



The Remembrance of a Moon Village

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This article describes one of urban renewal projects in Seoul in 1990s that caused severe tragedies in the area based on the writer's experience. Despite the criticisms of the "slum clearance" approach to urban renewal in the U.S. after the 1960s, Seoul adopted the concept to redevelop slum areas during 1970-1990s since the city government had to figure out the middle-class housing shortage as soon as possible. The urban renewal project abused the civil rights of slum residents by destroying their living foundation.

Last fall, I first faced the concept of urban renewal as a planning student. However, the concept seemed really familiar to me, as I had involuntarily experienced urban renewal in my childhood. I realized that the things that I had seen or heard about as a child had already happened in the U.S. a long time ago. Among the many urban renewal projects in the U.S. conducted during 1950s, the detrimental slum clearance in Detroit especially caught my eye because it reminded me of the neighborhood I lived in during the late 1990s. This neighborhood had replaced the largest moon village, a lower-income slum area, in Seoul. In spite of decades of time between them, the two cases closely resembled one another. I was astounded and wondered why Seoul planners followed the path of slum clearance that had clearly failed in the United States.

30 Years Later

In the summer of 1995, my family moved to a brand-new apartment located in the northern part of Seoul. The apartment complex, which was one of the massive redevelopment constructions in the city, had 4,516 households in an area of 47 acres. My new apartment was the replacement of a neighborhood called "Daldongne," a moon village. People called those kinds of neighborhoods moon village because most of the lower-income residents paid monthly rents, as they could not afford to purchase a house, and because the neighborhoods were often located on hillsides, where people could see the moon up close. In response to Seoul's rapidly increasing population, the city designated an existing moon village as a redevelopment area and applied urban renewal methods similar to those used in the U.S. in the 1950s. Despite criticisms of the slum clearance approach to urban renewal in the U.S. after the 1960s, Seoul implemented the concept for several neighborhoods during the 1970s through the 1990s, eventually causing severe tragedies in those areas including social injustice, declining quality of life, poor public services and maintenance, and enforced displacement. Admittedly, the urban renewal redevelopment did bring some benefits to the city, such as providing more middle-class housing by building high-density apartments in the squatter settlements that had been scattered in the mountainous area of Seoul. However, the city should not have adopted the outdated method of urban renewal due to its severe equity ramifications. Although the government expected the new developments to resolve issues of equity, it failed to save the moon village residents.

Donam Slum Clearance

In the early 1970s, the Seoul Metropolitan Government designated a large moon village in Donam, the northern part of Seoul, as a redevelopment area. Through slum clearance, the government sought to refurbish the area and supply affordable housing to middle-income families. Thomas and Hwang (2003) reported that to replace slums with clean and massive apartment complexes, the city contracted private developers to proceed with the plan and approved their proposal for redevelopment (p. 14). However, developers did not demolish the moon village until 1990, and then began construction in 1993.

Multiple layers of conflict prolonged the village redevelopment, including long-term conflict between the private developers and the moon village residents and internal conflict between owners and renters in the village. While the owner-occupied households banded together against the forces of eminent domain to demand compensation, renters and squatters had no assets for bargaining. The developers decided to build public housing in the new town to accommodate these residents; however, they offered only homeowners, not renters, priority to purchase the public housing units. This caused a conflict between the owners, who wanted to conclude negotiations with the developers quickly, and the renters, who did not want to negotiate because they had nowhere to go. This conflict delayed the redevelopment and caused unrest. In one case, the disagreement among residents drove a homeowner to commit murder. Neighbors who had once helped each other in times of need became foes. Additionally, even though homeowners had priority in purchasing units, most of them could not afford the developers' units. They had no choice but to leave the village, selling their priority to speculators who could actually afford to buy the units. Meanwhile, in 1990, the developers tried to raze the village faster than initially promised to shorten the redevelopment period, which led to a protest by the rest of residents who had not yet found alternative places to live. Despite a riot that caused injuries to some protestors, the private developers proceeded with the demolition. In so doing, the urban renewal project abused the civil rights of lower-income residents in the moon village.

It took only two years to complete the construction of thirty-one high-rise apartment buildings. Wide and well-paved concrete roads covered all traces of the moon village; the twenty-two story modern buildings





accommodated a large number of middle-income families. This functional apartment complex with a fascinating panoramic view of the city was seen as exemplary for other redevelopments occurring at that time. The short construction period was also helpful to middle-income households, who suffered from a housing shortage in Seoul. The new town had excellent amenities such as a mall, a gathering space for seniors, and a playground that residents could enjoy. Moreover, the town was easy to access by public transportation, providing additional convenience for commuting workers. Unlike the slum residents, the newcomers were the sole beneficiaries of this urban renewal project.

In the U.S. and Seoul, urban renewal provided a desirable aesthetic but brought unforeseen

When I transferred to a primary school near the new town, a small part of the moon village remained between the new town and my school, which most children of the apartment complex attended. We schoolchildren had to walk to school along a narrow path through a district with old, shabby houses. Since the alleyways were not paved, I complained about my shoes getting dirty during the rainy season and encountered “bottlenecks” on my way to school because many children hesitated before climbing down the slippery alleyway. In spite of these small inconveniences, I never thought this neighborhood should be destroyed because the community had existed for a long time and I had a couple of classmates who had lived there for their whole lives. I also appreciated the older neighborhood residents. Whenever I passed by the alleyway, an old lady sitting in front of her house generously welcomed me, which would make me feel warm for the rest of the day. However, the “old urban fabric” in the area was devastated in a moment: the small village was cleared out after the new town residents demanded “a safe school zone,” and the apartment children eventually got dry asphalt pavement on their walk to school. Needless to say, my friends at the moon village were forced to move out, and I never saw them again.

