
High-rise Buildings and Social Inequality: Focusing on the Street Quarter of Mapo-ro in Seoul

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In this article I discuss the cause and the effects of the increase in high-rise buildings in the ‘street quarter’ of Mapo-ro in Seoul, South Korea. First, I draw on official reports and *Seoul Downtown Redevelopment Master Plans* to explore why this phenomenon has occurred. Second, I investigate the sociocultural effects of high-rise buildings using evidence collected through an application of participant observation, that is, a new walking method for the study of urban street spaces. I suggest that the Seoul government’s implementation of deregulation and benefits for developers to facilitate redevelopment in downtown Seoul has resulted in the increase of high-rise buildings. The analysis also demonstrates that this increase has contributed to gentrification and has led to the growth of private gated spaces and of the distance between private and public spaces.

Key words: High-rise buildings, residential and commercial buildings, walking, Seoul, Mapo-ro, state-led gentrification.

Introduction¹

First, I wish to say how this study began. In the spring of 2017, a candlelight rally was held every weekend in Gwanghwamun square in Seoul to demand the impeachment of the President of South Korea. On 17th February, a parade was added to the candlelight rally. That day I took photographs of the march and, as the march was going through Mapo-ro,² I was presented with an amazing landscape filled with high-rise buildings. In the imposing skyline, the yellowish metallic light of the 40-floor skyscraper centre Lotte Castle-President was so strange and mysterious that it reminded me of a huge tower in a fantasy adventure film. So, I decided to investigate the sociocultural meanings of high-rise buildings. I put the plan into practice in my ethnographic study.



Figure 1. The Parade of Mapo-ro on February 17, 2017. Photo by Kim, Young-Jin

¹ I wish to express my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for *Urbanities* and the Board for their comments and feedback.

² Mapo-ro translates as Mapo boulevard.

Scholars from various disciplines have pointed out that citizens' everyday life is not independent from the physical aspect of the urban space. The philosophers and literary critics Benjamin and Laci (1979) suggest that everyday life in Naples is characterized by 'porosity' like the rocks and the structures of the city. The social anthropologist Pardo (1996) offers an ethnographic analysis of the everyday interactions among diverse socioeconomic groups in the city. The anthropologist Mock (1993) tells that the Hikone Castle, in the Edo period, symbolized the political leader's power in a very graphic way but today functions as a strong reminder to the citizens of the day-to-day connection between the city's past and present. Lastly, the architect Gehl (2011) specifies how the physical environment of streets such as height, speed and decorations affect pedestrians.

The present article focuses on high-rise buildings as one of the diverse physical aspects of the urban space. My aim is to study the sociocultural meanings of high-rise buildings looking at the street quarter of Mapo-ro in Seoul. In this specific context, the term 'street quarter'³ refers to the surrounding areas of a boulevard. The street quarter of Mapo-ro is one of the areas that encapsulate the rapid increase of high-rise buildings in the city.

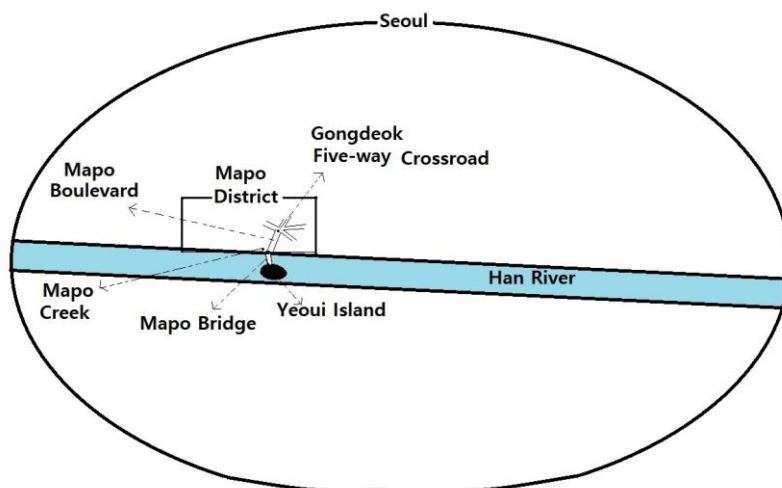


Figure 2. The Location of Mapo-ro in Seoul. Photo by Kim, Young-Jin.

