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## **Journal : Area**

**TITLE: Reversing the dominant directionality: Evidence of the East Asian model of gentrification in LA's Koreatown**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Reversing the usual directionality of gentrification theory and process, we work from an East Asian model of gentrification via Seoul to see whether it has been emulated in the Global North, in this case Koreatown Los Angeles. Focusing on the style, density, scale, scope and pace of the East Asian model and using interviews with 25 Korean gentrifiers and 10 key informants alongside secondary data, the results showed a mix of explicit emulation (density, new-build) and no emulation at all (slow pace, small-scale, punctuated scope), yielding a distinctly hybrid, LA-style model that builds up a wider geography of gentrification.

**KEYWORDS:** gentrification; Los Angeles; Seoul; Koreatown; policy emulation

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTUAL DEBATES

Gentrification is now arguably planetary in scale (Lees et al, 2016), but its conceptual anchors remain, for the most part, Anglo-American. Accordingly, its models are directed towards, rather than emanating from, the Global South and the Global East (Shin et al., 2016), thereby marginalizing knowledge production from those parts of the world. This Anglo-American model is very much based in the experiences of just a few cities, especially London and New York. But there has been an emerging critique that attempts to decolonize this gentrification model (Lees et al., 2016; Wyly, 2015), opening it up to new insights from beyond the gentrification heartland. This is part of a larger project of ‘provincializing urban theory’ (Roy, 2009; Sheppard et al., 2013), of showing that theories developed in the Global North are not as universal as they pretend, that they are in fact place-bound and parochial, and that these insights open up alternative sites of theory production. In this spirit, Lees (2012, p. 164) argues that “it is time now for gentrification researchers to decolonize the gentrification literature away from Euro-American perspectives and to pay much more attention to gentrification in the Global South”.

And yet relatively little study has been done on potential instances of reversing the dominant directionality, of finding evidence of non-Anglo-American gentrification models in the Global North. In this paper, we first outline an East Asian model of new-build gentrification, epitomized by large-scale, rapid and denser redevelopment as epitomized by the South Korean experience. This model has been described as the “synthesis of market and state power in the construction of a ‘joint urban project’...urban renewal...fused with national developmental imperatives” (Wyly, 2015, p. 2530; [see also Shin, 2016](#)). This rebalancing is particularly timely, given 30 years of sustained capital export from East Asia to the Global North, especially Australia, Canada, and the United States (Ley, 2010). We then seek evidence of this East Asian gentrification model in Koreatown Los Angeles, which as a Korean-American enclave undergoing gentrification (DeVerteuil et al., forthcoming; Sims, 2016) may be especially receptive. However, our approach does not assume, nor does it follow, the East Asian model as a mobile policy. Rather, we are open to presence *and* absence, seeking signs of whether the model has been emulated in Koreatown rather than following the policy across the Pacific. As Jacobs (2012, p. 419) argued, one must be attentive to “sites of failure, absence and mutation [that] are significant empirical instances of differentiation” rather than only sites that confirm our cosmopolitan expectations. We are therefore open to the possibility that gentrification models are immobile as much as they are mobile, open to cautionary tales and fixity, and eschewing the focus on successfully mobilized policy focus that currently pervades the field.

This paper contributes in several ways to the emerging debates around decolonizing gentrification theory. First, it reverses the dominant directionality of gentrification theory, going in this case from Seoul to Los Angeles, thereby building up a wider geography of gentrification (Lees, 2012). Second, it assumes that the East Asian model can be emulated in other places, much as the Anglo-American model supposedly does, and takes seriously the extralocal of the Asian city, in a process noted by Ren and Luger (2015, p. 145): “the metaphorical and semiotic, informational and immaterial ‘Asian city’ can appear in Singapore, Seoul or Seattle, in the form of ‘Asian-style’ policy...it can appear in a visual and experiential sense in Chinatowns or ‘Little Saigons’ throughout the world”. Third, by being open-minded about mobility and immobility of so-called travelling policies like

gentrification, the paper offers an empirical caution to fetishizing mobility, an “important counterpoint to the impression...that policies are mobilized more often than not” (Clarke, 2012, p.29).

We first flesh out the East Asian gentrification model, especially how it manifests itself in South Korea. Second, we provide context and methods for the Los Angeles Koreatown case study, followed by the results in which the commonalities from the East Asian model are analysed using 25 interviews of Korean gentrifiers, 10 key informant interviews and associated secondary data. Using a bottom-up approach, the results suggested a mix of explicit emulation and hybridized LA idiosyncrasies. In the conclusions, we point towards new areas of research on reversed directionalities of the East Asian model, as well as a more open relational approach.

