

Reproducing Authenticity: Seoul Station and the Intercultural Remaking of Postcolonial Memory in Korea

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Abstract

Once a colonial-era structure, Seoul Station has today been transformed into a symbolic exit sanctuary for global tourists, a place where foreign visitors consume Korean culture before departure, turning memory into merchandise. This striking transformation reflects a broader cultural shift in South Korea, as the nation moves from erasing traces of colonization to strategically reframing them within a globalized, postcolonial identity. This study investigates how Seoul Station has been culturally reproduced through a multi-layered process of reinterpretation, reframing, and global tourism. Adopting a qualitative research approach, the analysis draws on urban policy documents, architectural modifications, and consumer practices to explore how the station evolved into a hybrid cultural landmark. The research is guided by a three-part analytical framework that integrates Griswold's Cultural Diamond to map the relationships between cultural objects, producers, receivers, and their social world; Elizabeth L. Krause's conceptualization of authenticity as a culturally situated practice shaped by emotional resonance, ethical considerations, and lived vulnerability; and Pierre Nora's theory of lieux de mémoire to interpret Seoul Station as a layered site of national memory and identity. This integrated perspective enables a critical examination of how authenticity is not fixed or preserved, but actively reproduced through spatial storytelling, affective engagement, and intercultural reinterpretation. These findings offer broader implications for postcolonial societies navigating the transformation of colonial-era infrastructures into intercultural memory sites. This research contributes to the field of cultural and memory studies by demonstrating how postcolonial heritage spaces can be reframed as sites of intercultural convergence and global identity reformulation.

Keywords: Korean cultural policy, cultural heritage, cultural reproduction, globalization and identity, intercultural tourism

Introduction

Seoul Station has undergone a profound metamorphosis from a site once associated with Japanese colonial control into a symbolic “exit sanctuary” for global tourists, where travelers engage in curated cultural consumption before departing Korea. This shift reflects a broader cultural transition in South Korea, as the nation moves from erasing colonial traces to strategically reframing the past within a postcolonial and globalized identity.

This research investigates how Seoul Station is culturally reproduced today through architectural repurposing, urban policy, and tourist interactions. The station is no longer a relic of the past. It has been transformed into a hybrid cultural landmark that now functions as a space for memory, cultural consumption, and symbolic departure. Foreign visitors engage in a range of “pre-departure” rituals. In particular, they shop for cultural products, participate in curated exhibitions, and use international services such as EMS. These activities transform both personal and collective memory into merchandise.

This study does not treat authenticity as a fixed or intrinsic quality. In contrast, it employs a critical perspective grounded in three complementary theoretical frameworks. First, the study applies Griswold’s Cultural Diamond (Griswold, 2013) to map the relationships among cultural producers, cultural objects, receivers, and the social world in which they operate. This framework helps situate Seoul Station within the intersecting forces of national heritage policy, postcolonial nation-building, and global tourism flows.

Second, this study draws from Elizabeth L. Krause’s conceptualization of authenticity as a practice, understood as something performed, negotiated, and emotionally experienced rather than passively possessed (Krause, 2023). From this perspective, the transformation of Seoul Station can be interpreted as a form of spatial storytelling and affective engagement, where curated authenticity emerges through intercultural services, multilingual signage, wayfinding systems, and architectural design choices.

Third, Pierre Nora’s theory of lieux de mémoire provides an analytical foundation for understanding how material, symbolic, and functional layers converge within Seoul Station as a site of memory (Nora, 1989). The structure was constructed in 1925 during the Japanese colonial period. It later acquired new meanings through its adaptive reuse as Culture Station 284, a cultural complex established in 2011 (Republic of Korea Policy Briefing, 2011). These layers of historical architecture and contemporary cultural functions converge to position the site as a locus of national memory and identity. This repurposing overlays historical architecture with contemporary narratives and practices, transforming the building into a living palimpsest in which memory, tourism, and national identity interact and evolve over time.

Seoul Station can therefore be understood as more than a preserved monument. It functions as a dynamic postcolonial site in which global flows, intercultural practices, and state narratives intersect. Korea’s cultural policy does not erase the traces of colonization. Instead, it reframes those traces as platforms for soft power, intercultural exchange, and contemporary identity formation (Culture Station 284, n.d.; MCST, 2012).

