

# Cheonggyecheon Restoration Project: The Politics and Implications of Globalization and Gentrification

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the process of gentrification by analyzing the actors implicated in gentrification, the global and domestic discourses surrounding redevelopment, and the political motivations undergirding such projects in the context of the Cheonggyecheon Restoration Project. It takes a critical stance towards the South Korean government's pursuit of redevelopment projects with the goal of generating "world-class" spaces favoring the interests of large corporate entities, with which it has established economic ties constituting a conflict of interest. Consequences of these gentrifying practices include the displacement of local merchants, communities, and cultural spaces, which further stratify already disparate levels of privilege within the country's political economy.

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## **Introduction**

Foul pollution, traffic hell, back-breaking housing prices, brutal rivalry and unruly streets—this is the Seoul we think of today. Now close your eyes and envision the future of Seoul. Citizens are relaxing by a stream; happy crowds mingle as music plays all night long, and young couples wish for love as they toss coins into the water. This no longer will be merely an imagination but will come to reality starting this year. A city of romance and festivals will be born out of the previous pollution and traffic—all thanks to the Lee Myung-Bak Projects!<sup>1</sup>

This article, written five months before the initiation of the Cheonggyecheon reconstruction project, reflects a common sentiment in South Korea. The project received an overwhelming 79.1 percent approval rating amongst the residents of Seoul. The quick execution of the plan earned Mayor Lee Myung-bak further praise once the project was over, and eventually he was able to leverage this result to earn the South Korean presidency in 2008.<sup>2</sup> The project received international attention as an example of successful urban regeneration. The New York Times described Cheonggyecheon as a “gathering place...[that] taps into a growing national emphasis on quality of life and immediately makes the mayor a top presidential contender.”<sup>3</sup> Times magazine ranked the Cheonggyecheon Stream as number seven in places to visit in Korea.<sup>4</sup> The Landscape Architecture Foundation wrote that the project led an “important paradigm shift, changing from an auto-centric development-oriented urban landscape to one that values the quality of life of its people and the importance of functioning ecosystems.”<sup>5</sup>

The Cheonggyecheon restoration project was undeniably crucial to the economic revitalization and changing image of downtown Seoul. However, such reviews often lack a comprehensive analysis of outcomes, actors, and methods that paint a more complicated picture than the narrative of a newly born “clean and attractive global Seoul.”<sup>6</sup> Although the mainstream media may portray the project as a boon for the general population of Seoul, a more in-depth

study reveals the gentrifying processes in which the Seoul city government drives the Cheonggyecheon project. This project of gentrification manifests the motivations of a country executing a late and rapid entrance into industrialization and the global sphere, and willing to go to long measures to fulfill its goals, including suppressing labor and perpetuating exclusionary political and social relations.

Previous literature has primarily used the framework of urban regeneration to understand the Cheonggyecheon restoration project. Urban regeneration and gentrification are similar terms in that they conceptualize the same phenomenon. They both study the process in which residents are displaced to create spaces that serve and attract wealthier subjects. However, the two terms differ as frameworks of analysis, in that gentrification examines the socio-political relations between the displaced and displacer, while urban regeneration solely focuses on the displacer.

Urban regeneration is becoming more common now that open spaces are presumed to appeal to a “creative class” that is essential to urban maturation in developing economies.<sup>7</sup> In the past, the main dispossessors during gentrification have been households reacting to market incentives, or the “rent-gap.”<sup>8</sup> However, according to Hackworth, larger, corporate interests are entering real estate and, as a consequence, displacing “lower” commercial activities and lower income households.<sup>9</sup> Not only does Hackworth contend that gentrification is no longer only a market-induced phenomenon, but that government intervention has also joined in gentrifying efforts in order to combat deindustrialization.

