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Children's Library Project in Korea:  
The Miracle Libraries

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## Children's Library Project in Korea: The Miracle Libraries

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It is important for adults to provide children with attractive surroundings appropriate for their creative activities and wholesome growth. Miracle Libraries, which have been built since 2003 by the organization Citizen Action for Reading Culture in cooperation with the general public, a broadcasting company, local governments, private enterprises and children, are libraries for children.

The Miracle Library Project, through which some unique architectural concepts for these libraries have been realized, have demonstrated an ideal public-private partnership model while, at the same time, offered various educational programs focused on child development. As a result, the project has had a significant impact on the library culture, children, children's books and local communities in Korea. In this paper, I would like to not only share the experience of constructing and managing Miracle Libraries in Korea with you, but also convey the idea that books can build bridges of understanding and peace between people, and literacy can change the life of children and people.

### 1. The Objectives: What a Miracle Library Intends to Do

1-1. Children have the divine rights to enjoy freedom and have equal opportunities. They should not be marginalized by poor conditions, discrimination, lack of opportunities or neglect. A Miracle Library provides all children with an attractive environment in which they read books without discrimination while nurturing their dreams.

1-2. A Miracle Library makes real the ideal that, by being able to read books freely, children can grow into mature men or women. With the help of a Miracle Library,

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many children obtain spiritual and intellectual nourishment in the hope that they will learn public values, democratic ideas, consideration for others, ways to love the world, the importance of peace and respect for other human beings' life and dignity.

## 2. Public-private Partnership

2-1. The Miracle Library Project has been driven by the collaboration of a non-profit civic organization and local governments in Korea. This is an initiative model of a public-private partnership for the public good.

2-2. The Miracle Library Project is a spontaneous movement stemming from the ideas of ordinary people that a library is the infrastructure for a healthy civil society, creative culture and ethical communes. Citizen Action for Reading Culture along with the Book Culture Foundation of Korea (lead by Jung-il Doh) stand at the center of the project.

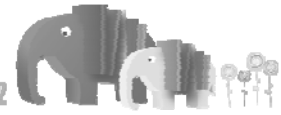
2-3. The project grew into a national one with the help of "Read Books" a TV program produced by Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC). Voluntary donations from every corner of the country, many resources from the private sector and some contributions from local governments have helped to make the project possible. Local Miracle Libraries belong to the children and citizens of the region, and at the same time, to all the people of Korea. Likewise, the management system of the Miracle Libraries is based on a new paradigm of civic engagement linked with public-private partnership. The informational, educational and cultural programs offered in Miracle Libraries have been made richer through the enthusiastic participation of ordinary people.

2-4. The Miracle Library Project has made public values a reality due to the connection between civil creativity and governmental support.

## 3. The Fundamental Principles of Operating a Miracle Library

### 3-1. Open to Even Babies and Toddlers

A Miracle Library is open to children of all ages, including babies and toddlers, in order to give all children the opportunity to get close to books. For babies and toddlers who



visit the library, ondol (traditional Korean-style floors, which are heated from below) are provided. The owners of Miracle Libraries are the children.

### 3-2. An Active Library

A Miracle Library is a place full of interesting activities in which storytelling, singing songs, play-acting, dancing, drawing, and handicrafts are connected to reading books. A Miracle Library is “living library” and “a library filled with fun.” Therefore, Miracle Libraries are furnished with charmingly decorated rooms for storytelling and other activities. A Miracle Library functions as the wellspring of inspiration for children, which in turn allows them to exercise their imaginations.

### 3-3. A Library Managed by Public-private Cooperation

A steering committee made up of people from all walks of life representing the local community and local governments are responsible for managing the Miracle Library in each region. This arrangement has successfully demonstrated a new paradigm: a library run by public-private cooperation.

### 3-4. Social Support for Childcare

A Miracle Library contributes to childcare because it functions as an organization where the common responsibility of these expenses is shared with parents. It offers new childcare methodology, specifically by conducting programs such as “Childcare Help Program for Parents” and “The Time for Babies.”

### 3-5. Connecting Home with School and Library

A Miracle Library tries to link reading at home, school and the library, thereby formulating a positive reading culture at home and in school.

## 4. Physical Facilities

### 4-1. The Library Where You Want to Go

A Miracle Library is designed according to the idea that a children’s library should be a fun place to take children.



## Ondol Culture

An ondol floor is a Korean traditional floor heating system that came from a way of life that included sitting and sleeping on the floor. It has been said that ondol exemplifies the Korean soul and that it is the groundwork of Korean culture. A Miracle Library includes an ondol floor in the reading area in order to give babies and toddlers some space to crawl and roll about on the floor. Moreover, the ondol floor in Miracle Library can help people who come into the library feel like they're home and read books while sitting comfortably. Perhaps ondol represents the first attempt in the world that this culture of sitting on the floor is brought into a public building like a children's library. With an ondol floor part of the reading area, both the standing and sedentary cultures coexist in a Miracle Library.

