Special Feature

How to Cope with Conflicting Information on Historic Sites Through Their Commemorative Texts: A Review of the Historical Cultural Markers in Seoul, Korea

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Introduction

Seoul Metropolitan City, the capital of South Korea, has a long history. Urban development and cultural development in the capital laid the foundation for many of Korea's first inventions and discoveries. Still, simultaneously, the passage of time forced other facilities and historic figures to fade away.

Since humans and their societies cannot remember everything around them, they deliberately distinguish "what happened in the past" and "what we say about it." Sociologist James Loewen calls the former the past and the latter history (Loewen [1999] 2019, 8). In this process, tangible relics serve as firm historical evidence and galvanize social authorities to turn the past into history (Lowenthal 1975). However, Seoul's rapid urbanization throughout the twentieth century completely changed the city's appearance, leaving little to no physical remnants on the ground. The loss motivated the city to launch the Seoul Historical Cultural Marker program in 1985. The new program was to commemorate bygone historic figures, facilities, and events before further changes render the sites untraceable.

At the same period, Seoul was preparing for two international sporting events held in the city: the Asian Games in 1986 and the Olympics in 1988. Therefore, aside from preserving the capital's historic sites for residents, the first Seoul markers had a second mission to promote the city's—by extension, the country's—profound history to foreign visitors (Park 1991). The first markers were made of small granite blocks with brief inscriptions, typically limited to one or two sentences. They are mostly placed on the sidewalks to attract pedestrians, but their sizes are kept small to avoid occupying too much space like other commemorative artifacts: towers, statues, or monuments. The marker's primary task is literally to "mark" each site, neither to impress nor overwhelm the viewers.

Both in theory and practice, historical markers tend to concentrate on densely populated urban centers to memorialize human activities and attract many readers (Choi and Giordano 2024). Marker's uneven distribution is also prevalent in Seoul, where 77% of the markers—266 out of 347—are erected in only two of twenty-five districts (Figure 1). The districts, Jongno-gu and Jung-gu, benefited from their continuous role as the historical downtown during the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), Japanese colonial period (1910–1945), United States Army Military Government (1945–1948), and the Republic of Korea (1948–present). Administrators in Seoul gradually expanded the program's

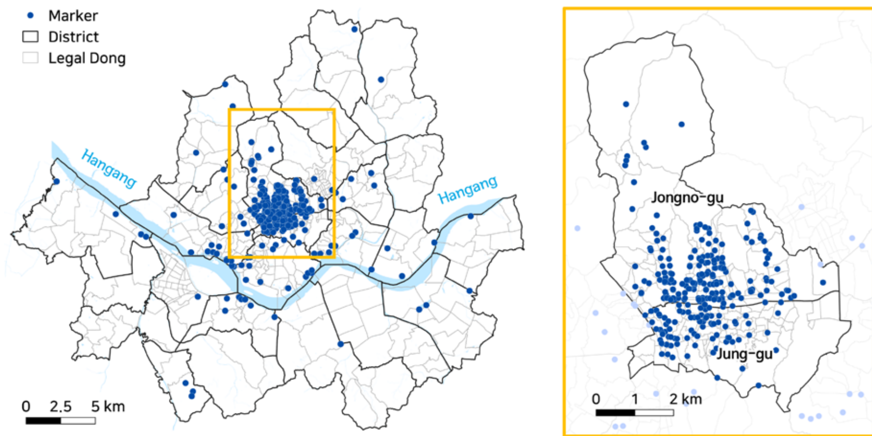

Figure 1. Dot Distribution of the Markers

geographic focus to the outer regions after erecting the first ten markers in Jongno-gu and Jung-gu in 1985; the first marker south of the Hangang dates to 1987 (Jangseungbaegi in Dongjak-gu). Still, the eleven districts south of the river currently house only 6% of the markers—20 out of 347—and nothing has been added since the last two installations in 2003 (Site of Haengju Wharf in Gangseo-gu and Former Site of Yi Jip's House in Songpa-gu). In the meantime, Jongno-gu further added seven new markers in 2024, even before July 31.

Over more than forty years, the city has erected more than 300 markers across its territory, accumulating a history of their own that is as significant as the city's history they have told. Cultural geographers often criticize the markers for solidifying hegemonic narratives through their stone or steel presence (Johnson 1995; Dwyer and Alderman 2008). Likewise, passersby may assume they are stationary objects fixed on the street, but the markers reflect dynamic changes resulting from urban development and new knowledge. The broadened roadways and landownership changes often leave no space for a marker to stand on a historically accurate site. New art designs and historical findings frequently lead the Seoul authorities to rewrite, relocate, or even remove markers to avoid critical errors. All these reactions testify to the markers' flexible adaptations, contrary to their seemingly durable appearance.

