

Repulsive Desperation in the Constructions of Survival

Violent

Urbanism in Korea *by Baruch Bruce Gottlieb*

With the Taepodongs (1) flying freely North of the border here, the world turns its war-weary head again towards this particular peninsula. Positioned unhappily between the two 'giants' of the region, Korea has been overrun again and again across the centuries, its arts and architecture ridiculed and razed, its society undermined and commandeered.

Seoul's urban history extends back more than 2000 years but you wouldn't know it. The city did not have a smooth transition to modernity. Japanese colonization (2) avidly destroyed much of Korea's cultural heritage as it began the process of electrification and modernization in the country. Thus, it seems, a complex attitude, whereby development has always been accompanied by some form of brutality, was ingrained in the Korean psyche. I met Jeon Yeonseok, the founder of FlyingCity.org and one of Korea's foremost architectural thinkers, to gain a theoretical footing and a frame of reference for describing this history.

Flying City

FlyingCity is one of the few critical voices on urbanism in Korea today, they do radical interventions in neighbourhoods under the wrecking ball. During the interview Jeon Yoenseok spoke in English, short descriptive sentences that I have quoted here, much as spoken. I took a few liberties here and there for style purposes only.

JYS: "Violence and the city..."

In short,

The technology which supports urban development is violent

Construction technology

The viewpoint that develops the city is violent

Civil servants and technocrats

Ignorance of various factors

They see the place with birds eye view,

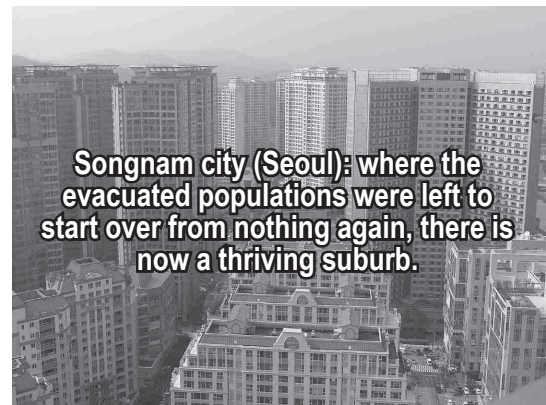
Draw lines on the map

They think they are drawing lines but actually, lives of the people there are reorganized by those lines"

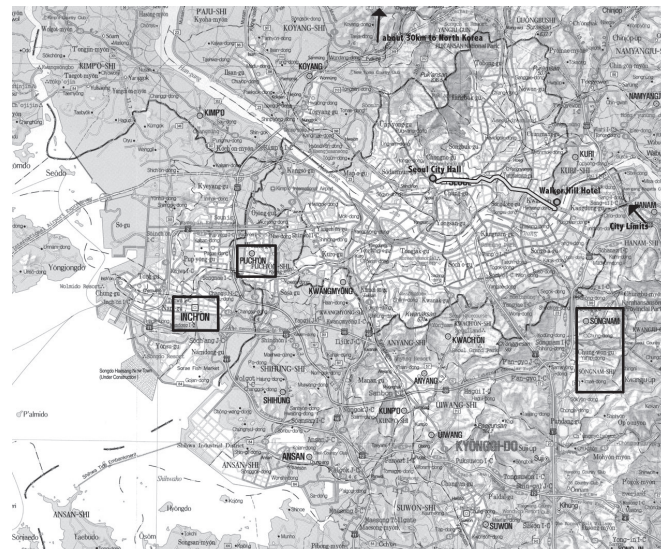
Resonance of War Trauma

What the Japanese colonial period began, the Korean War completed. Whole towns were utterly destroyed, landmarks razed. What survived was ripped down after the war in 'modernisation' campaigns. Whether you go to Icheon or Incheon or Bucheon (3) no difference. The urban trauma persists.

Korean people have not gotten over the trauma of the war, the violence and destruction seethes silently in their brutal humour and violent urban-



Songnam city (Seoul): where the evacuated populations were left to start over from nothing again, there is now a thriving suburb.



ism. The schism that divides the country still to this day makes any reckoning of the past unbearable. The war is not over; families are still divided across a 54 year-old armistice line.

