

Jon Dunbar's Leftover Seoul

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Note: This essay accompanies a photo essay titled "*Resurrection City: The Scale of Seoul's Urban Renewal Process*," which can be accessed online at the link above.

Photo essayist Jon Dunbar is like the German philosopher Walter Benjamin's "ragpicker" who, rather than restating the celebrated history, allows the rags or "leftover histories" to be revealed (Le Roy 2017, 128). Dunbar's urban exploration is a performative act that involves gathering snippets of waste material, reassembling them in "collage-like juxtapositions" and deriving from waste material the life stories of forgotten communities (Le Roy 2017, 128).

I admit that Dunbar's photos of abandoned houses and remnants of demolished structures next to high-rise concrete apartments look somewhat familiar. The abandoned houses, dusty shovel cars, rally banners in shanty towns, and green striped curtains held up by metal bars remind me of the ordinary street scenes from my childhood that fill the memories of my youth. But Dunbar reminds us that these scenes remain prevalent today. Bulldozers still crush houses and expel less well-to-do-people from their neighborhoods. Dunbar's photo essay highlights the uncomfortable truth that Koreans are more ashamed of witnessing socio-spatial inequality than socioeconomic inequality itself. The photos disturb the ordered present and arouse a resurgence of the past—a past that overtly exists in the present.

Urban demolition-renewal has been Seoul's development formula for the last hundred years. Having struggled to overcome its colonial legacy, the wounds of war, and poverty, Seoul has pursued growth, renovation, and conformity. Yet Seoul remained almost intact for five hundred years between 1394, when the Chosŏn Dynasty established its capital in Seoul, and the late nineteenth century, when the dynasty embraced an open-door policy (Cha and Yim 2010, 555). Over the centuries, housing had been available to every family despite differences in housing quality due to the rigid status system. Seoul's housing shortage surfaced as a major urban crisis in the 1920s, when rural residents who lost their land due to the land survey project conducted by the Japanese colonial authorities migrated to Seoul (Lee 2002, 186–187). Because Seoul was not yet industrialized, the city was unable to provide these settlers with jobs. Therefore, many of them became day laborers and squatters in slums adjacent to the city walls (Ahn 2011, 111; Cha and Yim 2010, 554–555). The congregation of undocumented housing and slums next to the downtown areas posed a conundrum. The city authorities attempted to evacuate squatters,

who quickly returned and formed new slums because they could barely survive by selling their daily labor to inner-city urbanites.

In the 1930s, when labor-intensive industries mushroomed in Seoul to provide war materials to the Japanese army, the number of settlers seeking labor opportunities in Seoul skyrocketed (Lee 2002, 186). Slum demolition, demolition protests, and the resurgence of new slums continued. In 1938, the city authorities sent workmen to demolish some two hundred houses in one slum during the daytime when only female residents were at home. Affected residents rallied in front of the city hall, shouting, “We are the victims of the construction of great Keiyo [the Japanese name for Seoul]” (Yeom 2004, 217). However, the colonial city authorities rarely implemented housing policies to cater to these urban residents. Urban planning during the colonial period focused on the transformation of Seoul from the Chosŏn Dynasty’s political center into a colonial satellite city of Japan. Urban planning thus centered on providing facilities for colonial administration in downtown Seoul while the urban poor stayed in the slums adjacent to inner Seoul (Ahn 2011, 122). In 1944, Seoul’s housing shortage stood at an estimated 40 percent (Lee 2002, 186).

After the Korean War (1950–1953), refugees from all over the country poured into Seoul. With the onset of industrialization in the 1960s, the massive influx of laborers into Seoul further worsened the housing shortage. In 1966, Seoul’s housing shortage reached 50 percent (Park 2015, 245). The city government began to clear undocumented housing and relocate squatters to settlements in the suburban areas (Park 2015, 257). These measures did not stop squatters from staying in inner Seoul, however, since nearly 70 percent of the male squatters were day laborers, according to a 1962 survey (Park 2015, 245). The city authorities thus came up with two solutions: building apartment complexes inside Seoul and creating satellite cities to disperse the urban population (Park 2015, 258). At that time, apartment complexes were associated with residences of the urban poor. By the 1970s, however, the government and conglomerates collaborated to boost apartment construction in order to stabilize the growing urban middle-class housing market. With the state’s institutional support, speculative developers demolished existing houses and constructed new apartment complexes in their place.

Although the high-rise apartment buildings that fill the Seoul skyline today are widely regarded as unaesthetic, they have come to represent the wealth and social status of the urban middle class in South Korea (Jeon 2008, 54). Living in the same apartment complex enables residents to share the same sociocultural habits and interests, and set their own rules and regulations (Jeon 2008, 59). “Ordinary” Koreans have also supported the demolition-renewal formula for development because they see new housing as a means of asset growth (Ha 2004). Singaporean sociologist B. H. Chua highlights how home ownership imposes discipline on people to stay in regular employment to pay their mortgages, which in turn prevents radical labor movements and unionization. Under the home-ownership scheme, homeowners are inclined to support the status quo for the sake of protecting their property values (Chua 2014, 520). Chua’s insightful observation helps us to understand the co-evolution of industrial capitalism and the rapid construction of massive apartment complexes in Seoul. Apartments provide urban workers with

domesticated spaces where class-consciousness is eased through family privacy and consumerism. In this respect, high-rise apartment complexes contribute to stabilizing the capitalist economy.

Seoul has been a continually growing and changing spatial machine over the last hundred years. However, a good place to live requires continuity—not least in terms of uninterrupted access to social relations and equitable distribution of public resources. Almost forty years of urban renewal has transformed residential areas with low-quality houses into districts with high-rise apartment blocks. The displacement of the original residents and the consequent decrease in community bonding has been spotlighted as the major negative social effect of renewal-induced urban development (Ha 2004). A variety of research has indicated that integration of the physical and social environments is essential for constructing good residential areas where people can age in place (Steels 2015).

The majority of the world's people, including those from less developed countries, now live in urban areas (World Health Organization 2015). Recently, Seoul has experienced the rapid aging of its population: the percentage of the population over 65 years old almost doubled from 5.4 percent in 2000 to 9.4 percent in 2010. By 2019, this figure is expected to grow to 14.1 percent (Seoul Metropolitan Government 2011). Although Seoul has become part of the developed world, there remain low-income neighborhoods in Seoul where large numbers of inhabitants are long-term squatters over sixty years old (Seoul Metropolitan Government 2013). This trend implies that future urban planners must contemplate how urban inhabitants with fewer resources—the elderly in particular—will be able to continue living in their neighborhoods.

Urban renewal efforts need to provide better livability when a city as well as its residents age. But can we explore progressive transformation in terms of repair, recycling, and reuse of existing resources, as opposed to large-scale urban renewal projects driven by property investment? Dunbar's familiar yet disturbing photos highlight the necessity for a paradigm shift in defining urban "growth" and "continuity."

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