

Photo Essay

Resurrection City: The Scale of Seoul's Urban Renewal Process

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Note: *This essay accompanies the photo essay of the same title, which can be accessed online at the link above.*

Resurrection City: The Scale of Seoul's Urban Renewal Process

Urban exploration—visiting human-built structures out of the public eye—has entered the global mainstream. Images of rooftop daredevils and thrill seekers who visit abandoned places, often taking mortal risks for the sake of instant fame, flood social media and even television. Whereas other roof-toppers make the news when they fall to their deaths, legitimate, responsible explorers eschew media attention. Yet, the hobby of urban exploration has mostly bypassed Korea. This is not due to a lack of opportunities; a casual trespasser can learn much in South Korea with just a flashlight and a camera. Rather, it is not a popular activity because few citizens express curiosity about their urban surroundings.

Urban exploration in Korea has taken me up high on rooftops and construction cranes, far beneath the surface in underground rivers and subway tunnels, and everywhere in between. I began urban exploring in Seoul in 2005, and by 2007 I was going out each week and discovering new sites to explore. Every time I felt myself losing interest, Korea would throw some amazing abandoned discovery at me—a university campus right in the middle of Seoul, an amusement park, a fully furnished hotel, a “haunted” psychiatric hospital. I’ve explored across Korea but focused mostly on what’s in front of me in Seoul, where I’ve visited more than fifty abandoned neighborhoods. I’ve had the chance to witness and document Korea’s social problems manifesting in several unique urban phenomena, many of which have gone unobserved by academics and historians. I’ve built a private nationwide network of urban explorers with the ultimate goal of localizing urban exploration in Korea for Korean people. I advocate for ethical methods of exploring and emphasize how it can lead to different levels of understanding of Korean contemporary society and history.

At first my pastime simply offered adventure after adventure. All that changed in January 2009, when the Yongsan Disaster killed five evictees and one antiterrorist riot cop, after police action caused a fire to break out at one of the sites I’d explored a few months earlier. I realized that urban exploring was no mere hobby, that I was venturing into the no-man’s-land of a class-based urban war. My years of documenting endangered architecture could be used to reveal and analyze many of Korea’s societal problems, problems as far-reaching as economic polarization, massive household debt, elderly poverty, the low birthrate, chaebol and government corruption, and the country’s problematic historical perceptions. My extensive photo archives and personal experiences give me the power and the responsibility to make a

difference, or at least serve as a reminder of what Korea has lost in its blind rush forward to modernization.

At any point in time, numerous sites across Seoul are being abandoned, demolished, and excavated. In the process, significant numbers of people are being evicted—sometimes violently—from their homes and businesses. The scale of this phenomenon is hard to grasp without immersion in the process over a long period of time. From virtually everywhere in the city, one can see the large apartment complexes that eventually fill in these vacated spaces. Almost every single complex was built through a construction process that claims large sections of land all at once (rather than building by building), discarding or displacing unwanted structures, populations, and even geographical features. Urban redevelopment moves mountains, sometimes literally.

Korean urbanization has become an exercise in self-defeatism. Everyone might agree that high-rise apartments offer superior quality of life, although they're aesthetically awful and, from an urban-planning perspective, nightmarish. But they also serve as a socioeconomic gatekeeper offering living spaces as well as urban citizenship for upwardly mobile, expanding young families while excluding the working poor and middle class, young and old. As more expensive housing is built, a city's actual population becomes more nomadic. The direction of urban planning in Korea today suggests that society is more concerned with utopian ideals than addressing reality—that is, with creating housing for the desired population rather than desired housing for the population.

My own theory of the lack of national awareness about urban renewal focuses on Korean sensitivities related to national pride. South Korea has been in an ideological race with North Korea to come up with the better society while also currying favor with the United States to keep its military in the region and using soft power to raise its brand in the world. Korea became the first nation to go from foreign-aid recipient to donor, but in making this pivot, it has turned a blind eye to domestic charity needs. Any perceived blemish is seen as shameful and in need of hiding in the name of national honor. This situation has sometimes made it difficult to study urban renewal, because any interest by an outsider can be seen as criticism.

One particular encounter back in 2008 stands out for me. In an abandoned office building in Seoul's district of Seongdong-gu, I encountered an elderly scavenger who, when our urban-exploring group explained why we were there, looked at my camera and wailed, "I feel so bad for my country!" He was there to collect scrap metal and sustain a meager living, but at the moment his biggest concern was the potential harm to Korea's reputation at the hands of this foreigner. I've since done most of my work alone and quietly, not because what I do is illegal, but to avoid upsetting anyone's feelings on site. My setup is simple and portable: just a digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) camera with no fancy lenses, requiring little setup time and allowing easy concealment. Sometimes I use a tripod if it's dark and no one is likely to find me.

Just as I use site discipline while exploring, I rely on information discipline when reporting on my adventures. I have been cautious about what I publish or post online, especially location and entry details—partly to avoid backlash, but also to avoid encouraging people who would cause harm (particularly vandals, arsonists, and treasure hunters) to follow my trail. Around 2009, I had an exhibition at Space Beam, a former *makgeolli* (sparkling rice wine) factory in Incheon, and released a booklet on urban exploring in Korea. Afterward, the attention was becoming too great, so I took my website offline for a while. Since then, I have been cautious about oversharing data and have become an evangelist on the ethics of urban exploration. (Almost all the pictures in this photo essay are of sites long since destroyed.) There are always a few people who bristle at the mention of "moon villages" (impromptu postwar refugee

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communities), the Yongsan Disaster, or evictee protesters; many don't like when I acknowledge these occurrences, and they might try to manipulate facts to justify the status quo and the dominant narrative.

It is my hope that as Korea's global reputation rises, its people's national confidence will follow, empowering the Korean people to confront and solve domestic social problems; when that happens, urban exploration will become a legitimate way for people to get to know their own country.

About the Artist

Jon Dunbar is a Canadian permanent resident of South Korea. He first visited the country in 1996 and moved there in 2003 after earning a Bachelor of Arts in sociology at the University of Alberta. Since 2005, he has been documenting Korea's endangered architecture. He has lectured on the topic for the Royal Asiatic Society Korea Branch and written for many publications. Currently he is an editor at *The Korea Times*, where he covers underground music, urban development, and the intersection thereof.