Infrastructures of displacement: the transpacific travel of urban renewal during the Cold War

Sujin Eom

To cite this article: Sujin Eom (2018): Infrastructures of displacement: the transpacific travel of urban renewal during the Cold War, Planning Perspectives, DOI: 10.1080/02665433.2018.1555770

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2018.1555770

Published online: 07 Dec 2018.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 2

View Crossmark data
Infrastructures of displacement: the transpacific travel of urban renewal during the Cold War

Sujin Eom
Department of Geography, Dartmouth College, Hanover, USA

ABSTRACT
By examining South Korea’s urban renewal regime in the 1960s, this paper sheds light on hitherto underexplored transpacific connections in the history of urban renewal. The period in question is crucial in that both Washington and Seoul came to regard urban space as a means to maintain an anti-communist regional order, which prefigured major urban transformations in South Korea for the decades that followed. With a focus on the circulation of technologies of governing urban space through particular forms of urban renewal, this paper shows that urban renewal in the mid-twentieth century illuminates the function of three interrelated phenomena during the period: (1) the formation of the transpacific network of power and knowledge; (2) the establishment of legal, financial, and symbolic grounds on which the ideal of homeownership could operate; and (3) the transport of what I call infrastructures of displacement. In doing so, this paper suggests a way of looking at urban renewal in the mid-century as the geopolitical project of disseminating ideas, norms, and technologies of governing cities during the Cold War.

KEYWORDS
Cold war; urban renewal; infrastructures; city planning; poverty

Introduction
We cannot wish away urbanization and the resultant political and economic problems which it raises, but we can try to do something about alleviating these problems and providing the Korean people and government with some hope for progress. The Korean Government needs to gain the confidence of the Korean people if political stability is to be a reality, and urban planning offers now the only hope of providing services to the volatile urban segment of the population.1

This paper takes the Cold War as a point of departure to reflect upon the circulation of technologies of governing urban space. By shedding light on South Korea’s urban renewal regime in the 1960s, I examine how Cold War geopolitics figured in the transpacific travel of urban renewal. The period in question is crucial in that both Washington and Seoul came to regard urban space as a means to maintain an anti-communist regional order in Asia. At the same time, the period provided legal and administrative foundations for South Korea’s city planning in the decades that followed and established a series of precedents for the way South Korean urbanism would be pursued.

The massive size of urban renewal programmes in South Korea starting in the 1960s reveals the specificity of territorial arrangements in the circulation of ideas. The proximity of North Korea and...
the coercive character of South Korea’s military regime gave much more weight to the symbolic language of urban renewal. South Korea provides a rich context to look at how the global Cold War shaped cities in Asia, where the doctrine of modern city planning was intertwined with the geopolitical tension in the region and the need for images of economic prosperity at the national level.

With the languages of rational land use, environmental improvement, maintenance of public health and order, and increase in property value, urban renewal programmes undertaken in 1960s Korean cities, such as slum clearance, high-density apartments, and elevated highways, have often been portrayed as the inevitable course of urbanization in Asia. I call into question such a perspective that depoliticizes and neglects the nature of urban renewal as a Cold War geopolitical project. Taking South Korea as an example, I attempt to capture this particular historical moment in which a nation’s ‘urban’ issues were treated from the perspective of international security. In doing so, this paper shows that the Cold War geopolitics played a decisive role in the transpacific travel of urban renewal in the mid-century, thereby disseminating ideas, norms, and technologies of building the capitalist urban future.

**Urban renewal’s transpacific connection**

Scholarly interest has abounded in the post-WWII period as a pivotal moment in diffusing planning knowledge and shaping the ideal of the modern city. Wars give rise to a host of migrants – refugees, exiles, stateless, and homeless – while facilitating technologies and ideas in unprecedented ways. A substantial body of research conducted on this subject has focused on transnational, mostly transatlantic, connections in the post-war period with emphasis on new architectural and urban ideas brought by expatriate professionals, migrant planners, refugee intellectuals and architects.²

More specifically, the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union fuelled the transcontinental transfer of technological expertise and assistance in the mid-century. Megaprojects such as construction of large dams were seen as crucial tools to expand political as well as economic influence.³ North American and Western European cities often served as urban models in the capitalist bloc, whereas the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China played a significant role in the forging of the communist bloc by helping reconstruct war-damaged cities.⁴ The Cold War geopolitics reconfigured connective routes through which knowledge, capital, experts, and technologies were transferred.⁵ It would be misleading, however, to consider that only the two superpowers dominated this picture. Playing an equally significant role in this global expansion of urban ideas were local actors who deliberately embarked upon the ideological battle to meet their own needs. Among the most illuminating examples is President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, who turned to the Soviet Union for the funding of the Aswan High Dam after he was rejected the promised financial support by the US government and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Egyptian engineers visited the USSR afterwards to acquire engineering knowledge necessary, whereas Soviet experts came to Aswan to provide technical aid for the construction of the dam.⁶ Not only did international institutions help disseminate norms and forms of city planning,⁷ but

³Sneddon, *Concrete Revolution*.
⁴Kim and Jung, “The Planning of Microdistricts in Post-War North Korea.”
⁵Eom, “Traveling Chinatowns.”
⁶Bishop, “Talking Shop.”
⁷Wakeman, “Rethinking Postwar Planning History.”
national governments also partook of the race by promoting political and economic interests of their own.

