

Gangnam style again?

The origins of South Korean urban modernity

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ABSTRACT: This study views architecture and cities as part of larger urban process that cannot be detached from the larger socio-cultural milieu, and this understanding begs us to delve with broader historical knowledge and deeper geographical understanding. Against conventional framework that espouses abstract economic mapping and hierarchical global city listings to address the locality, stories of Gangnam, a new city south of the Han River in Seoul, will represent emblematic unfolding of urban modernity in South Korea since early 1960s. The city is a showcase where, in Lefebvre's expression, "the industrial" and "the urban" did not proceed in a sequential order of historical development, but progressed simultaneously and complimented one another under the austere form of national ideology. Here the city illustrates more than its macro-economic spatial narration, and represents the distinctive socio-cultural and political conditions of its formation. Today, epitomizing upper- middle class lifestyle, Gangnam became a synonym for the new urban order where the new exchange value of space was expressed in the soaring price of once government-sponsored mass housings. Representing gradually territorializing urban consciousness, the culture and the symbolism of the new city strongly supported the consolidation of the fledgling middle class identity. Deeply immersed in both militarist and capitalist urban ideology, the city's emerging middle class embraced the segregated spatiality engendered by the Han River and projected its newly gained social status and citizenship on the identity of a particular urban space, Gangnam. Beyond dominant framing of a city in economic structuralism, what is emphasized here is the construction of place through finding confluence of variant conditions in particular time and space. From the urbanization story of Gangnam, reflected were the complex thread of social and political influences that realized the culture of capitalist spatiality, where the illegitimate turned into the legitimate, the irrational to rational, and the abnormal to normal.

KEYWORDS: Gangnam, Urbanization; Architectural Modernity, Seoul

Introduction

Separated by the Han River to north and adjoined by the hilly green space of the National Cemetery to west, the ground lying on the Han River's southeastern edge was propitious template for a new urban ground. Nestled in the protective river, the old farming territory was called Gangnam, meaning south of the Han River. This naturally bounded region recently gains great attention from the global media due to a Korean Pop singer, Psy who sings *Gangnam Style*, a terse tribute to an urban youth who strolls in Gangnam. A male protagonist (Oppa) in the song describes both himself and his female partner as characteristic Gangnam persona who displays sleek urbanity, full of capitalistic lush and erotic attraction. Quickly appearing on various global pop charts, the song is often sung by many without knowing what those Korean lyrics imply.

... A girl who looks quiet but plays when she plays
A girl who puts her hair down when the right time comes
A girl who covers herself but is more sexy than a girl who bares it all
A sensible girl like that...
I'm a guy
A guy who seems calm but plays when he plays
A guy who goes completely crazy when the right time comes
A guy who has bulging ideas rather than muscles

*That kind of guy...
On top of the running man is the flying man, baby baby
I'm a man who knows a thing or two...¹*

Puzzled by the urban trope of Seoul the song describes, this research looks back the origin of Gangnam and reflects a history of Seoul's urbanization that brings those sensational descriptions on the lifestyle of Korean youths, "the Gangnam Style."

Overcoming the river and militarized urbanism

Incorporating the expanded Seoul city limits of 1963, the initial plan for the New Seoul Project was visionary in its scale and reflected the state's desire to geometrically rearrange the surrounding rural area (Choe 1997). In a utopian plan reminiscent of the "Garden City," the plan of 1963 was a prelude to the phenomenal urbanization that followed over the next two decades. On the other hand the Han River had numerous undesirable conditions, which mandated the revision of development plan in order to open the way for large-scale urbanization to south. Urban expansion in Gangnam required an unusually high level of state investment in order to overcome the River's mile-long width and unpredictable tidal flow from the Yellow sea.

