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Caught between the Future and the Past: The Redevelopment of Seoul's Cheonggyecheon Stream in Context

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Abstract

This study examined the contested site of the Cheonggyecheon Stream in Seoul, which, since 2003, has experienced several phases of redevelopment, resulting in pioneering environmental revitalization initiatives while simultaneously spurring rapid gentrification. Employing a comparative methodology, the study analyzed a cross-section of scholarly and journalistic accounts of the redevelopment project's benefits and detrimental impacts to survey the range of positions that have emerged. It was determined that contrasting concerns over the temporality of the Cheonggyecheon site underpin this discourse, with the city government's investment lying in a future-oriented ambition to present Seoul as a sleek, global metropolis, and local residents and tenants insisting on the need to preserve the longstanding communities that are beginning to dissolve under the pressures of gentrification. The parallel case of the redevelopment of the Wolgok-4-dong area of Seoul in the early 2000s suggests that this is a widespread structural phenomenon in South Korea, and the author concluded that it indicates the need for increased involvement of diverse stakeholders from the earliest stages of the planning of large-scale redevelopment projects.

Keywords: Cheonggyecheon, Urban redevelopment, Gentrification

1. Introduction

Covered over for decades by a highway that carried some 170,000 vehicles daily, the Cheonggyecheon Stream in Seoul, South Korea, now serves as an attractive destination for residents and tourists alike. For some, the site stands as a testament to South Korea's commitment to vibrant redevelopment while simultaneously affirming the country's ecological consciousness. Initiated in 2003 by the Seoul city government, the project to deconstruct the highway and revitalize the stream has been shown, for example, to have reduced air pollution by 10%, showcasing South Korea's potential for large-scale environmental restoration (Jang, et al., 2010). From another perspective, however, the alluring stream and its environs obscure a darker history of gentrification in the region, as well as the social and economic impacts the redevelopment project has had on many who have maintained small businesses and worked there as street vendors.

Scholarly literature has tended to reflect the celebratory light of the Cheonggyecheon project (Busquets, 2011). Meanwhile, grassroots activists and artists have stood in solidarity with—and have worked to represent the plights of—the local tenants of the area (Park, 2016). The present study employed a comparative methodology in analyzing a cross-section of scholarly and journalistic sources that have aimed to represent the interests of and effects on different stakeholders connected to the redevelopment of Cheonggyecheon. These sources were selected strategically in order to identify discursive patterns across the starkly divided positions of the proponents and detractors of the project.

What is missing in current scholarly literature and public commentary on the Cheonggyecheon Stream, which has tended to limit itself to the local circumstances of the area and its inhabitants, is a discussion of the temporal dimension of this binary discourse. Down to the present, the Cheonggyecheon area remains fraught with contention as legal

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battles and public demonstrations are staged in relentless attempts to claim and reclaim the area, tying it either to a history in danger of being lost, or a future at risk of being obstructed. This temporal dimension allows us to see debates about the Cheonggyecheon redevelopment project not as an isolated phenomenon but as an encapsulation of the dynamics of contemporary South Korea's urban transformation more broadly. Shaping the spatial identity of Seoul are the constantly competing forces that stress either a fidelity to established, local spaces and the everyday practices that define them, or an investment in projecting the veneer of a leading global metropolis. In light of this ongoing tension, this study concluded that the involvement of diverse stakeholders in discussions and planning for large-scale redevelopment projects from the earliest stages is necessary to achieve equitable solutions to the complicated problems that often arise in conjunction with such undertakings.

2. Cheonggyecheon in Context

Across the globe, urban expansion has caused almost 4 million square kilometers of land to be occupied by cities, which are responsible for 75% of total carbon emissions, as well as other forms of pollution (Kunal and Kaushik, 2022). Against this backdrop, like many cities, Seoul has for the past several decades sought to reduce carbon emissions and reintroduce green spaces into its dense urban fabric, an ambition underscored by the Cheonggyecheon restoration project. Taking an optimistic outlook, the Cheonggyecheon restoration project might well be seen as confirmation that cities are capable of developing without compromising their ecological foundation. Indeed, for many, the Cheonggyecheon restoration project presents itself as a model for how to simultaneously revitalize ecosystems, reduce pollution, and enhance quality of life in the context of an urban metropolis—a model that might be replicated internationally.