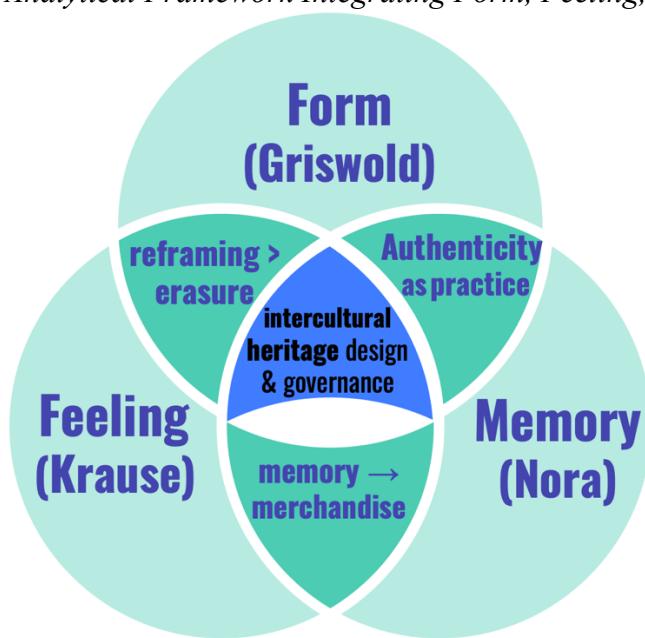
An examination of Seoul Station’s transformation reveals how postcolonial heritage sites in Asia can be reimagined as living, affective, and globally networked cultural spaces. These sites are no longer positioned as static remnants of the past. They instead function as platforms where historical memory interacts with contemporary cultural diplomacy and contributes to more

inclusive forms of national identity (MCST, 2012; Nora, 1989). The case of Seoul Station further illustrates how intercultural tourism operates as a medium that connects memory, everyday practices, and global cultural flows.

Methodology

The analysis is guided by three complementary theoretical perspectives that provide the conceptual basis for interpreting Seoul Station as a culturally reproduced site. The study draws on Cultural Diamond, authenticity-as-practice, and lieux de mémoire to clarify how cultural production, emotional engagement, and historical layering contribute to the station's present meaning and function.

Figure 1
Analytical Framework Integrating Form, Feeling, and Memory



Form is examined through Griswold's Cultural Diamond, which clarifies the relationships among cultural producers, cultural objects, receivers, and the broader social world that shapes cultural meaning (Griswold, 2013). This framework provides a foundation for situating Seoul Station within institutions of heritage governance, postcolonial identity formation, and global tourism flows.

Feeling is interpreted using Elizabeth L. Krause's conceptualization of authenticity as a practice. Authenticity is understood as something performed and emotionally negotiated rather than simply possessed (Krause, 2023). This category guides the analysis of how visitors encounter curated experiences that involve emotional resonance, ethical interpretation, and lived vulnerability as they move through the redesigned spaces of the station.

Memory is analyzed through Pierre Nora's theory of lieux de mémoire, which explains how material structures, symbolic narratives, and functional uses accumulate to create sites of national memory (Nora, 1989). This category supports the interpretation of Seoul Station as a layered historical environment where colonial architecture, contemporary cultural functions, and tourist practices continuously reshape one another.

The categories of form, feeling, and memory work in combination to establish an integrated framework for examining how cultural reproduction unfolds across architectural space, emotional experience, and the symbolic life of heritage. This combined approach enables the study to interpret Seoul Station not as a static monument but as a dynamic site shaped by institutional decisions, intercultural encounters, and evolving narratives of national identity.

The qualitative design uses three groups of data. Urban policy documents provide information about cultural governance and heritage management. Architectural plans and redevelopment records document changes in the station from its colonial construction in 1925 to its later reconfiguration as Culture Station 284 (Culture Station 284, n.d.). Observational data concerning visitor mobility, retail participation, intercultural services, and exhibition engagement illustrate how the station functions as a cultural environment.