This paper argues that among the planning ideas and norms transferred extensively under the political climate during the mid-twentieth century were practices regarding urban renewal. The study of urban renewal offers a vantage point for examining the transnational dimension of urban problems in these transformative years. In the United States, the urban renewal regime originated in what might be called ‘the New Deal Spatial order,’ which paved the way for ‘government-administered social welfare, elite expertise, and capitalistic progress’ in the form of governmentsponsored developments. The Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954 were the first and foremost legal decisions that authorized urban renewal at the federal government level by paving the way for government authority and subsidies to attract private investment and clear ‘slums’ in inner cities. Urban renewal programmes affected cities across the country, from San Francisco to New Haven, but they also constituted a culture which came to define mid-twentieth century American cities as manifested in the machinistic forms of bulldozers and wrecking balls. Christopher Klemek further claims that the culture of creative destruction was not exclusively American. Instead, he shows how urban renewal was the result of a transatlantic urban planning movement that linked North American cities with West European cities, which shared a vision of the urban future as well as ‘means for realizing those ends through aggressive state interventions to remake existing cities.’ It is in this sense that urban renewal can be understood as a transregional regime for government-led urban redevelopment projects that spanned decades.

Few studies have investigated transpacific connections in urban renewal, however, despite the fact that the transpacific circulation of financial aid and technological guidance became the foundation of the modern city in mid-century Asia, especially in housing. In ‘contested’ areas such as South Korea, the imperative for economic development through urban planning became pronounced in the 1960s. A transpacific inquiry would capture this moment in which a nation’s urban issues moved beyond the geographic boundary and came to assume a geopolitical character. Certainly, the boundary-crossing nature of urban problems is not peculiar to the mid-twentieth century, especially when one considers the global fear of epidemics along the newly established transpacific sea routes at the turn of the century. What characterized the mid-twentieth century urbanism instead was the concern for military security, which was believed among US foreign policy advisors, such as Robert S. McNamara, to have direct links with economic development. When poverty was considered a grave threat not only to domestic but also to international security, public policies with regards to economic development came to emerge both at home and abroad in the 1960s, especially in poverty-stricken areas in Asia. As I will show in pages that follow, urban renewal was among the policy responses implemented to alleviate poverty and thus contain the spread of communism in South Korea and beyond.

The recently growing body of scholarship on Korean mid-century urbanism has noted how the colonial legacy continued to have an impact on the ethos of city planning in the 1960s. While acknowledging the fact that the postcolonial state inherited much of the disposition of colonial
law and institutions, my intention is to widen the geographic scope of the inquiry and interrogate transnational dimensions of urban questions by taking the term ‘urban renewal’ into account. When introduced to South Korea in the mid-century, ‘urban renewal’ was translated into tosi chae-kaebal (which may correspond to ‘urban redevelopment’ in English) while the class and racial struggle in postwar American cities embedded in the original word became lost in translation. It is thus crucial to maintain the term ‘urban renewal’ in order not only to explore the actually existing network of personnel and knowledge around the planning idea, but to probe how the idea mutated as it travelled across different geographies and landed in a new context.

What was produced and circulated through forms of urban renewal was not merely its seemingly rational means to achieve the efficient use of land. Instead, I argue that the transpacific travel of urban renewal also transplanted infrastructures of displacement. In an ontological sense, infrastructures refer to ‘matter that enable the movement of other matter.’ The term ‘infrastructure’ may signify tangible and material platforms that facilitate the circulation of people and things, ranging from dams, roads, bridges to sewers, harbours, airports; it also indicates a set of intangible and institutional mechanisms, such as banking systems, by which new economic and social relations are produced. In both ways, infrastructures play a double role of encouraging as well as discouraging mobility. Not only does the development of physical infrastructures require the forced relocation of people from their homes, but infrastructures themselves may serve as mechanisms for the displacement of people while privileging other forms of circulation. Infrastructures are, by definition, built to link up formerly isolated entities to circulate humans, resources, materials, and capital; yet, more often than not, they are also designed to inhibit undesirable types of circulation. One example is the massive construction of elevated highways in American inner cities which were designed to facilitate the traffic of automobiles while discouraging pedestrians. ‘Networked paradoxes,’ as conceptualized by Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, capture this interplay between connection and disconnection taking place simultaneously in infrastructural landscapes.

What I term ‘infrastructures of displacement’ involves this paradoxical function of infrastructure development, which both enables and disables the mobility of people and things. Urban renewal programmes gave rise to a great deal of infrastructure projects, to which people came to establish emotive relationships by attaching meanings, but it also engendered mechanisms by which a certain group of people are displaced along the lines of race and class. By taking note of this paradoxical role of infrastructural development in controlling the mobility of people and things, I examine the ways in which urban renewal as infrastructures of displacement came into circulation in the 1960s across the Pacific.

Framing ‘urban’ problems in South Korea

The 1960s marked the beginning of explosive urbanization in the history of Seoul. Rural-urban migration dramatically increased in the aftermath of export-oriented economic policy, especially when the government’s low staple price policy pushed people out of rural areas. The rural migrants formed settlements at the outskirts of cities or on the hills in the city centre, which were colloquially named ‘moon villages’ (daldongne) due to their locations on the high elevation. Added to this migration was the inflow of refugees from North Korea after the Korean War and the high natural

---

17 Simone, “People as Infrastructure”; Nemser, Infrastructures of Race.
18 Graham and Marvin, Splintering Urbanism.
19 Lie, Han Unbound.
rate of population increase. Lee Ho-cheol’s novel, Seoul is Full, published in 1966, poignantly captures the stunted lives of rural migrants deprived of upward mobility amidst the allure of urban life.