Urban planning, development and construction take place at a blistering pace, but the structures planned and executed are not meant to last. They are provisory, as if people are unwilling to invest in such an unstable future; here, war could begin again at any moment and wipe all their work away.

Why do all Korean towns look alike? Because a handful of massive conglomerates rebuilt them all using the same materials. One can see the same apartment block in almost every city, the same ornamental railings on town bridges with the same rudimentary architecture. The society rules declare that everybody should at least have the same standard. Once this standard is achieved, people are satisfied. Going out for dinner in Korea means going to the first open restaurant, they are all the same. Conformity is a virtue.

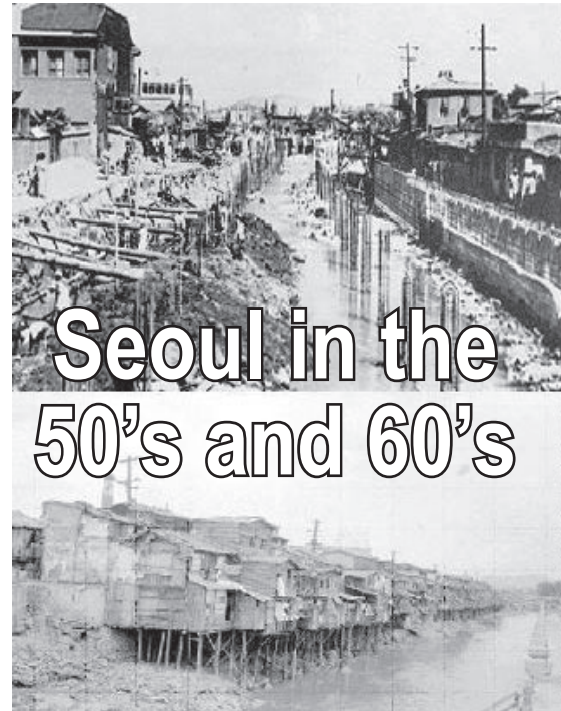
Jeon Yeonseok, says the people have internalized the violence of brutal development, of top down planning, of technocrats drawing lines on a map through people's neighborhoods and lives. It is almost as if by acquiescing, one may feel superior in acknowledging the superior wisdom of elite planners. People begin to treat their environment as the authorities see it, worthless unless developed.

People live in intolerable conditions in poor, yet to European eyes, picturesque, urban neighborhoods high on mountainsides. They sit and wait for the planners or developers to come, whereupon the value of their tiny plots will increase 10-fold, allowing them to purchase an apartment in the faceless development that will replace their rotten little warren. In the mean time, almost as if they deserve it, the government starves the people of public transport and other social support. The people live in houses they neglect. The whole place stinks, because everybody has their eyes on the future and not the present. Why make the present bearable when the bulldozer's around the corner?

Cheong-gye Cheon (4) to Songnam City (5): Survival

From the Walker Hill Hotel in a resort area on the eastern fringe of Seoul to City Hall, they bulldozed a 6 km swath of houses and built an elevated highway few used. The highway is gone now; the Cheonggye River beneath it has been reclaimed as part of a central beautification process. The ugly past is forgotten.

In the back alleys of prestigious Eulji-road (6) (Euljiro), where the colonial Japanese paraded in their expensive clothes past elegant shops catering to the finest tastes, the Korean merchants forged horseshoes and hawked scrap metal and wood. These alleys lead down to the southern bank of the Cheonggye. There, warrens of tiny dwellings crystallized along what became a huge open sewer. Koreans were quite evidently second-class citizens in their own country, with their improvised shacks and robust vernacular bustle amid the effete Japanese with their impeccable manners, posture and taste.



1960- To show foreign investors that Korea was a modern industrial power, the Korean government destroyed the central city neighborhoods lining the Cheonggye River and evacuated the inhabitants to the southern fringe of the city, an uncultivated and unprepared land where each family was given a 20sq meter plot.

"No infrastructure, no social structure, people didn't have jobs or anything to do...There was the rumour that a woman ate her neighbor's child out of hunger, it was probably only a rumour"

smiling "but that exemplifies the desperation of the time."

Eventually there were riots and the government was slowly forced to intervene, but by that time the people had already started to work together and develop the social and economic networks they lack. Now the city is called Songnam and the original families have all done well.