### 4-2. Meeting with Books, Meeting with Each Other

A Miracle Library is designed according to the idea that libraries make it possible to meet books and people. A library is a kind of meeting place: the library's clients meet librarians; parents come to the library with their children and read books to their children; children communicate with their parents through reading books in the library. A Miracle Library where the concept of a pleasant, convenient, safe, flexible, and environment-friendly space is realized, faithfully plays its role as a meeting place. The interior structure of a Miracle Library is pleasant not only visitors but also volunteers.

### 4-3. Multi-dimensional Space, Playfulness

Some areas of a Miracle Library undulate softly. This characteristic is designed to stimulate children's spatial sensibility. It is important for children to find the library fun and joyful. The interior design of a Miracle Library is finely adjusted to children's free movement, thus attracting their interest.

### 4-4. Allocation of Space

In a Miracle Library, there are storytelling rooms in which various stories can be told to children. Also, a Miracle Library is equipped with multipurpose rooms for all sorts of activities and multimedia rooms to experience a new media environment. Facilities and equipment for the disabled are carefully arranged. There are some sections for nature experience activities and nature walks outside the building, or on the roof garden. In these



sections, urban children can observe the wonders of nature, develop their sensibilities, and learn more about ecology. The following are the necessary space requirements in a Miracle Library: 1) at least two reading areas for children under 10 and school children up to 13; 2) information/librarian desk; 3) office; 4) storytelling rooms; 5) nap rooms for babies; 6) book storage; 7) an assembly hall or a multipurpose room and a stage with a projection room and a control room; 8) a computer section; 9) a staff lounge and a seminar room; 10) a plant cultivation room; 11) little hollows and lofts; 12) toilets; 13) a café in the hall; 14) a small open space with the shoe shelf; 15) washbasins in the hall; 16) verandas and terraces; 17) an exhibition area; 18) a preparation room; 19) a rooftop garden; 20) an area for social interaction.

## 5. Some Brainstorming about How to Build a Miracle Library

Here are the architects' notes written in the conceptual stage prior to the construction of a Miracle Library. Let me share with you these notes to help you understand the philosophical framework of a Miracle Library.

*The Miracle Library in Suncheon: The Maze in the Universe* by Giyong Jung

All the children in the world should be considered as free citizens of the world beyond the restrictions of borders between countries. They are not simply members of certain nations, but free souls of the universe. To build a Miracle Library is to give children a special little cosmos where they can enjoy their imaginary travels to the fullest with books. This Miracle Library will be a structure in which iron, wood, water, light and soil can be harmonized with one another. The steel structures inside the building sustains the whole building; the wooden exterior of the building is like the clothes made by Mother Nature; the earth set aside in reading areas is the fertile soil for green bamboos; the water on the roof is a metaphor of endless wisdom and time. Through the dome of glass, the sunlight comes in and the clouds can be seen. The spinning pinwheel outside the building is the visualized breath of the planet Earth. The various types of rooms and areas in the library allow children to encounter books in different ways. On the second floor, there is the "Starland Reading Room" in the shape of an airplane and a maze that slowly comes into view. At the end of the maze, water wells up from the "Time Spring."



*The Miracle Library in Jecheon: Five Trees, Sunshine and Moonlight* by Geonyeong Cho

The five trees, standing as if they hold up the sky, represent person's development and growing wisdom. I'll call the trees "Cosmic Trees." The transparent reading rooms made of glass are filled with sunlight passing through the apple orchard. At night, the moon and the stars seem to come in and read books. In the front garden of the library there is an open-air theater in the shape of the half moon, wishing to be a full moon with children's song and sound of reading. These are the reasons why I conceive the trees, sunshine and the moonlight as important factors at the Miracle Library in Jecheon. The library itself can be a gigantic book which inspires the children to make themselves very intriguing books filled with valuable things.

## 6. The Miracle Library Services

6-1. The functions of libraries are not limited to lending books and providing places for reading, but extend to a variety of activities and programs for the clients. Especially, children's libraries should be the places in which children find the library an open, inviting, and attractive place to visit.

6-2. Hence, Miracle Libraries across the country have developed some creative programs and motivating activities as library services for children. The services of the Miracle Library are appropriate for the cultural and entertainment needs of the community's children, as well as being innovative.

6-3. The following are the programs in practice in Miracle Libraries.

- Programs for Babies: "Storytelling," "Chants," "Listening to Sounds"
- Programs for Children up to 5 or 6: "Storytelling" and "Reading Aloud"
- Programs for Kids: "Reading Guidance," "Reading Class," "Helping Children Select Materials"
- "Special Remedial Reading Class"



- “Children’s Seminar: Discussion after Reading”
- Field trips, visits, observation exercises and travels related to the books
- Reciting poems, reading stories and dramatic readings
- Traveling library service
- Experiencing a librarian’s work: becoming a child librarian
- Reading programs with multi-media
- Video and slide shows, puppet shows
- Training programs for volunteers
- Educating parents and caregivers
- Camping in the library
- Meeting with writers and writing programs
- Small-scale concerts with poetry reading
- Writers’ talks, public readings by authors

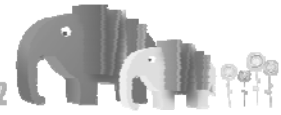
6-4. Some examples of the programs in a Miracle Library

Let’s look at the specific examples of some programs.

