

An Observational Study of Architectural Tourism Experience at Gyeongbokgung Palace Korea

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Abstract

This study explores the architectural tourism experience at Gyeongbokgung Palace using a non-participant observational approach. It examines how tourists interact with key architectural elements such as gates, ornaments, and pavilions in a real-world heritage setting. Findings show that spatial design, visual prominence, and accessibility influence tourist engagement, movement patterns, and emotional responses. Highly detailed structures attract longer attention, while open spaces encourage photography and social interaction. Overall, the study highlights how architectural layout and design shape tourist experience and engagement in heritage environments.

Keywords: Architecture; Tourism; Tourist experience; Gyeongbokgung Palace.

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1.0 Introduction

Architecture plays a crucial role in shaping tourism experiences, serving as both a cultural expression and a visual narrative of a destination's identity. Notably, architectural tourism experience encompasses the sensory, emotional, and cognitive interactions that tourists develop when engaging with the built environment of a destination. It goes beyond mere visual appreciation, involving deeper connections with the cultural meanings, historical narratives, and symbolic values embedded within architectural forms. In recent years, South Korea has emerged as a compelling destination for architectural tourism, particularly due to its well-preserved traditional architecture, which reflects the country's rich cultural heritage and historical continuity. As a niche segment of cultural tourism, architecture tourism enables visitors to engage with the historical, aesthetic, and symbolic meanings embedded in built environments. Building on this emphasis on traditional architecture, Gyeongbokgung Palace stands as one of the most prominent and representative architectural landmarks in South Korea. Located in the heart of Seoul, is a cornerstone of Korean cultural heritage and a prime destination for architecture tourism. Originally constructed in 1395 during the Joseon Dynasty, it served as the main royal palace and a symbol of national prestige. Despite its destruction during the Japanese colonial period, the palace has undergone extensive restoration

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efforts, reflecting Korea's resilience and commitment to preserving its historical identity (Choi, 2010; Pratt, 2012). Visitors to Gyeongbokgung Palace often perceive it as a remarkable heritage site that has been successfully restored and preserved, reflecting continuous efforts to maintain its historical authenticity and cultural value. Despite its importance, limited studies have specifically examined how traditional architectural elements influence tourists' experiences, motivations, and perceptions in the context of South Korea. This study aims to observe tourists' demographic characteristics and their behaviour towards Gyeongbokgung Palace, explore the palace's architectural elements, and synthesise insights into sustainable heritage conservation in urban settings through the case of Gyeongbokgung Palace. Therefore, this study aims to explore the role of traditional architecture in shaping architectural tourism experiences, using Gyeongbokgung Palace as a focal case. By doing so, the research seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on architecture-based tourism while providing practical insights for heritage management and tourism development.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Architectural Tourism Experience and Role of Architecture in Tourism

Architectural tourism is a growing field that combines the appreciation of architectural heritage with tourism, offering unique experiences that connect visitors to cultural, historical, and aesthetic dimensions of built environments. This review synthesizes insights from recent studies to explore the multifaceted nature of architectural tourism experiences. No doubt, architecture plays a pivotal role in shaping tourism experiences by influencing perceptions of space, environment, and cultural identity. It serves as an attractive element that enhances tourists' engagement with destinations, particularly through its aesthetic and historical significance. (Aksoy & Özdemir, 2025; Gai et al., 2024; Cao et al., 2024). For example, Tunisia is a prominent tourist destination, recognized for its rich cultural and architectural heritage. This creates opportunities for architects and interior designers to reimagine spaces in ways that authentically express the nation's identity (Chikha & Dana, 2025). Similarly, heritage architecture, such as the Hui-style buildings in Hongcun, China, demonstrates how aesthetic qualities like typicality and variety can modulate tourists' travel interest and aesthetic pleasure, enriching their overall experience (Cao et al., 2024).

2.2 Experiential Dimensions of Architectural Tourism

The architectural tourism experience is deeply tied to sensory, emotional, and cognitive responses. Visitors often perceive architecture as a medium for storytelling, connecting them to the past and evoking feelings of nostalgia and fascination (De La Fuente Suárez, 2019; Bhogal et al., 2024). For example, think-aloud protocols and visual surveys have been used to map how specific architectural elements elicit emotional and sensory reactions, such as beauty, order, and uniqueness (De La Fuente Suárez, 2019). Additionally, the authenticity of architectural heritage, as seen in destinations like South Luogu Alley in Beijing, significantly impacts visitors' perceptions and their sense of connection to the site. Furthermore, tourists often experience awe and emotional resonance when visiting Hagia Sophia Mosque Turkey, driven by its historical grandeur, intricate design, and layered cultural significance. The sensory and emotional interactions with the site contribute to its status as a relational and immersive cultural landmark (Torre, 2025). This case study in Istanbul, Hagia Sophia illustrates how architectural heritage can evoke deep emotional engagement and enhance tourists' experiential connection with historical spaces.