As numerous experts had already acknowledged, the high population density, a large number of unemployed and underemployed, and the high literacy rate characteristically defined the urban situation of 1960s Korea. There was a series of street demonstrations against the government, which culminated in the massive democratic movement of April 1960 and finally overthrew the Rhee Syngman regime. The presence of this discontent with the status quo alarmed US government officials both in Seoul and Washington. The demonstrations appeared to them as a warning signal to the country’s political stability, which was read as a grave threat to regional security. The Asia Foundation (henceforth, the Foundation) originally started as the Committee for Free Asia in 1951, hoping to ‘help to increase the desire and ability of Asian to resist Communism on their own soil.’ The Foundation established its office in Seoul in 1954 in an attempt to transform South Korea along the lines of the US model of democracy. It diagnosed that the intensity of the protests was not merely derived from bitterness about the Rhee Syng-man government’s corruption. It was, after all, a reflection of ‘deeper grievances against the failures of both the United States and the South Korean government to improve socio-economic conditions in their country.’ Modernization theory was being intensively disseminated during this period through various US channels, ranging from publications and conferences to research funds and exchange programmes, but it was the Foundation that took up measures to address ‘urban’ issues in South Korea, seeking to prevent social unrest.

Political instability and social unrest in Asia had already been well noted by the US government as a possible threat to the anti-communist regional order. In other parts of Asia, it mainly took the form of discontent among ‘farmers and peasants.’ For instance, during the Marcos regime, the Philippine government sought to control the spread of the rural communist insurgency. When it came to South Korea, however, ‘if there are to be unrest, agitation, demonstrations, and attempts to overthrow the government,’ the Foundation acknowledged that it would occur in the ‘urban area – areas which are badly in need of improved facilities.’

The emphasis on urbanism as a way of curtailing insurgent and revolutionary forces was markedly profound in South Korea, when there was a security concern from outside, North Korea. Robert S. Schwantes, director of the Northeast Asia Division of the Asia Foundation, wrote:

Unrest, agitation, attempts to overthrow the government, and pressure to reunite with North Korea are most likely to arise from urban populations whose environments for living does [sic] not provide stability and satisfaction.

This assessment was remarkable and unmistakable given successful city planning in North Korea at the time. The effective post-war reconstruction of North Korean cities, and their relative economic growth in the early 1960s, added more weight to the gravity of the situation. The Foundation was cautious about the possibility that the North’s relative success in this domain would spread to the general populace of the South through words of Korean residents in Japan (who held strong ties

---

20Norton, “Planning with Facts.”
22Brazinsky, “Koreanizing Modernization.”
24Shatkin, “Planning to Forget.”
to the North) or through dissemination of communist English language publications. The ‘marked contrast’ between North and South in city planning, or what Armstrong calls ‘Pyongyang speed’27 in the economic growth, was troublesome enough.

While communist neighbours posed a security threat from without, poverty became one of the significant sources of insurgency from within. The lack of facilities including adequate housing, employment, and recreation in urban areas, in spite of the rapid growth of urbanization and exploding urban populations in the early 1960s,28 emerged as thorny urban issues in this Cold War climate. Poverty was considered to be likely causes of social unrest against the established governmental structure and discontent with democracy. ‘Urban dwellers [would] feel that if democracy can offer them no better a life, perhaps some other form of government could,’ the Foundation reported.

It is in this context that urban planning was framed as a politically relevant project for both sides. On the one hand, the new government established after Park Chung-Hee’s military junta in May 1961 associated the current urban problems with the previous government’s administrative incapacity and absence of planning experts therein. Therefore, effective city planning would establish the new regime’s legitimacy. On the other hand, the Foundation pointed to the lack of ‘rational’ planning in South Korea. Although the Foundation framed its financial and technical assistance as a way to help the Korean government use its resources ‘rationally’ and ‘efficiently’ to transform urban space, urban planning was in fact construed as a bulwark against social unrest that might spur communist movements in the region.

The forging of transpacific urbanism

The efforts to harness urban planning as a way of promoting economic development and political stability in the region manifested themselves through the transnational transfer of ideas, experts, capital, technology, and imageries. With his frequent use of West Germany as an example par excellence for economic development achieved on the terrain of ruins in the aftermath of the war, President Park embarked upon ‘kukto kaepal’ (development of national land), which was seamlessly associated with the future of the nation. By the time Park was envisioning the construction of state-of-the-art highways during his visit to West Germany in December 1964, which would later become the Gyeongbu Highway, the Han River was dreaming of the miracle of the Rhine.29

Another state in the capitalist bloc played a crucial part in the transfer of the capitalist urban future during the Cold War: Japan. Entering the 1960s, Washington saw the need to share the financial burden with Japan in providing foreign capital necessary for South Korea’s economic development. The normalization of diplomatic ties between the two countries in 1965 was inevitable to this end. It brought a great impact on South Korea’s economic growth by facilitating the transfer of foreign capital and technological aid between the two countries.30 A group of Korean technicians was dispatched to Japan for technical training in May 1965, a month before the treaty was concluded. It was during this period that the state-sponsored Korea Engineering Consultants Corporation (KECC) was founded, which provided building materials and technologies necessary for large-scale urban redevelopment projects as well as undertake state-led projects ranging from waterfront development of the Han River to the Gyeongbu Highway.31 The establishment of the state-

27Armstrong, “‘Fraternal Socialism.’”
29Jeon, “A Road to Modernization and Unification.”
30Lie, Han Unbound.
sponsored construction firm encapsulates the crucial role of the Korean state in urban planning in the mid-twentieth century. The firm was staffed by people recruited directly from the central government or those who had personal ties to high-ranking government officials. Modernist architect Kim Swoo Geun was known to have a close relationship with Kim Jong Pil, who had played a decisive role in concluding the treaty and later served as Prime Minister under Park’s regime. He was elected Vice President of KECC when it was founded and soon inaugurated President of the corporation. The architect exerted the most influence over the corporation’s affairs and later undertook large-scale government-led construction projects, including the residential and commercial complex named Sewoon Sangga.32