- “Reading a Book” at the Miracle Library in Suncheon

The act of reading a book is very interesting and intriguing to children. The “Reading a Book” activity is carried out every day at the Miracle Library in Suncheon. The Miracle Library in Suncheon has many volunteers who read books to children. The volunteers often visit other public libraries, schools and poor families, and read books to children drawing on their abundant experience at the Miracle Library. They are called the “Storytelling Teachers.” The storytelling teachers started a club called “The Wellspring of





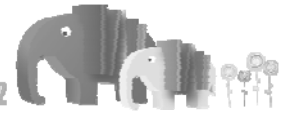
Stories” for training in how to read books. Another program trains adolescent volunteers and the elderly to read books for children. Most members of a club called “The Silver Spring of Stories” are older women, and they read books to people in welfare centers for the aged, child care centers and children’s hospitals. Their efforts have paid off in that they enjoy a great deal of satisfaction in the twilight years of their lives. There is a program called “Doggie, Read a Book with Me” in which guide dogs for the blind help to increase the pleasure of reading. Even children who dislike reading can have fun when they read a book to Seeing Eye dogs. A traveling library called “The Blue Cart Full of Picture Books” goes around rural areas in Suncheon, and lends many books to children who have difficulty coming to the library.

- “The Pipe in the Tiger’s Mouth” of the Miracle Library in Jecheon

“The Pipe in Tiger’s Mouth” is a circle of volunteers composed of the older men and women. They tell children old stories in the library and encourage them to be imaginative. They have tried to protect tradition and maintain an unpolluted spirit against the flow of modern civilization and devastated relationships, telling great old time stories to children who visit the library. They also create opportunities for children to see and feel places that are disappearing in the face rapid modernization such as a “wondumak” (a look-out hut built in a melon field). Some time ago, when a child asked what a “wondumak” was, they built one themselves and showed the real “wondumak” to the child.

- “Bookstart” at the Miracle Library in Jinhae

Citizen Action for Reading Culture with The Book Culture Foundation of Korea started the “Bookstart Korea” program in 2003. In its early days, only 930 babies were given free book packs as part of Bookstart Korea program, but, the numbers of babies who get the Bookstart service has increased steadily. Out of 232 local governments in Korea, 96 have introduced Bookstart Korea programs into their local communities. Since 2005 the Miracle Library in Jinhae has played an important part in the spread of the Bookstart movement. The Miracle Library in Jinhae also has follow-up programs including activities and clubs in



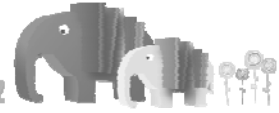
which the recipients of Bookstart packs can play with books. Mothers and children who received Bookstart packs come together once a week, read picture books, participate in many activities, give baby massages, play hand games with their babies, play classic music, draw pictures of their babies, baby yoga, responding to stimulus and enjoy non-verbal percussion performances. Librarian Yeonju Hyun noted, “Happy children make happy libraries and, at the same time, happy libraries make happy children.” Dongsun Bai, the volunteer representative in the library, added, “Bookstart Korea programs give me the opportunity to learn many valuable things, including connecting me with other people.” The Bookstart movement is not only sharing books but also social support for childcare and communication tools in Korea.

## 7. The Significance of the Miracle Library Project

The Miracle Library Project had a great impact on the library, children’s books and culture, and the local culture paradigm in Korea.

Jung-il Doh, the leader of Citizen Action for Reading Culture with the Book Culture Foundation of Korea, commented that issues about libraries were first raised through the Miracle Library Project. The Miracle Library Project has made a contribution to the spread of cultural awareness; in other words, that libraries are necessary to build the road to democracy and strengthen the social safety net in Korea. Thanks to the Miracle Library Project, taking note of what people say about libraries, many Korean government policy makers have come to understand the necessity of building or renovating libraries throughout the country. The Miracle Library Project was the catalyst of the library movement and reading campaigns in Korea.

Jung-hwan Bang (1899-1931), a Korean activist who made an important contribution to the children’s welfare movement and suggested that a “Children’s Day” be created in Korea, wrote in *The Children’s Charter* (1923) that we should respect and take care of children more than any other human beings. Also, he declared that children are to the elders as the buds appearing in the spring are to the roots in the ground. The philosophy of the Miracle Library Project has something in common with Bang’s opinion. Respect for



children and the attitude that things should accommodate a child's needs are embodied in Miracle Libraries.

We should talk about how libraries will be in the future because we should provide all children with better libraries so they can become even more outstanding places to meet people and enjoy books. We should be more concerned with the improvement of current libraries and try to create many more libraries all over the world.

Children's libraries should continue to talk to children, attract them, and inspire children's culture on the right path. The Miracle Library Project has been at the center of realizing social needs for libraries and a desirable children's culture. I would like to share the experience of Miracle Library project with people throughout the world.

