Understanding Development Discourse through Ontological Design: The case of South Korea

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Discourse is a powerful way of understanding/forming the world. It consolidates/disassembles society by conforming/disarticulating. However, the work of discourses has not been explained sufficiently in terms of design theory. In this respect, this paper aims to explore how the work of discourses can be understood in relation to the concept of ontological design, especially from the perspective of coloniality. The case of South Korea’s development experience around different types of development assistance strategies was used to interrogate this question. A hermeneutic approach and discourse analysis were adopted for the empirical analysis. The research found the designed development assistance strategies of the “West” design back the development thinking and new development assistance strategies in South Korea. In doing so, the country replicates the “West-centred” discourse of developmentalism. From this, we conclude that discourses are shared through the ontological practices of designing. This informs design studies of how discourse relates to design.

Keywords: Ontological design, Discourse, Developmentalism, Coloniality, Hermeneutics

Introduction

A certain order of discourse produces permissible modes of being and thinking while disqualifying and even making others impossible (Escobar, 1995, p. 5).

Discourse is a selective way of understanding/knowing the world (Escobar, 1995; Krippendorff, 2005). As Krippendorff (2005) identified discourse (re)draws boundaries “between what belongs and what does not” (p. 23) and creates conceptual frameworks of society by (re)justifying its identity. Because of this selective nature, tending to exclude others, discourse always contains the concept of ‘power’ (Escobar, 1995; Kim, 2015). However, the boundaries of discourses do not stay in fixed forms. They are rather permeable in ways of being consolidated or rearranged, or even replaced by those of stronger discourses, as they interact with different issues in society (Krippendorff, 2005). Therefore, studying discourse with respect to social issues is significant to understand how our material/immaterial world is (re)formulated: discourses consolidate society by conforming the existing framework of the issue or disassemble a social order by disarticulating/reconstructing. As Mignolo (2011) stated, discourses (re)construct power relations in society by pursuing certain “set of rules” (p. 50) (boundaries).

‘Development discourse’ or ‘developmentalism’ is one of the powerful hegemonic discourses forming the contemporary world. Developmentalism is a political consequence of ‘development assistance strategies’ designed by American or European power in the mid twentieth century (Dirlik, 2012; Du Pisani, 2006; Kim, 2015; Sachs, 2017). The discourse was based on a missionary task of the “West” (countries in Europe or
Northern America) to enlighten the non-West who are “less-developed” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). From this conceptual framework, depending on how much money a nation earns and how industrialised it is, the global societies coined new names such as “developed”, “developing”, and “underdeveloped” (Escobar, 1992; Esteva, 1992). Developmentalism does not remain in the state of being designed. Instead, it shapes the people’s understanding of development and the world they live in and even leads society to design another form of development centred outputs. Kim (2015) found that developmentalism generalises the history of “West” as an ideal or a normal state of the world that defines “developed-ness” and gives power to those “developed countries”.

In this respect, developmentalism was widely accepted by international society especially by the countries in the non-West, who have faced economic crises, after they achieved political independence after the Second World War (Kim, 2015). South Korea is one country that was influenced by the national and international increase of development regimes and the global discourse of developmentalism (Kim, 2013).

This research proceeds from the position that the relational work of discourses are related to design. We often consider that designed things remain in the state of ‘being designed’ solely directed by human intentions and disregard the consequences they can bring, so the performances of discourse have rarely been connected to the theories of design. However, discourse insidiously relates to and pervades every being including design. Despite the conventional understanding of design, which emphasised its functional aspects (Simon, 1996), the new era of design studies has begun to acknowledge that the essence of designing is on the philosophies (discourses) that underlie its performances (Buchanan, 1992). Building on this perspective, design scholars have conceptualised design in the context of ontology: design formulates the ‘world’ that we are living in and what we have designed is designing ‘us’ back. Discourse resembles the ontological practices of design as it influences things around it and (re)produces artefacts through the relations with other discourses. For this, Krippendorff (2005) remarked discourse as a “design problem” (p. 22) who works in active and recurrent practices. First, discourse constructs all kinds of artefacts from literacy to abstract theories, cultures and even to material products and places within the people who produce/consume it. Second, discourse repeats its practices by shaping individual experience, generating conceptual direction of society, and producing artefacts that exemplify the formers. Likewise, this study understand design is enmeshed with the work of discourses in a “redirective” (Fry, 2017, p. 30) way to shape human beings and their world, encompassing the relations between designed thing, its users, and a society. Since the subject was hardly studies hitherto by design scholars, an empirical investigation of understanding the work of discourses through the language of ontological design, especially from a political perspective, might be useful.

This research aims to explore how the colonial discourse of developmentalism might be understood in relation to ontological design. To achieve this, the study asks, ‘how can ontological design theory relate to discourses of developmentalism?’.