Various researchers have shed light on the relationship between the social and the physical dimension in the urban space of Seoul. Gelézeau (2014: 178-181) provides a visual demonstration of how changes in housing styles affect everyday life in the streets by comparing photographs of the Singongdeok neighbourhood taken in 1996, 2000 and 2010. Sarfati's ethnographic research (2017) analyses the vernacular religious landscapes of Seoul taking into account both religious activities and the spatial transformation influenced by fast urbanization. My own research also aims to explore the sociocultural meanings of the built environment. The research project involved the study of the literature on the process of modernization of the street quarter of Mapo-ro, extended walks in the streets when I recorded

³ 'Street quarter' is a legal term (Article 60 of the Building Act, South Korea).

my feelings and observations on the spaces and interviews with local people; they were residents, security guards, public officials, real estate brokers, and so on.

For the last four decades, high-rise buildings have rapidly increased in Seoul. We need to understand the effects of this built environment on everyday life. High-rise buildings require the investment of a huge amount of money and time. Therefore, once a building is completed, it is not easy to change or demolish it. Nevertheless, tall buildings continue to be constructed without knowing what impact they will have on social life. If such a trend continues, we may end up being trapped in a maze of our own making.

Walking as Participant Observation

De Certeau (1984: xix and 97) points out that walking is an everyday practice and that it is tactical in character. For him, walking actualizes only a few of the possibilities set out by the established order and increases the number of possibilities and prohibitions (de Certeau 1985: 129-130). It has been argued that his discussion has triggered social scientists' interest in walking (Pauknerová and Gibas 2014: 174-175). Above all, 'visual ethnographic exercises' (Krase 2014: 154; Krase 2017: 77) contribute to our research as a method to collect documentation on the ground. Walking makes it possible to observe, describe and take photographs of the details, the rhythm and the flow of urban landscapes. For example, this approach has helped researchers to address vernacular landscapes in gentrified areas, ethnic enclaves, and so on (Krase 2012, Krase 2014, Krase and DeSena 2016, Krase and Shortell 2011).

On the other hand, there are anthropological studies that pay more attention to the practical dimension of walking. Pauknerová and Gibas (2014: 173-175) explore the urban space of Prague through walks. For them (2014: 175-176), walking means escaping the established routes and find new places, as well as being a research method that helps to document kinaesthetic experiences. For Gatta and Palumbo (2014: 260 and 246), walking is not only a method to explore places and interview people but also an activity to get in touch with an urban reality beyond its merchandised image. They suggest that we can understand, inhabit and domesticate the *entre-temps* of urban transformations by 'walking through', 'walking with' and taking part in 'organized walks' (Gatta and Palumbo 2014: 260).

The abovementioned researches classify walking as a new 'research practice', a 'mobility method' or a 'visual ethnography practice' (Pauknerová and Gibas 2014: 173-175; Gatta and Palumbo 2014: 246). Here, however, I deal with walking not as a new category but as participant observation. Specifically, the present discussion relies on my definition of walking as participant observation of street spaces (Kim 2015), which will contribute to a theoretical elaboration of walking beyond the existing tendency to consider walking as 'poor methodology', or as a lesser theoretical notion (Kohler 2014: 134).

According to Spradley (1980: 39), all participant observation takes place in social situations, each of which can be identified by three primary elements: *place*, *actors* and *activities*. Referring to Daphne Northrop's study (1978), he adds that a researcher does not always need to distinguish the different kinds of actors in a given situation (1980: 41 and 186).

So, a social situation can be the object of participant observation, whether or not the main actors are strangers. According to Spradley (1980: 41), in selecting a social situation it is not necessary to distinguish between types of actors; one only needs to know that people who are present are actors because they are engaging in some kind of activity, even if it is merely loitering.

A participant observer comes to social situations in order to engage and observe activities, people and physical aspects (Spradley 1980: 54). In the study of street spaces, a researcher can achieve both engagement and observation by walking, intended as a key street activity that can also be a way to witness and explore the street spaces. Many studies have investigated urban spaces using the method of ‘big urban walks’. Unlike these studies, I am interested in walking as a routine and repetitive everyday activity.

