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Four branches of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea: how each branch has been newly positioned within a single institution management strategy

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Biography of the author(s)

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Abstract

This paper introduces a case study of National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (MMCA) in order to show how it has changed its management direction according to increased branches. In 2013 MMCA Seoul opened in central Seoul in addition to its previous two branches in Gwacheon and Deoksugung. Another branch is coming to Cheongju, whose architectural design process is on the way aiming to open within a couple of years from now. It will find that MMCA has tried to put unique characteristic on each branch. For example, MMCA Gwacheon keeps its position as a main branch with containing traditional arts genres, and MMCA Deoksugung focuses on modern period of Korean arts. A recent built MMCA Seoul explores more interdisciplinary arts, and MMCA Cheongju plays a role as a main storage of the whole branches while providing access to its collection to visitors.

Keywords

Art museum, Korean museums, museum architecture

1. Introduction

On the 13th November in 2013, the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea opened new Seoul branch to public. It brought a lot of attention from media, public, and people in arts and cultural sectors as well due to its central location in Seoul (National Museum of Modern and Contemporary 2014). Until then there was no national art museum located in Seoul, which has been regarded somewhat strange since there are so many other national museums focusing on history, folk or anthropology. Although there has been National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Gwacheon, a city located in outskirts of Seoul, it has been said that its location is not very public friendly.

Although new establishment was generally welcomed, there were some concerns regarding this. For example, how to manage its new branch located in city's iconic location was one of the most frequently raised ones. Further to this concern, it has been also emerged as a critical challenge how to position other two branches in the long-term. In addition, MMCA is planning to open its last branch within the next few years in Cheongju, a mid-sized city two hours away from Seoul.

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With increased branches MMCA has developed its new way of management strategy, re-positioning of each branch. According to its new strategy, MMCA Gwacheon plays a role as a main facility, MMCA Deoksugung focuses on modern period of Korean arts, MMCA Seoul focuses on contemporary and interdisciplinary arts, and MMCA Cheongju functions as a main storage for all the other branches. This paper will look through the process of how MMCA has developed each branch, particularly MMCA Seoul, and how it has positioned each branch in order to face new organizational structure.

2. MMCA, the only 'National' museum specialized in art

As the only national art museum in the country accommodating both modern and contemporary art of Korea and international art of different time periods, MMCA was established in the small exhibition hall in Gyeongbokgung Palace in 1969 and moved to Seokjojeon in Deoksugung Palace in 1973 (National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art 2011, 2012). In 1986 MMCA moved to Gwacheon with a much larger size facility and an outdoor sculpture park (*ibid.*). It has been devoted to its function as a national art institution by collecting, conserving, exhibiting and researching artworks and materials, and improving art and cultural awareness through international exchanges, education and promotion of artistic activities.

The history of MMCA's establishment and development is summarized in four stages: the conception and formative years (including opening of the museum), development years 1 - expansion of facility and organization, development years 2 - stabilisation of museum administration, and advancement and beyond-conception of new museum branches. Milestones for each stage are below.

The conception and formative years

- 1969: Settlement of organization structure
- 1969: Opening of MMCA
- 1973: Relocation to Deoksugung Seokjojeon
- 1984: Construction of MMCA Gwacheon began

Development years 1 - Expansion of facility and organization

- 1986: Restructuring of the organization
- 1986: Opening of MMCA Gwacheon
- 1998: Opening of MMCA Deoksugung
- 2002: Settlement of organization structure in MMCA Deoksugung

Development years 2 – Stabilisation of museum administration

- 2005: Selected as a government-affiliated yet independent institution
- 2006: Officially appointed as a government-affiliated yet independent institution
- 2006: Officially organized independent curatorial departments
- 2006: Officially established art conservation and storage facility

Advancement and beyond – Conception of new museum branches

- 2009: Announcement of a new museum branch in Seoul
- 2009: Ground plan for MMCA Seoul gets established
- 2011: Construction of MMCA Seoul begins
- 2013: MMCA Seoul opened
- 2015: MMCA Cheongju expected to open

As the only national art museum, MMCA has obtained its unique status from arts and cultural sectors in Korea. However, a little bit detached location has always been at the centre of discussion in terms of its accessibility for audience. Expanding its branches can be also understood as a way of figuring out this concern. Next section will discuss brief introduction of each branch after it opened its new one in Seoul.

