

When History Feels Alive: Heritage architecture and tourists' sense of the past at Gyeongbokgung Palace, South Korea

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Abstract

This study investigates the architectural tourism experience at Gyeongbokgung Palace through a non-participant observational approach. It explores how visitors engage with key architectural features, including gates, pavilions, and decorative elements, within an authentic heritage setting. The observations reveal that architectural design, spatial organization, visual appeal, and accessibility significantly influence visitor movement, engagement, and emotional responses. Intricately designed structures attract prolonged attention, while expansive open spaces encourage photography, exploration, and social interaction. The findings demonstrate that heritage architecture plays a vital role in shaping tourists' perceptions and experiences, offering valuable insights for enhancing heritage interpretation, visitor management, and sustainable cultural tourism.

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

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1.0 Introduction

History becomes most meaningful when it is not only remembered but also experienced. At heritage destinations, architecture has the unique ability to transport tourists beyond the present, creating a compelling sense of the past through spatial settings, architectural forms, and cultural ambience. This experience extends beyond simply viewing historic buildings; it allows tourists to imagine, interpret, and emotionally connect with the lives, traditions, and historical narratives embedded within heritage environments. Architecture therefore plays a pivotal role in shaping tourism experiences, serving not only as a cultural expression but also as a visual narrative that reflects the identity, history, and values of a destination. Architectural tourism experience encompasses the sensory, emotional, and cognitive responses that tourists develop through their interaction with the built environment. Beyond aesthetic appreciation, it involves meaningful engagement with the cultural significance, historical narratives, and symbolic values embodied within architectural forms.

In recent years, South Korea has emerged as a distinguished destination for architectural tourism, owing to its well-preserved traditional architecture that showcases the nation's rich cultural heritage and historical continuity. As a distinctive branch of cultural tourism, architectural tourism allows visitors to appreciate the historical, aesthetic, and symbolic dimensions embedded within heritage structures. Among South Korea's most iconic heritage attractions, Gyeongbokgung Palace stands as a remarkable representation of traditional Korean architecture. Situated in the heart of Seoul, the palace is a cornerstone of the nation's cultural heritage and one of its leading architectural tourism destinations. Constructed in 1395 during the Joseon Dynasty, it served as the principal royal palace and symbolised the authority and prestige of the Korean monarchy. Although extensively damaged during the Japanese colonial period, Gyeongbokgung Palace has undergone significant restoration, demonstrating South Korea's enduring commitment to preserving its cultural identity and historical legacy (Choi, 2010; Pratt, 2012). Today, visitors often perceive the palace as a place where history feels alive, as its restored architecture, ceremonial spaces, and traditional setting evoke a vivid sense of the Joseon Dynasty and foster meaningful engagement with Korea's cultural past.

Despite its prominence, relatively few studies have examined how the traditional architectural characteristics of Gyeongbokgung Palace shape tourists' experiences, perceptions, and behavioural responses. Existing research has largely focused on the palace's historical significance and conservation, while limited attention has been given to understanding how its architectural environment enables visitors to experience and connect with the past. This study addresses this gap by observing tourists' demographic characteristics and behavioural patterns, examining the palace's key architectural elements, and synthesising insights that support sustainable heritage conservation within an urban context. Accordingly, this research explores how traditional architecture shapes tourists' sense of the past at Gyeongbokgung Palace. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of knowledge on architectural tourism while offering practical implications for heritage management, visitor experience enhancement, and sustainable tourism

development. Architecture plays a fundamental role in shaping tourism experiences by serving as both a cultural expression and a visual narrative that reflects the identity, history, and values of a destination. Beyond its physical form, architecture embodies stories of civilization, tradition, and national identity, enabling visitors to connect with a destination through meaningful cultural encounters. The architectural tourism experience encompasses the sensory, emotional, cognitive, and aesthetic responses that tourists develop when engaging with the built environment. Rather than being limited to visual appreciation, this experience involves a deeper understanding of the historical narratives, symbolic meanings, cultural significance, and artistic craftsmanship embedded within architectural forms. Consequently, architecture becomes more than a physical attraction; it functions as a medium through which visitors interpret the past, appreciate cultural continuity, and construct memorable tourism experiences.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Heritage Architecture