Shortell (2017: 133) pays attention to walking as ‘everyday mobility’. Although he does not explicitly say that walking is a participant observation method, he refers to the researcher who collects visual data from urban spaces as ‘a participant observer’; specifically, as ‘a participant observer in modes of everyday mobility, on foot and using public transportation’ (2017: 137). Shortell also notes that walking allows a multisensory experience (2017: 133), communication and interaction in public spaces, which is not much different from the aims of participant observation.

I gleaned multisensory data, collected my empirical material and engaged in diverse experiences while walking repeatedly in the street quarter of Mapo-ro from March to December 2017. At the same time, I visited several stores for daily chores or a snack. I patronised shoe repair shops, stationery shops, pharmacies, banks, bakeries, convenience stores, stalls selling street food, restaurants, cafes, and so on. Sometimes, I joined residents in community parades.

In short, I suggest that walking is not much different from traditional participant observation. Walking makes it possible for the researcher to take part in a vital part of street activities, collect data at the micro level and look at the street spaces from an emic perspective.

The Street Quarter of Mapo-ro

The Development of the Street Quarter

As the Korea Stock Exchange was relocated to Yeoui-island (Yeoui-do) in 1979, the island became a financial hub. Mapo-ro is the main passage connecting Yeoui-island to downtown Seoul. Mapo-ro is a 2,700-mile boulevard from Ahyeon three-way intersection to Northern crossroad of Mapo bridge (Sohn 2003: 185). In 1966, the Seoul government gave official names to 37 boulevards for the benefit of citizens and to promote Seoul as an international city (Seoul Government 1966: 56). Mapo-ro was one of them.

Today’s landscape of Mapo-ro has resulted from several government projects that have been carried out there and in the surrounding areas.

First, in 1963, the military regime that took power in Korea gave priority to a policy of ‘National Modernization’. Under this plan, Mapo-ro was repaved using new machinery and techniques (Mapo District 2014b: 13; Kim Do-In 2016: 14).



Figure 3. The Pavement of Mapo-ro of 1963. Source: Ahyeon-dong Office

Second, the US president Jimmy Carter visited Seoul in 1979. The previous year, the government had nicknamed ‘VIP Road’ the road that connects Gimpo international airport to Gwanghwamun through Yeoui-island and had invested about 260 million dollars in its renovation (Sohn 2003: 181). As Mapo-ro was included in this route, it was enlarged and repaved. Today, it is a boulevard that can be divided into two parts: one part is the 50-metre-wide 10-lane road from Mapo bridge to Gongdeok five-way intersection, the other is the 40-metre-wide 8-lane road from Gongdeok five-way intersection to Ahyeon three-way intersection (Seoul Government 2001: 154).

Third, the bridge that connects the Mapo district to Yeoui-island was completed in 1970 and further developed later. Originally called Seoul bridge, it was renamed Mapo bridge in 1984. In 2005, it was expanded from 6 to 10 lanes (Kim 2016: 156; Mapo District 2006: 100). The bridge contributed to making Mapo-ro a transportation hub together with the 1982-1986 Han River Overall Development Project, the opening of the Olympic Highway in 1986, the development of Yeoui-island between the 1960s and the 1970s, the opening of Metro Lines and the establishment of the Airport Train between 1996 and 2011 (Kim Do-In 2016: 161; Mapo District 2014a: 53).

Fourth, in 1967, the government drafted a plan for the development of Yeoui-island, which was a large government-owned land. In 1968, the government built the levee of Yoonjungjae on the island to prevent flooding and then, in the 1970s, constructed several luxury apartment complexes. At the same time, it relocated to Yeoui-island several national buildings, such as the Capitol and the KBS broadcasting station (Kim Do-In 2016: 66-67).

The island started to be considered economically important when the Korea Stock Exchange was moved there in 1979.



Figure 4. The Gongdeok Five-way Intersection in 1996. Source: Ahyeon-dong Office.

Lastly, between 1996 and 2011 several railway stations were opened at the Gongdeok five-way intersection (Seo 2016: 163 and 165). The station serving the Metro Line 5 opened in 1996, that for Metro Line 6 opened in 2001 and the Airport Train line station opened in 2011. On the other hand, the ground-level Gyeongui railway was removed from downtown Seoul in 2006 and opened as an underground line in 2009. The railway is now called Gyeongui & Jungang Line. Today, the area around the Gongdeok station is considered to be a ‘railway station sphere’.