## 2. THE EAST-ASIAN MODEL OF GENTRIFICATION

There has been a growing recognition of the importance of East Asian cities within urban theory, whether global cities (Sassen, 2001), cutting edge urban forms (e.g. Hogan et al., 2012; Ong, 1999; Shin, 2016), urban design (e.g. Koolhaas, 2004) or sites of neoliberalism and its contestations (Roy & Ong, 2011), all serving to challenge the hegemony of North American and European urban theory. With regards to gentrification, however, the influence of the East Asian model has been rather limited, with academics (e.g. Shin, 2009) more interested in drawing out the commonalities across places such as Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore than in how the model has been emulated elsewhere. Perhaps one reason for this lassitude has been an important internal debate as to whether gentrification is occurring at all in East Asia, with two schools of thought. The first school of thought takes seriously that gentrification is occurring, albeit in a very new-build, densifying and infrastructure-led form, leading to mass displacement and wholesale change, contrasting with the more gradual and incumbent upgrading found in many Anglo-American cities (Shin, 2009; see Ley & Teo, 2014 for a more ambiguous perspective). The second school sees gentrification as yet another Global North concept being (mis)applied to East Asia, that in fact it is redevelopment *tout court* (Tang, 2017). But if we agree that gentrification produces certain globally cross-cutting regularities, such as re-investment, social and spatial polarization, and displacement (Lees et al., 2015), then arguably the East Asian version of massive redevelopment falls under a more ecumenical gentrification rubric.

There has been extensive discussion of this redevelopment cum gentrification model in East Asia, including Japan (Cybriwsky, 2011), Taiwan (Huang, 2015), China (Ren, 2015), Hong Kong (Ley & Teo, 2014) and Singapore (Chang & Huang, 2011). Our empirical anchor will be Seoul, as it epitomizes many of the tendencies of what Shin (2009, p. 906) called the “strong arm of the development state”, of “condensed urbanization” (Lees et al, 2015, 442) with forty years of aggressive restructuring and densification of urban space (Shin & Kim, 2016). This model is not an imported new-build programme from the Global North, but rather an endogenous East Asian-style redevelopment, tightly coupled to neoliberalized state-private market actors, large-scale, speculative and usually infrastructure-led, high-rise and master-planned (Lees et al., 2016). More specifically, the generalized East Asian model (Ha, 2015; Hogan et al., 2012; Huang, 2015; Kim & Ha, 1998; Shin, 2008, 2009; Shin et al., 2016) is premised on large developers, invariably facilitated by an entrepreneurial state via large-scale



infrastructure provision. Ultimately, profit-seeking and mass homeownership are the goals, with privatization as the dominant mode of land use. Further, the process and politics feature little overt resistance.

So far, the model is rather typical of state-led redevelopment/gentrification in many parts of the world, not least the Global South. What sets the East Asian model apart, and what will be studied in this paper, is the confluence of three very specific conditions:

1) *Density* is always higher, as densification is a signature of the East Asian model, moving from relatively low-density and individual homes (and sometimes slum housing) to high-rise apartments, of building to the maximum density;

2) *Style* is always new-build, with limited desire to rehabilitate buildings older than 50 years old, leading to a drastically altered physical environment through what Ha (2015, p. 165) called “renewal-induced gentrification”; and

3) The *pace*, *scale* and *scope* are rapid, large and all-encompassing respectively, as this model involves quick and wholesale demolition of previous urban structures accompanied by mass displacement, in places where real estate prices have risen astronomically.

In Seoul, this “mega-gentrification” (Lees et al., 2016, p.173) has been essentially a form of state-led densification, producing mass displacement from the 1980s onwards and with little sentimentality for older built forms. As Ha (2015, p. 165) pointed out,

In comparison with Western cities, gentrification seems to have taken a somewhat different path in South Korea, which has seen real estate development being a central force in urban economic expansion over the last 30 years....I argue that these urban renewal projects, are in fact, a form of urban gentrification because they often involve the displacement of poor residents from their city neighbourhoods, for those tenants are unable to pay the increased rents or afford the pricey new housing.