It is important to remember the political and socio-cultural context of South Korea in the late 1960s and the 1970s, when the country's industrialization established a symbiotic relationship with the urbanizing culture of Seoul. In Lefebvre's expression, "the industrial" and "the urban" in South Korea did not proceed in a sequential order of historical development, but progressed simultaneously and complimented one another under the austere form of national ideology (Lefebvre 2003). As with other projects of the time, the South Korean nationalism had overridden and guided these couplings of the industrial and the urban for the decades of rapid economic development. The urbanization of Gangnam reflected this complex thread of influences. Under the influence of state patronage, Gangnam was on its way to realizing its own culture of capitalist spatiality where the illegitimate turned into the legitimate, the irrational to rational, and the abnormal to normal.

Focusing on development south of the Han River, the state began to plan the expansion of the capital city based on a policy driven by militarist ideology, the policy directing Seoul's future development to the south of the Han River which had for the South Korean leaders strategic and military value (An 1996). While the public memory of the river being a natural defense line during the Korean War still lingered, Gangnam across the Han River continuously changed its profile that provided another dramatic urban growth stories in East Asia. At the beginning of the 1970s, the population of Seoul was almost reaching the mark of 3.5 million, more than double the population of the Korean War era. With the memory of the War only a decade old, state elites raised grave concerns of defending key national institutions in the event of another inter-Korean conflict, whence the defensive potential of the Han River came to the fore by justifying the policy direction of expanding Seoul (Moon 2005, Choe1997).

Yet inter-Korean rivalry played another role. Seoul's arch-competitor, Pyongyang, was a city built along the Daedong River where the major state buildings and national monuments were rebuilt along the shoreline after the city had been entirely leveled by the B-29 bombers during the Korean War (Lee 1993). Impressed by carefully arranged monumental architectures along the river shores in Pyongyang, the South Korean government sought to counter its rival's city spectacles beginning with the Yoido project, and find new ways in which massive urban projects could emulate the spectacles of the "enemy's" capital. Even in this competition, every urban structure is counted: a new concrete bridge over the Han River, the main bridge connecting Gangnam, had to be enlarged to surpass the width of a bridge over the DeaDong River (Son 2003). The regimes of both Koreas became caught up in a race to militate and fashion new urban environments. Preying on the "enemy" who shared the same Korean history, language, and ethnic identity, the South Korean government placed tremendous psychological pressure of fraternal contest on the public and engendered an unassailable rationale for drastic urban changes. In this sense, state-sponsored nationalism, through channeling the mass hysteria of fratricide and anxiety of another war not only produced mesmerizing effect on citizens complicit with militarizing social milieu, but also prevent them possible politicization

neutralizing the meaning of the state-led urban environments (Duncan 1990, HanGang GunSul and Han River Development Plan 1969). In the process the Han River became a natural line of defense that also demarcated the boundaries for a new round of urbanization. The existing city of Seoul was framed as a riddle of “undesirable” urban sprawl and a bulwark against possible North Korean attack, while Gangnam as a newly established security zone that was bounded for a safer and affluent space. Korea’s division and Cold War environment in the late 1960s provided the powerful exigency for the South Korean government to develop the vast stretches of farming land south of the river, avoiding the historical centers of Seoul.

State entrepreneurship

Presenting state planners a with a “clean slate” for development, Gangnam, in addition to its security concerns, was planned as the showcase for the nation’s future modernization. In the process, it became the prime national project that presented to the newly formed but rapidly rising urban middle class space with unprecedented opportunities to accumulate private wealth by speculation. Underwritten by the state, promotion of private ownership and land speculation in Gangnam bred a highly materialistic urban culture that had become formulae to think about current forms of urban consciousness and of citizenship. Deeply immersed in both militarist and capitalist urban ideology, the city’s emerging middle class embraced the segregated spatiality engendered by the Han River, and projected its newly gained social status and wealth within the confinement of specific territory. In Gangnam, therefore, territorialized urban consciousness strongly supported the consolidation of the fledgling middle class identity, while the state leadership took advantage of this autonomous division and spatial segregation by lessening the chance for the poor to lay any serious claim to a new city (GangNamGu SangWhalGwun GiBon GaeWhekE GwanHan GiBonJoSaYonGu 1979, GaePoJiGu 1985, Dogok ApatuJigu 2000).