The Cheonggyecheon restoration project is useful when discussing the evolution of urban regeneration because, in this case, the state intervenes in order to prioritize the interests of the free market. This paper will analyze who the actors involved in gentrification are, how this process is facilitated and justified, and how different social groups experience gentrification. In doing so, this paper will take a critical stance on development-induced urban projects and argue that the Cheonggyecheon project is emblematic of a world-wide phenomenon in which the poor are displaced in the name of development.

## **Industrialization, Development Discourse, and Political Motivations**

In order to understand what the previous inhabitants of Cheonggyecheon have exactly been dispossessed of, a study of this project through the lens of gentrification must understand what the Cheonggyecheon stream was like before its regeneration. Cheonggyecheon used to be an 11-km stream that ran through downtown Seoul until the rapid industrialization during the 1950s, when the entire stream was covered with a road and the elevated Cheonggye Expressway to foster the growth of industrial and residential areas in Eastern Seoul. Gradually, wholesale markets, small stores, street restaurants, vendors, and bars settled down along the expressway and into the slim alleys of close neighborhoods.<sup>10</sup> By the 1980s, this particular scene did not settle right with the metropolitan government. Downtown Seoul was the only area in the city with a declining population, and *bulyang jutaeks*, or substandard housing types, (mostly rentals or squatters) composed 35 percent of downtown housing, a proportion that was 2.5 times the average of Seoul. Most of the people leaving were in their 20s or 30s, and the number of businesses and enterprises in the downtown area had declined by 24.1 percent from 1991 to 2000.<sup>11</sup> In simpler terms, downtown Seoul was not “developed” enough, especially compared to the rest of the city, and the metropolitan government was determined to revitalize the area.

Thus, the Cheonggyecheon restoration project certainly was not the first to introduce ‘development’ as the ideal. The metropolitan government had been making small scale regeneration efforts prior to the Cheonggyecheon restoration project—improving rundown houses, expanding roads and refining infrastructure in small dilapidated neighborhoods with poor traffic conditions. Yet such minute operations were not enough to transform Seoul into a central business district as long as the 18-lane elevated highway was still present.<sup>12</sup> It was not until Lee Myung-bak, with ambitious career goals and a detailed plan on how to reach them in mind, arrived with the Cheonggyecheon restoration project when downtown Seoul underwent drastic change.

By liquidating the unsightly legacy from Korea’s developmental period and restoring the city’s natural environment, Seoul can be

ready to emerge as a cultural metropolis where tradition and modernity are harmoniously blended with each other.

- Lee Myung-bak<sup>13</sup>

Ever since South Korea became its own country in 1948, efforts toward ‘development’ have largely gone uncontested. This allowed for the development of infrastructure, numerous mega-conglomerates, called *chaebol*, to thrive, national GDP to soar; the country had even hosted what is arguably the biggest international event to ever exist, the Olympics, in 1988. ‘Development’ is not only a constant theme in South Korean history but is also a rhetorical device deployed to justify gentrification projects worldwide. After all, a common synonym for urban regeneration projects is urban redevelopment projects. But what exactly is development, and what does it look like? And how has the image of development changed in South Korea since the days of rapid economic growth led by military dictators in the 1970s and 80s?

Before delving into how the project was carried out, one must recognize the specific vision of development Lee Myung-bak had in mind. First, he distances the new and refurbished Seoul from that of the “unsightly” developmental period by “liquidating” its “legacy.” Hence, the city must hold a certain aesthetic that is more advanced than that of crude industrialization. He focuses on “modernity,” a term that refers to an ambiguous global standard, but is also concerned with “tradition,” which indicates a nationalistic appeal to the Korean ethnicity. With the phrase “cultural metropolis,” he paints the picture of a city full of vibrancy with a healthy economy. This is only one dimension of the city, however, since it must also contain a “natural environment,” an ecological appeal, as well. Under the pretext that this new scene will help “national growth,” the Seoul city government meticulously advertised a very curated image of Seoul to the global stage.

