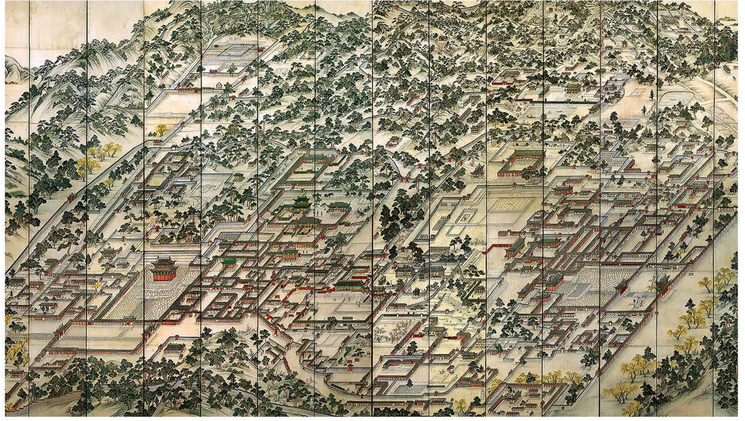
Changdeokgung Palace

The Most Unique Korean Palace in Harmony with the Landscape.

The whole view of the Changdeokgung Palace (昌德宮)

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the most well-preserved palace of all the royal palaces from the Joseon Dynasty (1392 - 1910). This is where kings and their ministers discussed state affairs to effectively reign over the people, and where the royal family resided.



Donggwoldo
(東闕圖)
Map of East Palace.
Resource:
Cultural Heritage Administration

Introduction

Changdeokgung was built as a secondary palace of the Joseon Dynasty in 1405, during King Taejong's reign. the Changdeokgung Palace Complex occupies a 57.9 ha site in Jongno-gu, in northern Seoul at the foot of Ungbong Peak of Mount Baegaksan, the main geomantic guardian mountain. Although it was originally secondary to Gyeongbokgung, Changdeokgung was served as the residence for many kings and later it became the main palace. After all palaces in Seoul were destroyed during the Japanese invasion (1592-1598), Gyeongbokgung had been left in ruins. Changdeokgung, however, was reconstructed in 1610 and served as the main palace for about 270 years, until Gyeongbokgung was finally rebuilt in 1868.

Donhwamun Area (敦化門)
Main Gate of Changdeokgung, built with imposing dignity

The Changdeokgung palace was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1997.

Unlike Gyeongbokgung, where major buildings are arranged along a main axis, Changdeokgung is laid out in harmony with the area's topography: Changdeokgung was constructed on the base of a mountain. Buildings were positioned naturally, taking into consideration the geographical features of the slope. Even though some parts of the palace was destroyed under the Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945. Restoration of the palace was begun in 1991, and the project still continues today. Changdeokgung is a unique case in the history of palace architecture in East Asia, as it retains remarkable asymmetric beauty in terms of layout, and is exceptional for the way in which the buildings are integrated into harmony with natural setting.

Historical background to establishment of Changdeokgung (昌德宮)

Why did King Taejong, the third Joseon monarch, establish an additional royal palace when Gyeongbokgung had already been built? Taejong explained that the second palace was needed because the topography of Gyeongbokgung was not auspicious enough, according to the principles of geomancy. It is likely, however, that the king had ulterior motives. Taejong seized the throne after having assassinating his half brothers and Jeong Do-jeon, the powerful Merit Subject. Afterward, he was very reluctant to live in Gyeongbokgung, the scene of the bloodbath.

Injeongjeon Area (仁政殿)
—Setting for major ceremonies
Injeongjeon is the throne hall of Changdeokgung. Major state affairs, including the coronation of a new king and reception of foreign envoys, took place here.

Nakseonjae Complex evinces the simple tastes of King Heonjong.

Nakseonjae Complex (樂善齋)

Nakseonjae is a normal noble style of house for the royal family without colourfully painted Dancheong.

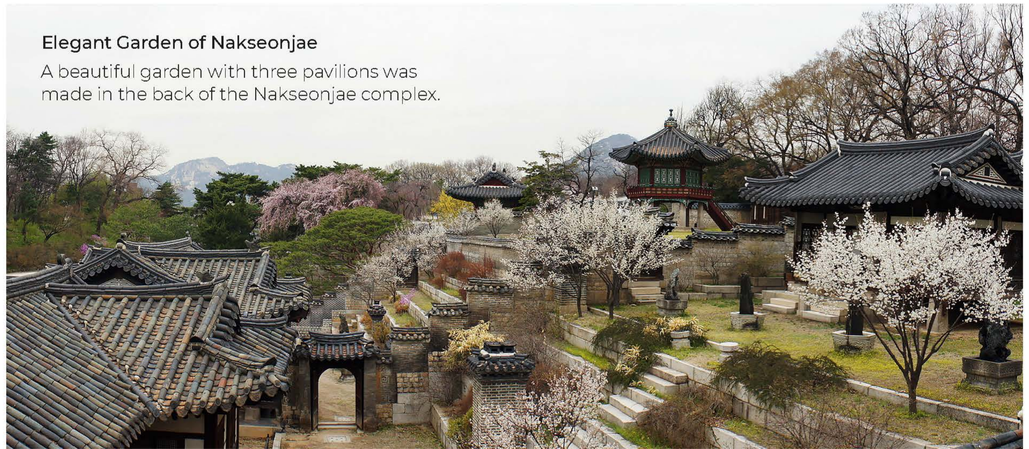
Nakseonjae Complex (樂善齋)