In this article, I explore the Seoul marker program to examine two phenomena when people attempt to interpret the past and record it into history: namely, how multiple pieces of information contradict on historic sites and how Seoul counteracts the conflicts to prevent the citizens' misunderstandings. The

relationship between the two sides is not unilateral because they form a cause-and-effect relationship for one another. Seoul applies new measures through the markers to reduce the information conflict, but in some exceptional cases, those countermeasures intentionally create a new contradiction to meet the citizens' demands. Therefore, I argue in this article that markers are more flexible than most people believe; they constantly make and reflect changes while compromising various societal demands. Before discussing information conflicts and countermeasures, I first introduce this article's theoretical backgrounds and methods to situate the Seoul marker program into the field of cultural and historical geography.

Backgrounds and Methods

The first framework for a geographic study of commemoration came from David Lowenthal, a geographer who studied heritage and its impact on human lives. Lowenthal (1975, 2015) especially emphasized how the "tangible past," including photographs, souvenirs, and monuments, gives a sense of security for those who lost their hometowns or connections to their ancestors. Inspired by Lowenthal, Kenneth Foote also contributed to the geographic studies on monuments by scrutinizing how Americans react to tragic or violent events in history. The most significant finding from his work might be a highlight on active forgetting, as people want to heal the wound and return to their everyday lives. Active forgetting can result in a complete removal of all physical evidence and records, as if people had made no mistakes. As a result, Foote ([1997] 2003) classified their reactions into four, setting sanctification and obliteration on the two extremes of an emotional continuum, and designation and rectification in between.

While the foundational thinkers focused on material objects that one can perceive by their sensory organs, "new" cultural geographers emerged from the 1980s to interpret the meanings of anything hidden beneath the visible surface. Interestingly, they borrowed the metaphor of "text" from poststructuralists and regarded the landscape as a social construct to be read. Their interest in text expanded to intertextuality, a relationship in which each text reads and writes other texts (Duncan and Duncan 1988). When it comes to historical events, for example, an author can urge others to understand an event in a pre-defined

way. However, the author's intention is always subject to readers' rebuttals and reevaluations. This poststructuralist concept of intertextuality affected geographers who study commemoration in two ways. Firstly, they came to recognize that people and society simultaneously author and read the landscape. Secondly, the production of meaning never ends because one interpretation is challenged by writing and rewriting.

The majority of marker studies have been conducted in the United States, and the text metaphor has heavily influenced them. Some states in America administer their marker program to promote their long history and preserve the sites, the same rationale as the Seoul one. Cultural and historical geographers in the 2010s, affected by a boom in memory research in the mid-2000s, began to study how historical markers naturalize racial injustices through representing the white American's perspective or omitting the uncomfortable truth on slavery or racist lynching (Alderman 2012; Legg 2025). Some studies adopted content and discourse analyses to figure out social consensus, politics, or sentiment asserted in the text's rhetoric and word choice (Cook 2018). They commonly pointed out the role of markers in teaching partial truth and social activists' efforts to counterbalance the content. Still, their text reading was based on a few samples, given that each state typically operated hundreds to thousands of markers.

New digital techniques, particularly GIS (Geographical Information System) and Corpus Linguistics, allowed researchers to comb through the big data of marker texts. Hanna and Hodder (2015) employed Qualitative GIS to analyze people's accessibility to markers that report slavery and emancipation. Their discourse analysis on marker inscriptions opened new possibilities for a more qualitative use of GIS, which had traditionally been treated as a mere quantitative tool. While introducing the Texas Official Historical Marker program to geographers, Choi and Giordano (2024) utilized Corpus Linguistics to identify a thematic transition from war to peace in the 1960s and 1970s. In a similar vein, Choi (2018) proposed to build a Historical GIS database to keep records of the Seoul markers being erected, relocated, or removed. He maintained that GIS could provide an optimal space to store and back up miscellaneous metadata that are inappropriate to engrave on a small marker on the physical ground.

These recent technological advances and new insights on commemoration encouraged this study to employ GIS methods for data management, calculation, and visualization of approximately 300 markers in Seoul. Still,

my theoretical foundation is inherited more from the traditional thinkers like Lowenthal and Foote rather than “new” cultural geographers. Despite agreeing with the idea of endless authoring and reading of text, I propose here to shift the “text” concept from the abstract world to the physical world because this article aims to highlight information conflicts and countermeasures against them. To do so, this study not only explains the intertextual dynamics of text authoring and revising but also ensures that the dynamics’ outcomes are perceivable through rewriting, relocation, and removal of markers. The marker photographs that I captured during years of fieldwork testify to how the theories work in reality.

This study is partly based on a research project commissioned by Seoul and conducted by the Academy of Korean Studies from October to December 2024. The three-month project aimed to identify incorrect marker information on online map platforms, like Kakao and Naver Maps. Although the marker’s official database was viewable and downloadable at a website called Smart Seoul Map, lingering errors on the enterprise platforms could result in critical misunderstandings among the citizens. The fundamental issue was that marker information was subject to modifications at any time, making the information on enterprise maps outdated. Thus, the research team focused on the information on historic sites fixed in the past, unaffected by future updates on the markers’ side.