"The people succeeded where the policy failed"

"Was it anarchy?"

"I would say it was frontier, a Korean concept of frontier"

Rural Korea: Abandoned Heartland

Korea, mostly rural before the Japanese colonial period, was poor, yet every village had its own flavor, its own wine, its own gods. People congregated in the twisting alleys, which allowed various degrees of contact between the private space of the home and the social space of the main street. These alleys communicated a permeable privacy, screening out strangers and allowing for spontaneous exchange within the neighborhood.

Every village was built according to feng shui. Those that survived 30 years of brutal colonization and war were razed and replaced with prefabricated buildings on rectilinear streets, which made people move more quickly. Suddenly, there was nowhere to meet. Those concrete buildings looked great when new, but within a few years began to age horribly. 40 years later, they still have not been replaced. This is the state of rural Korea today: neglected, its culture atrophied, a dead-end. More than 40% of South Korea's population now lives in Seoul.

The Internalization of violence

After 2 or 3 decades, the attitude became rooted in the subconscious of the people... The people treat their environment like the authority treats them, accelerating capitalistic development

It was not beautiful but it was organic. The twisting back alleys choked with tiny Korean businesses agglomerating behind fashionable and elegant Euljiro. They were the real culture, and like any real culture, dirty, smelly, violent and volatile. The fragile collapsing bric-a-brac funkiness to the neighbourhoods along the Cheonggye, unhygienic and unzoned. These people gravitated right to the center of the city to trade and survive in the most desperate of times. The buildings aesthetically evoked that desperation, that stubbornness, that irrepressible vitality. To the planners the manifestations were embarrassing, which, like a grandmother's grief, should be sanctioned to a space far away from social events. Implacable emotions are globalism's taboo.



The emotions expressed in the architecture of desperation are the emotions of the whole society, yet the people who live there do not feel it. They are hard at work everyday trying to survive or even get ahead. Ahead, out of the slums, for that is what they are, to a nicer place of both temperament and body. The emotions in this architecture, this testament to defiant peoples' appropriation of city land, are expendable.

Today, I don't think any Korean regrets the violence of the re-appropriation of the Cheonggye. The city revitalized the Cheonggye, landscaped and sculpted it and even pumped extra water to invigorate its flow. Seoulites are unanimous, the improvement is incontestable. It's smooth and planned geometries strip off even the most thickly painted mourning, the Cheonggye breathes life and hope for a greener, happier central Seoul.

Meanwhile, in Songnam city, where the evacuated populations were left to start over from nothing again, there is now a thriving suburb. The original 20 sq. meter plots of land, have increased in value hundreds of times. Massive identical apartment blocks line the wide commerce-free avenues. It's the socialist ideal, everybody up to standard. The evacuees' suffering has been redeemed, and nothing remains to commemorate it.

Local community exists only as a survival mechanism. As soon as people have the resources to be 'independent' they forgo community altogether, alienation sets in and they 'choose' their community, of golfers, say.

When a place starts to form an economical scale, they can manage themselves with or without support.

In the old town of Songnam we can see the alley culture. This is the essence of Korean adaptation to violent urbanity. One objective of Flying City's activities is to reveal this alternative development, and encourage people to imagine another way of development – with the heritage of these processes.

"Have you been able to get the people to acknowledge these alternative values?"

"No."

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- (1) a type of missile recently launched by North Korea
- (2) Japan has invaded Korea repeatedly over the last two millennia, venturing deep into the countryside to destroy precious temples and other cultural treasures. The 20th century colonization (1910-1945) was unexceptionally brutal. One example, after the rape and murder of the last Empress of the Lee Dynasty (1392-1910) her palace 'Gyeongbokgung' was turned used as a zoo.
- (3) Ichon, famed for its pottery, Incheon an ancient port, these cities today are almost identical.
- (4) Cheong-gye Cheon (River) runs through the historic center of Seoul.
- (5) Songnam City is today a satellite city south of Seoul with a population of about one million people.
- (6) Today, Euljiro is still a vital central traffic artery in Seoul. The Japanese residences have been replaced by steel, stone and glass office towers.