

Spatial Hegemony and Imperial Subjectivity: A Technical Analysis of Japanese Rule and the Politics of Public Space in Colonial Seoul (1910–1945)

Published: October 1, 2025 | Index ID: #616

The study of colonial Seoul (then known as Keijō) offers a profound technical case study into the intersection of urban planning, architectural semiotics, and social engineering. Todd A. Henry's seminal work, **Assimilating Seoul: Japanese Rule and the Politics of Public Space in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945**, provides a critical framework for understanding how the Japanese Government-General utilized the physical environment to foster a sense of imperial subjectivity among both Japanese settlers and colonized Koreans. This analysis moves beyond binary nationalist narratives, exploring the nuanced “spatial politics” that transformed a dynastic capital into a modern colonial metropole.

The Theoretical Framework of Spatial Citizenship

At the core of the Japanese colonial project in Korea was the tension between **assimilation** (dōmei) and **differentiation**. While the official rhetoric promoted the idea of *Naisen Ittai* (Japan and Korea as one body), the administrative reality was one of systemic inequality. Todd Henry introduces the concept of “spatial citizenship” to describe how public spaces—parks, shrines, plazas, and civic buildings—were engineered to produce specific behaviors and loyalties.

Technical governance in this era was not merely about coercion; it was about **choreography**. By redesigning the urban layout of Seoul, the colonial state sought to redirect the movements of the populace, forcing them to engage with the symbolic power of the Japanese Emperor. This involved a multi-scalar approach, ranging from the macro-level of city-wide zoning to the micro-level of ritual performance at state-mandated ceremonies.

The Three Phases of Colonial Governance (1910–1945)

To understand the evolution of public space in Seoul, one must analyze the three distinct periods of Japanese administration. Each phase utilized different spatial strategies to manage the Korean population and integrate them into the Japanese Empire.

1. The Era of Military Rule (Budō Seiji, 1910–1919)

Following the formal annexation in 1910, the Japanese authorities focused on establishing absolute control. Public space during this period was characterized by **securitization**. The former palaces of the Joseon Dynasty were repurposed or dismantled to diminish the symbolic authority of the Korean monarchy. The construction of the Government-General Building (completed later in 1926) was initiated during this time, strategically placed to physically obstruct the view of Gyeongbokgung Palace.

2. The Era of Cultural Policy (Bunka Seiji, 1919–1937)

Triggered by the March 1st Independence Movement of 1919, the Japanese administration shifted toward a more sophisticated mode of governance. This period saw the expansion of public spaces intended for “civic improvement.” Parks like Namsan and Pagoda Park became sites where the state attempted to demonstrate the “benefits” of colonial modernity. The technical goal was to co-opt the Korean middle class by providing spaces for

leisure and hygiene, while still maintaining strict surveillance through the police force.

3. The Era of Mobilization and Imperialization (K ŒÖ–æ¶ À 1937–1945)

With the onset of the Second Sino-Japanese War, public space was militarized. The focus shifted to **total mobilization**. Every public square and schoolyard became a site for Shinto rituals and military drills. The spatial strategy during this final phase was designed to erase Korean cultural identity entirely, forcing subjects to “volunteer” for the imperial cause through highly regimented public performances.

Comparison of Colonial Administrative Strategies

The following table provides a technical breakdown of how different administrative phases utilized urban space and policy to achieve colonial objectives.

Feature	Military Rule (1910-1919)	Cultural Policy (1919-1937)	Mobilization (1937-1945)
Primary Objective	Pacification and Control	Co-optation and Reform	Total Imperialization (K 〰-æŋ •)
Spatial Logic	Destruction of Dynastic Symbols	Expansion of Civic Infrastructure	Ritualization and Militarization
Public Space Focus	Administrative Buildings	Parks, Libraries, and Plazas	Shinto Shrines and Parade Grounds
Korean Status	Suppressed Subjects	Emergent 'Spatial Citizens'	Imperial Subjects (Minsen)
Key Infrastructure	Military Barracks / Police Posts	Exhibition Halls / Department Stores	Ch ×6Vâ ǀ-æqk (Shinto Shrine)

Technical Urbanism: The Transformation of Keij ̊

The physical transformation of Seoul under Japanese rule was guided by Western principles of **Haussmannization**—the clearing of traditional neighborhoods to make way for wide boulevards and monumental architecture. This served two technical functions: ease of military movement and the projection of imperial majesty.

The Geopolitics of the Shinto Shrine (Ch ×6Vâ ǀ-æqk)

One of the most significant spatial interventions was the construction of the **Ch ×6Vâ ǀ-æqk** Namsan Mountain. Completed in 1925, this Shinto shrine was positioned to look down upon the city, creating a vertical hierarchy. The technical design of the shrine approach—including a massive stone staircase—forced visitors into a posture of physical exertion and eventual submission as they ascended toward the site of imperial worship.