We have two expectations from this research. First, this research will contribute to understanding of ontological design and its practices by investigating an empirical case of South Korea. We expect this research will provide a more practical explanation of how design takes part in implementing and creating discourses. Second, by navigating the unequal global order through the discourses of developmentalism this research will provide insights on the politics of design, especially in terms of decolonisation of design. Since the subject is rarely investigated by design scholars, this study will respond to a need for critical scholarship into power imbalances and their relation to design.

In the following parts, we will introduce the key literature related to our research topics of design and developmentalism, explain our research design based on hermeneutics and case research, show the case results based on South Korea’s development story and provide discussions and conclusions with respect to design theory.
Design in the past emphasised the functional aspects of design to solve immediate problems and developed the idea of “science of design” to apply the quantitative methods of natural science to design practices (Cross, 2001; Cross, 1993; Cross, Naughton & Walker, 1981; Huppatz, 2015; Johansson-Sköldberg, Woodilla & Çetinkaya, 2013; Simon, 1996). However, as the inherent differences between science and design have been demonstrated by design researchers, design started to be understood as an independent area of study differing from science. Unlike science, design aims to achieve practical goals through action or solutions; uses various types of knowledge such as craft, design, organisation, and management; and takes place in commercial or organisational contexts (Archer, 1979; Cross, 2001; Cross, 1993; Cross, 1982; Naughton & Walker, 1981; Krippendorff, 2005; Rittel & Webber, 1973). In this sense, “designerly ways of knowing and thinking” (the term is Cross’) became significant ways to deal with intricate and “ill-structuring” (Cross, 1982, p. 224) problems known as wicked problems by developing multifold ideas to produce the most appropriate solution (Cross, 1982; Johansson-Sköldberg, Woodilla & Çetinkaya, 2013). Since, the object of design has evolved to include services, systems, business models, policy innovation, organisational structures, as well as traditional work of producing tangible artefacts (Archer, 1979; Buchanan, 1992; Cross, 1982; Cross, Naughton & Walker, 1981; Johansson-Sköldberg, Woodilla & Çetinkaya, 2013; Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Richard Buchanan (1992), in his paper “Wicked Problems in Design Thinking”, has addressed that this expansion of design in its meanings and connections is an inevitable phenomenon because of the intrinsic nature of design as “an art of experimental thinking” (p. 8). In other words, despite the conventional understanding, the essence of designing is not the production of pragmatic results, but the philosophies that underlie its performances (Buchanan, 1992). Therefore, design and “designerly” ways of thinking can be implicated in flexible (various) forms with philosophies that shape human experiences and the world that we are living in (Buchanan, 1992; Krippendorff, 2005; Willis, 2006). Building on this perspective, design scholars such as Terry Winograd, Fernando Flores, Charles Spinoa, Hubert Dreyfus, Anne-Marie Willis and Tony Fry have also conceptualised design in the context of ontology. Ontology, following Heidegger, is one’s various ways of understanding about self (being) and its relations with the world around it (Fry, 2017; Willis, 2006). Therefore, ontological design is referring to “a way of understanding the dynamic designing relations between the world, things and human beings” (Fry, 2017, p. 26). The designing relation, according to Tony Fry (2017), is illustrated as follows:

Design almost totally directs the form and content of the environment in which we live. It pervades our lives, constitutes a world within the world, and impacts how we view, understand, use and extend this world (p. 26).

For ontological design, design formulates the ‘world’ that we are living in and what we have designed is designing ‘us’ back (Escobar, 2018). These relations of designing exist and work without any direction (Fry, 2017). Rather, they are chaotically repeated within “a hermeneutic circle” (Willis, 2006, p. 70), which is to say...
what is designed is designing the world and the “being-in-the-world” (Fry, 2017, p. 10) in a “redirective” (Fry, 2017, p. 30) way. This essential, but recently constructed conceptualisation of design is still developing in this sense.

An ontological understanding of design surfaces the political in design. Design materialises social relations and politics that have long-term structuring effects on society. Tony Fry (2017) has stated that “design always has profound political consequence” (p. 29), as it shapes the environments that people “depend” (p. 29) on and accordingly shapes the lifestyles and minds of people who live within those environments. Politics in ontological design is revealed through the fundamental notion that design has “futural consequences” (Fry, 2017; Willis, 2006). For this, Willis (2006) has defined that ontological design entails “an argument for particular ways of going about design activity” (p. 70), which acknowledges the responsibility of designing for its discursive impact on people and world both in the present and the future. In this way, design and the act of designing become politics.