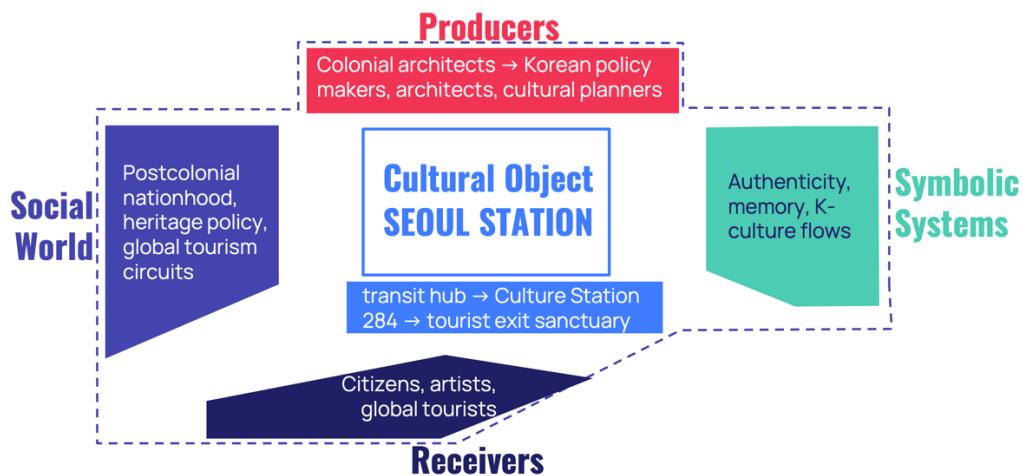
Three analytical procedures guide the interpretation. Interpretive reading is used to identify evolving cultural meanings in policy materials and design choices. Contextual mapping situates these meanings within postcolonial nation building and contemporary global mobility. Case based synthesis connects architectural transformation with visitor experience, showing how the three analytical categories of form, feeling, and memory operate together in cultural reproduction.

The combined use of these categories and procedures produces a comprehensive explanation of how Seoul Station is culturally reproduced today. This qualitative orientation clarifies how memory becomes reframed as intercultural meaning, how authenticity is generated through spatial storytelling and visitor practices, and how the adaptive reuse of colonial architecture positions the site as a hybrid cultural landmark shaped by both historical legacies and global flows.

Data Collection & Key Findings

Data collection for this study relied on three main groups of qualitative materials. Urban policy documents supplied information about heritage governance, cultural policy, and tourism development in contemporary South Korea. These documents included plans and guidelines concerning the reuse of historical buildings and the positioning of cultural infrastructure within national identity strategies (MCST, 2012). Architectural records and redevelopment materials offered evidence about the physical transformation of Seoul Station from its colonial era construction to its designation as Culture Station 284 and its subsequent integration into wider commercial and mobility networks (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2022). Observational notes and secondary descriptions of visitor practices at and around Seoul Station provided insight into how global tourists and local users engage with the site through mobility, shopping, photography, and participation in curated cultural events.

Figure 2
Cultural Diamond Analysis of Seoul Station



Key findings emerged through an analytical process that combined these materials with the three theoretical perspectives already outlined. The first group of findings is anchored in the category of form, drawn from Griswold's Cultural Diamond. Producers include colonial era architects and railway planners, followed by Korean policy makers, architects, and cultural planners who later redefined the station. The cultural object is Seoul Station in its successive forms as a transit hub, as Culture Station 284, and as a symbolic exit sanctuary. Receivers comprise Korean citizens, artists, and global tourists who interact with the site in different ways. The broader social world consists of postcolonial nation building, heritage policy, and global tourism circuits that shape expectations about what Seoul Station represents and how it should function (Griswold, 2013). The combination of these elements shows that the station has shifted from an instrument of imperial control to a hybrid cultural landmark that supports both mobility and symbolic practices related to identity and memory.