Isolation and Discrimination

As many urban renewal advocates claimed, the city government believed that clearing out problematic regions to build modernized and functional communities would resolve most of the city’s social problems. But these city improvements failed to resolve the complex social issues as expected. As noted above, the private developers built only one public housing unit in the apartment complex and gave priority to moon village residents as compensation for demolishing their homes. However, most of the residents could not afford to move into the building. Those who did move in faced severe discrimination in the new community. Even the site plan reflected such discrimination: their building was located at the end of the apartment complex, farthest from the main entrance and isolated from other apartments. In addition, the construction company scheduled a later move-in for the public housing residents than for the other residents of the complex. Therefore, public housing residents had little opportunity to integrate with the rest of the households in the new town.



Fig. 5.1. Source: Soobin Park

consequences. In Seoul, those unforeseen consequences threatened the very safety of the city’s residents. In the rainy season, after all the new residents had settled into the area, the embankments supporting one building’s foundation suddenly collapsed, causing ten casualties. It was disclosed that the accident occurred because the construction company did not adhere to building and construction safety standards. In order to increase profits, the construction company used cheap and unsafe materials to reduce per-unit costs and create more housing units. This sparked a controversy among Seoul citizens, revealing other dishonest construction practices throughout the city. Urban renewal was threatening public safety for all residents.

Inherited Segregation

This kind of tension in the community also carried over to the primary school. To deal with the rapid increase in the student population, the school created additional classes dedicated to incoming students from the apartment complex. As a rite of passage, students had to state their building number to classmates. Since the new town consisted of apartments in different areas, a building number identified a resident's income class. When a newcomer introduced himself or herself as a resident of 301, a public-housing building number, he or she had difficulty making friends in the class. Even if the classmates started to get along, the parents advised their children not to hang out with children from 301. The social and economic polarization between residents of 301 and others worsened with time; one 301 resident even committed suicide in the building. Nonetheless, nobody made an effort to discuss the problem or find a solution. Rather, the new town residents became even more inclined to avoid the lower-income residents of 301. It seemed that social equity was nowhere to be found in this neighborhood.

An Alternative Way

Urban redevelopment in Seoul was inevitable given the radical population explosion of the 1960s and 1980s. However, Seoul should not have redeveloped the inner city by simply clearing out slum areas. First, the relocation of slum residents should have been a long-term project so they could have had adequate time to prepare to move to other regions. In the Donam redevelopment case, it took only three years to force residents out and completely raze the whole town. This was not enough time for lower-income people to adapt to new circumstances, as it was hard for them to find affordable new housing in the city.

Also, the government should have had a more concrete and comprehensive compensation policy. Though the city gave some slum residents the right to move into new public housing in the new town, they could not afford to pay the rent and many left the area after selling their rights to those who had more money. The lower-income households in the slum therefore did not benefit from compensation. Moreover, instead of bulldozing the entire designated region and erecting high-density buildings, the city and private developers should have considered a mixed-income and mixed-density redevelopment in order to intermingle a variety of social classes

and preserve the character of the neighborhood. If they had preserved some of the slum area, renovated the infrastructure and old houses incrementally, and held public discussions with residents, while simultaneously pursuing the high-density housing plan, Seoul would have had diverse types of neighborhoods with unique characteristics.

Baeksa Village, a New Challenge

One of the last moon villages in Seoul, Baeksa Village, has the potential to incorporate some of these alternatives, as developers are currently attempting to create a sustainable and vibrant neighborhood. Created by the expelled residents who had lived in the inner-city slum area that was cleared in the 1970s. The village had been designated as a green belt for 47 years,



so the neighborhood has kept its original topography and the shape of the lots. When the government lifted the green belt regulation of the area in 1998, the demand for redevelopment increased, and developers proposed a typical plan to bulldoze the neighborhood and build high-density, market-rate apartments. Voicing their concern, local architects insisted that the developers consider sustainable development and keep the neighborhood's unique topography and shape in order to respect and preserve the residents' lifestyles. Eventually, the government accepted the local architects' proposal, and the architects are currently working on the new site plan for a mixed-income, mixed-density, eco-friendly neighborhood.

Fig. 5.2. Source: Soobin Park

Learning from the Past

While reading about the urban renewal project in Detroit, I became preoccupied with memories of the new town where I had spent my childhood. As a child, I had a vague sense that something was wrong with the apartment complex, but I did not realize the extent of the issues. I now realize that the type of urban renewal pursued there was not suitable for comprehensive neighborhood improvements. Fortunately, people are now more aware of social justice issues, so Seoul citizens have questioned this kind of result-oriented

redevelopment plan and have tried to find better ways to improve the remaining moon villages. Although it might be difficult to make a moderate redevelopment plan that appeals to all residents and developers, plans like those for Baeska represent a step in the right direction that may enhance the quality of life for all residents of Seoul. ■

This work is dedicated to the memory of Jong-ho Yi, my undergraduate professor at the Korean National University of Arts, who loved Seoul and was involved in the Baeska Village Redevelopment Project.

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