

Ewha: Campus or Complex?

The Commercialization of Women's Education Space

It has been over half a decade since I first attended this school; no longer does the proverbial “yidae ap,” or the bustling streets in front of Ewha Womans University renowned for their commercialism-promoting stores, extract from me any specific response. Once I emerge from the subway station, I am prone to avert my gaze and walk briskly past food stands, bluntly colorful signboards, gleaming windows ... and, arriving at the end of the short yet endless street, traverse to the other side, entering the realm of Ewha.

Is it autumn's spell, or the easy familiarity with which I have come to regard this school and the expanse of land it occupies that coaxes me out of my armor spun from wariness? I don't know, and frankly, I find that my attention is more preoccupied with admiring the view Ewha makes at this time of the year. It is nothing short of lovely; buildings, old and new, peek out from their respective corners of the campus, framed by masses of golden leaves, streaked with blazes of rich maroon in certain places and tinged with hues of brown in others. I momentarily liken the campus to a woman dressed in a style understated yet sophisticated, free from the clutter of self-important bodies typical of urban landscapes and distanced from the openly capital-driven world beyond her doors. Is she offering refuge from such outside forces? It seems so, and my thoughts tilt in the direction of the affirmative when I proceed further forward and the Ewha Campus Complex, or the ECC, gradually enters my periphery of vision and I decide to suspend my judgment.

¹ graduate student at Ewha Womans University



It is not until one stands directly at the mouth of the ECC that he or she begins to understand the scale of the most recent addition to the school campus. From afar, it resembles a small green hill, made picturesque with lushly planted shrubs and jagged stone paths. Upon closer observation, however, this sprawling carpet is revealed to be the rooftop of the ECC; it is but the outermost coat of the colossal construction that resides below and kept mostly hidden from people's eyes. And what a startling impression it makes upon discovery – the ground seems to have been caved in to create a gently sloping valley, and on either side, giant glass walls inform onlookers of the activities carried out on the many floors within the building. It's a striking contrast – the hollow formed between the two slopes seem to welcome everyone to its embrace; on the other hand, it also seems to keep strangers' advances at bay with its cool dress of glass that shows but also firmly guards its interiority from the external sphere.

An irony it is, to refer to the ECC as a "building," when it was formed in subterranean domain (as a consequence of burrowing rather than cumulating) instead of above ground. On second thought, however, there is little reason why this fact should come across as surprising; after all, appropriating underground space for the purposes of accommodating dense population and diverse needs is hardly new (Coex Mall, anyone?) and to follow this context is to dismiss the ECC as simply another redundancy, nothing novel. Yet it is. It is distinct from other similar examples in one crucial aspect: its separation from nature and above grown territory is precarious, deliberately so, at best.



The ECC merits notice for defying convenient labels of space; it may be irrefutable that the building was made possible by excavating a staggering amount of underground space. Yet it is less clear whether the ECC presides below ground. It has been designed in such a way so that the walk from the main gate to the deepest point of the ECC valley merely consists of a few minutes' walk; it is a continuation, there are no steps to descend, no heavy doors to push through, no other physical barriers to signify that one is moving from one type of space (above ground) to another (underground). And the ambiguity persists indoors. The two glass walls that face each other over the long belt of ground in between invite sunlight to spill its rays on all four floors of its insides. The result is the comforting illusion (and truth) that one's connection to the outside world is not completely severed. The splashes of natural light that flood the ECC seem to feed the notion that one is inside as opposed to outside but not necessarily underground; division, it seems to say, is not an inevitability. A clever negotiation, or so I've often thought.

I resume my walking from the starting point of the ECC. I take into account how the glass walls grow in their height; they are like shiny, neatly-cut cliffs, sometimes like frozen waves that could crash with splintering force if animated. A few more steps; now I feel utterly besieged by the twin curtains. It strikes me how their presence resonates at this moment when they were obscured from view only minutes before. It's a sly trick; no wonder visitors new to the campus often ask in apparent bafflement where the ECC is to be found. It does not brazenly present itself with evident expectations of being adulated; it does not flaunt its physical prowess. It makes a quiet statement in its cove, self-assured and mysterious. It is

upon proximate acquaintance that the ECC reveals itself as a force to be reckoned with; it is set apart from other campus edifices that seem to strive to be almost airborne. A smile teases my lips as I briefly consider the ECC as a modest woman.

