

Attempts to preserve some of South Korea's last traditional homes have met with official stonewalling, and landed one resident in hospital, writes Andrew Salmon



RAISE THE ROOF

PHOTOS: ANDREW SALMON

IN A COUNTRY where activists typically wear red headbands and wield steel pipes, tea merchant David Kilburn stands out. But although the 62-year-old English expatriate knew he'd face hostility in his campaign to preserve some of South Korea's last traditional homes, he didn't expect to be put into hospital.

Kilburn was photographing construction in his Seoul neighbourhood of Gahoe-dong last month, when he was involved in a scuffle with an architect for a developer. He claims the man assaulted him, knocking him unconscious. Kilburn was taken to hospital, where he's still being treated for back injuries. The architect claims Kilburn pushed him first. The incident is being investigated by prosecutors. Meanwhile, local authorities have ruled the construction to be illegal and frozen all activity.

The Briton's lobbying and agitating through his website, which features photos of construction work, has put him at the frontline of a fight to stop the destruction of *hanok*, or traditional Korean houses, in Bukcheon district and its ward of Gahoe-dong.

Much of what activists call destruction is regarded by city authorities as restoration. In Bukcheon, *hanok* owners are eligible for subsidies to renovate old homes. But Kilburn and his allies argue that what passes for restoration is, in fact, demolition and ersatz reconstruction.

In a metropolis notable for its ranks of faceless apartment blocks, the Bukcheon district, nestled between the capital's two major palaces, has always been a desirable area – valued as much for its favourable feng shui as its prestige. Once in-

habited by court officials, Bukcheon is today the last area in Seoul in which a significant cluster of 920 *hanok* still stand.

Hanok are single-storey, wood-framed houses constructed on stone foundations. Traditionally, the houses face south, so the living areas at the rear enjoy maximum sunlight, and their wide, curved eaves maintain shade in the hot months. The kitchen traditionally faces east, so that ingredients benefit from exposure to the early rays of the sun. A clay-floored attic is customarily set above the kitchen – should a fire break out (a real danger in wooden buildings) it collapses, extinguishing the blaze. Heat is channelled via underfloor flues. The largest stones in the exterior walls are at the bottom, with smaller ones at the top, leading the eye up to the home's most attractive feature: its curved, tiled roof.

In Gahoe-dong, where Kilburn lives in a *hanok* with his Korean wife, Choi Keum-ok, the traditional houses are stacked like rows of theatre seats along winding alleys.

However, the district in northern Seoul isn't what it once was. In the past two decades, its character has been eroded by what could be called democracy run amok. Although previous authoritarian governments bulldozed much of old Seoul, they recognised that Bukcheon merited preservation – to the point where *hanok* owners weren't even permitted to install modern toilets or kitchens.

After South Korea passed democracy laws in 1988, residents in the district protested about the state of their houses. They wanted modern conveniences and were eager to benefit from the real-estate boom in Seoul, where owners in other

areas had been allowed to build higher. After building restrictions were lifted in 1991, 600 *hanok* disappeared. It was a decade later before belated moves were made to preserve the remainder.

"The city government supports the preservation of *hanok*," says Kim Woo-sung, head of the Historic City Preservation Team, a unit in the city's Urban Design Division. "We provide 30 million won (\$237,000) in subsidies and up to 20 million won in low-interest, 10-year loans. To obtain the funds, owners must register their home as a *hanok* and keep it as it is for at least five years."

Although a few narrow *hanok*-lined alleys still remain, modern villa apartments, shops and houses now dominate in Bukcheon. If tourists didn't know where to look, they might stroll through without realising it was a historic district.

City Hall has published a glossy photographic book showcasing major restorations. But activists and *hanok* experts say that many redevelopments are destroying the authentic character of houses: too often, the buildings are torn down and rebuilt.

"I have no objection to modern houses with superficial *hanok*-style features in other parts of Seoul," says Kilburn. "But these few streets in Gahoe-dong represent authentic traditional architecture. They're a living museum of how Koreans used to live."

But Jaho, the construction company engaged in the dispute with Kilburn, defends the redevelopment. "Many people like well-renovated *hanok*," says spokesman Kim Duk-yoon. "Houses in Bukcheon aren't cultural heritage sites, but homes where people actually live."

Buttressing that argument is the fact that most *hanok* in Bukcheon date back no further than the 1920s.

City Hall concedes that restoration can be demolition – so what it describes as traditional homes aren't necessarily authentic. "Whether demolition, reconstruction or renovation, all plans should be submitted and reviewed by the city's Hanok Advisory Committee," says Kim. "But the new buildings should have the features of a *hanok* – traditional-style tiled roof, rafters, heated floor – and they should be one storey."

The situation has some academics fuming. "These newly built, so-called *hanok* have features – the roof, basically –

That's not the experience of former Bukcheon resident and Kilburn supporter, Jung Tae-bong. "I sold [my *hanok*] 13 months ago," he says. "Prices used to be seven million won per pyeong, but I sold at nine million won. Now they're 15 million won per pyeong."

Jung, who has since left Bukcheon, says he saw little preservation work by his former neighbours in the district. "The three houses in my area weren't renovated. They were rebuilt from scratch."

Despite his raised profile since being taken to hospital, Kilburn isn't the best known foreign *hanok* activist. That honour goes to Peter Bartholomew, a former Peace Corps volunteer who arrived in

"THESE FEW STREETS REPRESENT AUTHENTIC TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE – A LIVING MUSEUM OF HOW KOREANS USED TO LIVE" David Kilburn Preservationist

but they're not really *hanok*," says Hyun Young-jo, a professor of architecture and authority on *hanok*. "They don't have traditional views and shapes. They're a distorted form of *hanok*."