Moreover, this state-led class formation through urbanization was intensified with the emergence of closer ties between political and economic elites. As exemplified in numerous political scandals between government officials and corporate heads in the late 1960s and 1970s, projects favorable to the city’s laboring population were often rejected by state authorities and the vested interests of large corporations often protected (Shim 2004). With absolute monopoly over the mega urban projects allowing only a few selected private construction companies to participate, the government created a systemic base for those collaborating ones to evolve into huge construction giants, known as *chaebols* – business conglomerate (Son 2001, 2003). Establishing symbiotic relationships with only a few private corporations, the South Korean state was then at the forefront of privatizing efforts and deepened the speculative nature of capitalist urban space. Imagined as Korea’s paramount model city, Gangnam worked as an anchor to develop the Han River and in the process formed the dual characters of its spatial identity. That is, the area became as much a highly speculative property-based urban space buttressed against the risk of constant class encounter by inclusion, and as a defensive territory protected from the North Korean threat, a bastion immune to both social (domestic) and military (foreign) unrest. Coupled with phenomenal real estate hike, architecture and urban space in Gangnam began to embrace this imagery of conflict-free urban space, where only the “haves” had the right to the city.

Inevitable solution or state choice: Privileging the state’s “technical rationality”

Apatu evolved as a term in the Korean language to designate modernist form of apartment housing, a multi-story residential structure of reinforced concrete. While this modern style collective housing first appeared during the Japanese colonial period, it really came to dominate the South Korean urban scene with the beginning of Gangnam development (Gang 2006). The urban proposition by CIAM (Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne) that envisioned a “tower in the park,” widely applied and tested in Europe and America at the time, was also a popular model and targeted planning paradigm in East Asia. This mass provision of modernist apartment came to the attention of Korean policy makers from various sources and would ultimately be chosen as the model for future provision of mass housing in Gangnam (Kim 2005). Apatu, an indigenous term for modernist high-rise apartment in Seoul, became a national prototype of mass housing inspired by the global planning practices of social restructuring and environmental determinism.

What was ironic is that, while in the West efforts to provide public housing in skyscrapers often devolved into ghettoized and dilapidated regions, Apatu in Seoul realized one of the greatest “success” stories of modernist ideas as a response to concurrent social restructuring and industrialization (Bristol 1991). Contrasting the ideal of early modernists to be a speculation-free housing for all, the inspiration for this Korean “success” was not for Seoul’s laboring population, but instead for a chosen few who were riding with the state’s privatization and speculative activity. Thus, describing Apatu as Seoul’s “public housing,” as Valerie Gelezeau has noted, is a misnomer that mistook state-initiated speculative housing development for social welfare policy (Gelezeau 2003, 2007). As in Gangnam’s case, the South Korean state fueled a highly speculative market system in which public demand was directed towards the collective consumption of modernist housing, well matched to status distinction. Preferred by the state to represent a new urban aesthetic, Apatu thus became a powerful medium where a commoditized urban consciousness of the emerging middle class found its cultural position confirmed by singular form of architecture.

The city government, as well as the housing authority of the Government (KNHC), framed the massive development of high-rise dwellings as the inevitable solution in response to unusually high population density in Seoul. This fixed framework worked towards normalizing alien building forms on which an intellectual discourse established the adoption of Apatu as a natural evolution that could mediate the conflict between the absolute lack of buildable space and a growing urban population. Under this rationale of cause and effect, the state, the conglomerates, and the emerging middle class created a developmental “myth” and stipulated visible evidence in the form of environmental novelty. Gangnam appeared to be, along with a distinctly American import of super blocks and immensely scaled grids designated for automobiles, the territory for new national center, where the built forms of Apatu would prove the Korean “miracle” that broke the agrarian society of the past in an unimaginable speed (Gelezeau 2007).