Among various ontological consequences of designing, coloniality is one which limits sustainable futures. Tony Fry (2017) has commented on this as follows:

*The world of the South (or “underdeveloped countries”) has in large part been an ontological designing consequence of the Eurocentric world of the North (or “developed countries”). Thus, design was deeply embedded in the structures of colonial imposition. For example, (...) the colonial city was not merely an expressive form of colonial power, but equally an ontologically designing operational system of order (p. 26).*

After the territorial conquest of the European empire that colonised the subjigated distance by force, the history of coloniality have been constantly reproduced through the various forms of “military intervention, aid, humanitarian causes, technical assistance, goodwill or education” (Fry, 2017, p. 11). This phenomenon is called ‘neocolonialism’ by scholars in social science (Clarke & Haraway, 2018; Fry, 2017; Sachs, 2010). According to Fry (2017), the colonial discourses in contemporary society have been imposed through the activities, narrative and the spirit of “development”.

**Developmentalism and coloniality**

Development has been used as an important term in global politics from the twentieth century (Cowen & Shenton, 1996; Dirlik, 2012; Du Pisani, 2006; Sachs, 2010; Sachs, 2017). The literal meanings of development are manifold, however, the “ideology of development” (Dirlik, 2012, p. 4) or development thinking which has acted as a powerful mentality to guide global thought and behaviour (Sachs, 2010) was designed within a specific context to indicate a specific circumstance (Du Pisani, 2006; Esteva, 1992; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Sachs, 2010). The most consensual explanation of the invention of development thinking comes from an international assistance programme of the United States whose aim was to benefit the world through economic growth. In this sense, development began to stand for an economic richness of a nation, especially driven from the “Western style” of industrialisation. This understanding of development is called development discourse, or developmentalism. By the force of American hegemony, developmentalism has been shared worldwide and has urged the world to achieve the state of being “developed” (Sachs, 2010). The inverted paradigm of development was presented by the United States to monopolise its political leverage to the world after the Second World War and the model of development has been mostly borrowed from the industrial experiences of the United States and its neighbouring capitalist countries in the “West” (Clarke & Haraway, 2018; Du Pisani, 2006). Therefore, the ‘West centred development’ or ‘Western style of development’ became a dominant discourse in the sense of development thinking. Today, the practices of developmentalism survive through the work of international institutions such as the United Nations (UN), missionary ministries, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Sachs, 2017).

However, developmentalism is often criticised as “a commitment to progress without people” (Dirlik, 2012, p. 4). A cast for development and for an achievement of a global position of superiority are accompanied by exacerbating anxiety to escape from the indignity of “underdeveloped-ness”, which threatens society with uncertainties for the future (Dirlik, 2012). Many critics have condemned developmentalism for its madness of “using borrowed and foreign views” (Sachs, 2010, p. 3) rather than looking within one’s own culture; a poor design of top-down strategies that fails to sustain the goodness for all; and a marginalisation of more than a half of the world (Sachs, 2010). As a consequence, the term ‘development’ became completely opposite from what it should have meant: people use the term in dreaming of a comprehensive future, but the real
consequence of “development” is exclusive and uncaring (Cowen & Shenton, 1996; Fry, 2017; Sachs, 2010). The development discourse and its consequences are inherently engendering neocolonialism. According to Sachs (2010), as developmentalism has become widespread throughout the world, with the emergence of globalisation, it has constructed a transnational economic class instead of national economic structure and this has produced an international economic hierarchy. Under this phenomenon, brutal competition between nations to obtain the winning title of “developed” has proliferated (Sachs, 2010; Sachs, 2017) and nations have come “under the custody of the economy” (Sachs, 2017, p. 2574; Clarke & Haraway, 2018).

In response to such criticisms, ‘sustainable development’ has been discussed as a new mainstream alternative for an inclusive future (Dirlik, 2012; Du Pisani, 2006; Sachs, 2010; Sachs, 2017). The concept of sustainable development has increasingly emerged since the 1970s with an acknowledgement of the ecological crisis and socio-political inequality caused by the extreme optimism of unlimited economic development (Du Pisani, 2006). In this sense, the concept has been promoted as a redevelopment for ecology and democracy (Sachs, 2010) and immersed into development discourse (Du Pisani, 2006; Sachs, 2017). However, sustainable development has faced criticism that it might be just another ideology of “Western” capitalist countries rooted from a shallow foundation imposed on the rest of the world that prolongs the disparity between “developed” and “underdeveloped” countries (Du Pisani, 2006). Indeed, Dirlik (2012) stated that

*Sustainable development has done little to change the existing paradigm of development, relying above all on technological solutions which may be part of the problem (p. 11).*

Despite these concerns, in September 2015, the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development (Sustainable Development Goals; SDGs) was adopted by the United Nations (UN) as a guide to world politics.