Heritage architecture stands as a tangible testament to the legacy of past civilizations, embodying the cultural identity, historical significance, and artistic achievements that have been passed down through generations. More than a collection of historic buildings, heritage architecture embodies cultural values and historical narratives through its architectural forms, craftsmanship, materials and spatial organization (Qadir et al., 2022). Architectural features such as domes, arches, columns, courtyards, ornamentation, geometric patterns, and traditional construction techniques communicate the cultural philosophies and aesthetic traditions of their respective societies. As a result, heritage buildings function as living records that connect contemporary visitors with the history, beliefs, and lifestyles of previous generations. Within the tourism context, heritage architecture has evolved beyond a conservation asset to become a major attraction that shapes visitors' experiences and destination image. Tourists are drawn to heritage sites not only for their historical significance but also for the emotional, sensory, and educational experiences they offer. The visual appeal, cultural authenticity, and symbolic meanings embedded in heritage buildings encourage appreciation, reflection, and deeper engagement with local history and culture. As experiential tourism continues to grow, heritage architecture plays a vital role in creating memorable experiences by fostering emotional connections with the built environment, ultimately influencing tourists' perceptions, satisfaction, and attachment to a destination.

2.2 The Power of Architecture in Tourism Experiences

Architecture is far more than a physical setting to tourism; it is a powerful medium through which destinations communicate their history, culture, and identity. As tourists increasingly seek authentic and meaningful experiences, architectural tourism has emerged as a growing field that connects visitors with the cultural, historical, and aesthetic values

embedded within the built environment. Rather than merely observing buildings, tourists engage with architecture as a form of storytelling that evokes curiosity, appreciation, and emotional connection. Consequently, architecture plays a pivotal role in shaping tourism experiences by influencing visitors' perceptions of place, cultural understanding, and destination image (Aksoy & Özdemir, 2025; Gai et al., 2024; Cao et al., 2024). Across diverse destinations, architectural heritage has become a key tourism asset that enhances visitor engagement through its visual appeal, symbolic meanings, and historical significance. For instance, Tunisia's rich architectural heritage provides opportunities to showcase the nation's cultural identity through thoughtfully designed and preserved spaces (Chikha & Dana, 2025). Likewise, the Hui-style architecture of Hongcun, China, illustrates how distinctive architectural characteristics, including traditional forms and aesthetic diversity, stimulate tourists' visual appreciation, travel interest, and overall tourism experience (Cao et al., 2024). These examples demonstrate that architecture is not merely a setting for tourism activities but a central component that shapes how visitors experience, interpret, and remember a destination.

2.3 Dimensions of the Architectural Tourism Experience

The architectural tourism experience extends beyond visual appreciation, encompassing sensory, emotional, and cognitive dimensions that shape how visitors engage with the built environment. Rather than simply observing historic structures, tourists often perceive architecture as a medium for storytelling that connects them with the history, culture, and identity of a destination, evoking emotions such as awe, nostalgia, and fascination (De La Fuente Suárez, 2019; Bhogal et al., 2024). Research using think-aloud protocols and visual surveys demonstrates that architectural attributes, including form, symmetry, materials, and ornamentation, can stimulate emotional and sensory responses such as admiration, harmony, and a sense of uniqueness (De La Fuente Suárez, 2019). Moreover, the authenticity of heritage architecture strengthens visitors' emotional attachment and sense of place. For example, the preserved architectural character of South Luogu Alley in Beijing enhances tourists' perceptions of authenticity and reinforces their connection to the destination. Similarly, the architectural grandeur, intricate craftsmanship, and layered historical significance of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul inspire feelings of awe and emotional resonance, transforming a heritage visit into an immersive cultural experience (Torre, 2025). These examples demonstrate that heritage architecture is not merely appreciated for its physical appearance but also for its ability to evoke meaningful experiences that deepen visitors' understanding of the past and strengthen their connection with historic places.