2.3 Traditional Korean Architecture and Gyeongbokgung Palace

Traditional Korean architecture is characterized by its integration with nature, use of wooden structures, and symbolic design elements. Palaces like Gyeongbokgung exemplify these principles, showcasing features such as open courtyards, semi-indoor spaces, and intricate roof structures that reflect the cultural and historical identity of Korea (Kee, 2025). Gyeongbokgung, the main palace of the Joseon Dynasty, holds significant cultural and political importance, serving as a symbol of national identity and pride. Its restoration, following destruction during the Japanese colonial period, has sparked debates about historical authenticity, preservation methods, and its role in modern Korean society (Youn & Bae, 2025). The palace's architectural elements, such as the Gyeonghoeru Pavilion, highlight the advanced craftsmanship of the Joseon era, blending traditional construction techniques with aesthetic and functional considerations (Kim, 2023). Gyeongbokgung Palace often perceive it as a remarkable heritage site when restoration efforts emphasize not only physical reconstruction but also the preservation of its symbolic and memory-based values, aligning with adaptive heritage principles (Youn & Bae, 2025).

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research setting

This study was conducted at Gyeongbokgung Palace, one of the most significant historical landmarks in South Korea. The palace is renowned for its traditional Korean architectural features, including grand entrance gates, expansive courtyards, and intricately designed wooden structures. As a major tourist attraction, the site provides an ideal environment to observe visitor interaction with architectural elements. The diversity of visitors, including both domestic and international tourists, allows for a comprehensive understanding of architectural tourism behavior.

3.2 Sample

This study employed a non-probability sampling method, specifically purposive observation sampling. The sample consisted of tourists present at selected key architectural locations within the palace, including the main gate, courtyard, and main hall. Rather than focusing on individual respondents, the study observed visitor behaviors within specific time intervals. Approximately 10 to 20 visitors were observed during each interval, depending on crowd density. The unit of analysis was the interaction between tourists and architectural elements.

3.3 Research instrument

The primary instrument used in this study was a structured observation checklist developed by the researcher to ensure systematic and consistent data recording. The checklist was designed to capture key aspects of architectural tourism experience at Gyeongbokgung Palace. It included several components, namely architectural elements such as gates, roofs, and courtyards; visitor behaviors including photography, observation, and movement; types of activities such as posing, walking, and pointing; level of engagement classified as high, medium, or low; number of visitors present at each location; and additional notes on visitor interactions. This structured approach enabled the researcher to record detailed behavioral patterns and gain a comprehensive understanding of how tourists engage with architectural features in a heritage tourism setting.

3.4 Data collection

Data collection was conducted over 1 day at Gyeongbokgung Palace. The observation was carried out for approximately four hours, divided into multiple time intervals of 10 to 15 minutes. Observations were conducted at key architectural areas, including the main gate, courtyard, and main hall, to capture variations in visitor behavior across different spatial settings. The researcher adopted a non-participant observation approach, where no direct interaction with visitors took place to ensure natural behavior. The total number of observations differed across checkpoints due to variations in tourist movement, attraction popularity, and site accessibility during the observation period. The observation continued until behavioral patterns became repetitive, indicating data saturation.

3.5 Data analysis

The data collected were analyzed using descriptive analysis, where observed behaviors were systematically organized into key themes. These themes included architectural elements that attracted visitor attention, tourist photography behavior, visitor movement patterns, and the level of engagement with architectural features. The frequency of each behavior was examined to identify dominant patterns across the observation sessions at Gyeongbokgung Palace. The findings were then interpreted to provide an understanding of how architectural elements influence tourist experience within a heritage tourism context, particularly in shaping visitor interest, movement, and interaction within the site.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Tourists' Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 illustrates the demographic characteristics of the 150 tourists in the study. Regarding gender, the majority were female, 80% (n = 120), while 20% (n = 30) were male. In terms of age distribution, 63.33% (n = 95) were youth aged 15–30 years, followed by 34.67% (n = 52) adults aged 31–50 years, and 2% (n = 3) elderly aged 51 years and above. Regarding tourist type, 76.67% (n = 115) were international tourists, while 23.33% (n = 35) were local tourists. For group type, most participants traveled in family or groups, 88% (n = 132), followed by couples, 10% (n = 15), and solo travelers, 2% (n = 3). In terms of attire, almost all participants wore hanbok, 98.67% (n = 148), while only 1.33% (n = 2) wore casual clothing. Overall, the findings indicate that the sample is predominantly female, young, international tourists, and traveling in family or groups, with a very high preference for wearing hanbok, suggesting strong cultural immersion among respondents visiting the destination, and this reflects the tourism profile of tourists engaging in heritage and cultural experiences during their travel activities in the study area context respectively across tourism segments.