As one of the research team members, I analyzed 347 historic sites described by the same number of Seoul markers as of July 31, 2024. Given the short research period, I requested and obtained all the resources the city authorities and other research teams had collected to spot accurate locations for newly proposed markers. Based on the historical evidence provided by predecessors, our task was to restore the sites in a shapefile format (.shp) within a GIS environment. A crucial caveat here is that the marker locations sometimes differ from the historic sites I restored, and this is one of the information conflicts to be thoroughly explained in the following sections. As a result of the research project, I created one shapefile for 347 points and the equivalent for 347 polygons so that users could display any historic site either as a point or a polygon on electronic maps. A point represents each polygon’s centroid, the geometric center of a shape. These historic centroids are compared with the marker sites later.

When drawing a boundary of each polygon, I referred to cadastral maps produced by the Japanese colonial government through the 1910s and 1920s,

commonly known as Jijeokwondo 地籍原圖. Japanese authorities have already attempted to draft cadastral maps of Seoul in the 1900s, which only partly remain today (Seoul Museum of History 2015). For that reason, Jijeokwondo is widely used as the first modern land survey covering the entire Korean peninsula. An address recorded in a historical resource (e.g., 194 Yeonhui-dong) and its corresponding land lot on Jijeokwondo are the most accurate identifiers of historic sites (e.g., Yeonhuigung Palace). These sites were transformed into GIS polygons by tracing the land lot's boundary. This method worked for a few places with complete addresses, but not for others with uncertain and unreliable boundaries. In this case, Seoul's relics map inspired me to address the issue by drawing a circle or ellipse instead of a precise land shape (Seoul Metropolitan City and Seoul Museum of History 2006). In this article, I applied dotted lines around those uncertain historic sites to clarify that their boundaries are less reliable than the land lot tracings (Choi 2025).

Conflicts in Space: Historic Sites and Their Markers

A marker is supposed to stand on the historic site it describes, given that its objective is literally to "mark" the exact location. However, a marker can sometimes distance itself from its corresponding historic site in renewed urban settings. As the capital, Seoul experienced more rapid and abrupt changes than any other city in South Korea, and the dynamics are still in progress. Critical modification in a short period, as is the case in Seoul, could cause damage to people's sense of connection to their individual or collective past (Lowenthal 1975). Seoul launched the current marker program in 1985 after realizing it had already lost plenty of its old cultural heritage. The authorities and scholars identified historic sites in accurate locations, only to discover that land uses there have been transformed into a boulevard, a water body, or a confidential area. For instance, the Site of Itaewon marker in Yongsan-gu stands in front of a school gate, an intersection outside an army base. When the marker was built in 1988, Seoul inevitably avoided its accurate place because the USAG (United States Army Garrison) Yongsan occupied the area after the end of World War II and the Korean War.

The Site of Baengnyeonsa marker, located at a military hospital in Jongno-gu, shows an accessibility issue in the opposite way but shares the same

problem of land use change. As of 2025, a special permit is required to view the Baengnyeonsa marker, just as my access as an independent researcher was prohibited during the 2018 fieldwork. The Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation originally occupied the area when the marker was first erected in 2001. Later, the Armed Forces Seoul Center District Hospital moved and secured the land confidentially in 2010. In Virginia, United States, Hanna and Hodder (2015) developed the “visitability index” to measure the public’s access to each marker. The result revealed that markers dedicated to the accusation of slavery and emancipation were most likely to meet potential readers by locating themselves at historical routes, districts, or parks. The Baengnyeonsa case is different; no matter how historically accurate the site is, the marker is now geographically isolated from the public. As such, low accessibility is one of the primary reasons why Seoul occasionally adjusts a marker to an open area at the expense of its locational accuracy, as discussed in the following “Relocation” section.

The absence of material relics is fundamentally a deficit to Seoul, but they can also take advantage of the invisibility. As per its official guideline established in 2023, the Seoul markers must commemorate a site where no physical remnants exist whatsoever:

> 2.1. A “marker” is a sign that remembers and commemorates missing cultural heritage or a site of a historical event.…
> 4.2. Removal. A marker is subject to removal once it does not satisfy the following standards:… A place where part of a historical relic remains, thus ineligible for a marker erection.… (Seoul Metropolitan City 2023; emphasis mine)[1]

The principle explains why I constantly use the term “historic sites” instead of “relics” while discussing the Seoul markers. If any tiniest bit of a building remains, like a cornerstone or rubble, the state, province, or city designates the relics as the national heritage of Korea. Without any material artifacts to designate, Seoul’s marker program operates separately from the same city’s heritage designation process. Thus, as long as they specify locational discrepancy with a supplementary measure, a marker can move away from its invisible

1 Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations of quoted passages are the author’s own.