2.4 Traditional Korean Architecture: Gyeongbokgung Palace

Traditional Korean architecture is distinguished by its harmonious relationship with nature, wooden construction, and symbolic design principles that reflect the philosophical and cultural values of Korean society. Among its finest examples is Gyeongbokgung Palace, the principal royal palace of the Joseon Dynasty, which embodies these architectural

characteristics through its expansive courtyards, open pavilions, elegantly curved rooflines, and carefully planned spatial organization (Kee, 2025). Beyond its architectural excellence, Gyeongbokgung Palace holds profound historical, cultural, and political significance as a symbol of Korea's national identity and royal heritage. Following its destruction during the Japanese colonial period, extensive restoration efforts have generated scholarly discussions regarding historical authenticity, conservation approaches, and the palace's evolving role in contemporary Korean society (Youn & Bae, 2025). Architectural landmarks such as the Gyeonghoeru Pavilion further demonstrate the exceptional craftsmanship of the Joseon era by combining traditional construction techniques with aesthetic refinement and functional design (Kim, 2023). These restoration initiatives not only preserve the palace's physical fabric but also reinforce its symbolic meaning and collective memory, enabling visitors to experience Gyeongbokgung Palace as an authentic cultural landmark that embodies Korea's rich architectural heritage (Youn & Bae, 2025).

3.0 Methodology

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 behaviour. 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 behaviours 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.

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 behaviours 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 behavioural patterns and gain a comprehensive understanding of how tourists engage with architectural features in a heritage tourism setting. 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 behaviour across different spatial settings. The researcher adopted a non-participant observation approach, where no direct interaction with visitors took place to ensure natural behaviour. 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 behavioural patterns became repetitive, indicating data saturation.

The data collected were analyzed using descriptive analysis, where observed behaviours were systematically organized into key themes. These themes included architectural elements that attracted visitor attention, tourist photography behaviour, visitor movement patterns, and the level of engagement with architectural features. The frequency of each behaviour 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 Results

4.1 Tourists' Demographic Characteristics at Gyeongbokgung Palace

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 travelled in family or groups, 88% (n = 132), followed by couples, 10% (n = 15), and solo travellers, 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' Behaviour towards Gyeongbokgung Palace

Table 2 demonstrates the tourists' behaviour observed at Gyeongbokgung Palace. The findings indicate that architecture exploration recorded the highest percentage, accounting for 28.4% (n = 114) of the observed behaviours. This was followed by photography behaviour and cultural participation behaviour, both representing 25.1% (n = 101) respectively. Emotional attachment behaviour 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 behaviour 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 behaviours recorded during the observational study, focusing on behavioural occurrences instead of individual tourists.

Table 2. Tourists' Behaviour

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

Total

402

100

4.3 The architectural elements of Gyeongbokgung Palace

Table 3 presents the architectural exploration behaviour exhibited by tourists at Gyeongbokgung Palace during the observation period. The most frequently observed behaviour 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 behaviour 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



Figure 1: From left to right, the images illustrate (a) Intricate Dancheong decorative paintings adorning the palace roof, showcasing vibrant colours and symbolic motifs that reflect the artistic excellence and cultural identity of traditional Korean architecture. (b) Traditional Dancheong ornamental patterns embellishing the wooden door structure of Gyeongbokgung Palace, illustrating the craftsmanship, symbolic meanings, and aesthetic principles of the Joseon Dynasty.

Source: Author's own work (2026)

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



Figure 2: From left to right, the images illustrate (a) The majestic main gate of Gyeongbokgung Palace featuring traditional Korean architectural ornamentation. (b) The grand open forecourt of Gyeongbokgung Palace, creating a sense of awe through its monumental scale.

Source: Author's own work (2026)

4.3.3 Korean calligraphy



Figure 3: From left to right, the images illustrate (a) Korean calligraphy displayed above one of the gates of Gyeongbokgung Palace (b) Traditional Korean calligraphic inscription on a palace gate at Gyeongbokgung Palace.

Source: Author's own work (2026)

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.

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



Figure 4: From left to right, the images illustrate (a) A traditional Korean Hanok house, showcasing the distinctive characteristics of Korean vernacular architecture (b) Architectural details and structural design elements of a Hanok, highlighting its timber construction, tiled roof, and traditional craftsmanship.