The Joint Redevelopment Project (JRP) looms large in Seoul, an alliance between homeowners, construction companies and the local state to promote growth as a spatial fix (Shin, 2008, 2009, 2016). In these ways, Seoul can constitute an important basing point for understanding a certain style of gentrification that conceivably travels to other countries or even be emulated without any traveling at all. This is especially true given that South Korea has long exported capital to other nations, including the United States (Park & Kim, 2008). So despite Seoul occupying a rather peripheral position in gentrification debates, there is much to potentially learn from it; namely, how this East Asian version might be emulated in a Global North global city that is equally peripheral with regards to gentrification – Los Angeles. LA is a city that is well connected to Seoul in terms of migration (over 400,000 Koreans live in Southern California) and a long tradition of courting Korean investment. Given this strong transnational connection between the two cities, we would expect at least some explicit emulation of the East Asian model in the inner-city enclave known as Koreatown, but of course we are open to a variety of possibilities, including no matching at all, or that matching is not to some other model. In the next section, we outline the methods and contexts to investigate these possibilities with the Koreatown case study.

### 3. KOREATOWN CASE STUDY: CONTEXT AND METHODS

Koreatown is located to the west of Downtown Los Angeles (Figure 1 below). For the purposes of the study, data was collected within the boundaries of zip codes 90004, 90005, 90006, 90010 and 90020, and contained a total population of 125,000 in 2010 (US Census, 2010).

#### Figure 1: Locator Map for Koreatown, Los Angeles.

Because we are interested in going beyond the usual statistical and ‘high-altitude’ nature of many gentrification case studies, we focused on obtaining opinions and preferences of Koreatown gentrifiers themselves with regards to density and style, as well as key informants (e.g. architects, planners, developers) who provide a ‘big picture’ vision of Koreatown gentrification and its pace/scale/scope. This bottom-up perspective recognizes the agency of gentrifiers in terms of their insights and experiences vis-a-vis the grounded nature of Koreatown gentrification, of how it may both remind them of Seoul but also move beyond to embrace Los Angeles. Interviews with Koreatown gentrifiers and key informants occurred in the Spring and Summer of 2014. In terms of the sample, the co-author was conversant in Korean culture and language, and did most of the interviews in that language, which were then translated into English. Gentrifiers were identified using a convenience sample of residents in six new condominium towers in Koreatown, producing 25 open-ended interviews that focused on their residential history including both South Korea (all had originally come from Seoul) and Los Angeles (where, on average, they had lived for 16 years), current living arrangements, reasons for choosing Koreatown, and what they thought about gentrification more generally and in Koreatown more specifically. It was decided that 25 interviews, while not representative of all Koreatown gentrifiers, were sufficient to provide what Small (2009) deemed empirical ‘saturation’, that is diminishing new information for each subsequent interview rather than the seeking of some sort of quantitative representativeness.

While the interview material provided a direct and individual account of Koreatown gentrification, an additional ten key informant interviews with real estate experts and redevelopment officers were used to provide a ‘big picture’ of Koreatown gentrification, supplemented by census data (1990-2010), research reports and real estate data between 2003 and 2013 (Data Quick, 2013). The census data showed patchy gentrification (measured as zip code median price per square foot increasing at a higher rate than the City and County of Los Angeles) in Koreatown, mostly along Wilshire Boulevard in the 90010 zip code. At \$503 in 2013, its median price per square foot was well above County values (\$260) and the City of Los Angeles (\$326), and its increase of 93% between 2003 and 2013 was far greater than the County (18%) and City (32%) (DeVerteuil et al, forthcoming). The big picture interviews were also used to confirm pockets of gentrification so as to identify specific buildings from which to sample gentrifiers, rather than relying purely on the quantitative/real estate data which is too coarse for the subsequent sampling.

Seeking evidence of the East Asian model in Koreatown involved analysing the case study material for degrees of emulation, or the matching or imitating of the three components outlined in section 2. As such, no assumption of mobility was made – it was more to see *if* rather than *how* the model had travelled (and which components), thus avoiding the teleological ‘follow the policy’ approach. Yet our approach was also necessarily relational, in that it is equally sensitive to the local and the extralocal (McCann & Ward, 2010). Koreatown

is held to be an unbounded territory, open and porous to the East Asian model, but also decidedly fixed in terms of built-up legacies (and inertias) of American urbanism (e.g. entrenched racial segregation, mass suburbanization leading to inner-city poverty) that resist change. The material was marshalled to structure the results according to three possible outcomes: (1) explicit emulation, whereby specific East Asian model components are emulated in LA; (2) emulation of models other than the East Asian; and (3) no emulation at all, suggesting a more homegrown and possibly hybrid model.