Table 1. Tourists' Demographic Characteristics (n=150)

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	120	80
Male	30	20
Age Group		
Youth (15–30 years old)	95	63.33
Adult (31–50 years old)	52	34.67
Elderly (51+ years old)	3	2
Tourist type		
Local tourists	35	23.33
International tourists	115	76.67
Group type		
Solo travelers	3	2
Couples	15	10
Family/ group	132	88
Attire Pattern		

Wearing hanbok	148	98.67
Casual clothing	2	1.33

4.2 Tourists' Behavior towards Gyeongbokgung Palace

Table 2 demonstrates the tourists' behavior observed at Gyeongbokgung Palace. The findings indicate that architecture exploration recorded the highest percentage, accounting for 28.4% (n = 114) of the observed behaviors. This was followed by photography behavior and cultural participation behavior, both representing 25.1% (n = 101) respectively. Emotional attachment behavior accounted for 20.6% (n = 83), suggesting that a considerable number of tourists demonstrated emotional engagement and appreciation toward the heritage site. In contrast, resting behavior recorded the lowest percentage at 0.7% (n = 3), indicating that only a small number of visitors were observed engaging in passive activities within the palace environment. The results suggest that tourists at Gyeongbokgung Palace were primarily engaged in active exploration, cultural interaction, and visual appreciation of the architectural heritage. Overall, findings show that tourists often experience awe and admiration when visiting the site, expressing fascination with how past generations were able to create such beautiful and enduring architecture. The intricate design, historical craftsmanship, and cultural significance of the structure evoke strong emotional resonance among visitors. This architecture inspires admiration among tourists, encouraging them to capture the beauty of the building through photography and share their experiences on social media platforms. It was also observed that, wearing hanbok while exploring the building reflects tourists' engagement with traditional culture and demonstrates their desire to experience authentic Korean cultural heritage. Table 2 indicates 402 observed behaviors recorded during the observational study, focusing on behavioral occurrences instead of individual tourists.

Table 2. Tourists' Behavior

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Architecture exploration	114	28.4
Emotional attachment	83	20.6
Photography behavior	101	25.1
Cultural participation behavior	101	25.1
Resting	3	0.7
Total	402	100

4.3 The architectural elements of Gyeongbokgung Palace

Table 3 presents the architectural exploration behavior exhibited by tourists at Gyeongbokgung Palace during the observation period. The most frequently observed behavior was appreciation of Dancheong decorative patterns, accounting for 20.0% (n = 120) of the total observations. This was followed by tourists observing the palace gates and Korean calligraphy, both representing 19.5% (n = 117) respectively. Observation of Hanok structural elements accounted for 16.9% (n = 101), while exploration of the Gyeonghoeru Pavilion contributed 15.4% (n = 92). In addition, 7.2% (n = 43) of tourists were observed focusing on palace doors and entrance details. The least frequently observed behavior involved attention towards the courtyards, accounting for only 1.5% (n = 9) of the total observations. Overall, the findings indicate that tourists were more attracted to visually distinctive and culturally symbolic architectural elements within the palace environment.

Table 3. The architectural elements of Gyeongbokgung Palace

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Dancheong Decorative Patterns	120	20
Hanok Structure	101	16.9
Gyeonghoeru Pavilion	92	15.4
Korean calligraphy	117	19.5
Courtyards	9	1.5
Gates	117	19.5
Doors	43	7.2
Total	599	100

4.3.1 Dancheong Decorative Patterns



Fig. 1. (a) Dancheong decoration on palace roof; (b) Traditional Dancheong Korean decorative pattern.
Source: Author's own work (2026)

Figure 1, Dancheong refers to the traditional Korean decorative coloring applied to wooden buildings, particularly temples and palaces. It is a significant cultural and artistic practice that reflects the historical, spiritual, and aesthetic values of Korea. Tourists are drawn to visually distinctive architectural elements such as vibrant colors, intricate ornaments, and decorative patterns, as this aesthetics stimulate visual attraction, emotional connection, and appreciation of cultural heritage. In particular, Dancheong decoration, literally meaning “red and blue or green” in Korean, captures tourists’ attention through its vivid pigments, symbolic artistry, and harmonious integration with the surrounding natural landscape.