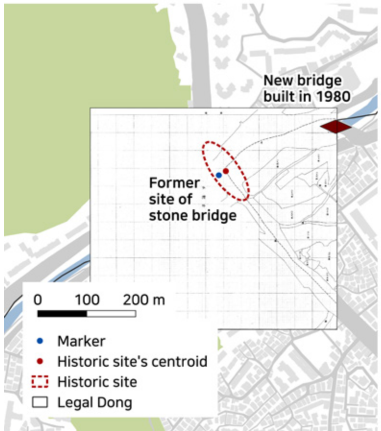

Figure 2. Site of Hongjegyo (photographed by the author)

historic site to reinforce its visibility and accessibility. It is an interesting practice in commemoration where the authorities choose geographical advantage at the expense of historical authenticity (Choi 2023).

The conflicting information in space can be represented as a distance between a historic site and its marker, ranging from 2 to 1,371 meters, with an average of 46 meters. Among the 347 markers, 261 (75%) are within the 100-meter radius of their corresponding centroids, whereas thirty-nine (11%) stand farther than 200 meters. Compared with the historic sites I restored as GIS polygons, 115 markers (33%) are inside historically verified areas, whereas 232 (67%) are out. Not only the latter, but the former also tends to place the marker along the sidewalk, so passersby can read the text without entering a dangerous area or trespassing on private property.

Figure 2 exemplifies how urban development creates contradictory information in space at a mild level. Hongjegyo 弘濟橋 was a stone bridge that crossed the river Hongjecheon 弘濟川, but it no longer exists. The bridge was initially built for travelers between Seoul and Uiju 義州, a northwestern city currently in North Korea. Therefore, the bridge must have been at the crossing of the main street and the river, as seen on the cadastral map Jijeokwondo. Since the bridge's precise boundary is untraceable, I drew an ellipse with a dashed line on GIS to indicate the area's uncertainty. The original bridge disappeared after the modernization process completely altered the landscape. The name "Hongjegyo" also moved to another bridge constructed in 1980, approximately

Figure 3. Site of Yeonhuigung Palace (photographed by the author)

240 meters from the original. However, the historic site's heavy traffic today signifies its enduring geographical significance as a traffic node. In 1997, Seoul erected a marker near the stone bridge's location, and its careful positioning on a broad sidewalk ensures the viewer's safety to this day.

The case in Figure 2 accepts the marker within the historic site's boundary, but in Figure 3, the marker is erected way off the boundary. The marker commemorates Yeonhuigung Palace, which later became a national silkworm farming center named Seojamsil. The marker was erected near the entrance of Yonsei University in 2002, setting the farthest departure from its centroid—1,371 meters—among the 347 cases. Historical records suggest the palace existed far away from the current marker site. One 1960s gazetteer identified the old site's address as "194 Yeonhui-dong" inside a local community called Gungmal (The Korean Language Society 1966, 69). The corresponding land lot on Jijeokwondo and the label "Gungdong" 宮洞 on the topographical map both point to the same location, supporting the gazetteer's argument. In 2009, the residents there voluntarily restored a well, presumed to be part of the palace, and set up a sign to promote the historical significance of their community. As a result, the missing relics created two candidate places in Seoul, separately asserting their own authenticity as follows:

> The area around this well has been called Gungmal, Gungddeul,…Seojamsil, and the Jang Huibin well. The names originated from a detached palace called Yeonhuigung, which was here from the early Joseon dynasty.… (residents'

> sign erected at the historic site)
>
> Yeonhuigung is one of the detached palaces built in the early Joseon dynasty. It was rebuilt by King Sejong in 1420 for his father, King Taejong, and Sejong himself stayed here for a while in 1426.… (Seoul authorities' marker erected at Yonsei University)

Conflicts in Time: Outdated and Updated Information

The latest information recorded during a specific period inevitably becomes obsolete and unreliable over time. This temporal deterioration is significantly faster in Seoul, caused by its abrupt changes in land use and the discovery of new knowledge every year. The volatile change squarely relates to why Seoul restored the 347 historic sites on GIS through this research project. The fundamental concept was to fix the information displayed on online maps, unaffected by the markers' future modifications. A historic site's information rarely changes once confirmed by historical proof, whereas its marker can rewrite the inscription or relocate to other places multiple times. Even though follow-up studies can challenge the site's historical accuracy, the possibility of change is far lower than its markers. Thus, the city authorities intended to display the historic sites' static information on the map rather than the unstable markers.

Not only are the markers passively affected by the changes in their surroundings, but they also actively alter their environment and information. These temporal changes are well documented in Seoul's official guidebooks, which were published around the program's tenth and twentieth anniversaries (Seoul Metropolitan Government Culture and Tourism Bureau 1995, 2004). The book series compiled the entire markers by each year of erection and listed their titles, inscriptions, and folklore related to the topics. The 2004 edition supplemented its locational descriptions with landmarks nearby and transportation routes to visit the markers. Even though the third edition was never published, the program saw significant progress around its thirtieth anniversary. Since the early 2010s, Seoul has thoroughly scrutinized the historical evidence behind each marker's location and relocated many of them (Choi 2018). The data accumulated during this period formed the basis of the current database on Smart Seoul Map, but the previous guidebooks are also noteworthy

in grasping the marker program's history over forty years.