Originally, the Donggung, which is the quarters of the crown prince, was on this site. Nakseonjae was built as the king's quarters in the reign of King Heonjong, in 1847. It was a very personal space built so that King Heonjong could relax and read. Though it was part of the palace, King Heonjong refrained from using colorful paint decorations, Dancheong. Meanwhile, Nakseonjae was used until the most recent days. Bangja Lee, who was the wife of the last crown prince lived here until 1989. Seokbokheon was constructed in 1848. It was built for the Royal Lady Gyeongbin who was chosen in order to give King Heonjong's desired heir.

Nakseonjae Hall stands in the area between Chang-deokgung Palace and Changgyeonggung Palace. The complex, in which Nakseonjae is located, includes Seokbokheon and Sugangjae Halls, as well as stone stairs decorated with interestingly shaped stones and flower trees on the gently sloping hills behind the buildings. In the rear garden there are three more buildings, namely Sangnyangjeong and Chwiunjeong Pavilions and Hanjeongdang Hall.

Elegant Garden of Nakseonjae

A beautiful garden with three pavilions was made in the back of the Nakseonjae complex.



Secret Garden of Changdeokgung is the forbidden place for the recreational area and retreat for the royal family.

Left: Ongnyucheon Area (玉流川)
The brook flowing through the deep valley north to the Secret Garden of Changdeokgung is called Ongnyucheon. In 1636, during the reign of King Injo, the 16th king of the Joseon Dynasty, a U-shaped groove was carved on a large flat rock known as Soyoam and filled with water.

Opposite: Jondeokjeong Area (尊德亭), **Gwallamjeong** (觀纜亭)
Pavilions in various shapes