The Korean government’s political and economic motivations for urban planning dovetailed with the interests of the US institutions. In 1962, the former representative of the Asia Foundation, William Eilers, began to express concerns about the problem of city planning in South Korea. Princeton Lyman, another staff member at the Foundation, visited Hong Kong in December 1965 to investigate the possibility of applying its urban planning approach to Seoul. Simultaneously, grants in the field of city planning came to be provided to Korean intellectuals, among them Cha Il-suk, a professor at Yonsei University and later Vice Mayor of Seoul, who helped Mayor Kim Hyun-ok pursue urban renewal agendas. In 1963, he was commissioned by the Foundation to study previous city planning efforts in Korea and ‘what suitable methods might be adopted by the Korean government to adapt foreign city planning principles to the needs of Korea.’33 Soon after, the Foundation also underwrote the costs of Cha’s trips to Hong Kong to observe city planning and urban design projects in 1964,34 and Tokyo in 1965.35

The Foundation noted the inefficiency of urban planning and waste of budget in Korea. This call for efficiency inevitably necessitated expertise and experts in city planning, and the Foundation came to invest a large amount of capital therein. The Foundation’s efforts were largely divided into meeting three goals: (1) assign foreign experts as advisors to city planning; (2) promote formal education of planners and encourage publicity of the ideal of city planning, and (3) provide financial and administrative support for city officials to take research tours.

First, the Foundation recruited foreign advisors in the field of urban planning and design. They appointed New York-based architect Oswald Nagler as an advisor for Korea’s urban planning effort. Nagler’s involvement with the Foundation was significant. In an interview with a Korean newspaper conducted during his six-week pilot study, Nagler concluded that one of the most fundamental problems with urban planning in Korea was ‘the shortage of trained technical staff’ capable of producing a ‘logical and comprehensive master plan.’36 What he emphasized in urban planning was to curb expenses and make ‘the best utilization of land.’

His report submitted to the Foundation in July 1964 was based on his six-week stay in Korea, during which he focused on identifying economic and political effects of ‘the cost of unplanned urban growth.’ In economic terms, an unplanned urban area would steal productive capacity by creating unnecessary travel time for workers. Moreover, in the case of the horizontal sprawl of poorly planned housing, it would also unnecessarily destroy precious arable productive land and cause extra expenditure in installing utility services such as sewerage, water supply, electricity, gas, telephone,

32Son, Sŏul tosi kyehoeik iyagi.
etc. Poor planning also had its political outcomes. If the connection between social problems and the physical conditions in the city were to become evident, the residents would soon blame it on the government and, probably more importantly, ‘such conditions [would] easily be utilized by forces of political opposition.’

While placing emphasis upon provisions for housing, Nagler criticized the layout of American suburban housing – that is, single-story detached dwellings on individual plots of land subdivided by total road access for each dwelling – since it increased travel time between work and home, placed a tax burden to individual homeowners for the creation of community facilities, dissipated tax revenues in the city centre, and wasted funds on the construction and maintenance of road networks. He made a case that a housing policy based on low density would be unrealistic in the Korean context. The suburb-oriented housing system would not be a good fit because of the high overhead costs of suburban planning, low car ownership, and the dramatic housing shortage. In his address to a student seminar on housing held in 9 July 1966 at Seoul National University, Nagler reiterated his perspective on housing by criticizing the garden city concept, which, he argued, moved housing into a direction of very low-density development while increasing the dependence on private automobiles and hence increasing travel time. Particularly for the Korean context, Nagler strongly advocated the development of housing of higher density and stressed the convenience of apartment living.

Aside from the report he had prepared for the general audience, Nagler drafted another which was intended to be distributed among Foundation staff only. For his audience, he became more candid about his assessment of the situation. ‘In a country with nearly the highest overall density in the world, coupled with one of the highest population increase rates, with a low percentage of arable land, with a weak economy, limited resources for industrialization,’ Nagler wrote, ‘a careless use of land planning is shocking and dangerous.’ He went on to criticize Korean planners and officials, who had ‘enthusiasm, interest, understanding of the basic problems,’ but lacked ‘coordination and direction.’

Another means for the Foundation to engage with Korea’s urban planning was through formal education of urban planners and designers. Following Nagler’s recommendation for a city planning programme in higher education, the Foundation funded the establishment of the Housing, Urban and Regional Planning Institute (HURPI) in June 1965, Korea’s first government-sponsored urban research institute. HURPI soon embarked upon a number of pilot projects, including the Kumhwa project, which housed 40,000 people by relocating 18,000 existing squatters; the development planning of South Seoul (present-day Gangnam); the Namsan Park beautification project; and the new town project in Ulsan. The Foundation provided a considerable amount of funds to make HURPI a flagship institute in city planning. Not only did it organize nation-wide university lectures and symposia, and even lead television discussions on urban planning problems in Korea, but also it assisted with a Foundation-supported documentary on urban planning to be shown to wide audiences in theatres.

One of Nagler’s recommendations was concerned with publicity to advance urban development projects, which was in line with the consensus of the Foundation that urban problems along with solutions should be publicized. In addition to publicity, which was considered integral to the

---


39For detailed information on the formation of HURPI, see Jung, “Oswald Nagler, HURPI, and the Formation of Urban Planning and Design in South Korea.”
whole programme for urban renovation, the Foundation purchased a large number of books published in the United States, distributed them to universities, and allocated grants for purchasing books on modernist city planning and architecture.