Comparing the two guidebooks—the status quo of 1994 and 2002—provides a helpful insight into the conflicting information even within the official resources. Table 1 summarizes the number of new markers erected each year. The figures in the two columns are mostly identical, which means no numerical change between the two periods. Still, in reality, they differ in 1987, 1988, 1992, and 1994. To be specific, the following four markers existed but disappeared at some point between 1994 and 2002: Site of Hong Yeonghu's House in Jongno-gu (newly erected in 1987), Site of the Korea Daily Newspaper Building in Jongno-gu (1988), Site of Tojeong in Mapo-gu (1992), and Site of Kim Koo's Assassination in Jongno-gu (1994). Unfortunately, it is unclear whether the markers were actually removed or whether they were merely omitted by mistake in the 2004 edition. It is because the guidebooks specified nothing about the conflicting information, pretending everything had been intact without any modification at all. Readers cannot notice the change without comparing the figures year by year, and they are vulnerable to a misconception that the four markers have never existed.

One of the four cases could be tracked down through old newspaper archives and heritage interpretation panels. According to the 1995 guidebook, the Site of the Korea Daily Newspaper Building marker was erected in 1988 at a two-story red brick house, on the west side of an old ginkgo tree (address: 1 Haengchon-dong). It was known to the public as an old office where

Table 1. Annual Erection of Markers

Year of erection	Number of new markers (1995 Guidebook)	Number of new markers (2004 Guidebook)	Year of erection	Number of new markers (1995 Guidebook)	Number of new markers (2004 Guidebook)
1985	10	10	1994	11	10
1986	10	10	1995	-	11
1987	15	14	1996	-	10
1988	25	24	1997	-	10
1989	16	16	1998	-	15
1990	10	10	1999	-	15
1991	9	9	2000	-	30
1992	10	9	2001	-	74
1993	20	20	2002	-	20

Figure 4. Site of the Korea Daily Newspaper Building (photographed by the author)

Ernest Thomas Bethell and Yang Ky-tak published the *Korea Daily Newspaper* 大韓每日申報 in the early twentieth century. Given that the Bethell family lived just a few blocks away from there (address: 2 Hongpa-dong), it was not strange to relate the brick house to the news publisher. However, a discovery in 1997 debunked the myth. On its fieldwork to refurbish the brick house into a newspaper museum, Seoul found its cornerstone with an inscription: "Dilkusha 1923." A long-time resident nearby confirmed that the inscription was the year of construction, and follow-up studies added that the Haengchon-dong hypothesis had not been grounded upon any historical evidence. Upon the new findings, Seoul canceled its museum plan and removed the marker from the site (G. Jeong 1997).

Seoul's further research revealed the site's history as follows: it was a house constructed in 1923–1924 by the American journalist and entrepreneur Albert W. Taylor, who first entered Korea in 1897. He named his residence Dilkusha, "Heart's Delight" in Persian. As a correspondent for the Associated Press, Albert reported on Koreans' various protests demanding their independence during the Japanese colonial period. After being arrested and deported by the Japanese authorities in 1942, he could never return to Korea until he died in 1948. Dilkusha was later occupied and modified by multiple households, so its original

owner and cornerstone gradually fell into oblivion. The public came to recognize Albert after his son, Bruce, finally visited the house in 2006 and appeared on a Korean television documentary (S. Jeong 2006). The Korean government registered Dilkusha House as the National Registered Cultural Heritage in 2017 and restored its layout in 2018–2020.

In the meantime, Seoul has newly identified the address 85 Susong-dong as the authentic location of the newspaper office. The city erected a new marker near the place: "original site of the Korea Daily Newspaper Building Site" (Figure 4). Given that Smart Seoul Map states its year of erection as 2007, it is assumed that the original marker in the wrong place has officially been removed from both the online space and the material world. What users see today is only the latter one since the record has been overwritten like a computer file. Today, the 1995 guidebook remains the only evidence of the original marker's short life (1988–1997) as the young marker denies its ancestor.

Countermeasures to the Conflicts

Text and Map

Seoul employs various strategies to deal with contradictory information within its marker program, and Foote's ([1997] 2003) analysis of public reactions to negative memories inspired me to classify the countermeasures into four. The most direct way among them is to state the accurate location within the text, typically referring to an address. The Former Residence of Seong Sammun is a prime example: "The house where the scholar Seong Sammun lived was around this area (23 Hwa-dong)." Today, the marker is at the entrance of Jeongdok Public Library in Jongno-gu, so viewers do not need to climb up a narrow upslope of 321 meters (straight distance) to reach Seong's original residence. When it comes to distance, three rare cases specify their departure from historic sites precisely in meters:

> 138 Hongje-dong, approximately 50 meters from here along the alley, is the site of Hongjewon. (Site of Hongjewon in Seodaemun-gu)

> Approximately 10 meters from here is the former site of a tavern…

(Former Site of Eunseong Jujeom [Tavern] in Jung-gu)

> Its original site is now the railroad, approximately 300 meters to the north.
> (Site of Former Cheongpa Baedari Bridge in Yongsan-gu)