### **Execution of the Project**

Once Lee Myung-bak won the 2002 Seoul mayoral election with 52.28 percent of the votes, the Cheonggyecheon projects commenced less than a month later on July 1, 2002 and lasted until 2006. Lee Myung-bak formed three groups—the Cheonggyecheon restoration

headquarters, Cheonggyecheon research group, Cheonggyecheon citizens' committee—to manage research proceedings regarding the restoration, generate plans, and organize structural processes. Each group consisted of government officials, experts, and citizens. This triangular structure was specifically designed to simultaneously launch implementation whilst building public relations. Efficiency was especially considered an important component of the process and the three departments congregated every Saturday for a meeting in which they made decisions in a “speedy and determined manner.” A development plan concerning strategy for downtown development, revival of downtown industries, and the Cheonggyecheon neighborhood were announced in June 2003. A year later, the Cheonggyecheon restoration headquarters presented a master plan that specified how to revitalize Cheonggyecheon's natural environment in order to design a more “human-oriented public space” and how to return the stream, acquire water resources, manage sewage, traffic and historical assets.<sup>14</sup>

The process was incredibly fast-paced. In fact, much of the planning and construction stages overlapped. The manufacturing of the Cheonggyecheon stream did not happen in an orderly, linear fashion. Construction began only six months after the government had started working on the “Cheonggyecheon Restoration Master Plan” even though it was not until a year later when the plan was finalized. To give a point of reference, the Big Dig city regeneration project in Boston, Massachusetts that covered 12 km took 25 years. The High Line project in New York City, which covered 1.6 km, took 9 years. The Cheonggyecheon project, which covered 5.8 km, was completed in just 27 months. The construction process was hurried in order to minimize business disruption and financial loss for the merchants and property owners in Cheonggyecheon, but Lee Myung-bak was also eager to complete the project before his term as the Seoul mayor was over.<sup>15</sup>

The metropolitan government wanted Cheonggyecheon to be recognized as a public project, thus it accumulated \$84.13 million from what was supposed to be the Cheonggye elevated highway renovation, another \$84.47 million pulled from other city programs, and the rest from tax money to secure a total government budget of \$323 million.<sup>16</sup> The financing of the Cheonggyecheon restoration project depended on the “ripple effect” as well.<sup>17</sup> Once the public sector was able to build a “better” urban environment, the private sector was presumed to follow

in regeneration efforts. The private and public sector then would work in partnership to continue “urban regeneration.” With an elevated highway, an “eco-friendly” waterfront, and the stream, Cheonggyecheon first opened to the public in September 2005.<sup>18</sup>

Under the developmental state, Korea derived its zeal for urban reconstruction from the “great works of nation building and social transformation.”<sup>19</sup> The use of urban renewal and city marketing to enhance economic competitiveness and international attraction in Seoul had always been a topic of interest for the metropolitan government since industrialization. The goal was to develop Seoul into a “sustainable, livable, and global city” through strategic management and marketing of its resources for eventual economic growth and urbanization. Cheonggyecheon was pivotal for Seoul’s envisioned future as a “world-class city.”<sup>20</sup>

A key feature of a model city in the minds of the metropolitan government today is one that can compete at a global level. Indeed, Lee Myung-bak stated that Seoul must “stand out as a center of foreign investment...as an attractive center of business along with Shanghai, Tokyo, and Beijing.”<sup>21</sup> According to Kriznik, global pressures mounted especially high on Seoul, who was late to urbanization and was, for a long time, a “wannabe world city” eager to prove itself.<sup>22</sup> It had “most to gain—in status, power, and wealth—from its worldview.”<sup>23</sup> With the advent of globalization, cultures and politics across nations became increasingly intertwined and cities rose as centers of global flows of culture, capital, and goods. Yet Kriznik argues that cities were not just spaces for globalization to unfold, but “engines of the global economy and reproduced the global order as much as they were affected by it.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, globalization is about increased local control as well. The Cheonggyecheon project epitomizes a new phase of developmentalism, one that is intensified by policies reminiscent of Kim Young Sam’s *Segwehwa*, where globalization meets ethnic nationalism and a very specific image of Seoul is marketed to the world. In the context of globalization, the ability to attract foreign investment became critical for economic growth and urban development. This phenomenon incentivizes governments to invest substantial financial resources and enact administrative initiatives in their urban policies in order to create social change. In response to these trends, in 1995, the Seoul metropolitan government took a central role in local economic growth and urban development. It also increased the marketing budget by 750% in 2008.<sup>25</sup>