Last but not least, the Foundation provided city officials with a large amount of travel grants to support their study tours and conference participations. For instance, Mayor of Daegu visited nine Japanese cities, took as many as 500 pictures, and brought with them books or magazines concerning city planning in Japan.\(^4^0\) From financial aid to technical support in the name of cultivating local capacity, the Foundation’s support for study tours was coeval with the changing US agenda in East Asia. The education of South Korea government officials and mayors through travel abroad appeared particularly significant. In light of their positions in society, they were considered capable of disseminating the knowledge and vision needed to usher in a capitalist urban future. Furthermore, their close connections to the central government would make them instrumental in implementing actual policies to change urban space.

The tour of the Minister of Construction was seen as particularly successful. The Foundation funded Minister Chun Ye-yong’s trip to European cities in January 1966. With a company of trained officers, Lee Moon-yong (chief of staff in Chun’s administration) and Hwang Yong-ju (senior engineer), Chun’s tour of Britain, France, West Germany, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, and the United States was jointly sponsored by the Foundation and the embassies of each country. It was Nagler who designed the agenda for the trip, including important sites to visit, people to meet, and areas to see in order to comprehend both good and bad examples of city planning. Chun’s trip to Europe appeared to pay off. It was widely discussed and mentioned in South Korea’s newspapers, disseminating the importance of city planning to the public. The Foundation expected that ‘very favourable’ publicity would also be made after trips of Seoul city officials,\(^4^1\) and thus decided to pay for trips taken by Mayor Kim Hyun-ok and Vice Mayor Cha Il-suk to American cities in August 1966.

**Mayoral trips to urban renewal**

Mayor Kim Hyun-ok is among the most important figures in the history of city planning in South Korea, a mayor who represented an insatiable and modernist desire for development. Kim brought a drastic transformation to planning culture during his mayoral terms, which earned him the nickname of ‘bulldozer mayor.’ His assertive, can-do-stance was partly derived from his military background and close ties to President Park, but his taste for reconstruction should also be situated in the developmentalist planning culture forged across the Pacific. The Foundation was quite aware that Kim was well connected to President Park, who was eager to push planning projects forward in Seoul, and intended to harness Kim’s drive and desires. Although they acknowledged that the mayor lacked ‘broad knowledge of the field’ (of city planning) and might not work ‘always wisely,’ his style of dealing with business ‘quickly and effectively’ made them decide to fund his study tour in 1966.\(^4^2\)

Accompanying Mayor Kim on the tour was Vice Mayor Cha Il-suk, who was one of the most important technocrats in city planning of 1960s South Korea. In contrast to Kim, who had little knowledge of the field, Cha had earned a degree in city planning when he studied in New York.

---


\(^{42}\)Ibid.
City. He also possessed intimate knowledge of the New York area from his six years of residence there. His Christian upbringing had enabled him to learn English from an early age, and his language ability and planning knowledge convinced the Foundation that he would make the trip more meaningful to the party travelling. The Foundation noted, Cha was ‘familiar with many of the complex legal and financial aspects of renewal programs in the US’ and knew ‘exactly the projects that he wanted the Mayor to see and even planned to take him around the city by subway.’

The tour was originally scheduled to begin around 20 August 1966, but Park changed the plan in view of the various projects underway in Seoul, which made it necessary for Mayor Kim to remain in the city until mid-October. Finally, the tour was planned for November 20 through December 15. Once again, Nagler prepared the whole schedule of the tour, which was designed to showcase various aspects of urban renewal projects in North American cities. Their first destination was San Francisco. Upon their arrival on November 21, 1966, the mayors had a tour of the city’s urban renewal programmes guided by staff from the city’s redevelopment agency. The sites they visited were characterized by pedestrianized malls and mixed-use zoning. During the tour of the city, Cha showed particular interest in the Golden Gateway Centre, the most representative of the urban renewal programmes in San Francisco, which featured the separation of vehicular and pedestrian traffic thanks to a series of bridges interconnecting the buildings within the complex.

After the short stay in San Francisco, the mayors flew to the East Coast, arriving in Washington DC. They conducted a city tour the next day and held a discussion meeting with officials from the Department of Housing and Urban Development regarding issues ranging from urban renewal to rehabilitation in the United States. Among the crucial parts of the agenda was the visit to the new town of Reston, which Nagler had particularly recommended the mayors to visit to learn aspects of city planning for a new town with its profile. But Kim did not take the tour scheduled in the morning of the 25th but instead went to New York, which left the involved staff baffled.

Upon his arrival in New York, Kim again unexpectedly cancelled the events that the New York authority had arranged for his visit, which included a tour of urban renewal programmes, a luncheon meeting with a group of experts in urban development, and even a ballet concert. Rather than participating in the events, Kim expressed his desire to meet with Mayor John Lindsay of New York, which was not realized because it was the Thanksgiving weekend. And instead of keeping to the itinerary, he attended a party on Saturday evening hosted by the Korean Consulate to which only Koreans were invited. Kim’s irresponsible behaviours gave the New York representative of the Asia Foundation, Ernest M. Howell, an impression that Kim seemed more interested in ‘politicking with the Korean community and building prestige by meeting a few important people’ than in learning about urban development, the original purpose of the tour.

Instead of following the official schedule, the mayors seemed set on taking a tour of the city on their own, as could be seen in Cha’s memoir written decades later. Cha already had explicit plans for showing Kim urban renewal projects. In New York City, gigantic skyscrapers and road systems

---

46Steinberg, “Project-Proposal.”
48Ibid.
drew Kim’s attention. ‘The car that carried us,’ Cha wrote in his memoir, ‘continued to run straight without stopping.’ Kim marvelled and exclaimed, ‘New York is a city of straight lines, the fruit of advanced technology and art!’ This physical experience in New York City made a great impression on Mayor Kim.