Flowing through roughly 10.8 kilometers of downtown Seoul, Cheonggyecheon now consists of fountains, waterfalls, and walking paths. According to government tourism websites, it is a place for "meetings, harmony, peace and unification" (VISITKOREA). Visitors to the space are also greeted by a museum housing cultural artifacts excavated during the renovation project, and Palseokdam, which is made of eight stones representing the eight provinces of South Korea. Prior to a concrete cover being placed over the stream in 1958 as part of the country's postwar modernization project, at one time, Cheonggyecheon was a natural stream, one of the Han River's tributaries. During the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897), Seoul became the capital of the Korean Peninsula, causing the city to become a thriving social center. However, due to such experiences as Japanese occupation between 1910 and 1945, and the Korean War (1950–53), temporary refugee housing was built along the banks of the stream, which negatively impacted the city's overall public health conditions.

These negative connotations persisted into the 1960s and would only end when in 1968 the Seoul city government opted to replace the stream with the Cheonggye Highway in response to urbanization problems and severe traffic congestion that had begun to accompany the city's rapid economic development. Although this highway initially acted as a symbol of South Korea's developmental progress, it also caused the surrounding area to become a noisy commercial zone (Congress for the New Urbanism, 2011). It continued to exist and perpetuate such conditions in the area until 2003, when Seoul's Mayor, Lee Myung-bak, set in motion a full-scale project to deconstruct the highway and reconstruct the stream. This move came in response to a mutual agreement among scholar intellectuals who decided it would be best to remove the now significantly worn highway and restore the stream that had originally been there.

Government messaging at the time asserted how this effort would improve the economic, political, and ecological landscape of the city (Hwang, 2015). The project was in fact part of a larger "urban renaissance" campaign, which aimed to develop deteriorated industries along the stream and renew downtown areas so as to achieve a more public-oriented landscape within the city (Schuetze and Chelleri, 2016). The Cheonggyecheon Stream, according to the logic undergirding the initiative, was to serve as a point of reconnection between disrupted and dispersed areas of the city while also displaying the area's historical heritage for citizens and tourists. Formally recognizing the initiative as a public project, the city government cut no corners, approving a colossal budget of $323 million for the revitalization of Cheonggyecheon (Yoon, 2022).

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To orchestrate the project, Mayor Lee created three constituencies that would focus on different aspects of the restoration. These comprised: the Politics and Implications Headquarters; the Cheonggyecheon Research Group; and the Cheonggyecheon Citizens' Committee. The main task of these groups was to generate plans and structural processes. Throughout the undertaking, "efficiency" became one of the most widely reiterated concepts associated with the project. That said, the restoration hardly unfolded in a linear fashion, as it occurred at an extremely fast pace, to the point where oftentimes planning and construction phases overlapped. Indeed, construction for the project began a mere six months after the master plan for the restoration had been completed—this timeline contrasting strikingly with comparable projects in other international contexts, such as the Big Dig city restoration project in Massachusetts, which took 25 years, and the High Line project in New York City, which took nine years (Yoon, 2022). A major reason for the extended timelines of the latter projects was the degree of community input they involved. To be sure, the scale of the Big Dig initiative was far greater than the Cheonggyecheon project, entailing the removal of an elevated highway to create the Rose Kennedy Greenway (Omega Centre, 2014). Yet, the structural approach initiated by the Boston Transportation Planning Review also provides a striking foil to the Cheonggyecheon initiative due to the range of stakeholders who were solicited to provide input, including, among them, engineers, environmentalists, anti-highway activists, economists, and lawyers (Bushouse, 2002). The New York City Highline project stands apart even further because it was set in motion by grassroots efforts of the nonprofit organization Friends of the High Line who engaged local communities as much as bureaucratic entities to turn a neglected rail spur into a public park (Reichl, 2016). By contrast, the Cheonggyecheon project was driven primarily by the motivations of a relatively small cohort of government officials.