4.3.2 Gate Structure

Figure 2 Gyeongbokgung Palace Gwanghwamun Gate is significant because it is the main entrance to the royal palace and symbolizes the authority of the Joseon Dynasty. Its grand design shows traditional Korean architecture and Confucian values. It is also a key cultural landmark that attracts tourists and represents Korea’s historical identity.



Fig. 2. The main gate of Gyeongbokgung Palace
Source: Author's own work (2026)

4.3.3 Korean calligraphy

Figure 3 At Gyeongbokgung Palace gates, Korean calligraphy appears on wooden plaques and signboards inscribed with Hanja or Hangeul. These inscriptions convey the gate's name, royal authority, and Confucian values. The calligraphy enhances aesthetic dignity while reinforcing historical legitimacy and cultural identity. As a visual symbol of tradition, it also attracts tourists by offering an authentic representation of Joseon-era craftsmanship and royal architectural communication.

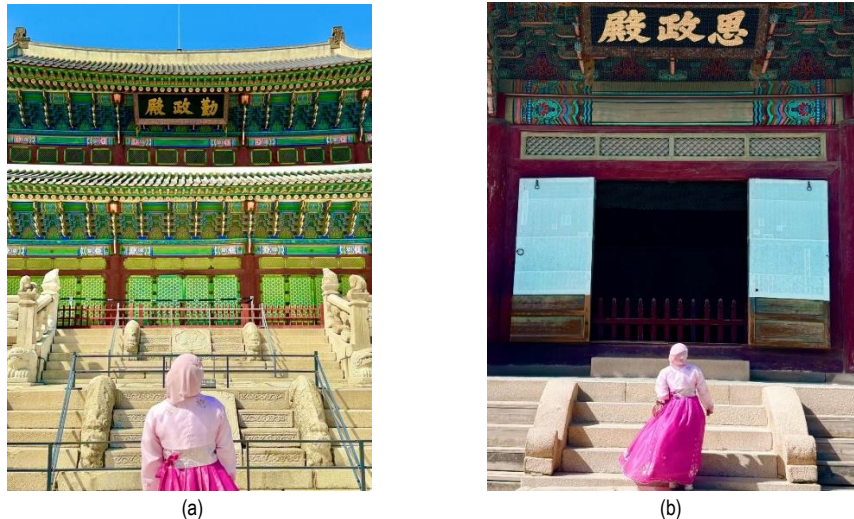


Fig. 3. (a) Korean calligraphy displayed at the palace gate; (b) Traditional Korean calligraphic inscription observed at Gyeongbokgung Palace
Source: Author's own work (2026)

4.3.4 Hanok Structure

Figure 4 Hanok structure refers to the traditional Korean house, is a post and beam timber structure characterized by its eco-friendly design and cultural significance. Its architecture incorporates natural materials like wood, stone, and clay, and features a large tiled roof with proportional aesthetics. The design emphasizes harmony with nature, employing principles like *baesanimsu* (mountain at the back, river at the front) and adapting to regional climates. For instance, northern Hanoks are enclosed for heat retention, while southern ones are open for ventilation.

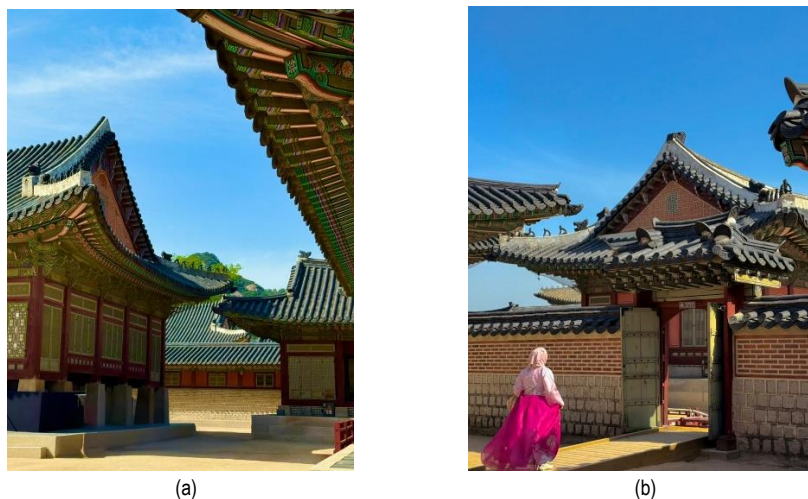


Fig. 4. (a) Hanok, the traditional Korean house; (b) Structural details and design elements of the Hanok house
Source: Author's own work (2026)