Behind the scenes of the Gangnam development, another social milieu surrounding Apatu fostered the greater cohesive power of nation building. In particular, through “Saemaul Undong (The New Village Movement),” the president Park Chung-Hee advanced a new discipline of the society contrary to past “ills” of laziness, dependency, and selfishness. “Diligence (Kunmyon),” “self-help (Chajo),” and “cooperation (Hypdong)” were to be the new social norms by which a person belonged to the membership of modern Korean nation was obliged to follow a set of state-sponsored ethical codes (ToSi SaeMaUI 1979). Although this moralization of individual behavior first began in the countryside, it would also appear in urban neighborhoods. Park believed that a “national renaissance” was only achievable through a change in the spiritual character of people, a belief that “spiritual posture is no less important than external and material posture.” This imagination for a future national society composed of self-disciplined and industrious individuals became the premise of Gangnam in which “Genuine modernization can be achieved only when material reconstruction is made on the basis of healthy national morality and social ethics”(Park 2005, Jager 2003). In the balance of material and spiritual ethics, the new aesthetic of modernism was chosen by the state to guide “a new way of living,” a “spiritual revolution of the people,” and the start of a “new history of the nation”(Jager 2003).

The state’s projection of the modern nation provided the overarching environment for the architectural culture in Gangnam, where naturalizing Modernist towers as the socialized and accepted aesthetics came to pass as a consequence of the scientific pragmatism that managed the city’s growth. With the state’s own nation-building programs running, this normalizing role of Modernist architecture and urbanism evolved into a generic built-environment prepared for the rising urban middle class. In Gangnam, architectural Modernism worked as a visualized manifestation that declared the state’s commitment to the development of a new face of the nation.

In this way, flagship developments of the large-scale Apatu complex and riverside highways in Gangnam represented national rejuvenation and modernization, which were, like Saemaul Undong reforming the anachronistic and ill-formed personal characters of the past, supposed to contribute to the emergence of a new urban self. In the evolution of Gangnam, an intensive

capitalist production of space took shape in the “public” form of housing and was channeled via the speculative actions of numerous individuals. While the popular discourses on Apatu cast it as a “rational” and “inevitable” choice, framing it as a solution for “urban problems” such as population density and inadequate land, the modernism of Apatu gradually dominated the public’s perception as a representative of specific class and social privilege.

Neighborhood unit

Working as experts, elite Korean planners tried to combine the scientific justification of modernist urbanism with the new applicable ideas of idyllic community. The additional layer included most notably the Neighborhood Unit, another Gangnam approach for an exclusive and more splintered urban environment. In the hands of architect Park Byung-Joo, the super blocks of the riverside apartments had to correspond with community based Anglo-American design ideals (Perry 1939). Hence, first used in both the DongBulchonDong (1968) and the Yoido housing development (1971), the Neighborhood Planning Unit was applied to already repartitioned Apatu zones in Gangnam (Gang et al 1999, Son 2003). Following the examples proposed by Clarence Perry, Korean planners utilized the Neighborhood Unit in order to encourage the development where elementary school based pedestrian communities were emphasized. Traffic flows were separated from the residential areas in which necessary living amenities were placed within walking distance, creating the images of a neighborhood in Gangnam as a perfect educational environment for children. For example, in JamSil (1975) as much as 20 Neighborhood Units were planned. The radius of each Neighborhood Unit ranged between 500 and 800 meters. Within each boundary, garden areas and walking paths were designed to protect residents and their children from motorways (JamSil Basic Planning 1974).

Particularly interesting in the adoption of the Neighborhood Unit was its social ramification to South Korea’s frenzy competition for climbing up the social ladder: that is, Perry’s highly communitarian-based urban design intersected with the social milieu of South Korean society where upward social mobility and reproduction of social relations were mostly determined by a few premier colleges and their after-college social networks (Jung 2006). Acting aggressively on this critical point, South Korean state planners orchestrated the space of the Neighborhood Unit in such a way that they not merely imitated Perry’s young community with elementary schools, but also consolidated a long-term community better suited for status symbols with extraordinary educational quality. By the mid 1970s, top private and public high schools left their current places north of the Han River and were relocated among the modernist Apatu of Gangnam (Gang 2006). For emerging middle class families, the newly structured high school districts south of the river acted as the most powerful magnet, where neighborhood-based high school districts legislated by the Ministry of Education in 1978 to form the so-called “8th School District” of Gangnam (Palhakgun), an ideal neighborhood with all of the best college-prep schools in the nation (Lett 1998).

