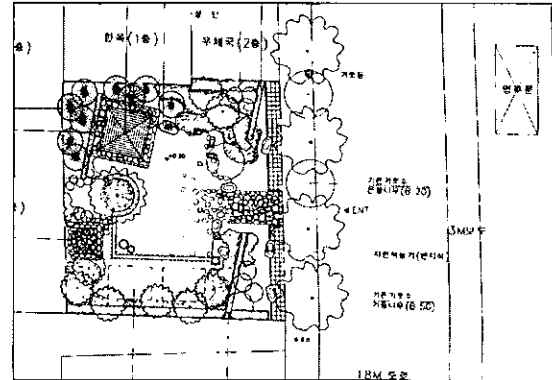


Figure 14. Tongeu-dong Maeul-madang Landscape Plan

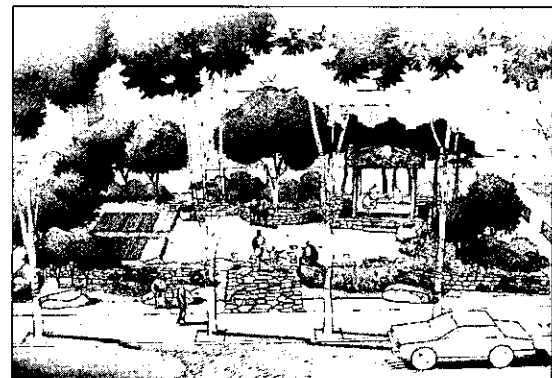


Figure 15. Perspective Drawing



Figure 16. The complete view after completion of Tongeu-dong Maeul-madang

madang development plan carried out since 1996 is the third.

Three Ssamzie parks have been constructed experimentally in a highly populated low-income residential area, as a convenient place to share

public culture and welfare, at 3 sites of size between 330m² and 990m², presenting a new experimental model for Korean small urban parks. However it is regretful that the selection of sites and possible visitor groups are somewhat restrictive, and the project did not continue after completion of the three Ssamzie parks. Moreover, in utilization of small urban spaces, the design seems to have stressed on providing more hard surfaced 'paving', rather than providing 'green spaces' in the city.

On the contrary, the objectives of the modernization plan for children's parks are to improve the poor environment of the 1083 existing children's parks, whose average size is around 1500m² and that are between 10 and 20 years old. The main idea in 'Modernization Plan for Children's Parks' is that modernized children's park should function not just as a playground for children, but also as a comfortable place for rest and conversation between generations and family members, and as a public place for neighborhood events. In this respect, the image of children's parks that provides such functions should be based on local characteristics and history of each district. Hence the playgrounds mandatory in large apartment complexes or in a new town should be differentiated from the precious 1,083 children's parks in old downtown area.

On the other hand, judging from the small scale of the sites, the 'mauel-madang' should not be just a modern paved desolate plaza left behind when there

is no special events or public programs, but should be a community garden the whole village can enjoy and take care of together. We wish each scattered small stranded urban space to be reborn as a characteristic community garden, that can function as a dreamy garden of mind - a place where we can feel preciousness of nature and thanks for the green natural environment. And as a very pretty garden that everyone will gladly take care of

It is desirable that the City of Seoul shifts its policy for city parks from securing green space on its outskirts to utilizing efficiently small urban spaces in the downtown areas. In this respect, it is meaningful that the 'Modernization Plan for the Children's Parks' and 'Maeul-madang Development Plan' have presented a concrete direction for such policy.

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