



# Preserving the Uncomfortable Past and Ontological Security

## : The Former Soyosan STD Management Center in South Korea

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### Introduction



[Tearless](#)  
(Gina Kim, 2021)

The former Soyosan STD Management Center, located near a U.S. military camp town in South Korea, was established during the Cold War to control sexually transmitted diseases among American troops. The facility operated as a site of state-led gendered violence, where women were forcibly detained and subjected to compulsory medical treatment.

Today, this site faces imminent demolition under local tourism development plans.

### Theoretical Framework

Drawing on Jane Grenville's concept of conservation as psychology, this study views the built environment as a medium through which communities sustain ontological security— a stable sense of self, continuity, and belonging. The proposed demolition of Soyosan site is analyzed as producing ontological insecurity through:

- **Narrative disruption:** severing links between lived experience and material evidence
- **Memory silencing:** marginalizing counter-narratives and testimonies
- **Exclusion from collective past:** denying victims recognition in collective history

### Conclusion



Recognizing Soyosan site as heritage functions as a form of reconciliation — not by offering closure, but by sustaining a space where difficult memories remain visible and open to

interpretation. The paper contends that societies achieve greater resilience and social cohesion when they live responsibly with their histories rather than erasing them.

- Preservation supports narrative continuity for marginalized communities
- Material sites anchor testimony in ways that oral history alone cannot
- Critical interpretation of difficult places fosters ethical reflection at the collective level
- Inclusive memorialization contributes to a more just sense of belonging

### Timeline

1973–1996	<b>Operational</b> State-mandated STD management center
1996	<b>Closed &amp; Abandoned</b> Facility shut down
2023–2024	<b>Development Plan</b> Dongducheon City announces Soyosan Tourism Expansion Plan; demolition of center proposed
Present	<b>Contestation</b> Ongoing conflict between development-driven erasure and heritage preservation demands

### Methodology

This study employs a critical heritage studies approach, combining:

- **Archival analysis** of state documents, policy records and survivor testimonies
- **Discourse analysis** of development plans and advocacy counter-narratives
- **Site documentation** of the facility's material condition
- **Comparative analysis** within international difficult heritage scholarship

### Discussion

The Soyosan site case contributes to global debates on difficult heritage governance and offers a model for how post-authoritarian societies might approach sites of state violence. It also challenges South Korean heritage policy to engage more directly with gendered and militarized legacies of the Cold War era.

However, while some argue for preservation to maintain narrative continuity, voices of survivors who experience the site as a 'trigger for trauma' highlight the profound ethical complexity of difficult heritage.