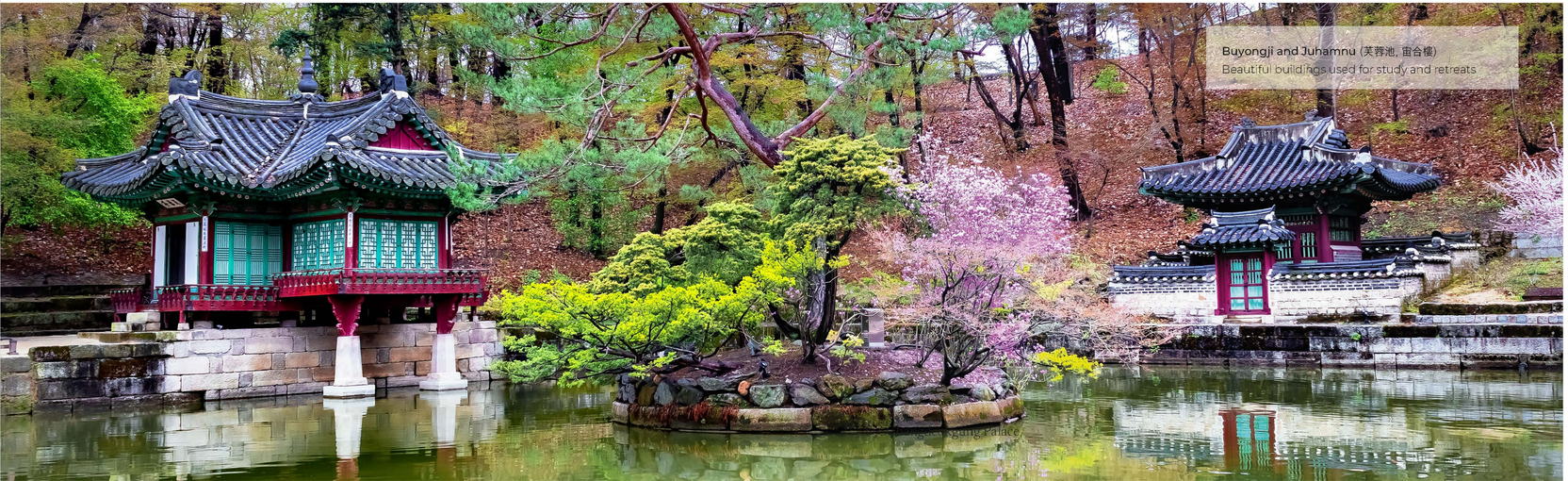
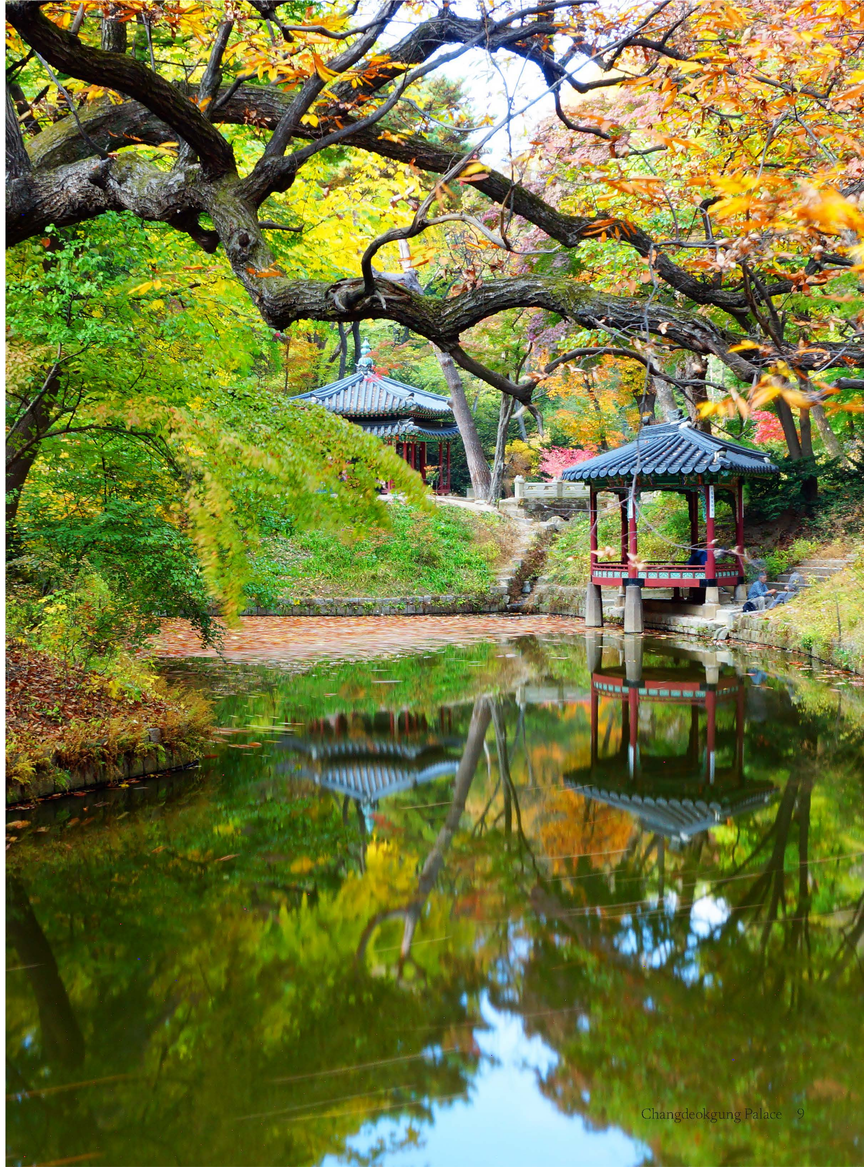
Secret Garden of Changdeokgung (昌德宮 後苑)

With palace architectures, a beautiful rear garden, also known as the Secret Garden, was created in Changdeokgung. The garden was landscaped with a series of terraces planted with lawns, flowering trees, flowers, a lotus pool and pavilions set against a wooded background. There are over 56,000 specimens of various species of trees and plants in the garden, including walnut, white oak, zelkova, plum, maple, chestnut, hornbeam, yew, gingko, and pine.

Sometimes the garden was ruined with the building's area in history, but reconstruction work was achieved by several monarchs. Today, behind of buildings' area, the beautiful pavilions and ponds are still existing in Changdeokgung. This garden presents an unusually exquisite design. It is adapted to the topography and contains small hills and natural forests. The natural setting was accentuated by keeping artificial landscape to the minimum.

In this Secret Garden, there are some beautiful ponds like Buyongji, Aeryeonji and Gwallamji. Small but beautiful Ongnyucheon Stream runs through the northern part of the garden. New Seonwonjeon, set in the deep woods in the western part of the garden, is a sacred place with facilities for ancestral rites.

The Secret Garden, the secluded rear garden of the palace, was used for various purposes. It served as a place for composing poetry, a setting for contemplation, a venue for banquets, and as an archery range. The royal family enjoyed fishing and boating on the pond and fireworks was sometimes displayed here. The king and queen of the Joseon Dynasty also engaged farming and raised silkworms in this garden.



Buyongji and Juhamnu (芙蓉池, 宙合樓)
Beautiful buildings used for study and retreats