**Methodology**

**Hermeneutic approach**

This study is positioned within a standpoint of constructivism which is an ontology focusing on the meanings and the interpretations of an object produced by individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Crotty, 1998). As this interpretivist approach “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67), the approach tries to explain the relative concept of understandings within the real-life context. From this ontological perspective, the research aimed to interrogate the discourses and meanings ascribed in the research object(s) from semiotic perspective and how design deploys them within the context of international power relations. Since the purpose of this research is to identify the hidden meanings beneath the narratives, the nature of the study is qualitative. To interpret the collected data, this study adopted a philosophical stance of hermeneutics and used discourse analysis for an in-depth analysis. Hermeneutics in social research is one of the streams of interpretivism whose premises is to understand social phenomenon through semiotic analysis of meanings, intentions and contextual relations (Johansson-Sköldberg, Woodilla & Çetinkaya, 2013). The analysis can be achieved by examining the language, literature, behaviour, art, religion, law, symbols, histories, and cultures surrounding the object(s) (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Crotty, 1998). As hermeneutics pursues the interpretation of meanings, this research approach is commensurate with the nature of discourse and ontological design.

**Case study research**

A case study research method of South Korea’s development experience around the different types of development assistance strategies is used to investigate an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon within the real-life context (Yin, 2012). South Korea is a unique example of a country who once was a recipient of the “Western” development assistance became a producer of its own development assistance strategies to other “underdeveloped” countries. The research presents an empirical case of how a country who has been formerly influenced by West-centred developmentalism, transforming its political, economic and social foundations, replicates the performance of delivering development discourses elsewhere. This indicates how the ontological practices of designed development assistance strategies of the “West” shape South Korea’s understanding (discourses) around development and how the global power relations influence new designs of the “underdeveloped” nation’s (South Korea’s) own development assistance strategies.
The data collected by documentary evidence and qualitative interview. Documentary evidence represents two types of materials including introductory resources and review documents of South Korea’s Official Development Assistance (ODA). Introductory resource (I) indicates a self-introduction of an ODA agency in South Korea in the form of web pages, explanatory documents of organisation initiatives and brochures. This contains the history, purposes and visions of an organisation. This allows the researcher to determine the official explanations of the intention of the South Korea’s development assistance and how South Korea identifies itself in this context. Based on the structure of South Korea’s ODA, five introductory resources of the most active agencies of South Korea’s development assistance were selected for analysis including the web pages (14 pages) as well as brochures (76 pages). Review document (R) is a summary and evaluation of the nation’s aid plan. The summarised texts of the review provide a synthesis of all the plans and activities initiated by the South Korean government with specific examples and contain the evaluation of the nation’s aid plan in the contexts of politics, economy, cultures and history. From this, this study aimed to gain a contextual understanding of the history of South Korea’s ODA and the domestic and international influencers of the project. Two review documents published in 2016 and 2017 by the South Korean government were selected for an analysis. These documents are total 219 pages but selectively examined by the researchers based on the research objectives. The evidence was found in K-Developedia (www.kdevelopedia.org), a platform produced by the South Korean government to organise all information related to its development experience. Since the resources in K-Developedia are officially approved and presented by the South Korean government, this gives an authority and adequacy of the resources in this research to examine how the nation intends to design and deliver its own story. The list of the documentary evidences used for this research is indicated in Table 1 and Table 2.
In addition, qualitative data collected in this project was gathered through interviews. Two actors participated in the interviews, who were from the research department of the one of the key organisations communicating South Korea’s development experience. The interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes with each participant and were conducted by video chat due to the far distance between the researchers and the participants. The interviews were semi-structured with some tentative questions. However, the questions were developed in indirect and value-neutral expressions to encourage the natural and spontaneous answers of the participants and minimise the unintended influence of the interviewer (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2010).

Discourse analysis

Since the case study object analysed in this research was a ‘nation’ which does not own a single unit as a whole nor has a projection to represent itself, it is impossible to meet the nation face-to-face and interview it. Therefore, to examine how a ‘nation’ identifies self and other, creates discourses, and promotes itself, this is achieved through analysing the narratives it produces. Therefore, the research used discourse analysis as a practical method to analyse the empirical case of South Korea, aims to investigate/define “colonial semiosis” (Mignolo, 2011, p. xx) ascribed in those narratives. With a critical approach that proposes a need for change and seeking alternatives, especially in the sense of power, justice and ethics, the research design of this study is aligned to Tony Fry’s concept of ontological design to investigate how designed narratives can formulate the world and how possibilities for change might appear.

Table 3 Process of discourse analysis (Clarke, 1999, p. 364)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Stages in this research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Story presentation</td>
<td>A. Hearing and Writing the Story</td>
<td>Reading documentary evidences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify significant statements</td>
<td>B. Hermeneutic interpretation</td>
<td>Identify initial insights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First level of themes</td>
<td>C. Learning through dialogue</td>
<td>Learning through interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second level of themes</td>
<td>D. Construction</td>
<td>Construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual categories</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major group categories</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group conceptual model</td>
<td>E. Conceptual model of phenomenon</td>
<td>Conceptual understanding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The analytic structure was informed by Clarke (1999)’s research design as shown in Table 3. First, the research data was collected by reading and re-reading the documentary evidences (stage A). Second, the research gained initial insights by identifying the significant statement from the data observed in stage A (stage B). The initial insights of stage B was conceptualised in depth through qualitative interviews (stage C). The findings of stage B and C were synthesised and discussed by constructing the meaning of the results (stage D). In the final stage, the holistic understanding of the research object was concluded (stage E). As discourse analysis derives interpretations and insights from observing and re-observing the materials, the analysis process of stage B, C, and D in this research were overlapped and replicated with several iterations at the necessity of the research.