In order to better understand the situation, it is necessary to bring up a meeting that Nagler had with Lee Moon-yong, the MOC official who had accompanied Chun during his trip to Europe. In April 1966, Lee approached Nagler to deliver his concerns regarding Mayor Kim’s push for ‘crash’ programmes that would show obvious progress in Seoul, particularly before the general elections scheduled in 1967. Lee added that Mayor Kim often used the word ‘bulldozer’ in order to profess his plans for razing squatter areas, widening out roads, and building subways. Mayor Kim’s ambition was to draft a master plan of Seoul within six months after the trip, which appeared to Nagler quite inadequate for preparing a sound plan. The mayor expressed his desire to visit Europe, especially England and the Netherlands, but at the same time asserted that, without having to coordinate with local officials, he could just visit certain projects on his own.49

The purpose of the three-week tour of US and European cities was to study and observe urban planning firsthand. While Mayor Kim was judged as lacking in broad knowledge of city planning and administration, the Foundation hoped that he would gain knowledge of ideas and techniques for urban renewal through the trip while in company with reliable technocrats such as Vice Mayor Cha. It is not that the Foundation was unaware that the trip might end up being a ‘junket’ for the Korean mayors and even understood that Mayor Kim had ‘political motives in mind for the elections of 1967’ given that the ruling party ‘in the past elections lost very heavily in Seoul.’50 In other words, it was obvious that Mayor Kim hoped to ‘remedy the situation’ through urban planning. Although they did not necessarily want to endorse the mayor, the Foundation was ‘in agreement with his general drive and enthusiasm’ to bulldoze out ‘the potentially explosive social problems’ in Seoul.51

Urban renewal across the pacific

I do not wish to claim that urban renewal projects pursued under Kim’s mayoral term were merely the outcome of this trip. Rather, it was based on multilateral relationships which had already been cultivated through the years in the 1960s. More importantly, Kim used this mayoral trip as a means to convince the public and lend more credence to his planning agenda. Some months after his visit to US cities, Mayor Kim wrote an article for the Korean architectural magazine named Konggan, founded by architect Kim Swoo Geun 1967. In this article, he made a particular reference to land adjustment methods used in Washington DC in order to stress the importance of ‘sacrifice’ by private land owners for the purpose of public good.52 He even mentioned his own experience of visiting the new town of Reston, whose private development he admired as urban planning par excellence epitomizing American ‘pragmatism.’ It remains unclear whether or not Mayor Kim actually paid the visit to Reston, but apparently his physical experience and anecdotal accounts of the American city seemed to exude authority in public persuasion.

50Steinberg, “Project-Proposal.”
51Ibid.
Upon his return from the trip, Mayor Kim wasted no time in pursuing urban renewal programmes. He declared 1967 as the year of ‘onrush’ and announced several urban renewal programmes: (1) urban development to increase land efficiency; (2) slum clearance; (3) urban redevelopment; (4) modernization of traditional market areas; (5) development of urban fringes; and (6) expansion of green areas and urban beautification. The government rushed forward to realize the plans: they restructured road systems by constructing elevated highways in city centres, drew up plans for a new administrative centre called Yoido (dubbing it the Manhattan of Seoul), developed the waterfront of the Han River (with marked reference to the Hudson River), and implemented public housing and slum clearance programmes (Figures 1 and 2).

A masterplan drafted by the Seoul Metropolitan Government in 1967 shows this scheme of urban renewal in a nutshell. Housing development was among the foremost elements of the urban renewal programmes. Estimating that about 48% of residents were not homeowners in Seoul, the city government announced a plan to build 600,000 more houses, thereby reducing the percentage to 36%. Following the model of US urban renewal, the main tenet of housing provision was public housing through slum clearance, that is, the construction of apartment complexes on the ground where slums had stood. This new type of housing was named ‘shimin’ (citizens) apartment.

Figure 1. The elevated highway in 1969.
Source: National Archives of Korea.
In order to better execute this public housing programme, the Korean National Assembly passed the Housing and Home Loan Bank Act on 28 February 1967, which was designed to guarantee government insurance for long-term house construction loans. Based on the legislation, the Housing and Home Loan Funds Program was officially established in July the same year. The government was now able to subsidize low-income families, covering part of the high current interest costs as well as to securing massive land for housing construction. The government encouraged the purchase of housing even through the form of loan, which would dramatically increase the exchange value of housing. The new loan banking system differed from its predecessors in that it provided low-income families with government-subsidized housing aid and loans for the first time and thereby expanded the size of the mortgage market to a great extent. Furthermore, the legislation came to boost the construction industry, particularly in housing. Promotion was also integral to the boom: Starting in 1967, the ideal of homeownership and the image of modern living became widely disseminated through women’s magazines, newspaper advertisements, and housing exhibitions.

Having secured the legal and financial means to embark on massive housing construction, the city government continued the war on slums. Slum clearance was the most visible of the urban renewal projects, a priority in the ambitious scheme of modernizing the nation, which was closely bound up with the urban elite’s abhorrence to slums. Vice Mayor Cha even likened shanty towns to ‘poisonous mushrooms’ that spread fast across the city. The city government embarked upon large-scale slum clearance by eliminating what they defined as substandard housing and shacktown settlements, and demolished about 10,000 housing units in 1966 and about 20,000 units in 1967. Cha reflected upon
this slum clearance: ‘As the dirty stains of Seoul disappeared, the appearances of a modern city increased.’