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3. Toward four branch systems

3.1. Positioning of Gwacheon branch

MMCA Gwacheon was built in 1986 by architect Kim Tai-soo with respect to the surrounding artificial and natural beauty (National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art 2014). The architecture of the museum expanded the traditional concept of spatial construction to meet the contemporary needs, the result encompassing both the tradition and contemporary sensibilities. The overall design conception takes after the traditional Korean castle fortress and beacon mount. A three-story east wing and a two-story west wing spread out from the beacon-shaped spiral ramp at the centre of the building.

MMCA Gwacheon has a total of nine exhibition spaces. Gallery 1 and 2 on the ground floor are reserved for special exhibition and the other Galleries (Gallery 3 and 4 on the first floor, Gallery 5 and 6 on the second floor, the Circular Gallery 1 and 2, and Children's Gallery) display institution's permanent collection and various educational programmes for Children's Gallery. In addition to the Galleries, MMCA Gwacheon opened a new research centre based on its collection, cataloguing, preservation and utilisation of the resources, which has been expected to provide a vital source for the study of modern and contemporary Korean art.

After opening MMCA Seoul, MMCA Gwacheon has strengthened its position as a main facility. Below are summary of its revised position toward a new management system of four branches (Ryu 2014; National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art 2014).

- Large-scale of retrospective exhibits on established Korean artists
- Genre-specific (architecture, photography, design and craft) permanent exhibitions
- Research-oriented archive for professionals and scholars
- Contemporary sculpture projects
- Exhibits for young and emerging artists
- Educational exhibits for school children
- Outdoor cultural activities and programmes
- Family-oriented programmes

Among them, the first two play an important role in differentiating MMCA Gwacheon from other branches. Reflecting on these two strategies, MMCA Gwacheon changed the names of galleries 3, 4, 5, 6 to Design Gallery, Craft Gallery, Architecture Gallery and Photography Gallery, which means that each gallery is specialized for each genre's exhibitions. It was a totally new approach to designate a gallery for a specific genre and from 2013 MMCA Gwacheon launched Korean Contemporary Artists Series in each genre at each gallery, which is a mid-term project for the next five years.

3.2. Positioning of Deoksugung branch

In 1988, MMCA Deoksugung was established in the historical Seokjojeon, the first modern-style architecture built in Korea with the aim to systematize the discourse of Korean modern art and ultimately aid the establishment of a cultural and historical identity of Korea. Unlike MMCA Gwacheon, MMCA Deoksugung specifically addresses Korean art from the 1900s to the 1960s and modern art from around the world.

Bearing its meaning of historic site and in order to find its own characteristic as an art institution, MMCA Deoksugung has positioned itself as an institution for rediscovery of Korean modern art and it has worked on the thematic exhibitions on Korean modern art from late 19th century too 1960s and international art from Renaissance to 20th century.

3.3. Positioning of Cheongju branch

MMCA Cheongju is scheduled to open within a few years. This branch is undergoing with a special collaboration with Cheongju local government. MMCA signed an MOU with the city of Cheongju, where

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MMCA Cheongju would be housed at a remodeled tobacco factory. This new branch is supposed to boast a facility that holds approximately 11,000 works from MMCA and other private collections. An art storage and conservation centre aside, MMCA Cheongju will also offer curatorial projects and educational programmes in order to fulfill its function as another branch of MMCA.

The unique characteristics of MMCA Cheongju are (1) its specialized function as a conservation centre and (2) the way of establishing a branch with local government. Therefore, MMCA Cheongju sets its strategic management directions like below.

- Preservation and conservation of MMCA collection
- Collection storage with exhibition galleries
- Collaborative exhibition with local art institutions and private collections

3.4. Opening of Seoul branch

3.4.1. Background to MMCA Seoul project

The plan for the new museum at the site of the Defense Security Command was first announced by former president Lee Myung-bak in early 2009 (National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art 2014). MMCA Seoul attempts to connect the cultural institutions nearby such as historical palaces, museums, contemporary art galleries, Bukchon Hanok Village, theatres, and playhouses and thereby create a vibrant cultural hub that embraces the past, present and future of the nation's cultural heritage. Following an extensive research and survey period (National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art 2010, 2009a, 2009b), the architectural proposal by Mihn Hyun-jun was selected in August 2010. The museum opened to the public in November 2013.