Results and findings

Case study

We have developed the framework of the case based on the information we have found around developmentalism and the history of South Korea.

Background of the case: Colonial history of development

After the second World War, the territorial coloniality of the European empires that conquered the distant dominions finally came to an end. However, the traces of imperialism are transmitted to current people’s lives formatted through laws, literacy, language, customs, and so forth (Said, 1994). This history is repeated with an imperial thinking, which is ‘discourse’.

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In the early twentieth century, the discourse of civilisation acted as a hegemonic discourse in the world (Kim, 2015). It distinguishes the world into “civil” and “barbarian” and gives the superiority to the European countries (so called the “West”) by positing the cultures of the “West” as predominant (Kim, 2015). However, since the world had gone through a tragedy of the First World War, the fame and the power of “civilised West” had become quickly weakened (Brohman, 1995). The war seemed to reveal a violence of materiality and science driven by the “West” and suddenly the “West” had become a danger that threatened peace and humanity (Kim, 2015). Since the world had lost faith in the “civilised countries” in Europe, the power of civilisation discourse began to decline. In addition, as the United States raised its global supremacy, a need for a new hegemonic discourse headed by the United States grew (Kim, 2013).

To fulfil the need, developmentalism came out in the mid twentieth century alongside the emergence of American power (Kim, 2015; Sachs, 2010). The discourse was propagated during the presidential speech on 20 January 1949 of Harry S. Truman, the 33rd President of the United States (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Sachs, 2010). In the speech, Truman declared the “Truman version of development” whose goal was to change the world by transforming each society with industrialisation and economic growth. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) explained that this proposal was based on a “missionary task” of the West to enlighten the non-West who are “less-developed”. From this conceptual framework, the world was divided into “developed” and “underdeveloped” depending on how much money a nation earns and how industrialised it is (Escobar, 1992; Esteva, 1992, Sachs, 2010). Because developmentalism understands the world through the standards of the “West”, it prevents a comprehensive understanding of the global economy and society and oppresses sufficient discussions of different nations (Escobar, 2018; Kim, 2015; Sachs, 2010).

**Developmentalism in South Korea**

Developmentalism was widely accepted by the international society to overcome the economic crises that followed the Second World War. Especially the countries who had just achieved the political independence wanted to escape their poverty by following the principles of developmentalism (Kim, 2015). South Korea also adopted development discourse in this manner. As the Korean War broke out in 1950 right after the liberation from the imperial Japanese in 1945, the two Koreas had faced extreme poverty. Under the political influence of the United States, South Korea tried to overcome its economic crisis by following the American model of industrialisation and modernisation (Kim, 2015). In the 1960’s, a former president Park Chung-hee (the fifth to the ninth president of the Republic of Korea from 1963 to 1979), stated that his regime’s very first goal is to achieve economic development by industrialisation and to get a higher position in the global community (Kim, 2015). By adopting the concept of developmentalism, South Korea conceded to identifying itself as an “underdeveloped” country which is less progressed and less organised (Kim, 2013). Moreover, to stimulate the citizens’ attention and increase the country’s profitability, Park’s government emphasised Korea’s “undeveloped-ness” during his presidency (Kim, 2015). Regarding rural villages as a symbol of ‘poverty’ (Korea Saemaul Undong Center, 2018) and orthodox Confucianism as an old-fashioned tradition which is conservative and refutative for change, South Korea focused its national endeavours to transform from villages to government departments to become one of the “developed” countries while ‘catching up with the West’ (Sonn & Gimm, 2013; Kim, 2013). According to Kim (2013), the government’s ‘self-degradation’ strategy has brought a hierarchical understanding of the (economically) developed “West” to others and a loss of independent originality of Korean tradition. In this respect, the modernisation of ‘catching-up with the West’ was legitimised in Korean society, as stated by Kim (2013).