In April 1967, the government announced the ‘legalization’ of squatter settlements, which they estimated at 150,000 units in Seoul alone. On the steep hills on which shanty towns had once stood, new apartment complexes sprang up rapidly. The housing units were not finished products, but only building frames were provided on the sites and residents were expected to finish up the construction with their own labour and materials. Soon after, this provision of housing through slum clearance became a nationwide phenomenon when many other local cities, from Busan to Daegu, followed suit. In December 1968, the Sky Apartment was erected in the northern part of Seoul, on the previous site of shanty towns. In April 1969, the Kumhwa Complex, one of the pilot projects initiated by HURPI, was built. It was not uncommon to read assertions such as the following in newspapers in the late 1960s: ‘Slum clearance is a necessary condition for the modern city.’ (Figures 3 and 4)

Through the relocation of the urban poor, the city government attempted to create a new space of leisure. For the sake of urban beautification, districts crowded with worn-out houses and buildings, including ‘red-light’ and crime-infested areas were selected as ‘redevelopment project sites’ to ‘purify the city’s beauty and living environments.’ The removal of the poor from city centres came with the large-scale investment in downtown areas. The construction of elevated highways began in 1967, with the Aheyon Elevated Highway as the first example.

The promise of homeownership was a far cry from the reality. Many of the former slum residents worked informally, piecing together a marginal livelihood, either as wage workers or street vendors. The self-help building method, which had already been widely promoted in Third World countries, most notably in Latin America, was an almost impossibility for those who worked day and night to make the ends meet. Moreover, they could not afford decent building materials to complete the construction work. Even the maintenance fees necessary for collective housing units were out of reach. According to one report made in 1967, of 30,000 families surveyed, about 40% were able to relocate on their own because they received substantial compensation. The remaining 60% only moved from slum neighborhoods in the city centre to new slum neighborhoods at the edge of the city. Their conditions became even worse. After a sample survey was made in Kumhwa Hill, the same report concluded, ‘It appears that only about seven percent of the families in this community earn enough to make the monthly payments required under the new government subsidized housing program.’

It was not before long the downside of rushed construction reared its ugly head, in an extremely tragic manner. A whole building within the Wawoo apartment complex, one of the public housing programmes built on the steep hill where squatter settlements had stood, collapsed overnight like a house of cards on 8 April 1970. The tragic accident, which resulted in dozens of casualties, was owing to poor construction under the bulldozer mayor’s administration. After the collapse, a citywide investigation of public housing programmes was conducted. Of about 400 units, more than 60 units had structural defects. Some had poor base construction, whereas in others columns were twisted to a degree that the collapse seemed imminent. The installation of sewers not appropriate

---

56Ibid., 155.
59Jung, Kwon and Rowe, “The Minimum Dwelling Approach by the Housing, Urban and Regional Planning Institute (HURPI) of South Korea in the 1960s.”
61Horwitz, Evaluation of Planning and Development in Seoul.
62Ibid., 18.
to dwelling was commonly found. Especially given that the public housing projects were primarily built on steep hills, some suggested that the real number of units with the possibility of collapse would far exceed what had been officially reported. Upon the news of the collapse of the Wawoo Apartment and the investigation report, residents of the Kumhwa Complex did not stay within the building out of fear. They could not help but to come out on the street and set up tents. They already knew that even a few months ago two of the Kumhwa residents had died from carbon monoxide poisoning. Poor construction was one of the main reasons.  

(Figure 5)

Infrastructures of displacement: planning technologies in circulation

The Asia Foundation noted that successful urban planning was particularly important to achieve social stability of Korea. Washington saw political relevance to quell urban unrest that would be likely to incite communist movements, which they imagined were incubating in the shantytowns. Political stability was expected to be achieved through application of sound urban planning. The Korean technocrats resolutely embraced the planning doctrine by acknowledging the important role of urban planning in countries like South Korea in, as Minister Chun stated in his report to the Foundation, ‘the stage of seeking the modernization of industrial and economical systems.’

In this light, the purpose of slum clearance had seemed clear cut: It was to bring about the removal of potential threats to society. Everyday police surveillance was not uncommon in such public housing projects. While advertising the dream of ‘sweet home’ for the low-income households, the

government even dispatched seventeen police officers to the Kumhwa Complex in 1969 so that they could detect any suspicious activities while living among the residents, and announced that the police officers would also be dispatched to other public housing programmes.

The transpacific travel of planning technologies through urban renewal has three implications. First, it reflected the rapidly growing transpacific network of power and knowledge, which had already come into formation in the 1950s through education programmes such as the Minnesota Plan and became even more strengthened in the mid-1960s. In the long run, the repercussions for city planning were significant in the decades to come. By gradually replacing previous generations of city officials educated under Japanese colonial rule, American-educated technocrats and experts came to play dominant roles in city administration and planning, as in the case of Vice Mayor Cha. The network of power and knowledge was further reinforced through a series of study-abroad programmes in the field of urban planning and architecture. The formation of the transpacific community of urban professionals was not merely based on impersonal references but also on the intimate personal relations. Through the development of personal connection, for instance, Nagler helped Korean architects and planners move to the United States for education and employment, rising technicians who would later play a crucial role in the field of architecture and city planning in Korea in the decades that followed.

---

65Chang, “Reischauer.”
66Park, “The Roles of the United States and Japan in the Development of South Korea’s Science and Technology during the Cold War.”
67Jung, “Oswald Nagler.”
Second, the travel of urban renewal carried with them norms and forms of capitalist urbanization by helping build a ‘market’ for housing industry. A number of urban renewal programmes contained a great deal of real estate value, thereby opening up a new regime of urban development and capital accumulation. The enactment of the Home and Housing Loan Act in 1967 provided the legal and financial means for expanded housing construction, facilitating the building of small-scale houses and integrating the urban poor into the formal sector.\textsuperscript{68} In 1976, the city government began to collect property taxes from public housing residents, whose properties had been exempted for the past years.\textsuperscript{69} Such efforts to transform the poor into tax-paying citizens went hand in hand with the denigration of slum dwellers as degenerates and the demonization of squatter settlements, thereby providing justifications for massive removal and reconstruction and reinforcing the legitimacy of the new military state with the spectacular image of ‘renewal’ that it promised to bring to the city.

