

auri research brief

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Improvements to Lower Floors and Outdoor Spaces of Public Buildings

An increasing number of public buildings are being established to cater to various functions like daycare centers, kindergartens, community centers, libraries, exercise and public health centers. Public interest in the quality of these buildings is rising as well, with the current administration implementing various policies to enhance building quality. However, there have been no discussions or studies highlighting questions such as “What is a good public building?” “What is the current condition of public buildings?” “Are the citizens satisfied with public buildings?” and “How can we improve the quality of public buildings?”

Apart from the original function of serving the public, these buildings are also required to improve the quality of people’s lives and vitalize communities. Despite the lower floors and outdoor spaces of public buildings being considered as important spaces that should be accessible and usable, there is hardly any discussion that addresses their significance or planning direction. This study aims to identify the current condition of the lower floors and outdoor spaces of public buildings, and establish future direction for improvements. Subsequently, it proposes measures to transform such spaces for use by the people and local communities.

This study focuses on “four criteria to create a great place” as proposed

by the Project for Public Spaces (PPS – a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating and sustaining public spaces), which include “access and linkages,” “comfort and images,” “uses and activities,” and “sociability.” Based on these principles, indicators set in previous studies with regard to public buildings in Korea and the publicness of the buildings were analyzed, and the most frequently appearing “accessibility,” “openness,” “linkage,” “comfort and sociability,” and “participation and communication” were set as target indicators.

Employing these five indicators, floor plan analyses and field surveys were conducted on 12 public buildings in Sejong City, Korea, that are frequented by local residents, in order to evaluate the construction and the use of the ground floor and open spaces, and gauge the level of user satisfaction. A study of the current state confirmed that the ground floor and open spaces of public buildings were being utilized as resting areas for the general public. Another positive aspect is that the surroundings of public buildings constructed after 2010 are pedestrian-friendly. Nevertheless, there were several problems with regard to accessibility, openness, linkage, comfort and sociability, and participation and communication. Regarding accessibility, there were problems such as distance from the main entrance of a site and the step-height difference at a building’s entrance. Concerning openness, there is a lack of connection between indoor and outdoor spaces as most spaces of the surveyed public buildings are indoor-oriented. As regards to linkage, not only are many of the public buildings isolated, lacking continuity with surrounding buildings, but also detached from pedestrian access due to vehicle parking. From the aspect of comfort and sociability, although many public buildings are equipped with resting areas, the rate of utilization was low due to the inappropriate location and environment, and outdoor spaces were built for parking vehicles, with no space for people. From the aspect of participation and communication, many ground floors and open spaces of public buildings were passively used with little or hardly any scope for participation by local residents. According to the surveys on the actual use and level of user satisfaction, it was found that the frequency and satisfaction of use, and hours spent in public buildings were high, suggesting that such buildings serve as spaces for everyday life. Nonetheless, people’s satisfaction toward comfort and sociability was the lowest among the five indicators, suggesting that public buildings fail to serve beyond their original function, and are yet to be actively used as social activity spaces for leisure, rest, and communication. This suggests that there is a great demand for facilities of convenience. A majority of respondents in the survey indicated that in order to raise the level of comfort and sociability, improvements should be made to increase the number and types of convenience facilities. Regarding openness, there was a popular demand to extend the business hours of the facilities.

Issues related to the institution and planning of the ground floor and open spaces of