#### 4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Lee and Park (2008, p. 245) characterized the Koreatown population as “fragmented into wealthy transnational investors, small-business owners who comprise first-generation Korean Americans, generation 1.5, and second generation Korean-American professionals, and poor transnational guest workers....Koreatown also houses a sizable number of Latinos”. In effect, Latinos are the majority population according to the 2010 census, while Koreans were around 25% of Koreatown’s population. Gentrification has come only recently to Koreatown, as it has more generally to Los Angeles (DeVerteuil, 2011, 2015; Marr et al, 2009), and certainly not via the typical **model of** Anglo-American incremental upgrading of an existing built environment (DeVerteuil et al., forthcoming).

This section is organized around the three key components derived from the East Asian gentrification model, revealing varying degrees of emulation in Koreatown Los Angeles. Largely produced from the ‘big picture’ interviews, the *pace*, *scale* and *scope* of Koreatown gentrification were slow, small and piecemeal, very much the opposite of the East Asian model of quick, large-scale and all-encompassing redevelopment cum gentrification. The 2003-2013 real estate data (Data Quick, 2013) showed only seven major high-rise (over 7 floors) redevelopments or rehabilitations – of which six were residential. That pace has picked up significantly since 2013 (as it has across LA more generally), and as of January 2018 there have been 60 completed developments and rehabilitations, currently under construction or proposed since 2013 (Urbanize LA, 2018). However, only 14 were high-rise, within an area with over 5,000 existing buildings. **In Los Angeles, the building of skyscrapers is expensive and attracts community opposition to this kind of densification, seen to cause more traffic and, inevitably, encourage gentrification.** As a result, in the words of a planner,

*Pushing out original residents by gentrification might be possible in Korea but it is impossible in America... If we go to city hall, we can see the development plan of the city over the span of 50 years. America’s development clock moves slower than South Korea’s. I acknowledge the changes but all changes by gentrification come to us slowly and not quickly.*

The gentrifiers themselves noted the slowness of redevelopment in Los Angeles more generally and Koreatown more specifically, pointing to the inertia of the built environment, the difficulty in tearing down older buildings (especially if they are heritage), the added expenses of providing up to two parking spaces per unit, and the occasional NIMBY lawsuit against developers. When asked about whether gentrifiers had emulated Korean urban living in Los Angeles, or whether they had adapted more to American realities, most were cognizant of how Korea simply moved faster and with more efficiency and that LA Koreatown had not yet caught up:



*Korea's trends such as in matters (i.e. IT, smart phone culture, fashion, redevelopment and so on) are two years faster than America's. Previously hot trends began in America and moved to Korea but this has changed.*

*In Seoul, everything is high-tech. The IT system in houses is amazing. I am jealous of the train system in Seoul, too. The streets in Seoul are so clean. I think everything in Seoul is much better than here in Koreatown.*

In effect, the pace of Koreatown gentrification had so far been slow, the scale had been relatively modest, and the scope rather piecemeal, suggesting a different model to the East Asian one. However, emulation in terms of *style* was very much in evidence – all of the gentrifiers, and the key informants as well, favoured the new-build model as it reminded them of Seoul and spoke to their self-selected preferences for redeveloped landscapes.

Accordingly, Koreatown gentrification is almost exclusively new-build, with relatively little rehabilitation of older buildings, at least thus far. All 25 gentrifiers were adamant that 'newer is better', as the quotes indicate below when asked if the age of the building matters:

*Of course newer is better. I like modern buildings because they are more comfortable.*

*Newer is nicer. Koreatown is a notoriously dangerous place, especially late at night. However, new buildings provide good security services. Moreover, new buildings are clean, and remind me of what you can have in Seoul.*

*Newer is always better. Usually newer buildings make use of better technology, new architectural designs and good building material. Security is an unavoidable issue and newer buildings provide safe environments.*