Figure 3
Krause's Model of Authenticity as Practice



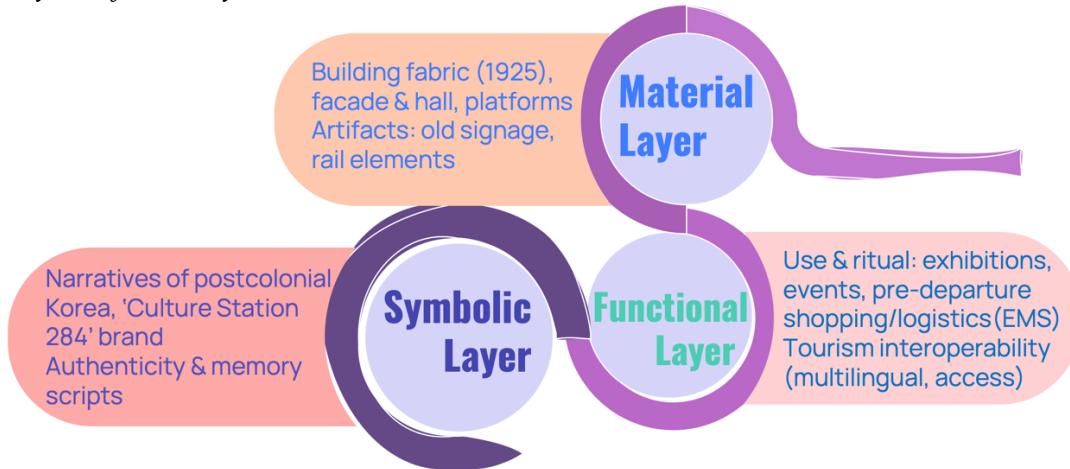
A second group of findings corresponds to the category of feeling, which is informed by Krause's account of authenticity as a practice. Authenticity in this context does not appear as a fixed essence. It takes shape through emotional resonance, ethical judgment, and lived vulnerability as visitors move through the station and engage with its services and displays (Krause, 2023). Curated routes, signage in multiple languages, and carefully selected products and exhibits generate a form of staged yet meaningful authenticity.

Figure 4
Krause's Model of Authenticity as Practice Applied to Seoul Station



Foreign visitors often treat Seoul Station as a place for final encounters with Korean culture before departure. They purchase food, cosmetics, and souvenirs associated with contemporary Korean popular culture, participate in or at least pass through exhibition spaces, and use services that facilitate travel logistics. These practices show that authenticity is performed and negotiated in the middle of market transactions, convenience needs, and personal narratives of travel, rather than existing as an untouched historical core.

Figure 5
Layers of Memory at Seoul Station



A third group of findings aligns with the category of memory, informed by Nora's concept of lieux de mémoire. The material layer consists of the preserved station building, interior halls, and platforms that date back to the early twentieth century. The symbolic layer develops through narratives that describe Seoul Station as a heritage site, as Culture Station 284, and as a gateway to modern Seoul. The functional layer includes exhibitions, cultural events, everyday commuting, retail activities, and pre departure uses such as luggage handling and last minute shopping (Nora, 1989). These layers do not remain separate. They overlap and interact as colonial era architecture houses contemporary cultural programs and commercial services. The result is a living historical environment in which memory is continuously reinterpreted through present day use.

A central pattern becomes visible when the analysis is viewed through these three categories. Seoul Station operates as a site where form, feeling, and memory converge. Institutional decisions and design choices structure the station as a cultural object. Visitor experiences and emotional engagements activate authenticity as an ongoing practice. Historical remnants and contemporary functions combine to create layered memory. These findings indicate that cultural reproduction at Seoul Station does not simply preserve the past. This process generates new meanings as colonial heritage is reframed within an intercultural and globally connected environment.

Results and Findings

Findings from the analysis indicate that authenticity at Seoul Station functions as a reproduced practice rather than as a stable essence. Authenticity appears through repeated interactions among architectural space, policy decisions, and visitor routines. The station does not simply preserve a singular historical truth. The site functions as an ongoing process in which meanings are negotiated by institutions, global tourists, and local users in a postcolonial and globalized context (Griswold, 2013; Krause, 2023).

Memory at Seoul Station moves toward merchandise through a series of curated arrangements. Visitors follow routes that guide them from trains and platforms toward retail zones, exhibition areas, and service counters. Panels that present historical information stand close to shops that sell food, cosmetics, and souvenirs associated with contemporary Korean culture. Services such as packaging support and international shipping further encourage the conversion of memory into material objects. Personal narratives of travel become linked to consumable items that can be carried away, displayed, or gifted after departure.