Having developed Gangnam, the state’s commitment to a prosperous urban community resulted in the promotion of special social privilege for certain groups and therefore social exclusion. As Teresa Caldera has noted, what once constituted a critique of the problems of industrial cities, such as the Neighborhood Unit and architectural modernism, trans-morphed in Gangnam and became the source of the destruction of its own democratic ideals (Caldeira, 2000). In Gangnam, translated both from Clarence Perry and Le Corbusier, spatial distinction created by the state’s flagship housing projects splintered the urban space of Seoul. Relishing social networking within homogenized groups, middle class Koreans then easily linked their own privileged school districts to the modernist housing and fresh infrastructure in Gangnam. In the state’s efforts to build Korea’s future model city, a distinctively exclusive city was created across the Han River, encouraging massive middle class exodus to the south (Seo 1991, Koo 1994).

Conclusion

By the mid 1970s, while modernist planning fell under increasing criticism in the West, state planners in Seoul were busy applying architectural modernism to the new territory south of the Han River. Cultivating real estate speculation and spreading modernist aesthetics, they utilized state power in order to reshape Gangnam into the representative urban image of future Seoul. In the process, Apatu, a novel dwelling type, evolved into a popular housing form and an

aesthetic expression of newly gained wealth and property ownership (Jang 1994, Gelezeau 2003, 2007).

In such late development of modernism, the state's spatial restructuring along the Han River, despite the extensive production of modernist buildings, followed a trajectory quite different from the one envisioned in the early 20th century. That is, instead of providing for the "public good," "benefits of mankind" and therefore making a "public city," the South Korean state employed architectural modernism strictly for the utilitarian drive that ventured new urban space in order to complement rapidly expanding industrialization. Rather than inserting a grand master plan into a dense working class sector, state authorities explored areas beyond the existing Seoul and transformed Gangnam into a geographically protected enclave for the rising urban middle class. In the course, Apatu was chosen to lead South Korea's architectural culture. In stark contrast to the intentions of early European modernists, Gangnam development reversed the relationship between the role of the state and that of modernist architects. As James Holston has pointed out that, even though CIAM did not advocate the abolition of private property, it did espouse state power as the only safeguard against disorganized urbanization by private real estate developers. One of CIAM's important positions was that private interests were seen as an obstacle to the total design of the modernist city (Holston 1989). Paradoxically, the mega-scale of modernist planning in Seoul was accompanied by the state's powerful role as the "promoter" rather than the "suppressor" of private interests. While the state continuously emphasized the need for mega scale designs that aimed to convert Gangnam into the foremost façade of Seoul, the emerging spectacle of Apatu along the river in fact betrayed the ideals of the modernist city. In particular, the transformation of modernist ideology in Seoul was total betrayal to European modernists who had deplored land speculation as rampant irrationality of the private sectors. In the place of public responsibility, the South Korean state embraced this "irrationality" by deepening the capitalist urban culture of Gangnam through encouraging private speculation.

In order to expedite rapid urbanization, the South Korean state actively sought the ways in which accumulative "mechanism" through the state management of urban space engendered class oriented residential enclaves. As a new base for the urban hierarchy and an expression of propertied citizenship, Gangnam was not an ideologically neutral outcome of modernist urbanism, but rather a tightly woven capitalist grid that combined the state sponsorship of real estate speculation with the private pursuit of wealth and social status.

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Endnotes

¹ <http://www.kpoplyrics.net/psy-gangnam-style-lyrics-english-romanized.html> Accessed on November 3, 2013.