4.4 Sustainable Heritage Conservation in Urban Settings: The Case of Gyeongbokgung Palace – objective to syntesis

Findings from observation indicate that Gyeongbokgung Palace demonstrates effective sustainability and heritage preservation despite its central urban location. Although many heritage sites are often situated far from city centers to reduce environmental and human pressure, Gyeongbokgung shows that preservation can still be successfully managed within a dense metropolitan context. The site is well-maintained through controlled visitor flows, regulated access, and continuous conservation efforts. Despite being surrounded by urban development, impacts such as traffic congestion, pollution, and structural erosion remain minimal due to strong management systems and protective zoning policies. Gyeongbokgung Palace was successful as how the building is being preserved for a long period and manage to be seen by present generation. This reflects a balanced integration of heritage conservation and urban development, showing that cultural heritage can be sustained effectively even in highly urbanized areas when proper governance, planning, and maintenance strategies are implemented.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 The Role of Architecture, Culture, and Heritage in Attracting Tourists

Architecture, culture, and heritage play significant roles in attracting tourists. The aesthetic value of architecture, culture, and heritage undoubtedly attracts and influences people to visit a destination. Unique designs, historical elements, and cultural identity create visual appeal and memorable experiences for tourists. Ornamentation, calligraphy, color, and architectural design work together as a visual language that communicates cultural meaning, making architecture a storytelling medium for living heritage. These elements do not only serve aesthetic purposes but also reflect history, beliefs, and social values, allowing cultural identity to be expressed and continuously experienced. These features enhance visitors' interest, strengthen cultural appreciation, and contribute to the attractiveness and sustainability of heritage tourism destinations. Overall, architecture serves as a powerful symbol of cultural heritage and historical continuity.

5.2 Heritage Preservation and Sustainable Conservation

Heritage preservation and sustainable conservation are essential in protecting historical sites for future generations while maintaining their cultural and architectural significance. Preservation efforts ensure that heritage buildings remain authentic despite environmental and urban pressures. In the case of Gyeongbokgung Palace, effective conservation strategies have enabled the palace to retain its historical identity even though it is located within a modern urban environment. Continuous maintenance, controlled tourism activities, and proper management systems help minimize structural erosion, pollution, and overcrowding. Sustainable conservation also balances tourism development with cultural protection, allowing visitors to appreciate the heritage value without damaging the site. These practices demonstrate how historical architecture can continue to function as an educational, cultural, and tourism asset while remaining preserved for present and future generations.

5.3 Living Heritage

This refers to cultural traditions, practices, and expressions that are continuously practiced and transmitted across generations, including architecture, rituals, performances, and daily cultural activities. It is closely linked to architecture because built environments provide the physical setting where these traditions take place. Architecture is not only a static structure but also a living space that supports cultural continuity and interaction. At Gyeongbokgung Palace, traditional architecture plays a key role in sustaining living heritage. The palace hosts cultural activities such as royal guard ceremonies, calligraphy demonstrations, and traditional dress experiences within its historical spaces. These architectural settings preserve cultural identity while allowing active engagement with heritage. In this way, architecture becomes a medium that connects history with present experiences, ensuring that cultural values remain alive, relevant, and accessible to future generations through both preservation and continuous use.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, architecture plays a fundamental role as the physical and visual foundation that shapes cultural experiences and meaning. Through its design, symbolism, and spatial organization, architecture preserves and communicates cultural heritage, allowing historical identity to be continuously expressed. Cultural heritage is therefore sustained and experienced through these built environments, where traditions, values, and history are embedded within architectural forms. This integration contributes significantly to tourism by offering authentic, educational, and immersive experiences for visitors. At Gyeongbokgung Palace, the architectural setting enhances cultural appreciation through ceremonies and traditional displays, leading to higher tourist satisfaction. In addition, the emotional attachment formed through aesthetic appreciation and meaningful encounters strengthens visitors' connection to the place. Ultimately, the relationship between architecture, cultural heritage, tourism experience, and emotional attachment demonstrates how well-preserved built environments enrich visitor engagement and support sustainable cultural tourism development. Nevertheless, this study relied primarily on observational data and was conducted over a limited period. Future research should integrate interviews or questionnaires to validate the findings, extend the study duration, and explore additional aspects such as visitor satisfaction and other factors influencing architectural tourism experiences.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study contributes to the field of architecture tourism by offering valuable insights into the relationship between architectural understanding and tourist appreciation of built heritage. It highlights the significance of architectural design, aesthetics, and cultural values in shaping visitor experiences and enhancing destination appeal. The findings may assist policymakers, heritage managers, and tourism practitioners in developing more effective strategies to promote and preserve architectural attractions as key tourism assets.

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