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Soul of the city

Guardian Weekly

The demolition of a vast motorway through the centre of South Korea's capital and the restoration of a river and park in its place proves that mega-cities can be changed for the better. One year ago this month, several million people headed to a park in the centre of Seoul, the capital of South Korea and seventh-largest city in the world. They didn't go for a rock festival, a football match or a political gathering, but mostly to just marvel at the surroundings, to get some fresh air and to paddle in the river.

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This was no ordinary park or river. The very old people of Seoul still remember how, more than 50 years ago, the Cheonggyecheon was a wide but shallow seasonal stream that traditionally divided the city between the rich in the north and the poor in the south. It was where people went to wash clothes and kids to play, but as Seoul grew from being semi-rural to a vast, smog-bound east Asian metropolis, the Cheonggyecheon - which means "clear valley stream" - became little more than a sewer.

As cars took over the city, the river bed was turned into a road, and then an elevated six-lane motorway was built above. It was one of the most comprehensive obliterations of the natural environment perpetrated.

But in a revolutionary act of ecological restoration that is now being examined around the world, the city of Seoul, under the leadership of the then mayor, Lee Myung Bak, pledged in 2002 to restore the river, tear down the motorway and create a 8km-long, 800-metre wide, 400ha



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lateral park snaking through the city where the river once ran.

The vision was ordinary enough: to create a focal point of both historical significance and aesthetic appeal, but it meant thinking the culturally impossible. The road carried 160,000 cars a day and was perpetually jammed. It was seen as a proud but decaying symbol of South Korea's emergence from a rural to an industrial economy, and of the investment of the lives that had been sacrificed to achieve it. So to tear it down was "above all, a symbolic act", says Kee Yeon Hwang, a professor in the department of urban planning and design at Hongik University. He led the feasibility work in the late 1990s, and was the principal author of the masterplan.

"The idea was sown in 1999," Hwang says. "We had experienced a strange thing. We had three tunnels in the city and one needed to be shut down. Bizarrely, we found that car volumes dropped. We discovered it was a case of 'Braess paradox', which says that by taking away space in an urban area you can actually increase the flow of traffic, and, by implication, by adding extra capacity to a road network you can reduce overall performance."

He and his team asked thousands of people what they thought was the most important thing in the city, and they all said the environment and water. The research team spent six months investigating what would happen to the traffic and developing a forecasting model which said it would slightly improve overall. It was put to the electorate that the motorway should be removed, and mayor Lee was elected partly on the environment ticket.

Work started in July 2003. It had taken 20 years to build the roads, but it took contractors just two years to pull them down and restore the river. It cost \$380m and required 620,000 tonnes of concrete and asphalt to be removed and recycled. Twenty-two new bridges were built, and the water in the river was restored, albeit mainly from groundwater. There was opposition and protests to begin with from traders, who feared that cars would no longer be able to get there, and thousands of hawkers and other people who used the space below the motorway were forced to leave.

Hwang said: "The tearing down of the motorway has had both intended and unexpected effects. As soon as we destroyed the road, the cars just disappeared. A lot of people just gave up their cars. Others found a different way of driving."

The city had beefed up its bus service and given people options to avoid the motorway, and the effect on the environment was remarkable. Hwang says: "We found that surface temperatures in summer along the restored river were an average 3.6C lower than 400 metres away. The river is now a natural air-conditioner, cooling the capital during its long hot summers. Average wind speeds in June this year were 50% higher than the same period last year."

The scheme has had a ripple effect, Hwang says. A new mayor has come to office and he is now getting to work on the Han river, an important river that is not at all pedestrian-friendly. He is going to shrink the road and replace it with pedestrian walkways.

Shanghai is thought to be considering a similar, though smaller, scheme. Tokyo has an elevated road above an ancient bridge and is investigating the possibility of removing it, and other cities in east Asia are taking an interest.

Critics say that it has been gentrification on a massive scale, that it has forced thousands of people away from the area. Others say the city is really only masking its problems. There have been accusations of profiteering, and the rich moving in to appropriate the views and the better quality environment.

But for Simon Evans, head of Creative Clusters, the Sheffield-based group that works for the regeneration of cities, it is a triumph. "Mayor Lee and his team took a crumbling, filthy motorway, turned it back into a river, and reclaimed the area for pedestrians. "The Cheonggyecheon restoration is a perfect example of joined-up regeneration and environmental progress. It asserts that intimacy and creativity is still possible in the mega-city."

Evans is strongly backed by most locals. "Our life has been changed," says Inchon Yu, an actor and cultural adviser to the former mayor of Seoul, Lee Myung Bak. "People feel the water and the wind. Life becomes slower. The price of land nearby has risen. But it reminds people of their own hearts. It gives a new heart to the city: 30,000 people use it every weekend."

"I am so proud of what we have done", says Hwang. And so is former mayor Lee, who is now the frontrunner for the presidency - and known as Mr Bulldozer.

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