3. Dichotomous Perspectives on Cheonggyecheon

Studies on the long-term effects of the Cheonggyecheon stream have remained at odds, with polarized sides privileging different metrics. On the one hand, it was demonstrated that by 2010, nitrogen dioxide levels in the area had decreased by 10 percent—this in marked distinction to a 16 percent increase in neighboring areas (Kim and Yang, 2023). Biodiversity in the stream had also increased in terms of both the richness of species and abundance, with both factors showing consistent increases over time. Additionally, through the restoration project, the city was able to recycle resources including scrap iron, steel, waste concrete, and asphalt. The stream itself also served as a key mechanism for ventilation throughout Seoul: through satellite imaging, it was shown that the heat island effect in the area was mitigated by the restoration, which created a path for wind flow through the center of the city (Kang and Cervero, 2009). Proponents of the restoration regularly highlight how these effects worked in tandem with the elimination of the overpass to positively impact air quality.

The project was aligned with a broader plan to reform Seoul's traffic patterns and was used to help initiate major changes in this regard. The idea was to shift from a traditional traffic flow system to one that was beneficial for humans and the environment. New public transportation systems, such as the BRT (Rapid Transit Bus) were enhanced, and new subway lines opened, further facilitating pedestrian traffic through the city (Lee and Anderson, 2014). With the restoration project appearing to have brought about environmentally friendly impacts, total visits to the area increased substantially.

However, in tandem with the increased popularity of the region came gentrification. Luxury apartment complexes were built along the stream, and new commercial developments sprung up. Fallbacks and heavy criticism thus ensued, and Mayor Lee struggled to build social consensus among civil groups. Such difficulties caused the project to extend from ten months to two years (Yoon, 2022).

Several points of critique were leveraged during this stage of the project, reflecting the distinct investments of different stakeholders. A critical refrain from scholars and activists concerned with the environmental impact of the project was that it lacked environmental integrity and ecological authenticity. Many such critics saw the restoration effort as entailing a confrontation between deep ecology and environmental managerialism. The original stream was designed to use naturally occurring water sources to channel runoff; nevertheless, the stream's original source had to be shut off due to the new restoration project. Therefore, 120,000 tons of water started to be pumped through the stream each day instead, with the Han River being the primary source (Kim and Yang, 2023).

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Cultural heritage experts, meanwhile, were concerned about cultural asset damages that might ensue as a result of the precipitous construction. On still a different front, transportation experts and citizens who regularly traveled through the area hypothesized that traffic problems would ensue. It was perhaps merchants and street vendors, however, who raised the most poignant objections, protesting that their livelihood would be at risk as a result of the environmental cleanup efforts. Small businesses, in particular, feared profit reduction from business disruptions as they began to witness the eviction of smaller merchants based in the area. Speaking to a reporter from the *Guardian*, one shop owner, Kim Hak-Ryul, aged 60, expressed that "There's no place to go. We cannot really move to other places—this is an ecosystem" (Michael, 2019). As low-income, long-term residents began to be pushed aside, new residents formed their own homeowner associations and constituted voting blocs whose agendas, including improving facilities, enforcing stricter zoning regulations, and pushing for greater public safety, overshadowed the immediate concerns of long-term residents about their ability to remain in the area.

For the Seoul city government, on the other hand, the restoration project was seen as a great opportunity to transform the economic landscape of the city and showcase it as a leading Asian global city, overshadowing the voiced concerns and worries of numerous stakeholders. Mayor Lee took a relentless stance on this score, and any dissent was dismissed, even when land prices became too high for current residents, forcing them to relocate. As evictions increased, numerous merchants began reporting threats made by anonymous thugs hired by the government who would come each night, urinating on their property, swearing at and even physically acting out upon the women in the area. At one point, two hundred such gangsters swarmed the neighborhood while the police remained unresponsive, leaving many injured (Cho, 2010). The merchants who heavily opposed the project were deeply disadvantaged, and the government provided no compensation for business interruptions and relocations, electing simply to move street vendors to the area of the Dongdaemun Stadium. (Yoon, 2022).

4. Wolgok-4-dong: A Parallel Case

Though the dichotomous viewpoints and experiences surrounding Cheonggyecheon are especially intense, the situation is hardly isolated. In fact, South Korea has had a history of urban conflicts such as that now facing Cheonggyecheon throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Take, for example, the Wolgok-4-dong redevelopment project in northern Seoul. This area experienced a radical transformation in the early 2000s, when detached housing units were replaced by grand apartment complexes. While this resulted in an apparent improvement of the residential area, the effects of gentrification became obvious, and existing residents were in large part replaced by middle class residents in their 30s and 40s (Kim, 2006). The new tenants were generally employed in management, administration, and business, and had a high level of education. For this demographic, the Wolgok-4-dong area proved attractive due to the accessibility it provided to downtown areas, saving commuting time and travel costs while allowing for additional recreational and livelihood opportunities (Kim, 2006).