When a marker is newly erected, it can have multiple candidate sites because old facilities tend to move here and there while in operation, and a historical event typically involves many places as it develops over time. Markers inevitably select one site as a historical snapshot, which can represent the facility's or event's significance (Seoul Metropolitan Government Culture and Tourism Bureau 2023). The Former Site of Seoul University marker, one of the first Seoul markers erected in 1985, commemorates a vacant space after the main campus transferred from Jongno-gu to Gwanak-gu in 1975. This case has only one (former) location to memorialize, but if a facility has moved more than once, the marker inscription must chronicle each movement. Those texts explain that the current site signifies one moment in the facility's longer history, and why this place has been particularly selected among the numerous candidates. The Site of Former Gyeongseong Library marker in Jongno-gu details the building's long history of relocation: "This site is where Gyeongseong Library was first established on November 27, 1920.…The library moved to Tapgol Park in 1922,…to Sajik-dong in 1968,…"

On the other hand, one place can house multiple facilities or events at once. The Site of the Independent Building marker was erected in 1985, initially for an early newspaper published there in the late nineteenth century. The marker appears in the 1995 and 2004 guidebooks but not on the Smart Seoul Map because it was later incorporated into a new marker erected in 2014. Having discovered two more facilities that occupied the same place in the same period, the text writers determined they were worth commemorating simultaneously, along with the newspaper building. By doing so, Seoul experimented with a new art design that combined three marker texts into one large panel as follows:

> Yugyeong gongwon was a modern educational institution established by the government that taught Western studies. It was located here from its establishment in September 1886 until moving to Bak-dong (Susong-dong at present) in 1891.
>
> The German Consulate was opened in Bak-dong in 1884. It began its Jeong-dong era by exchanging locations with Yugyeong gongwon in 1891. It

> stayed here until 1902, when it was relocated to Sang-dong (Namchang-dong at present).
>
> The Independent was the first private newspaper in Korea. It was published in two editions, Korean and English. Its headquarters were located within the German Consulate area from the first issue on April 7, 1896, until the last on December 4, 1899.

To this day, as of 2025, this marker remains the only example of juxtaposing three facilities that have shared one place. If one pays respect to the marker program's forty years as "history," as Choi (2018) argued, this unique event can also be regarded as a "historical" moment.

Maps, like texts, also serve to state the complicated facts on the marker itself. Pictorial expressions have been restrained back in the days when sculptors chiseled the contents on the black slate. However, Seoul has begun to conduct another experiment with small maps with the help of recent printing technology. Unlike the textual expressions quoted above, these maps visualize two conflicting locations in images to prevent the citizens' misunderstanding.

For example, the Maenghyeon Ridge marker in Jongno-gu portrays the ridge's accurate location on the south, near the scholar Seong's hilly residence, and the marker's location on the north. The whole residential area is now part of a tourist area called Bukchon Hanok Village. Still, compared to its other popular

Figure 5. Maenghyeon Ridge (photographed by the author)

spots, the ridge is relatively less frequented by visitors. The narrow alley offers no tourist attractions, even after climbing up the slope, and the scenery is mainly blocked by the high walls of Jeongdok Public Library and its neighborhood. According to Jijeokwondo, the ridge's path is formed along a relatively gentle slope across the valley, detouring the peak where the marker stands. As of 2025, a hilltop observatory and souvenir shop attract tourists next to the marker, and an intersection there provides a much broader space than the ridge (Figure 5).

Data Accumulation

In forty years of the marker program, perhaps the most significant progress driven by recent technology would be accumulating data through online platforms. In material space, where people can see or touch the markers through their sensory organs, the markers have little space to show off all the information regarding the topic. In the field of commemoration and storytelling, markers work differently from larger artifacts like statues, towers, trails, museums, or theme parks. Given that a historical marker's primary function is to configure a tiny space as a narrative medium, its inscription must be kept concise, and the size should not overwhelm the viewers (Azaryahu and Foote 2008). The efficient use of material space partly contributes to the absence of information on missing markers, like the short-lived Site of the Korea Daily Newspaper Building. The program administrators have stored their research achievements and official documents, which served as the primary resource for this study and research project. Still, the majority of information is locked in the filing cabinets or computers, given that material space does not allow a marker to lengthen its inscription or obstruct the pedestrian traffic.

For now, Smart Seoul Map directly addresses these physical limitations by adding new information to the old ones. This countermeasure greatly relieves the small-sized marker from an overwhelming amount of information. The data type allows texts and images, which users can view on their electronic device without actually visiting the marker site. Combined with its relatively large capacity, this electronic space incorporates larger and longer information than physical space can. As of July 31, 2024, Smart Seoul Map displays all 347 markers' locations as dots, categorized by their themes: economy, culture, society, physical geography, politics, and independence movement against the Japanese authorities. Once users click on each dot, the point details their information: the

Figure 6. Park Inhwan's House (photographed by the author)

title, inscription, year of erection, topic period, and address, to name a few. These metadata—namely, data about data—complement the marker's small size on a physical ground. Site of Song Hakseon's Patriotic Deed, for instance, tells the marker's history like a human's biography or a software developer's patch note: "erected in 1995; typo corrected, plate replaced, and relocated in 2015; and relocated again in 2021."