The predilection for new-build gentrification came directly from growing up in Seoul; allied to this is that gentrification in Koreatown always involved an increase in *density*, although not usually the maximum density allowed – this is particularly the case away from Wilshire Boulevard, the prestige artery. Gentrification in Koreatown invariably replaces a smaller older building with a larger new-build one, or involves construction on parking lots; and, rarely, rehabilitating a non-residential building like the office building on Western and Wilshire known as the Mercury – a case of adaptive re-use that now houses gentrifiers. Of course, density was nowhere near as high as Seoul redeveloped areas, but high for Los Angeles, which is seen as positive and something to aspire to, speaking to the gentrifiers' preference for dense urban living. In effect, Korean gentrifiers in Koreatown had not lost their taste for density and urbanity they had inherited from Seoul when they moved to LA, **although density in LA would always be lower and more patchy**. As this Korean-born architect spoke,

*Koreans were used to urban living because people in Korea are used to high rises. People complain about bright lights going in through their window and signage and advertisement on the building. They had all these other issues but Koreans did not care.*

*[density] is good. Geographically, LA cities tend to be scattered and spread out but Koreatown packs a lot in a very small area. This only results in more mass.*

A clear majority of those interviewed thought that *more* density, i.e. more development and thus more gentrification, were necessarily good things for Koreatown:

*I think that more development, population growth and change are all good signs for the future. Even if I would lose some profits because of the change, I will accept the investment result.*

Gentrification-induced densification was favoured not only because it reminded them directly of living in Seoul, but also showing that Koreatown was upgrading and becoming more like Seoul. As the architect explained,

*One of the biggest things of Koreatown is the density. I'm not talking about the people who work there but the people who live there. Because what really makes a community from an economic standpoint, thrive? It's density. 15 years ago, a lot of the mainstream retailers did not want to come to Koreatown at all...because it was a poor neighborhood-- no one is going to buy. That was the mentality that many people of L.A had at the time. Because we don't understand density in this city. We are a suburban city.. okay? What happened though in the last 10 years is that people are saying, "wait a minute... Koreatown may have a low income but there are 10 times more people here than West L.A.. If there are these people with medium income who make 25,000 a year, but there's 10 times as many--that's \$250,000 a household. And they look at the demographics of Latino's and Asians-- they spend! You know what, this is got to be a market we got to be in." So density really created more economic stimulus into that area.*

Explicit emulation of the East Asian model and evidence of cross-Pacific tendencies included densification, which was favoured by all interviewed, as well as the strong preference for new-build developments. But the Koreatown experience becomes far more muddled when one considers pace, scale and scope, which was slow, small and punctuated (see DeVerteuil 2015 on the LA model), with relatively little state intervention and certainly nothing 'national' about the redevelopment imperative. Rather, the Koreatown reality was a mix of localized LA tendencies and an unevenly-emulated East Asian model. The 'big picture' interviews confirmed this further – that Koreatown gentrification is transnational only to a point, with a lot of home-grown capital from well-established, first-generation Korean immigrants that create a hybrid landscape of Seoul and LA (DeVerteuil et al, forthcoming). The results showed both absence and presence of the model within an enclave arguably receptive to it (especially given thirty years of Korean investment, although much of it by first-generation immigrants themselves), but one that must bump up against the incremental and modest nature of the redevelopment and gentrification model in Los Angeles. The mix of an LA incremental model with the emulation of a denser, new-build East Asian model leads to a mixed reality in Koreatown and suggested some reverse directionality, of the Global East informing the Global North in a very modest yet obvious way via the preferences of individual gentrifiers and developers.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has moved beyond the usual suspects of gentrification theory and its narrow set of anchors in Western cities, to consider evidence of East Asian-style gentrification in Western cities, namely Koreatown in Los Angeles. While there was certainly evidence of explicit emulation, particularly in terms of density and new-build, there was counterbalancing

evidence of a more hybrid, LA-centric model in terms of scale, scope and pace that was remarkably bounded and parochial (DeVerteuil et al, forthcoming). In effect, while the East Asian model via Seoul breached its own territoriality, it had to confront the idiosyncrasies and immobilities of the Koreatown territory, yielding an incremental gentrification. Future research should expand the search for evidence of the East Asian gentrification model to other Pacific Rim cities with potentially receptive enclaves – such as Vancouver (Ley, 2010), San Francisco, Honolulu, Sydney, Melbourne and Auckland – as well as groups, including the larger Chinese diaspora, who arguably have a more suburban predilection. Further, there is a need for more systematic investigations of reverse directionality that combines the bottom-up perspectives of gentrifiers with more statistical real estate analysis – and at the same time, present a truly relational approach to gentrification models whereby any one city's gentrification is an amalgam of various far-away and localized versions, and that the reference points can be nearby as well as 'elsewhere' (McCann & Ward, 2010).

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