The Wolgok-4-dong redevelopment project's success depended on the involvement of local government entities who were motivated by the potential enhancement of tax revenue and the perceived desirability of the area. Thus, they actively encouraged gentrification. In contrast to countries such as the U.S. and the U.K., which, by comparison, exhibit a greater focus on local area initiatives through partnerships between local governments and key agencies, such as with New York City's High Line project, South Korea has regularly emphasized material and economic indicators over the social impact brought about by changes to residential neighborhoods. The main goal in Seoul has routinely been to demonstrate a quantifiable improvement in the quality of housing, namely by replacing deteriorating buildings with modern high-rises. Local neighborhood, or "Gu," governments in Seoul often have not actively participated in devising plans for redevelopment, but instead have played a passive role by advocating unilaterally for the necessity of redevelopment (Kim, 2006). This means that redevelopment often occurs without regard for residents' desires and is instead keyed to financing interests and the involvement of large-scale construction companies.

The economic effects of the Wolgok-4-dong redevelopment project quickly became palpable, with housing prices after redevelopment increasing by nearly 240 percent, and rent prices increasing by 522 percent (Kim, 2006). In addition to allowing for this increase of capitalized land value, the area also saw many physical changes, such as single story detached housing being demolished for the construction of buildings over 20-stories high, which in turn came

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to dominate the cityscape in the region. As more middle-class citizens moved into the area, demographic and economic attributes and structures shifted dramatically. These shifts led to problems, such as conflicts that arose between new and longstanding residents as the space became occupied by more and more people. The increase in apartment complexes additionally created problems with regard to equitable treatment in that it forged a gap between existing low-class residents and the middle-class gentrifiers. Many low-class residents had an average income of less than 2,000,000 Korean *won* per month while those moving in after the development generally had incomes of over 4,000,000 *won* per month. Thus, established residents began experiencing increased costs, with utility prices, for instance, coming to comprise 20 to 30 percent of their expenditures (Kim, 2006).

As with the Cheonggyecheon project, two radically different positions clashed, with some insisting on the value of Wolgok-4-dong as a long-established community, and others investing in a future outlook motivated by the perceived need to augment Seoul's standing as a global metropolis by erecting a greater number of high-rise apartment complexes.

5. Conclusion

This article analyzed the discourse that has accompanied the Cheonggyecheon restoration project since its initiation in 2003, comparing the optimistic framings projected by the city government with the critiques voiced by multiple stakeholders. It showed that while the former frequently invoked environmental data as evidence of the project's success and overall benefit to the people of Seoul, residents in the area underwent—and continue to testify to—many hardships as a result of the gentrification that has ensued. In examining this rhetoric, the article determined that a competing sense of temporal investment structures debates around Cheonggyecheon, with the government approaching the site with a future-oriented perspective guided by the desire to increase the attractiveness of Seoul as a global metropolis, and longtime tenants insisting on the need to preserve the communities that are being forcefully divided and removed.

Presenting the comparable controversies that arose with the Wolgok-4-dong redevelopment initiative in the early 2000s as a parallel case study, the article argued that the bifurcated discourse on the Cheonggyecheon redevelopment project is symptomatic of larger structures and the way in which redevelopment is approached in South Korea. To be sure, as a result of relentless developmentalist agendas, Seoul now projects an impressive sheen that signifies its position as a global metropolis. Yet, as many activists and Non-Governmental Organizations persistently contend, histories and local knowledges linked to areas subjected to redevelopment become lost in the process, as longtime communities are forced to relocate and disperse. With no end to this tension in sight, the dilemma for the South Korean state—and for those who advocate on behalf of citizens facing gentrification—remains how to look forward and advance the nation's living conditions and its perception within the global community without turning its back on the past and the vibrant communities that have proven to be the lifeblood of the country.

As this study has relied upon secondary sources to make its argument, further research is needed to delve deeper into the nuances of the arguments advanced by government authorities and the people who actually live in areas like Cheonggyecheon. Nevertheless, based on the research presented here, it is recommended that diverse stakeholders impacted by large-scale renovation projects be involved in discussions with the city government from the earliest stages in order to achieve equitable solutions to the problems that such projects often engender.

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