Source: Author's own work (2026)

4.4 Preserving the Past in a Modern City

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 Power of Architecture, Culture, and Heritage in Attracting Tourists*

Architecture, culture, and heritage are fundamental elements that shape the attractiveness of tourism destinations and influence visitors' travel decisions. The aesthetic qualities of heritage architecture, combined with its cultural and historical significance, create distinctive and memorable experiences that attract tourists. Architectural features such as ornamentation, calligraphy, colour, spatial design, and decorative motifs function as a visual language, communicating the history, beliefs, traditions, and identity of a destination. Beyond their aesthetic appeal, these elements transform architecture into a medium for storytelling, allowing visitors to engage with the living heritage embedded within the built environment. Such interactions foster cultural appreciation, deepen visitors' understanding of local heritage, and strengthen emotional connections with the destination. Consequently, architecture serves not only as a physical landmark but also as a powerful symbol of cultural continuity, enhancing the attractiveness, authenticity, and long-term sustainability of heritage tourism destinations.

5.2 *Sustainable Heritage Conservation*

Sustainable heritage conservation plays a vital role in safeguarding historic sites for present and future generations while preserving their cultural, historical, and architectural significance. Effective conservation practices maintain the authenticity and integrity of heritage buildings despite the challenges posed by urbanization, environmental change, and increasing tourism. Gyeongbokgung Palace exemplifies how sustainable conservation can protect a heritage landmark within a rapidly modernizing city. Through continuous restoration, regular maintenance, visitor management, and controlled tourism activities, the palace has retained its historical identity while remaining accessible to the public. By balancing heritage preservation with tourism development, sustainable conservation ensures that cultural assets continue to serve as educational, cultural, and tourism resources, enabling both present and future generations to appreciate, learn from, and experience their enduring heritage value without compromising their long-term preservation.

5.3 Living Architectural Heritage

History comes alive when heritage architecture is not only preserved but also experienced. Living architectural heritage transforms historic buildings from static monuments into vibrant cultural spaces where traditions, stories, and identities continue to thrive. Rather than simply observing architectural beauty, visitors immerse themselves in the living legacy of a destination through its rituals, craftsmanship, cultural performances, and everyday heritage practices. Gyeongbokgung Palace exemplifies this concept by preserving the architectural grandeur of the Joseon Dynasty while continuing to host royal guard ceremonies, traditional cultural events, and educational activities. These experiences enable visitors to engage with Korean history beyond visual appreciation, fostering a deeper emotional and cultural connection with the site. By bridging the past and the present, living architectural heritage strengthens cultural continuity, enriches the tourism experience, and ensures that the historical, architectural, and cultural values of heritage sites are appreciated and safeguarded for present and future generations.

6.0 Conclusion

Great architecture transcends time, allowing the past to remain alive through its forms, meanings, and cultural expressions. Architecture serves as the foundation through which history, culture, and identity are preserved, interpreted, and experienced. Beyond its physical form, architecture communicates cultural narratives through its design, symbolism, and spatial organization, enabling heritage to remain relevant across generations. As a result, built heritage becomes more than a collection of historic structures; it offers authentic, educational, and immersive experiences that enrich tourism. At Gyeongbokgung Palace, the harmonious integration of architectural features, cultural ceremonies, and traditional practices enhances visitors' appreciation of Korea's heritage while fostering memorable and meaningful experiences. These encounters cultivate emotional attachment, strengthen visitors' sense of place, and deepen their connection with the destination. Collectively, the interplay between architecture, cultural heritage, tourism experiences, and emotional engagement underscores the importance of preserving heritage sites as living cultural assets that support sustainable tourism development for present and future generations. Nevertheless, this study was based primarily on observational data collected over a limited period. Future research should incorporate interviews or questionnaire surveys to validate these findings, extend the observation period, and examine additional dimensions, such as visitor satisfaction, place attachment, and other factors influencing architectural tourism experiences.

Article Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study contributes to the fields of architecture, tourism, and cultural heritage by highlighting how heritage architecture shapes tourists' experiences, perceptions, and emotional connections with destinations. It demonstrates that architectural elements,

cultural meanings, and conservation practices play an important role in preserving historical identity while enhancing tourism experiences. The study provides insights into how heritage sites, such as Gyeongbokgung Palace, can be sustainably managed as living cultural assets that connect the past with the present.

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