3.4.2. Brief history of MMCA Seoul site

MMCA Seoul opened at Gimusa, the former Defense Security Command site located near Gyeongbokgung at the heart of Seoul. Considering the characteristics of the site, the construction plan focused on underground expansion and extensive attention to environmental issues, ultimately adopting the madang (yard) concept, which integrated the exterior and interior of the building to the surrounding environment. The new site also aims to bring up a new discourse on the relationship between the public and the institution in an urban space, opening new possibilities for a future-oriented art museum of the 21st century. The site of the museum embodies a rich, complex history. During Joseon Dynasty, it served as a site for the national Taoist temple, Sokgeokseo, the Office of the Censor-general, the Office of Roayl Genealogy, and the palace library Gyujanggak (National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art 2014). During the Japanese colonial period, the site housed the Japanese Army Capital Hospital and Keijo Medical School Hospital (*ibid.*). After the Korean War, Seoul National University Hospital, Korean Armed Forces Capital Hospital, and the Defense Security Command (a military intelligence agency) were once situated in the area (*ibid.*). In 1981, Gyeonggeundang and Okcheopdan Pavilions, which were part of the Office of Royal Genealogy, were relocated to the nearby Jeongdok Public Library grounds (*ibid.*). In 2008, the building that housed the Defense Security Command was designated as Registered Cultural Heritage No. 375 (*ibid.*). MMCA Seoul's construction plan includes restoring the Office of Royal Genealogy to its original site and preserving the former Defense Security Command compound, thereby establishing a meaningful cultural centre that embraces the past and present of the site that is at once eclectic, complex, and intriguing.

3.4.3. Concept of MMCA Seoul architecture

There are three basic concepts for MMCA Seoul architecture: Shapelessness, openness and archipelago (Mihn 2014; New museum construction and management team 2012; National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art 2009a). In order to emphasise the characteristic and history of the site, the architectural elements were designed to remain unobtrusive to the environs. 'A shapeless museum'

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signifies that a beautiful, ethical structure can be constructed simply by arranging empty spaces in a manner that is in accord with the surrounding context.

To maximise public accessibility, the site has many entrance points circling the premises. It also boasts various visitor-friendly facilities with respect to the visitor needs and convenience.

Rather than a unified, single construction, the architecture is a coalition of smaller 'islands.' Although a large scale overall, the allocation of spaces and the organic flow from each building's exterior to interior make the architecture highly approachable. It justly serves its intention to invite the visitor to freely and selectively navigate around.

3.4.4. Positioning of Seoul branch

MMCA Seoul mainly seeks to accommodate leading-edge contemporary art nationally and internationally. So, it focuses on (1) exhibitions on MMCA's Korean contemporary art collections, (2) new-media and interdisciplinary exhibitions, (3) international contemporary art exhibitions, (4) site-specific, commissioned projects, and (5) digital archive for public use.

The second, third and fourth ones show more distinguished characteristics of MMCA Seoul. It is identified from the exhibitions that MMCA Seoul has had since its opening in 2013. For example, 'The Aleph Project', which was a part of inauguration exhibitions, tries to show a new form of art project that visualizes the intersection of two key techno-cultural phenomena of our time: networks and visualization. 'Hyundai Card Culture Project 15 – Young Architects Program' shows a site-specific pavilion project joining an international network of MoMA's Young Architects Program. This project particularly contributed to providing pleasant space for visitors in museum courtyard and increasing visitor numbers as well. In addition, 'Matrix: Mathematicians_Heart of gold and the abyss' explores the relationship between mathematics and contemporary art, architecture and design. All of them show interdisciplinary approaches which are different from other branches of MMCA.

4. Conclusion: toward anticipated effects for the future

While MMCA expanding its branches, a concern about losing audience numbers in MMCA Gwacheon, a main branch, was raised. However, in terms of visitor figures, it turned out that the numbers actually increased from 671,758 to 698,456 for the same period (Pyeon 2014). MMCA Deokgugung's visitor numbers are also increased from 278,187 to 504,457 for the same period (*ibid.*). As a national institution that gets entire funding from government, MMCA has to pay attention to its visitor numbers, which is a measurement used frequently by the government. In terms of this point, MMCA Seoul looks contributing enlarging its visitor spectrum.

However, academics and professionals in arts and culture sectors indicate that it is just one year since MMCA Seoul opening and it needs to be investigated more long-term perspective to understand how MMCA Seoul influences other branches and what kinds of synergy effect could be created (Mihn 2014; Lee 2014).

MMCA has more branches than ever and it has re-positioned each branch to manage them effectively. All of them are different in size, collection, exhibitions and budget as well. It needs further observation to identify how these repositions would work well each other, which is the ultimate goal of the strategy to create more branches.

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