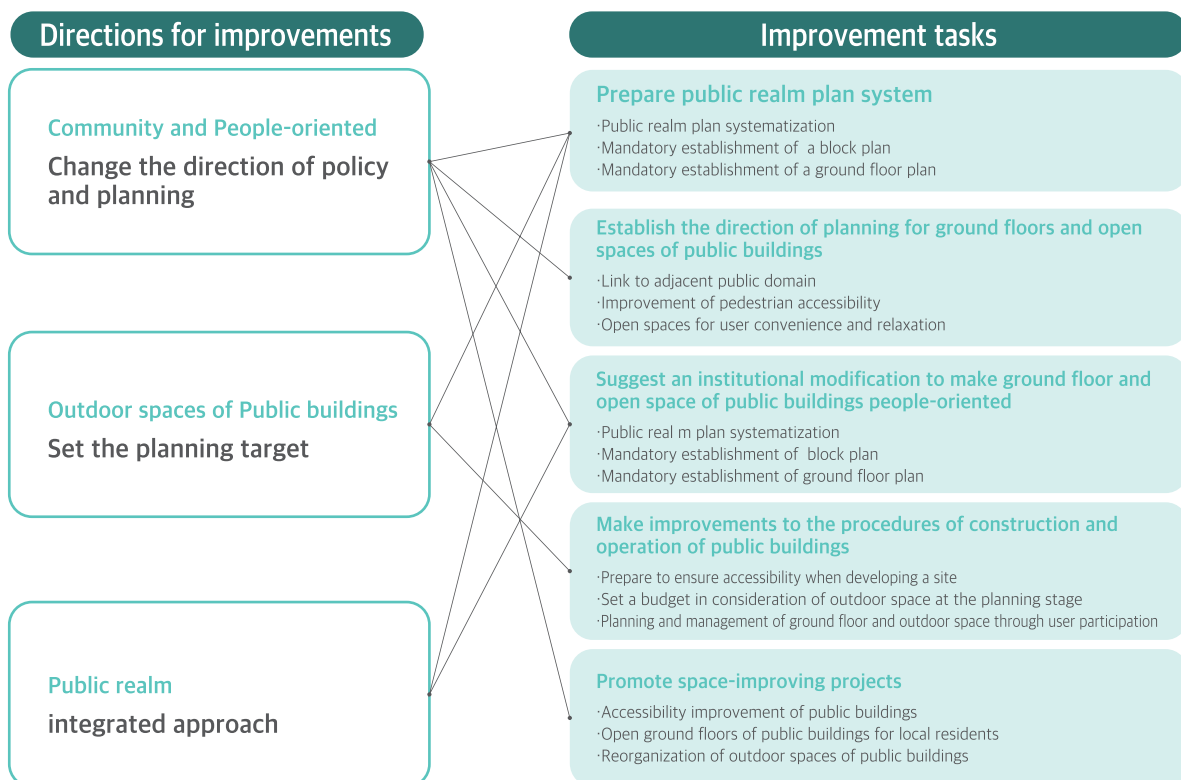
public buildings, and those found in the process of constructing individual public buildings were examined as well. The analysis found that sufficient consideration was not given to the ground floor and open spaces when constructing public buildings in the current legal system and plans. Under the current legal system, the outdoor spaces of public buildings are not included as a separate place or scope for work, and matters regarding spaces connecting a city and buildings are not sufficiently covered. While matters regarding connecting to public transportation and pedestrian-only streets are comprehensively addressed in urban management planning guidelines and regulations related to determinatives and establishment standards of urban facility planning, there is an absence of detailed standards on developing a site. Furthermore, in the district unit planning guidelines, the ground floor and open spaces of public buildings are not considered as separate areas in need of planning. Although the principles of accessibility, openness, linkage, comfort and sociability, and communication and participation are covered in legal mandates like urban management, district unit plan, landscape plan, the urban regeneration strategic plan, and the urban regeneration activation plan, they have yet to be incorporated in physical plans. Under such circumstances where concrete plans have not been established, the lower floors and outdoor spaces of public buildings will be created based on plot unit. Even then, not enough consideration has been given to such spaces during the process of constructing public buildings. There are numerous cases where the layout of public buildings is arranged mechanically, following only building codes like parking lot requirements, standards for convenience facility for the disabled, and crime prevention building standards. Additionally, there are many cases where plans for user-oriented lower floors and outdoor spaces were either changed or cancelled during the construction management process.

Based on the survey results, this study recommends future directions for improvements to ground floors and open spaces of public buildings. First, it is necessary to reset the direction of public building policies and plans to include communities and the public. It should be understood how public buildings can contribute to local communities, so that their surroundings can be reorganized to focus on the public. Next, the ground floors and open spaces of public buildings should be established as important targets for planning. Such spaces are a couple of many varying types of public spaces and should be objects of unique planning, and not be regarded as subordinate spaces. Lastly, the ground floor and open spaces of public buildings should be viewed as factors forming a city's public domain, where a comprehensive plan should be devised to improve the quality of public areas.

In line with these three directions for improvements, this study prepared a planning system for public domain, established the direction of planning, suggested an institutional

modification to make ground floors and open spaces of public buildings people-oriented, made improvements to the procedures of construction and the operation of public buildings, and presented improvement tasks related to the advancement of space-improving projects.

First, an integrated design system for public domain such as public area plans, block plans, and lower floor plans is needed in accordance with the districts, plots, and buildings. Second, planning criteria to improve accessibility and convenience are imperative to realize public buildings that focus on local communities and the public. Third, reforms should be made to existing rules in the current legal system that hinder accessibility, openness, and comfort and sociability of ground floors and open spaces of public buildings. Fourth, it is necessary to consider the importance of such spaces during the construction of individual public buildings. Lastly, while it is crucial to improve the ground floor and open spaces of public buildings that are under construction, it is just as important to actualize various types of improvement projects for existing buildings. It is possible to boost accessibility by eliminating walls or step-height differences, remodeling the lower floors of public buildings to create spaces of convenience for local residents, and rearranging outdoor spaces to build a plaza that can revitalize the local community.



[Figure] Improvement Tasks for Ground Floor and Outdoor Space of Public Buildings

Source : authors

Follow-up tasks should be carried out to implement the items mentioned in this study so as to improve ground floors and open spaces of public buildings. In particular, to institutionalize public areas, blocks, and lower floor plans that encourage an integrated design of public domains, a review of their contents and operating system is imperative. Conditions to relax parking lot standards should also be determined in greater detail. Additionally, budgetary standards need to be further examined to separately set aside finances for creating lower floors and outdoor spaces at public buildings. Reasonable budget standards should be established by analyzing exemplary cases of outdoor spaces of public buildings.

Keywords : Public Building, Lower Floors, Outdoor Spaces, Accessibility, Openness, Linkage, Comfort and Sociability, Participation, Communication, Public Sector Plan