Sometimes, data accumulation is observable in physical space as well as online. Once the marker's text plate gets soiled or scraped out, Seoul tends to replace it with a new, clean one. The granite block supporting the text hardly changes unless the stone is irretrievably destroyed, thus retaining old engravings intact. Choi (2018, 944) has reported several timestamps inscribed on the granite blocks, like: "2004.12. Seoul Metropolitan City." The marker, Site of Former Park Inhwan's House in Jongno-gu, records in the database about its rewriting and plate replacement in 2017. Consequently, as seen in Figure 6, the partial replacement accumulated the changes of 2004 (granite block) and 2017 (text plate) on the same site. Choi (2018) criticized the partial replacement, out of concern that the viewers might think nothing had changed since 2004. My comparison between the two official guidebooks in the earlier section shares the same concern about information conflicts. The history of early markers is mostly elusive, but the good news is that the Smart Seoul Map now faithfully chronicles what happened to the recent markers from the 2010s.

Relocation

Unlike the two previous solutions, relocation moves the marker's position. The official database on Smart Seoul Map has recorded the date and reason behind sixty-one relocations so far. The first relocation recorded in the database occurred in 2012 for two markers, thirty moved to new places in 2015 (49%), twenty-two in 2016 (36%), one in 2017, another in 2018, three in 2021, and the last two in 2022. When it comes to their reasons, the information conflict is most prominent; "locational error" was found in twenty-six (43%). Interestingly, geographical factors also play a role in those relocations, even if the original marker sites are historically accurate. "Obstruction to pedestrian traffic" transferred eight markers (13%), "low visibility" did seven (11%). Five markers provided "other reasons" like simple typos or maintenance (7%), while the remaining fifteen did not specify which factor forced them to leave (26%).

The Site of Andongbyeolgung marker in Jongno-gu exemplifies how Seoul compromises historical accuracy and geographical advantage—in other words, conflicting demands from citizens (Figure 7). The marker inscription states that the palace was used for royal residences, and Emperor Sunjong got married there while he was the Crown Prince. When Seoul first erected the marker in 1998, it was in front of the main hall at Poongmoon High School. In 2015, however, the marker had to move outside the gate, reporting the reason as "low visibility" in the database. The relocation created a new information conflict by moving to the incorrect place. Consequently, however, the decision allowed viewers to access the commemorative text at any time and protected the study atmosphere from distractions caused by outside visitors.

Another noteworthy point in the Andongbyeolgung case is the rapid change in Seoul's urban settings. The high school transferred to Gangnam-gu in 2017, merely two years after the marker's relocation. The area went under construction from 2018 through 2021 to build Seoul's new museum. The marker relocation in 2015 happened to take another geographical advantage during this period because the text, staying safe outside the construction area, was still accessible to the viewers. As the Seoul Museum of Craft Art finally opened its front yard to the citizens in 2021, the marker's previous and current locations became fully visible six years after its relocation, as in Figure 7. The place is the historic site of an old palace for most people. Nonetheless, those who acknowledge the marker program's forty years as "history" can simultaneously view the same place as the

Figure 7. Andongbyeolgung (photographed by the author)

marker's former site that lasted for seven years (1998–2015).

Removal

At the most negative extreme of Foote's framework resides a reaction called obliteration, in which people attempt to remove all the physical remnants or completely cover up the landscape with a new surface. Any wound and loss naturally fall into oblivion after a long time. Still, obliteration occurs when the trauma is so intense that people want to forget the pain and shame as soon as possible (Foote [1997] 2003). In the case of Seoul, it removes the markers in two instances. Firstly, the markers are temporarily kept in storage while the area is under construction. It frequently happens in Seoul, where urban development incessantly changes land use and material arrangements. Minor relocation in a few meters is also common after construction, and it adjusts the marker's position to a renewed surface and transformed structure. The Andongbyeolgung marker above is a fortunate case that avoided removal thanks to its early relocation to a safe place.

The official guidebook shows another case of urban renewal and ensuing marker removal: the Site of Uijeongbu marker in Jongno-gu. The text was first erected "inside the flower garden, on the left side of the citizen square's entrance," according to the 2004 edition (Seoul Metropolitan Government Culture and

Tourism Bureau 2004, 86). The area was later renovated to accommodate a new Gwanghwamun Square in 2008–2009, which created a broad pedestrian space in the middle of the driveway boulevard. The construction removed not only the Site of Uijeongbu marker and several other ones, mostly former government offices, and transplanted them to the new pedestrian corridor. The markers' new locations were historically inaccurate but concentrated the visitors' attention on the square. A photograph taken in 2018 testifies to the purposeful alignment of the markers—namely, the government offices—in front of a king's statue (Choi 2023, 130). In 2020, the Korean government excavated underground relics of Uijeongbu and registered them as a Historic Site. A new, lengthy interpretation panel began to describe the cornerstones, and a marker lost its meaning where a material artifact existed. The Sit of Uijeongbu marker was consequently removed for a second time and has never returned.