Kilburn claims that an "unholy alliance" of construction firms and local bureaucrats are profiting by Bukcheon's redevelopment.

City Hall's Kim Woo-sung disputes this. "Since the city started the project, the prices of property have gone up from 5,000,000 won to 15,000,000 won per pyeong (35.5 sq ft) – but real estate has also risen elsewhere in Seoul," he says. "It's nonsense to say that there is property speculation in this area."

South Korea in 1965. Now a business consultant, his *hanok* is in an area under redevelopment. Partly on the strength of his fluent Korean, he has become a minor media star. "The problem in Korea and across Asia, is that people see no value in old buildings other than monumental structures like palaces and temples," says Bartholomew. "New is, de facto, better than old and traditional. There's a prejudice that old homes are uncomfortable and obsolete."

However, Bartholomew sees a ray of hope. "A growing sector of society is becoming concerned at the loss of their traditional architectural heritage," he says. "But it's almost too late."



Preservationist David Kilburn (above), in hospital (above) after allegedly being assaulted by a developer; and academic Hyun Young-jo (left), who says renovators are destroying Seoul's *hanok* (top)

Fossil hunters search for lost world

Inner Mongolia is a treasure trove of dinosaurs, but it's being plundered by illegal traders, writes Peter Harmsen

Before spring, when Inner Mongolia seems to be nothing but a vast expanse of freezing desert, it's hard to imagine that it was once a tropical rainforest crawling with dinosaurs.

Traces of the lost world of giant reptiles, that lived nearly 100 million years ago, are plentiful in this northern region of China – perhaps more plentiful than anywhere else.

"We haven't yet uncovered one-100th, or one-1,000th, or one-10,000th of what there is to find," says Shao Qinglong, chief curator at the Inner Mongolia Museum, in the capital of Hohhot. "The area is just so huge."

Just keeping order of the fossils that have been excavated is hard enough for the museum, which has little modern technology. In an unheated room, middle-aged women are bent over, cleaning dinosaur bones with pocket knives and small brushes. Work on one of the world's great dinosaur treasures is proceeding at a glacial pace, and Shao could use more help.

Inner Mongolia covers more than twice the land area of France, leaving to chance much of what is uncovered and what may stay hidden.

Li Hong, the 43-year-old director of the museum's natural history department, remembers the fortuitous chain of events that led to her discovery of an unknown species of a pinacosaurus dinosaur – a giant armadillo-like herbivore that grew up to five-metres long.

In August 1996, while working in the remote Bayanmandahu district, she was separated from her team and had collapsed on the ground, overcome by thirst and despair.

She noticed a strangely familiar shape sticking out of the soil, and had enough presence of mind to determine that it was the skull of a pinacosaurus.

Excited, she eventually retraced her steps to her teammates. "It just goes to show how much this kind of research depends on chance or even luck," she says. "You have to be lucky,

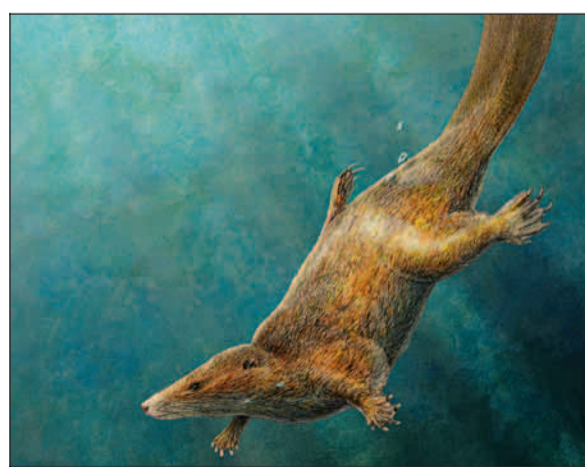
but luck alone is not enough. You also need to have enough experience, so you can tell if you find something interesting."

Inner Mongolia is a unique place for dinosaur bones. Much of the area, which comprises a part of the Gobi Desert, is largely unchanged from tens of millions of years ago and the fossilised dinosaurs remain where they lay down to die.

"The Gobi Desert is one of the best places in the world for dinosaurs," says Pascale Godefroit, a paleontologist with the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural History, who took part in several scientific missions in Inner Mongolia. "The ground is formed by sediments dating from the dinosaur age, and because it's desert, it's easier to find the dinosaur remains."

Generations of scientists have braved the immense logistical hurdles of doing research in an arid, desolate and inaccessible place as this. Five American expeditions in the 1920s had hoped to find traces of man's most remote ancestors, but truckloads of dinosaur fossils were found instead.

It's another example of Inner Mongolia's central role in paleontology that scientists have now found remnants of a beaver-



Castorcauda lustrasimilis was a beaver-like dinosaur. PHOTO: REUTERS

like animal that lived alongside dinosaurs. The finding, reported in the US journal *Science*, could lead to a complete rewrite of the history of mammals.

Other discoveries could be waiting, if only the harsh nature of Inner Mongolia allows it. "Every year, the sand is blown away, and unknown fossils suddenly turn up," says Li. "What that happens, you have to hurry up, for the sand may cover it again the following year."

But potentially worse than the sand are the private fossil hunters who often take priceless specimens. "Sightseers have picked up fossils here and there.

It has severely impacted on the research," says Li.

But the sightseers are only fringe actors in the unequal fight over the region's unique fossil record that is being waged between well-funded illegal traders and scientists sustained by meagre government salaries.

"It's a problem. Now you can find a lot of Chinese fossils on the private market everywhere in the world. Dinosaur eggs are very popular," says Godefroit. "It's completely illegal, but it's not difficult to bring the fossils abroad. It's like drugs. Everyone wants to stop it, but they can't." Agence France-Presse

Why wasn't this around when I was a kid?

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