Through its national endeavours to become one of the “developed” countries, South Korea has experienced rapid change in terms of economy, politics, and culture (Doucette & Müller, 2016). In 1996, South Korea joined as a member of the Development Assistance of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and has reached over USD 30,000 for Gross Domestic Product (GDP) index in 2018. The country transformed its role in the international society from an aid-recipient to a donor (Doucette & Müller, 2016). South Korea calls this rapid transformation “development” and tries to share its development strategies as a part of the nation’s foreign assistance plan to the other countries who want to become “developed” as South Korea has. “With the hope that South Korea’s past can offer lessons for developing countries in search of sustainable and broad-based development” (KDI President Oh-Seok Hyun, in Han, 2012, p. 4), South Korea’s project of sharing its development experience aims to contribute to poverty reduction in “underdeveloped” countries, to provide a new alternative option for policymakers, to increase the global marketisation of the nation, and to enhance the meta-narratives to facilitate the former (Doucette & Müller, 2016). By doing so, the nation strives to promote a positive image of its national identity while introducing its “development
experience” as “great advances in prosperity, stability, transparency, productivity, education, and in many other important areas” (Anholt, 2011, p. 294).

Development experience of South Korea and its relation to developmentalism

Here we introduce significant narratives related to developmentalism encompassed within South Korea’s experiences of “development” as identified through the documentary data sources (as indicated in Table 1 and Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Narratives related to the development experiences in 20th Century’s South Korea (1950~2000)</th>
<th>Narratives related to the development experiences in 21th Century’s South Korea (2000~)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The nation posited economic growth as the nation’s top priority</td>
<td>The nation shows positive sense to developmentalist thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The nation carried out the Western model of modernisation and industrialisation to achieve economic growth</td>
<td>The nation emphasises its rapid transformation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First, economic growth was a top priority of the South Korean government before 2000s:

As its iconic motto of “Let’s Live Well” illustrates, it (Saemaul Undong, a government-led movement in 1960s-1970s’ South Korea toward national development) was a movement aiming at better lives. It brought people around the same dream of getting themselves out of poverty and propelled government’s pursuit toward development. (I2, P. 4)

Second, to achieve development, South Korea carried out modernisation and industrialisation agendas of the nation such as renovating traditional houses, paving roads and enlightening people:

**The development of rural areas** is key to eradicating poverty. (I1)

In 1970s, SMU (Saemaul Undong) served as a driving force behind Korea’s economic development by modernizing rural communities and reforming people’s mentality. (I2, p. 4)

Priority projects (of SMU) at Foundation & Groundwork stage (year 1970~73): Improve Living Environments — expand roads inside villages, construct laundry facilities, improve roofs (eliminating the rural thatched houses). (I1)

**Rural Enlightenment:** As part of SMU, rural enlightenment aiming at changing people’s mentality was launched. To this end, people were encouraged to abide by order and manner and keep their surroundings clean. Along with it, SMU encouraged people to be frugal, receive education, read books and put their money in banks. (I2, p. 4)

As a result, Korea not only successfully achieved economic growth in quantitative terms but also ultimately brought about qualitative changes to its economy by receiving technology transfers and improving its systems of production and employment. (R2, p. 30)

Some expressions indicate developmentalism was adopted in South Korean society.

By positing ‘becoming an advanced country’ as an important goal, South Korea shows its positive sense of the developmentalist definition of “advance”. In addition, the country distinguishes itself from others by identifying itself as an “advanced country” and its ODA partners as “underdeveloped countries”:

(After addressing that foreign aid had helped ‘Korea’s remarkable, seemingly almost miraculous development’) As a country that has gone from being a receiver of ODA to being a giver of ODA, and from being a least developed country to being an advanced country, Korea’s ODA history provides a unique example (R2, p. 24)
‘Recipient-turned-donor country’ is one of the most frequent and representative expressions to describe the rapid and unique transformation of South Korea. By using this expression, South Korea emphasises the uniqueness of its development experience and its status as an “advanced” country:

The ROK (South Korea) has also transformed itself from a recipient country of Official Development Assistance (ODA) into the 23rd largest Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donor in terms of its ODA as a percentage of GNI, and the 16th largest donor by volume for many years. (R1, p. 2)

On the strength of its remarkable economic development, Korea has successfully escaped poverty and hunger, and has been returning what it once received from the international community. As the only recipient-turned-donor country in the world, Korea has become a formal member state of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), joining the ranks of advanced donor countries in the field of development cooperation. (R2, foreword)

Designing new development assistance strategies

The sharing of South Korea’s development experience is one of the major development assistance strategies in South Korea’s Official Development Assistance (ODA). To inform its development assistance strategy, the South Korean government formulates the nation’s development story (development experience) in various ways.

Table 5 Narratives designing South Korea’s development experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Narratives designing South Korea’s development experience</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The nation uses self-identification expressions (e.g., ‘model’, ‘example’, ‘success’, ‘once a recipient and now a donor’)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The nation uses expressions of praise (e.g., ‘remarkable’, ‘miraculous’)</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>The nation ratifies its development movements</td>
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The South Korean government designs its development story by using self-identification expressions and remarking on the experience. ‘Model’, ‘example’ and ‘success’ are frequently used to describe South Korea’s development experience:

Global Saemaul Undong: Universal model for development cooperation, which contributes to eradication of global poverty and sustainable development. (I1)

As a country (South Korea) transformed from one of the poorest to one of the most successful development examples in the world, and as a donor country (…) (R1, p. 32)

As described in the previous findings, ‘once a recipient and now a donor’ is the most common expression to emphasise South Korea’s rapid and clear transformation.

