Chapter II

To Connect and Flow in Seoul: Ubiquitous Technologies, Urban Infrastructure and Everyday Life in the Contemporary Korean City

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ABSTRACT

Once a city shaped by the boundary conditions of heavy industrialisation and cheap labour, within a few years Seoul has transformed itself to one of the most connected and creative metropolises in the world, under the influence of a new set of postindustrial prerogatives: consumer choice, instantaneous access to information, and new demands for leisure, luxury, and ecological wholeness. The Korean capital stands out for its spatiotemporally compressed infrastructural development, particularly in the domain of urban informatics. This chapter explores some implications of this compression in relation to Seoulites’ strong desire for perpetual connection—a desire that is realised and reproduced through ubiquitous technologies connecting individuals both with one another and with the urban environment itself. We use the heavily managed urban creek Cheonggyecheon as a metaphor for the technosocial milieu of contemporary Seoul, paying particular attention to what its development might signify for Seoulites both as a constituent node of the city and as an outcropping of networked information technology. We first describe some of the historic, social and economic contexts in which the Cheonggyecheon project is embedded, then proceed to discuss the most pertinent facets of Korean-style everyday informatics engaged by it: ubiquity; control and overspill; government-industry collaboration; lifestyle choice; and condensed development timelines.
HISTORY AND CONTEXT

A stream of fresh water. Shoals of fish orbit in a leisurely manner; curious children point them out, all the while being photographed by their delighted parents. Through the sound of the running water, surrounded by laughter and the little shutter-clicks from cameras and camera phones, a young couple are crossing evenly-spaced stepping stones, hand in hand. The air feels lush, fragrant, alive.

Standing on the many bridges arching over the stream, you realise you are at the centre of one of the most populous, polluted, quickly-developing, and densely interconnected metropolises on the planet. You are at Cheonggyecheon, in the very heart of Seoul.

Originally stretching ten kilometres from its origin to the point at which it eventually meets the Han River, Cheonggyecheon’s history as an urban feature dates to the Joseon Dynasty’s selection of Seoul as its new capital, at the beginning of fifteenth century CE. As a restored and managed stream, it now runs for almost six kilometres across the central city.

Recognition of Cheonggyecheon’s potential benefits for Seoul residents was initially realised in simple forms: as ‘a sewage system, a laundry and playground for children’ (Park, 2007, p. 9) and adults alike (Seoul Development Institute, 2004, p. 1). Its use as an open sewage system evidently became unsustainable sometime during the Japanese occupation, leading to a first attempt at dredging and partial covering, with the aim of safeguarding Japanese citizens from disease and crime (ibid.). However, with the intense national focus on economic reconstruction in the post-liberation (1945) and post-war (1953) periods, and a corresponding slide into social and environmental negligence on the part of a preoccupied government, attempts at improvement fell by the wayside. Cheonggyecheon remained—and was generally perceived as—a perilous seam in the fabric of Seoul.

The stream’s natural flow finally came to an end during Park Chung-hee’s authoritarian administration (1961-79), a period in which the thrust toward national greatness was heavily predicated on, and identified with, export-oriented industrialisation. During this period, the government’s need to make its authority and legitimacy visually manifest in modernisation—amidst a broad concomitant suppression of nature, history, and human rights—began to shape the city in ways that are still visible today. The result of this approach was evidenced in a contemporary statement of Kim Hyeong-ok, then mayor of Seoul: ‘The city is lines.’ Straight wires and streets started to replace traditional winding roads.

As part of this rapid national modernisation process, Cheonggyecheon was filled with cement, and was used as the foundation for both local streets and a high-capacity roadway transporting products and people in and out of the city centre. This was the height of the period often called the ‘miracle on the Han (한강의 기적)—approximately three decades from the mid-1960s to the Asian financial crisis of 1997 (Kleiner, 2001, p. 254) although the term is generally used to refer to the first two decades—in conscious emulation of the postwar West German Wirtschaftswunder (economic miracle), or ‘miracle on the Rhine.’ The stream was effectively ploughed under, literally subducted beneath the infrastructural development perceived as necessary to the advance of one of Asia’s surging ‘tiger’ or ‘little dragon’ economies.

During this “Miracle” phase, a large-scale national effort—both the iconography and the subjectivity of which frequently involved themes of heroic sacrifice—was directed toward the end of rapid economic development. The predominant institutional structure which South Korea relied upon to accomplish this breakneck industrialisation was the chaebol, a huge and highly centralised, but heavily diversified, family-owned form of business conglomerate with no direct comparison in the Western world.
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