



Two-year restoration effort reopens historical building in U.S. envoy's home



## Korean style, Western comforts

By Ines Cho  
Staff Writer

Less than a week before returning home for good, U.S. Ambassador to Korea Thomas Hubbard and his wife, Joan, had one last mission: to officially open the Old Legation House inside their home of just under three years.

Last Wednesday, the mid-day heat did not deter a few dozen guests who were able to get a sneak preview of the historically significant spot in town, usually off-limits to the public. Seoul Mayor Lee Myung-bak, who offered congratulations, was one of the tape-cutters, along with the Hubbards, at the opening ceremony.

According to the U.S. Embassy's Public Affairs Office, the official completion of the house is due "sometime in the near future," but Mr. and Mrs. Hubbard's departure prompted the early ceremony.

When the work is completed, the new ambassador, Christopher Hill, and his wife, Patricia, will be able to use the house for various diplomatic functions and the guesthouse for high-level visitors. They will arrive in mid-August.

The Old Legation House had been used as a guesthouse by successive American ambassadors to Korea in the past, but by the time Mrs. Hubbard arrived in Korea in September 2001, she found that it had been shut down since March 1999.

"It was condemned. We were not even allowed to go in and instead were asked to sit on the stones outside," Mrs. Hubbard said.

There was talk about turning the house into a museum, but Mrs. Hubbard wanted it to remain a guesthouse. "By keeping the house as a guesthouse, it will be a living muse-

um for the next 100 years," she said.

The U.S. State Department owns and manages both the Habib House, the main building where the American ambassador and his family reside, and the Old Legation House, which is inside the compound of the U.S. ambassador's residence in Jungdong, northern Seoul.

What makes the ambassador's home different from other diplomatic properties outside the United States is that both the residence and Old Legation House adhere to traditional Korean architecture.

The Old Legation House stands today as a testament to the dynamic history of modern Korea. It is the first foreign building on Korean palace grounds, as a traditional Korean-style structure that was renovated to accommodate a Western lifestyle.

Built in 1883, the Old Legation House was officially purchased in 1884, becoming the first overseas property owned by the U.S. government. According to one record, Lucius Foote, the first American resident representative to Korea, purchased two closely located buildings from a family surnamed Min for \$2,200 in 1884. One building in the north became the diplomat's residence; the other became a legation house.

The purchase became official in 1887, and the house was renovated in 1905 to suit an American lifestyle. For example, instead of the traditional *ondol*, or floor heating system, the house had wooden floors with a boiler system. It also had a Western-style dining room, kitchen and bathrooms.

The area known today as Jungdong is where Korea's royal families once resided. The site of the Old Legation House was originally the home of Prince Wolsan, the brother of King Seongjong (1457-1494) of the Joseon Dynasty. It served as temporary homes for royal families on the run during wars.

The sale of such an exclusive site to Americans was an example of King Gojong's friendliness toward American diplomats. After the king allowed foreigners to reside inside the city's gates, more foreign legation houses were built in the area.

After the murder of Queen Min on Oct. 8, 1895, King Gojong, who had taken refuge in the Russian Legation House, moved to the Old Legation House in 1896 and spent a year there before moving to Deoksu Palace. In 1905, the Old Legation House was shut down to function as a consulate as diplomatic rights went to Japan.

Because of its historical importance, on April 6, 2001, the Old Legation House was designated as Cultur-

### INTERVIEW

## Questions for the man behind the project

The IHT-JoongAng Daily spoke with the principal architect, Chang Soon-yong, about the reconstruction of the Old Legation House:

**Q. What's in the main ridge beam of this house?**

This is the central beam of the house, and traditionally, Koreans wrote a series of characters on the beam and held a special ceremony.

The letters [written vertically] start with a Chinese character meaning "dragon," and end with one meaning "turtle." These wish for the longevity of the house and its occupants.

Between the two, it reads, "American Legation House in Korea" in Chinese characters, followed by the date of the ceremony that marked the completion of the main beam, "5 p.m., Nov. 7, 2003."

According to Korean architectural tradition, a small space inside the beam would be created to hold a record of the construction, so I had really looked forward to reading it. But when I tore the beam down, strangely, I found nothing in it. I suspect that in old days, architects were so insignificant socially that the tradition might have been ignored when building this house.

So when I was finished, I put a few important documents written in Korean and English, which are to be read 100 years later when the building will be restored. Along with the official statement of the ceremony, I put a CD-ROM that contains a list of the 2,500 technicians working on the house, along with the materials used, photographs, moving images of how the house was reconstructed, and so on.

**There is a lot of wood used in the house.**

This is 100 percent Korean pine from Gangwon province, which had been dried for at least three years, to

prevent it from cracking. About 25,000 *sai* of wood was used. In Korean terminology, one *sai* equals 12 *ja*, which is a plank measuring about four meters long by three centimeters by three centimeters. We Korean architects and contractors use these Korean terms.

If you look at all the beams, you can tell which ones have been replaced. The old wood is darkened, and the new one is much lighter. The floor remains intact. We removed the dirt and polished it with flaxseed oil.

**How did you get to work on the restoration?**

It was a competition. Many Korean companies dropped out because they had to write a report in English. Me? I just hired a translator. It took one year to write a report on the condition of the house. And then I had to work with State Department personnel as well as embassy staff members.

I wish the stones in the back of the house were covered in plaster, which is how traditional Korean houses were made, but the Americans wanted to leave it as it was.

**What are the changes you have made?**

We had to start from scratch. Americans didn't trust the Korean-style foundation, which had mud and pebbles, etc. packed in it. So we did it with concrete. The point was to bring out the best aspects of a traditional Korean home, designed for an American way of life.

Under the floor lay complex pipes, and now there is centralized heating and air-conditioning, making the chimney outside obsolete.

There used to be what's called *banja*, or ceiling decoration, when we came to look. The design, which was not allowed for commoners' homes, was from the style of royal



Chang Soon-yong, principal architect of the Old Legation House project.

palaces. We removed it to create an open space, revealing the beauty of exposed beams overhead.

Also, there was a Western-style arcade motif made with plywood on the wall, which we decided to remove, leaving the wall simple and natural.

**What got you into architecture?**

I'm a second-generation architect. My father, Chang Ki-in, established fundamental principles of early Korean architecture. He wrote numerous books and textbooks. When I entered university, I thought I would continue under my father's influence.

My first job was to build a stone wall that was seven to eight meters high. I spent days calculating and recalculating the structure.

I've also worked on a number of restorations of important Korean cultural properties. Currently, I'm restoring the old Gwangtong Bridge in Cheonggyecheon.

The front view, above right, of the Old Legation House, which will be used as guesthouse. The dining room, top, the bedroom, above, and the living room, below, embrace the natural beauty of a Korean *hanok* and an American way of life. By Ines Cho



The United States Legation House in Seoul, as it looked from 1883 to 1905, taken by an unknown photographer.

glass and have sliding doors. The open ceiling exposes traditional natural-wood rafters, but the centralized heating and cooling system blows air through metal grids on the edge of the wooden floor.

Furnished by American decorator Susan Meyer, the interior features Chinese Min-style chairs, a Korean *sabangtakja* (decorative cabinet) and an all-American comfy sofa.

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