Some expressions of praise were used by the ODA agencies of South Korea to describe its development experience:

Behind this dramatic transformation (South Korea’s economic growth) lay a long period of foreign aid receipt that made Korea’s remarkable, seemingly almost miraculous development possible (R2, p. 24)

South Korea gives authority to its experiences of development by ratifying them. For instance, the nation designated Saemaul Undong (SMU) in UNESCO Memory of the World Register and established Saemaul Museum (development Museum)
Analysis and Discussion

Hermeneutic circle of designing development strategies in South Korea

In this part, we will discuss what we can understand from the case about ontological design and its political consequence encompassing coloniality of developmentalism. South Korea had experienced a rapid transformation in terms of economy and politics and tries to produce development assistance strategies based on this experience. However, we argue that South Korea’s development experience contains colonial concept of West-centred developmentalism and this discourse shape the foundation of the nation’s overall understanding of development and international power relations. Therefore, when South Korea designs development assistance strategy based on this understanding, the possible consequence of the project might be a reproduction of coloniality. Such phenomena have implications for design practitioners, as such governmental policies and programmes are implemented through products, services, projects and activities that design practitioners are increasingly involved in. Figure 2 represents the ontological relation of South Korea and its development strategies.

Development experience of South Korea

The research findings show how South Korea’s development experience was influenced by West-centred developmentalism and how this in return designs the nation’s understanding of development and global hierarchy. This is described in Figure 3.

When developmentalism posits economic wealth as a substantial indicator to defining “develop-ness” (Esteva, 1992) this had appointed South Korea, who did not have an economic foundation after Korean War, as “underdeveloped”. To escape from such stigma the South Korean government had economic growth as its top
priority and led national development strategies including 1970s’ Saemaul Undong (SMU). The nation’s development strategies were mostly designed by imitating the “Western” model of modernisation and industrialisation. For instance, as seen in the results and findings part, by regarding rural houses as a symbol of poverty the country transformed traditional rural houses with slate roof and paved the roads. Also, the government had tried to follow the “advanced” industries of the “West” to provoke its economic growth. However, as mentioned in literature review, such notion that West-centred modernisation and industrialisation are an ideal mode of development is grounded by the discourses of development (Du Pisani, 2006; Escobar, 1992). Moreover, since the discourse of development was generated by American hegemony which divides the world into “developed” and “underdeveloped” by the standard of the “Western” model of economy (Kim, 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Sachs, 2010), the attempts of South Korea to become ‘developed as the West’ is a result of the acceptance of developmentalism.

**Designing new development assistance strategy**

The research findings also show how South Korea’s developmentalist understanding is integrated in the nation’s development assistance strategy and how this reproduces colonial concepts. This is described in Figure 4.

![Figure 4: Ontological design model of sharing of development experience of South Korea](image)

As shown in the results, the sharing of South Korea’s development experience is one of the major development assistance strategies in South Korea. Thus, by analysing the narratives used in the South Korea’s development story, we have found that the nation’s development assistance strategies embody the West-centred developmentalism. South Korea has a positive sense on the word ‘advance’ and identifies itself as an ‘advanced country’ in designing its development story. The nation also employs the phrase, ‘once a recipient and now a donor’, to demonstrate its status as “advanced” and “developed” with an idea that being a donor indicates the nation’s economic richness. However, as explained in the literature review, the phrases ‘advanced country’ and ‘developed country’ are the economy-centred definitions conceived of by the “Western” powers (Du Pisani, 2006; Escobar, 1992; Kim, 2013; Kim, 2015). That is to say that when South Korea deploys those phrases to emphasise its newly got position in the global economy, this indicates that the South Korean society has assented the spirit of developmentalism and so have its development assistance strategies. Developmentalism has reinforced the dominant power of the “West” to the non-West by injecting dignity and superiority to the rich countries in Northern America and Europe (Clarke & Haraway, 2018; Escobar, 1992; Kim, 2015). This reinforcement becomes even stronger when the rich “Western” countries have appointed the ‘non-West’ as an object of their “missionary task” (Kim, 2015, p. 102) for global development (Escobar, 1992; Kim, 2015). Likewise, when South Korea identifies itself as a “developed/advanced” country and its partners “underdeveloped” or an object of the country’s assistance project (‘mission’), South Korea’s sharing of its development experience may replicate the same trances of the West-centred developmentalism that the country has been formerly influenced by: the economic stigmatisation on “underdeveloped-ness” reproduces the global power imbalances.