Third, the transpacific travel of urban renewal, whose drive was first and foremost to ‘purify urban space,’\textsuperscript{70} contributed to the entrenchment of infrastructures of displacement by removing the poor from urban lands with high real-estate values and financially and aesthetically benefiting the capitalist class. These disenfranchised segments of population did not benefit from the improvements made to the city, since relocation made them unable to have access to employment opportunities, transportation, community services and urban life in the city centre. Even worse, the urban renewal programmes produced a number of forms of state-sanctioned violence, making almost impossible

\textbf{Figure 5.} The collapse of Wawoo Apartment in 1970.
\textit{Source: National Archives of Korea.}

\textsuperscript{68}Park, “A Study on Mortgage Instruments.”
\textsuperscript{69}“Shimin apatu do chaesanse choum bugwa,” \textit{Dong-A Ilbo}, May 12, 1976.
\textsuperscript{70}Zipp and Carriere, “Introduction,” 360.
upward mobility of the poor. Slum clearance, however convincingly it seemed as antipoverty efforts, did not lead to the eradication of ‘poverty’ but to the eradication of ‘the poor’ from the city centre. Under Kim’s mayoral terms, as large as 43,000 households were removed from the city centre or the waterfront to make room for housing development and leisure space.71

Indeed, the abhorrence against slums had long existed among urban elites and experts.72 For instance, the supposed health threat from New York’s Lower East Side led to the legislations of sanitation codes in the nineteenth century, but this did not lead to the wholesale destruction of the neighbourhoods due to legal and financial constraints of the time. The legal and financial change in the 1950s enabled such massive slum clearance in the US. Similarly, the ideological, institutional, and fiscal landscapes carved out during the Cold War enabled the massive slum clearance in South Korea in the unprecedented way. The Korean technocrats shared the view with the turn-of-the-century planners that slums were obstacles to a more efficient way of using urban land. When it was undertaken in 1960s Seoul under the banner of urban renewal, slum clearance appeared as a rational method to modernize the city while the military government set out economic growth as a primary goal to construct (kŏnsŏl) a new modern state and the US institutions subsidized the means to achieve it.

In 1966, the American economist Martin Anderson criticized the federal urban renewal programmes by pointing to the forcible displacement of millions of citizens from their homes and the destruction of hundreds of low-rent homes. He went on to say, ‘No person, no matter who he is, should be sacrificed for the esthetic pleasure or personal gain of anyone, no matter how educated, how rich or how powerful.’73 By the time he wrote the book, the ugly consequences of the urban renewal programmes had become evident by creating urban communities of people ‘whose level or income [was] higher, whose skin [was] whiter, and whose social characteristics [were] more desirable than those of the former residents.’74 Urban renewal as racialized violence toward the poor in American cities crossed the Pacific to become a development tool to prevent the insurgency and revolution in another context. The circulation of technologies of governing urban space used against people is therefore symptomatic of the mid-twentieth-century transpacific urbanism, which cemented the transnational networks of capitalist accumulation through displacement and dispossession of the urban poor.

**Conclusion**

This paper has examined transpacific connections in the history of urban renewal. The Asia Foundation’s institutional efforts to urbanize South Korea along capitalist lines reflect the cross-boundary characteristic of city planning during the Cold War years. Despite their critique of the totalitarian government system of the communist regimes, the Foundation regarded urban planning as a way to contain communism and emphasized the intimate connection between housing and urban renewal programmes. South Korean city mayors were not passive recipients of this new urban order, but active agents who wanted to use the language of urban renewal to leverage their political influence in the country by appropriating state power and the Foundation’s funds. They actively embraced the urban renewal movement, a vigorous sponsorship often exemplified by the symbolic icon of bulldozers.

---

72 AlSayyad and Eom, “Bottom-Down Urbanism.”
74 Ibid., 219.
Slum clearance was among the most visible of their urban renewal projects. The city government embarked upon large-scale slum clearance by eliminating what they defined as slums and demolishing about thousands of housing units within a couple of years. A new finance institution was established to help promote urban renewal programmes, and the ideal of homeownership was widely disseminated. While urban renewal functioned as a means to make visible political legitimacy when it was going through the most severe crisis, it also facilitated capitalist accumulation by new urban elites who increasingly saw a possibility of making profit in the investment of urban space.

The travel of planning technologies through urban renewal reveals the three interrelated phenomena. First, it showcased the transpacific network of power and knowledge. Second, it established the financial and legal grounds on which the ideal of homeownership could operate by facilitating the housing industry, integrating the poor into the formal sector, and removing the poor from land with high values. More importantly, the transpacific travel of urban renewal transplanted the infrastructures of displacement in and through urban space.

The Cold War was not merely a period of ‘curtains’ and closed borders, but also a connective space generative of exchanges and connections across geographic boundaries. The transnational history of urban renewal provides a glimpse into how technologies of governing urban space were circulated in the mid-twentieth century. It was not necessarily the superpowers that determined the urban future, but also local actors, whose active intervention helped circulate technologies of governing urban space.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Sujin Eom is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Geography at Dartmouth College. Eom received a PhD in Architecture from the University of California at Berkeley, with a Designated Emphasis in Global Metropolitan Studies.

References