It's tempting to construe the ECC, now arguably the representative feature of this school (which has long been committed to the enhancement of women's education), as a female figure, at once a maternal existence that graciously embraces the throngs of students that flock to her nest and at the same time the architectural counterpart of such people; visibly young, largely untried by the withering weight of experience and kindling a twentysomething brand of fearlessness behind the polished façade. If it were a lady, whichever of the two she may be it inescapably prompts sexualized readings of this space. It can't be helped that this reading is fueled by the shape of the ECC; with its stretching panes of glass, it has been numerous times compared to a woman's physique, provocatively positioned and – in light of the fact that a substantial portion of the ECC functions as public space for anyone's recreational ends – ultimately accessible, an unmistakable departure from the Ewha that once sported a reputation for being exclusive, proud, chaste. Is the ECC symbolic of Ewha's transition from espousing reserved ladylikeness to celebrating female sexuality? Or is it possible that the joke is on Ewha and the ECC is a personal commentary made by its father, French architect Dominique Perrault? In commissioning the project and fleshing out its details, what vision did the two parties share? For I find it rather difficult to accept the answer that such a stark shape could have gone unnoticed by a school that boasts its location at the forefront of feminist studies and a man whose profession is primarily based on understanding of how forms communicate messages. I follow the trail of these questions into the ECC.

I am loitering along one side of the lowest floor of the ECC (not counting the two stories of parking lots) which should perhaps separately be named "Complex," as there are no hints of "Ewha" or "Campus" about the dozen or so stores in it. I tick off their variety: convenience store, cafeteria, eyewear shop, movie theater ... and, of course, its very own Starbucks Coffee store. I recall with amusement the outrage expressed by those who felt that a Starbucks on campus soil would solidify the unflattering image of Ewha students as superficial and extravagant girls who only insist on drinking "brand" coffees. I repress the silent retort: why does the association (never mind whether it is true) bother them so? I've always been curious – is it the fact that private commercial enterprises have invaded school grounds, or the

accusation itself that stings? I resolve to drink a steaming cup of Starbucks coffee as I toy with my mushrooming queries.



A couple of minutes later, I hold in my hands the result of a personalized order and let my eyes roam the store. It is a typical day; customers are assembled in a long line to wait for their own custom-made beverages and the air is imbued with the melted sounds of scooping ice, calling out orders and lively chatter. Frankly speaking, it does not show any sign of suffering from a shortage of customers or a boycott of any sorts; it's quite a popular place for members of the Ewha community to congregate and study. I want to ask: did Ewha invite commercialism into its grounds, or did commercialism find Ewha?

I glance at the small pool of liquid in my hands. It looks more or less innocent; yet it has been cited as a corrupting influence that has sealed the fate of Ewha upon obtaining entrance into its campus. I lightly shake the cup, tossing the contents. By participating in the process of commercial exchange in order to seize this, have I encouraged money logic in a sphere that should be untouched by the rules of the market? I take a small sip. How is a Starbucks Coffee store set apart from the other aforementioned shops that are identically free from the dictates of the school in terms of its management and profit-generating schemes? I don't argue that the nature of Ewha has changed vastly with the introduction of the ECC; I wholeheartedly concede that it has succeeded in bringing "yidae ap" from the school's doorstep to its core. To interpret this move, can we say that Ewha has compromised its identity from a fully-fledged academic site to something less so? How do we evaluate the ECC which works as both a feminist rendering of tradition buildings (horizontal, environment-conscious) as well as a scandalous architectural copy of a woman's intimate body parts, displayed for the world to feast its eyes upon? Are these signs of a weakened house of education, a women's university diminished in its respectability? Is Ewha, by its own accord, ebbing away its integrity at the

same instance it attempts to breathe new vision and vigor into its home? I turn my head towards the window and stare up at the length of one side of the double walls from the inside, wondering why I feel fiercely protected by these extended wings of concrete? Eventually I down my cup but the questions have not been drained.



The night air seems to sink its fine needles into my bare face when I walk out several hours later. The heavy door shuts with a muffled thud behind me. The school day over, the ECC has been stripped of its characteristic vitality and replaced with a subdued air; no longer does it greedily drink in the sunlight. On the contrary, it is at late hours that the ECC exhales its own artificial glow, the beams bouncing off the glass and the silver frames of the building; I am inspired of a giant sea-animal, slithering past the Ewha campus, its metallic scales shimmering in its wake. Cloaked by the sequined cobalt velvet in the heavens, it seems to be pregnant with secrets. Or perhaps this is my imagination working just a bit too overtime, in the hopes of believing the ECC not yet divested of its many facets, wanting to see in it a quality hitherto unveiled yet deliciously unsettling, as is the trademark of the city landscape to which it belongs.