The hope that the global status of Seoul could be altered by the determined management and marketing of its resources often overshadows the negative outcomes of urban development, such as uneven capital accumulation and social segregation. For example, sustainability is considered one of the “normative principles in urban design, assuring attractiveness in the city government.”<sup>26</sup> However, while green urbanism has been advocating the ethics of zero-emissions and zero-waste, a precise definition for sustainable urban design has not been reached. In fact, Scheutze et al. states that over 200 different definitions for sustainable urban development exists, which makes it difficult to comprehend urban sustainability beyond energy efficiency and aesthetics. Thus, city governments have not paid adequate attention to how to apply urban sustainability across various societal groups and invest in the “social responsibility and economical aspects on different levels of urban scales.” Especially in the case of the Cheonggyecheon project, which took an alarmingly short period of time to construct, one can only imagine how much attention was devoted to social and ecological responsibility.

In spite of the arbitrary nature of the standards used to judge cities, a space had already formed in which governments challenged established relations amongst cities through the “worlding practice,” or making their cities more “world-class.”<sup>27</sup> In 2005, OECD described the restoration as one that “can serve as a flagship project showing to the international community Seoul’s dedication in building a lively urban landscape. If the project is closely connected to a cultural booming, it could become a major touristic asset for Seoul’s international image.”<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the foreign media commended the project for successfully transforming previous international perception of Seoul as an “urban concrete jungle.”<sup>29</sup> These sources legitimized the city government’s undertaking of urban regeneration, furthering emboldening their efforts to achieve importance within the global competitive order.

### **Politics of Redevelopment, Corruption, and Public Reception**

Despite the constant rhetoric about “national growth,” and the betterment of Seoul, Lee Myung-bak had much to gain privately from this project. Enabled by the top-down structure of the Cheonggyecheon project, Lee Myung bak was able to aggressively push the project through and skillfully advertise his project in a way to further his professional career. When Lee Myung-

bak pledged during his 2002 Seoul mayoral election campaign that he would reconstruct the Cheonggyecheon stream, it immediately became the central question of the election, thus, allowing the project to have salient connections to the election and politics. The opposing mayoral candidate called for protecting neighboring merchants and commercial property owners from business interruptions. They argued that the project not only did not have a feasible infrastructure plan but would cause further traffic congestion and cost the city an additional \$446 million, and that funds be spent on more pressing issues, such as education. On the other hand, Lee Myung-bak argued that the highway was run-down and unstable, that the project would help resuscitate the downtown economy, and transform Seoul's image to that of a dynamic and emerging global metropolis.<sup>30</sup>

In spite of Lee Myung-bak's rhetorical emphasis of this being a public project for the general betterment of Seoul's citizens, hints of cronyism, corruption and personal advancement were apparent in the Cheonggyecheon reconstruction project. Once Lee Myung-bak was elected and initiated the project, he hired contractors who had been active in the bidding process in favor of the project. Cheonggyecheon was divided into sections in which various private developers, including Daelim Industrial Corporation, LG Engineering and Construction Corporation, Hyundai Engineering, and Construction Corporation, undertook responsibility for development.<sup>31</sup> It is notable that the direct beneficiaries of this \$300 million project were massive conglomerates. Namely, Hyundai Engineering and Construction Corporation, which was responsible for one of the main sections of Cheonggyecheon, was the same company that Lee Myung-bak himself had worked for, and eventually became CEO of, from 1967-1992.<sup>32</sup> It is not a coincidence that these particular conglomerates were delegated parts of the reconstruction project. Yet again in South Korea, a project set up in the name of development, disproportionately benefited conglomerates over the local markets and vendors that had existed there originally. Lee Myung-bak's own previous position as the CEO of Hyundai Engineering and Construction Corporation, and subsequent economic opportunities he gifted to the company as mayor, do not suggest the usual corporate-state link, but that, in South Korea, the line has truly blurred between the two entities. Perhaps the reason why the reconstruction project was able to