The results also show that South Korea’s development story gives distinction and superiority to the ‘able Korea’. Specifically, the country’s self-identifying expressions describing its development experience such as ‘model’, ‘example’, ‘success’, and ‘the only aid recipient-turned-donor country’ reveal the nation’s positive attention to its development experience. Since the words ‘model’ and ‘example’ themselves signify the meaning that the following object(s) is something to be learned from, those words imply a relational concept between the object and the others. Also, by using some praising words including ‘remarkable’ and ‘miraculous’
to describe the nation’s economic growth this positive attention is expanded. As those praising words emphasise the uniqueness and distinction of the following object, they make a classification and give specialty to the object. The development experience museum and UNESCO register of SMU also work in the same way. Likewise, since South Korea designs its development story in a positive image and separates its distinctiveness from other countries who are “underdeveloped”, we argue that this can orchestrate hierarchies. From a broader perspective, within the context and the history of foreign aid being used as a strategic tool to consolidate the existing unequal global relationships (ODA Korea, 2017), the sharing of South Korea’s development experience can also work as a means to provoke global power imbalances. Indeed, Escobar (1992) and Mudimbe (1988) emphasise that representation is the primary method to constitute the concept of dominance-subordination relation described in developmentalism.

Relation to ontological design

![Ontological design model of South Korea’s development strategy (revisited)](image)

We have analysed how South Korea’s development experience has been generated around different types of development assistance strategies. First, as explained in the literature review, the development assistance strategies designed by the “West”, ‘X’ in Figure 2 (the figure is revisited from the previous discussion), was formed by the discourses of development (i&ii in Figure 2) (Du Pisani, 2006; Esteva, 1992; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Sachs, 2010). The results of this research show that the designed development assistance strategies of the “West” (X) impacted the existing environments of the South Korean society. The strategies transformed the economic, political and social environment of the nation and reconstructed its social discourses by designing the nation’s understanding around development and the global power relations (iii). Again, the results also show that these realigned discourses have brought a new designing (iv) of South Korea’s own development assistance strategies for other “underdeveloped” countries (Y). This ontological circle of dynamic designing relations around development assistance strategies has worked in a “redirective way” (Fry, 2017, p. 30) over many years (Escobar, 2018; Fry, 2017; Wills, 2006). We haven’t verified in this research, but the new development assistance strategies of South Korea might bring a similar consequences (v) of those of the West (iii).

In this study, we have inductively presented the significance of discourses for design theory and practice in the context of governmental policies and programmes related to developmentalism. Through this exploration of discourses of developmentalism based on the specific case of South Korea we illustrate the importance of studying the relational work of discourses with respect to design. Since, the object of design has evolved to include services, systems, business models, policy innovation, such phenomena have implications for design practitioners, as such governmental policies and programmes are implemented through products, services, projects and activities that design practitioners are increasingly involved in.
Conclusion

This research started from a question that ‘how can ontological design theory relate to discourses of developmentalism?’. From an empirical case of South Korea’s development experience, the research found that South Korea’s experience of “development” encompasses West-centred developmentalism: the country posited economic growth for its top priority and imitated the “Western” model of modernisation and industrialisation to achieve this goal. We also found that South Korea’s development assistance strategy targeting underdeveloped countries engenders developmentalism as well: when South Korea shares its “development” experience the country gives itself superiority to other countries by using self-phrasing and hierarchical expressions. Our findings reveal the ontological practices of design and their relation to discourse: the designed development assistance strategies of the “West” impacted experiences and thoughts of South Korean society and have brought a new designing of South Korea’s own development assistance strategies. Development discourse has been transmitted throughout this process. From this, we conclude South Korea’s development experience is “redirectively” (Fry, 2017, p. 30) interacting with the development thinking inside and outside the nation by implementing development assistance strategies of the “West” and designing the new strategies of the nation. This shows the ontological nature of design that interacts within the relations between designer, designed things, and the world around them and how these ontological relations of designing are closely woven through the work of discourses.

In this study, we have argued from the position that the relational work of discourses is important to consider for design theory and practice. In this sense, we suggest design practitioners need to ask ways to produce more comprehensive designs considering possible futures, such as decolonisation, and have responsibilities to introduce this approach to design practices including policy making and discussions of global development agendas. This work forms the basis of a PhD exploration into ontological design and discourses. Further work will elaborate on those early insights presented here.
Appendix: List of documentary evidence used for analysis

Introductory resource (I)


Review document (R)


The evidence was found in K-Develoedia (www.kdevelopedia.org) which is a platform produced by the South Korean government with a purpose to organise all information related to their development experience. The most important standard to define the appropriateness of the resource was whether the data contain the ideas of promoting a nation or the national narratives such as self-identification, storytelling of a nation or of organisational activities, especially encompassing the topic of South Korea’s development experience and its communication of the former. The resource should be documented in forms of texts and pictures which the researchers can easily go back and analyse their meanings repeatedly.
References


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