Mechanisms that support this process operate through spatial storytelling, affective engagement, and intercultural use. Spatial storytelling appears in the way the station environment directs bodies and attention. Architectural transitions from historical halls to commercial corridors produce a narrative sequence that links colonial era architecture with present day consumption. Affective engagement emerges when visitors respond emotionally to heritage aesthetics, crowded movement, and branded cultural products. Intercultural use is visible in multilingual signage, tailored logistics for foreign visitors, and the presence of goods designed for international demand. Authenticity emerges from the interaction of these mechanisms as a practiced experience shaped by movement, choice, and felt engagement rather than as an inherited and fixed quality (Krause, 2023).

Tensions arise between heritage contemplation, accessibility, market speed, and preservation. Some design choices promote rapid circulation and convenience, such as clear wayfinding systems, concentrated retail zones, and efficient service counters. Other elements invite slower engagement, such as exhibitions inside Culture Station 284 or historical panels that reference the colonial past and the March First Independence Movement. Preservation concerns require that key architectural features remain intact, while commercial pressures encourage interior modifications and the expansion of retail functions. The station embodies a negotiated balance in which historical reflection, tourist efficiency, and economic objectives intersect and occasionally conflict.

When the three analytical categories of form, feeling, and memory are brought together, a broader interpretive pattern emerges. Institutional and design decisions structure Seoul Station as a cultural object that supports mobility and symbolic display. Visitor experiences and

emotional responses activate authenticity as an ongoing practice within that structure. Historical remnants and contemporary functions combine to create layered memory in which colonial heritage is neither fully erased nor left untouched (Nora, 1989). This process generates new meanings as the site is reframed within an intercultural and globally connected environment. The overall result is a transformation of Seoul Station from a relatively static relic of empire into a dynamic arena. In this arena, history, identity, and global cultural flows are continually reproduced through everyday practices of movement, consumption, and remembrance. These findings collectively demonstrate how Seoul Station illustrates broader patterns in the reframing of postcolonial heritage under conditions of global mobility and intercultural tourism.

Implications and Conclusion

Findings from this research have implications for the governance of postcolonial heritage and for the study of cultural reproduction. The case of Seoul Station suggests that postcolonial states can approach former colonial infrastructures through a strategy of reframing rather than erasure. Heritage in this sense functions as a platform where historical traces remain present through continuous reorganization that aligns them with contemporary cultural and economic objectives.

Heritage policy can align cultural preservation, tourism development, and soft power agendas when it recognizes such sites as active spaces for intercultural encounter (MCST, 2012). The analysis indicates that policy evaluation should include affective and experiential measures such as visitor use patterns and perceived meaning rather than only visitor numbers. Design implications emerge from the adaptive reuse of Seoul Station as Culture Station 284 and as a commercial transit hub (Culture Station 284, n.d.). Adaptive reuse that supports intercultural convergence relies on clear flows, legible wayfinding, and services that accommodate diverse visitors.

Ethical considerations arise from the need to provide inclusive narratives and multilingual access for both local publics and foreign tourists. Such narratives acknowledge colonial histories and present contemporary cultural creativity, which helps reduce the risk of historical amnesia or simplistic celebration. Attention to accessibility and crowd management can protect the contemplative quality of heritage while maintaining its function as a busy transport and commercial node.

The patterns observed at Seoul Station can guide the treatment of comparable colonial era sites in other parts of Asia that face similar pressures from tourism and urban redevelopment. Planners and researchers can use the tripartite lens of form, feeling, and memory to examine how authenticity is practiced and how memory is converted into cultural capital in these locations (Griswold, 2013; Krause, 2023; Nora, 1989). This perspective allows for comparative work on how different societies negotiate colonial legacies under conditions of globalization and intercultural mobility.

The study contributes to cultural and memory studies by examining how a postcolonial railway station has been transformed into an intercultural memory site. The analysis shows that authenticity is not preserved as a fixed quality but is continually reproduced through the everyday practices that occur within the station. Seoul Station illustrates that colonial heritage can function as a platform for global cultural flows and national self-representation. It also

demonstrates how such heritage supports negotiated forms of identity, instead of remaining a static monument to imperial power.

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