The Government-General Building (GGB)

The GGB was a marvel of colonial engineering and a masterstroke of spatial propaganda. Constructed using neoclassical granite, it was the largest administrative building in the Japanese Empire outside of Tokyo. Its placement in front of Gyeongbokgung Palace was a deliberate act of **architectural erasure**. By eclipsing the seat of the Joseon kings, the Japanese state materialized its claim to permanent sovereignty over the peninsula.

Socio-Technical Control: Public Hygiene and Surveillance

Beyond monumental architecture, the colonial state implemented rigorous systems of **public hygiene (eisei)**. Public space was sanitized as part of a civilizing mission. However, these hygiene initiatives were often thinly veiled mechanisms for social control. The technical implementation included:

- Compulsory Vaccinations: Administered in public squares to demonstrate the state's scientific superiority.
- Zoning Laws: Separating the “modern” Japanese sectors of the city (South Village/Honmachi) from the “traditional” Korean sectors (North Village/Jongno).
- Street Lighting: Improved not for safety, but for constant nocturnal surveillance of Korean neighborhoods.

The Agency of the Colonized: Negotiation and Subversion

A critical contribution of Todd Henry's *Assimilating Seoul* is the recognition that Koreans were not passive recipients of colonial spatial politics. Public space became a contested arena where Koreans negotiated their

identity. This manifested in several ways:

1. Mimicry and Performance: Koreans participating in state rituals often did so with a level of “performance” that satisfied the authorities while maintaining an internal distance from the ideology.
2. The Rise of the 'Modern Girl' and 'Modern Boy': Urban youth used department stores and cafes in the Japanese district as spaces to perform a cosmopolitan identity that transcended colonial boundaries.
3. Reclamation of the Square: Despite surveillance, public squares like Jongno remained sites of latent resistance, where rumors and nationalist sentiment circulated under the guise of daily commerce.

Comparative Matrix: Colonial vs. Pre-Colonial Urbanism

Metric	Joseon Seoul (Pre-1910)	Colonial Keijō “CR”
Urban Center	Palace and Royal Ancestral Shrine	Government-General and Station
Street Layout	Organic, following topography	Grid-based, axial boulevards
Market Dynamics	Periodic and traditional markets	Fixed department stores and malls
Public Gathering	Religious festivals and royal processions	State ceremonies and imperial rituals
Surveillance	Neighborhood watch (Oga-jaktong)	Professionalized Police / Panopticon

Technical Challenges and Failure Modes of Assimilation

Despite the sophisticated use of public space, the Japanese project of assimilation faced several technical failures. These “failure modes” highlight the limits of spatial engineering:

- The Paradox of Modernity: By providing Koreans with education and access to modern public spaces, the state inadvertently equipped them with the intellectual tools to demand the very rights (citizenship, equality) that the colonial state was unwilling to grant.
- Resource Scarcity: In the 1940s, the focus on the war effort led to the neglect of urban maintenance. The decaying public infrastructure undermined the state's claim to superior civilizational progress.
- Identity Resilience: Spatial choreography could dictate movement, but it could not dictate belief. The persistence of the Korean language and family structures outside of the state-controlled public sphere created a private realm of resistance.

Implementation of Colonial Memory in the Post-Colonial Era

The legacy of “Assimilating Seoul” continues to haunt contemporary urban planning in South Korea. The decision to demolish the Government-General Building in 1995 (on the 50th anniversary of liberation) was a technical and symbolic act of “de-assimilating” the city. The restoration of Gyeongbokgung Palace represents a multi-decade engineering project to reverse the spatial logic imposed by the Japanese administration.

However, many elements of the colonial period remain integrated into the city's fabric. The location of major train stations, the layout of the primary financial districts, and even certain park layouts are direct descendants of the colonial Keijō urban plan. Understanding this history is essential for modern urban planners tasked with managing a global megacity that is still reconciling with its colonial past.

Summary and Broader Implications

The technical history of colonial Seoul demonstrates that urban space is never neutral. It is an instrument of power used to shape identity, enforce order, and project authority. Through the lens of Todd Henry's research, we see that the Japanese rule in Korea was not just a period of military occupation, but a sophisticated experiment in spatial governance. The transition from dynastic subjects to imperial subjects was attempted through the transformation of every street corner and public plaza.

For the technical writer and historian, the lesson of *Assimilating Seoul* is the importance of looking at the built environment as a primary source. Architecture and urban planning are the “hardware” of political ideology, while

social policy and ritual are the “software.” By analyzing both, we gain a comprehensive understanding of how empires are built, maintained, and eventually dismantled. The case of Seoul serves as a warning and a guide: while space can be used to alienate and control, it can also be reclaimed as a site of national identity and collective memory.

Tags: #Todd A. Henry #Japanese Colonialism #Seoul Urban History #Public Space Politics #Colonial Modernity