be carried out so quickly, and all dissenting opinions suppressed so easily, was that corporations and the government were able to literally act together, as one and the same.

A particularly controversial case of cronyism arose when Vice-Mayor Yang Yoon-jae, who was once a professor at Seoul National University's Graduate School of Environmental Studies and director of the project from 2002 to 2004, was arrested for accepting over \$100,000 worth of bribes from a developer to relax height restrictions on the Cheonggyecheon Expressway. Although he was found guilty and sentenced to five years in prison, Lee Myung-bak, his former boss and who had been elected President by this time, not only pardoned him but also designated him as Presidential Commission on Architecture Policy.<sup>33</sup>

One of the biggest reasons the Cheonggyecheon project was able to happen so smoothly was that much of the project budget was devoted to marketing. One cannot help but wonder what Lee Myung-bak cared about more: the project or people's opinion of the project. It was important for Lee Myung-bak that the project served its purpose: to publicize the project and his own competency and kick-start his own campaign for presidency. In order to make known the success of the project, Lee Myung-bak devoted 1 billion won (approximately 959,000 US dollars) on numerous public relations programs related to the stream. With these finances, Lee Myung-bak instituted the Cheonggyecheon Revival Academy in the early 2000s to "inform public opinion" regarding the project, in an attempt to build, or at least feign, social consensus on the project. Lee Myung-bak did not stop with the South Korean media but made his debut into the global scene as well. On May 2004, Lee Myung-bak offered 390,000,000 won (approximately 374,000 US dollars) to the US documentary channel, "Discovery," to produce an episode on Cheonggyecheon, including an extensive interview with Lee Myung-bak. He has also expended 600,000,000 won (approximately 575,400 US dollars) on a project called "Cheonggyecheon Video White Paper" using Seoul citizens' tax money and hosted a symposium in which he invited infrastructure and environmental experts to speak about the Cheonggyecheon restoration project.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, with the support of government officials, government research institutions, and civic engineers, Mayor Lee pushed for swift reconstruction with wide political support and positive media coverage. The rapid and relentless fashion in which the restoration process was

conducted was supposed to reflect his “management competence” and strong political stance.<sup>35</sup> However, multiple civic, academic, environmental, and cultural organizations have questioned the “ecological and historical authenticity” of the stream and voiced protest on what they viewed as an undemocratic operation.<sup>36</sup> For example, an important aspect of Cheonggyecheon’s appeal is its environmental friendliness. However, because the city government had chosen a nearby water-treatment facility for water supply instead of a long-term gradual restoration of natural water inflow, an increasingly serious algae problem had developed in the stream. Moreover, the bottom of the stream, which is made of concrete, renders it almost impossible to conduct purification purposes, and maintenance expenses have been climbing by 30 percent annually.<sup>37</sup> Despite Mayor Lee’s claim to have built a modernized Seoul that is still in touch with its unique cultural heritage, not only has the project itself destroyed numerous historical and cultural sites, but his previous company, Hyundai Engineering and Construction Corporation, was also responsible for much of the environmental degradation during the period of rapid industrialization in 1960s and 1970s.<sup>38</sup>

### **Gentrification**

The case of the Cheonggyecheon restoration project offers two important facts concerning gentrification: that displacement is ongoing, and that the displaced does not just include lower income households, but lower industrial uses as well.