The second reason behind the removal is more crucial than temporary construction, resembling Foote's definition of obliteration. When information conflicts in space or time are too critical, Seoul permanently takes the marker away because its existence on the ground would fuel misunderstanding among the citizens. The case of Dilkusha House, in which follow-up studies revealed that it was not a newspaper office, exemplifies the concern. This apparent error is subject to complaints from angry citizens that the authorities and scholars must have done the research with care. Still, as Choi (2018) argued, removal should be acknowledged as an honest reassessment of the public program.

Unlike relocation, removal is not visible on Smart Seoul Map, as it shows only the existing 347 markers to avoid another type of information conflict. If a missing marker is still displayed on the map due to an update delay, visitors may become confused by a ghost marker seen on the map but missing on the ground. Fortunately, a CSV (comma-separated value) file from Seoul Smart Map retains the information of four removals, all of which occurred in 2017: the Site of Daedongdan Headquarters and Jongbusi Government Office markers in Jongno-gu, Nowon Station in Nowon-gu, and Hongneung in Dongdaemun-gu. The database does not state why the Jongbusi marker was removed, but the other three recall that they have been in historically inaccurate places. The Hongneung data further elaborates on the removal's background: "A heritage interpretation panel provides more detailed information at the former site of Hongneung, while this marker is over 500 meters away from there." The 2004 guidebook also supports the statement, stating the historic site resides deep inside

a forest, while the marker is erected "under the wall, on the left side of the main entrance" (Seoul Metropolitan Government Culture and Tourism Bureau 2004, 204). Consequently, Seoul has removed the marker to avoid conflict in space and a duplicated role as a commemorative text.

Conclusion

The Cultural Historical Marker program has erected over 300 markers across Seoul Metropolitan City to mark locations and their significance. The program was first introduced in 1985 to promote the city's profound history and cultural value to both the residents and foreign visitors. International sporting events and the overall change in urban settings in the mid-1980s galvanized the city authorities to launch the program before the last bit of physical remnants vanished and the citizens forgot their significance.

The markers' minimalistic principle makes the best use of small spaces as a narrative medium. However, rapid urban development and the absence of material relics often create conflicting information between the historic sites and their markers. When it comes to the temporal aspect, new findings from follow-up studies and discoveries contradict obsolete information. It led me to examine how Seoul has been addressing the two types of information conflict through its marker program. Seoul's countermeasures against the conflict can be categorized into four: text and map, data accumulation, relocation, and removal. The backgrounds and results of the first three are relatively well recorded in the official database on Smart Seoul Map, whereas the last measure requires other resources to complement the blank. Two official guidebooks, published in 1995 and 2004, enabled me to restore the history of several markers as a case study.

Lastly, I argue in this article that the program's history over forty years is as significant as the history told by the marker inscriptions. Their role as storytellers is a fundamental factor defining the two types of conflicts, but geographers and historians have hesitated to shed light on it. In the long term, one must restore a complete history of each marker to understand what has happened to the storytellers and how Seoul has addressed the citizens' possible misunderstandings. What we see on the Smart Seoul Map today is merely a partial record of 347 markers that luckily survived the test of time. The data must be accumulated, as in the example of four markers removed in 2017. Ideally, the

marker history should be recorded consistently and open to the public through Smart Seoul Map, as software developers commonly do with their patch notes. I have compared two guidebooks in this article, but a further contrast with the latest database poses new questions. For example, the 1995 guidebook registers the first ten markers erected in 1985, but only five of them remain on the Smart Seoul Map as of July 2024. What happened to the missing five? A complete history of the markers must be restored, preferably with the help of the Seoul authorities, to mend the missing links in history and minimize the same trials and errors in the public program.

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Abstract

In this article, I examine the Historical Cultural Markers, a commemorative program in Seoul to mark and preserve historic sites through 347 markers as of July 31, 2024. Most of its academic influences come from cultural and historical geographers who focused on tangible aspects, and GIS serves as a key method to restore and visualize historic sites in a shapefile format. Markers differ from other texts with the absence of physical remnants on the ground, and this nature results in conflicting information in space and time. The conflict in space occurs when a marker is installed away from its corresponding historic site, whereas the conflict in time means a discrepancy between outdated and updated information. Seoul implements its countermeasures to prevent the public misunderstanding caused by spatiotemporal conflicts, and I categorized its countermeasures into four: text and map, data accumulation, relocation, and removal. The measures help the city officials cope with contradictory data, but their treatment is always subject to unexpected incidents or the citizens' complaints. By explaining these problems and solutions regarding the Seoul markers, I argue that the markers, the storytellers, have as much academic significance as the stories they tell.

Keywords: commemoration, historical marker, historic site, GIS, Seoul

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