Despite Lee Myung-bak’s determined PR efforts to gain approval for the restoration project, the restoration plan was extended from the initial 10 months to 2 years due to trouble building social consensus amongst all civil groups.<sup>39</sup> Vehement and active protests, albeit ultimately drowned out in an authoritarian fashion, are evidence that the gentrifying practices prompted by the Cheonggyecheon restoration project were, in fact, exclusionary. Perhaps the protests against the Cheonggyecheon project were not met with the dramatic and violent silencing tactics from the 70s and 80s, when the police could openly beat demonstrators to death in the streets, but the government under Lee Myung-bak was oppressive nonetheless. Any dissent was ignored when the project was being pushed through, and when the land prices became too high for the previous residents, they were forced to relocate. Impacts and outcomes of the project

indicate that certain social classes were prevented from enjoying the benefits of the newly constructed stream, solidifying a widening gap in power relations between the dispossessor and the dispossessed.

Prior to the restoration project, Cheonggyecheon constituted a very vibrant community, with social and political complexities. Pollution and noise from the elevated Cheonggye expressway formed an amicable setting for small firms and trophy, metalworking and printing industry clusters to develop in surrounding areas. Small plots and lower buildings conserved the narrow alleys and historical sites, while lower-income workers, merchants, customers and illegal vendors populated the downtown area every day and built their livelihoods around it.<sup>40</sup> The area had, after four decades, nourished local cultures and businesses, and “woven into the fabric of the city.”<sup>41</sup>

Thus, merchants lead the opposition against the project. City officials and merchants held approximately 4,200 meetings, yet the merchants still emerged from the process as a deeply disadvantaged party. The government gave no direct compensation for business interruptions or relocation, and moved street vendors to the Dongdaemun stadium close by with the promise of renovating the flea market area.<sup>42</sup> However, not only did this promise fail to deliver and business wane, but the stadium itself was also demolished in the name of “urban regeneration” a year later under the next Seoul mayor, Oh Se-hoon. The street vendors were moved once again, this time to a folk market in sinseoldong.<sup>43</sup> As opposed to recognizing that the Cheonggyecheon reconstruction project has disempowered certain groups, the project has only incited more excitement about urban regeneration projects, and about development. Compared to the success story of a renovated city and a tenacious man, and the glowing international reception the project received, the story that the previous residents of downtown Seoul have to tell is harsh and unpromising.

The purported goals of the Cheonggyecheon reconstruction project were the following: decrease the disparity between northern and downtown Seoul by improving environmental and living conditions in the latter, reclaiming natural and cultural heritage that had been destroyed during rapid urbanization, form new public spaces, and increase traffic safety. In some ways, the Cheonggyecheon project was a success. The Cheonggyecheon stream has hosted 259 cultural

events from 2005 to 2007, and in a 2014 public survey, 59.6 percent of the respondents described it as a pleasant place to relax.<sup>44</sup> Hence the Cheonggyecheon is generally perceived to have enhanced accessibility to conveniences, yet this does not apply for everyone.

Through the project, the Seoul Metropolitan Government hoped to expand business services and commercial cluster in the area. Such transformations entailed increase land rents and property values. In fact, on account of the reconstruction, land prices increased from 35 to 80 percent depending on the proximity to the stream, and office rents increased by 20 percent.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, neighborhoods like Sinseoul, Hwanghak and Wangsimni became districts of land speculation. High-rise office buildings and residential projects grew along Cheonggyecheon in replacement of small workshops and businesses.<sup>46</sup> 19 percent of the economy used to consist of manufacturing, while another 32 percent was wholesale, retail, and transportation business.<sup>47</sup> However, the project drove out traditional industrial sectors in order to give rise to financial and professional services. By 2011, 98% of the land use changes along the reconstruction districts constituted hotel, commercial, office or educational institutes.<sup>48</sup> Almost half of all 168 land uses changes were commercial, including cafes, restaurants, bars, and retail, while approximately quarter of them were for office utilities and only 8 cases, or 4.7 percent, were industrial.<sup>49</sup> Before the project, there were about 60,000 shops that employed a total of 800,000 workers and illegal street vendors. The Cheonggyecheon flea market, along with the Hwanghak market, essentially vanished after the reconstruction, and only 700 street vendors were left in the Seoul folk flea market by 2011.<sup>50</sup> In other words, reproduction of local economy and day-to-day life perished to be replaced by structures of private urban development. In fact, Lim et al. argues that entrepreneurial cities purposefully escalated property tax revenues to compensate for the lack of state funding.<sup>51</sup> Under commercial gentrification, government intervention in refurbishing neighborhoods had become “conscious, active, intentional, and even a source of pride.”<sup>52</sup>

The structural changes the project enacted in the economy demonstrate the importance of spatial capital. A survey in Wangsimni, a low-income neighborhood nearby Cheonggyecheon, was conducted in 2008 about the stream. 69 percent of the respondents reported that they often spent their free time in the neighborhood, but 33 percent of the respondents said that they never or seldom visited the stream and complained that the neighborhood lacked available public

space. When asked why, they explained that they did not consider Cheonggyecheon as “their place.” In fact, reports show that Cheonggyecheon is mostly enjoyed by foreign visitors and visitors from other parts of Seoul.<sup>53</sup> The “privileged consumption practices” of other visitors is an act of “social power over the everyday use and meaning of space.”<sup>54</sup> The creation of the Cheonggyecheon stream has “created a new sense of order for some local residents,” effectively spreading a sense of alienation amongst those who were left behind in the process. Moreover, only 6% of the respondents stated that the reconstruction boosted economic development in the neighborhood, suggesting that a very small proportion of the local population, if any, had access to the economic benefits of reconstruction in their own living environment.<sup>55</sup> The inequitable outcomes of the Cheonggyecheon stream imply that this is a case of authoritative social and political actors enforcing their arbitrary understandings of urban renewal, whether or not it is meaningful to the already existing societies.

Based on the reception Cheonggyecheon has received, swift redevelopment for the “higher uses” is considered a successful instance of urban regeneration. Such general perception suggests which stakeholders are more valued not only by the city government, but by civil society. As displacement continues, a civil society that increasingly caters to bourgeoisie middle-class interests has emerged. As a result, the urban poor, who are most in need of income-generating opportunities, are pushed away from “central sources of income,” and from “civic life and urban culture, and were seen as impediment to progress and betterment of society.”<sup>56</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Continually chased by the workings of the global free market, and its agent, the state, the urban poor are transformed into nomads, or “transients in a perpetual state of relocation.”<sup>57</sup> The Cheonggyecheon restoration project not only sparked long languishing redevelopment projects, but also incited new ones. While no redevelopment projects were issued permits from 1990 to 2005, within two years of the stream’s public opening, eight redevelopment projects that had been inactive since the mid 1970s were issued permits. Hence developmentalism is still present, possibly even strengthened, under the world’s current political-economic climate. Despite the narratives of Seoul as a cultural, environmental, and “international hub of world capitalist

production and exchange,”<sup>58</sup> this paper argues that such top-down “scientific social planning” simply does not work. Communities are not designed to be dislodged and transported. Urban regeneration does not give rise to nation-wide growth, but instead further creates “spatial barriers, residential privileges, zoning, and other planning mechanisms where income, position, and clout determined access” to wealth.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, the Cheonggyecheon restoration project sheds insight into the hypocrisy and contradictions of Korean politics. The personal benefits Lee Myung-bak reaped from the Cheonggyecheon reconstruction project indicate that urban regeneration efforts strategically legitimize the elite political and corporate groups’ particular interpretations of urban renewal. Neglect of the demolition of traditional markets and local places, dislocation of lower-income neighborhoods, and isolation amongst local residents erases the memory of city exploitation, and perpetuates gentrification as embodying the new “global urban strategy.”<sup>60</sup>

## Notes

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