At the same time, citizens’ activities can be observed that resist development policies. The station of the ground-level Gyeongui railway is scheduled to become a commercial area; however, this plan has been opposed by the ‘Citizen Activity for Gyeongui-line Public Space’ (CAGPS), which has appropriated the land. Besides, Mapo-ro is used as a venue for diverse political rallies. For example, on 21 April 2017 disabled people took part in a rally from Gwanghwamun to the Capitol, carrying protest banners against the national policies on disability.

The Increase of High-rise Buildings

While the several development policies that I have outlined influenced the transformation of the street quarter, the redevelopment of Downtown Seoul was marked by an increase in high-rise buildings. In 1978, the Seoul government drafted the first redevelopment master plan for downtown Seoul and the next year added five blocks located in Mapo District to the target areas. Today, the project is criticized as one of the world’s most aggressive redevelopment programmes (Kim and Yoon 2003: 543 and 559). The project is characterized by a clearance-based, market-driven and private sector-led urban renewal (Kim and Yoon 2003: 586).

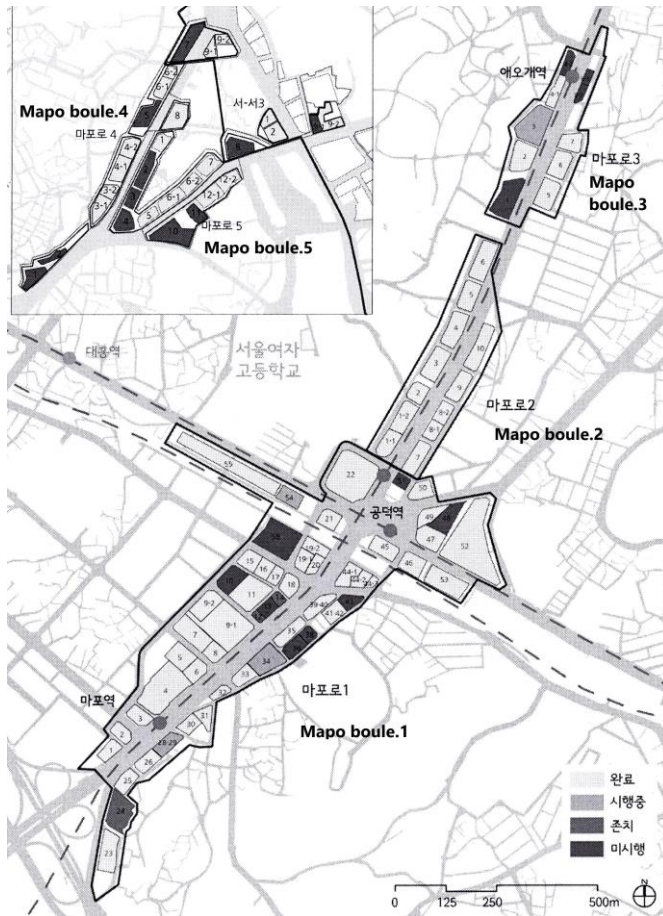


Figure 5. The Five Blocks of Mapo-ro. Source: Seoul Government (2016: 36).

In the Mapo District, 102 sections were planned for downtown redevelopment. Among them, Blocks I and II have respectively 53 and 12 sections; one building is generally built in a section. Here I focus on these two Blocks.

Block Name	Block I	Block II	Block III	Block IV	Block V	Total
Number of Sections	53	12	9	13	15	102

Table 1. The number of Sections in the Blocks of Mapo-ro. Source: Seoul Government (2001: 144), Seoul Government (2004a: 12).

Section Name	Block	designated (year)	permitted (year)	Completed (year)	FAR ⁴ (%)	BCR ⁵ (%)	Floors/ BSMT
Hyundai Build.	I	1979	1984	1986	648.86	43.75	15/4
Sinhwa Build.	I	1979	1984	1986	598.13	40.06	15/4
Daenung Build.	I	1979	1984	1986	620.81	41.93	15/4
Goryo Build.	I	1979	1983	1985	467.54	41.28	15/3
Iljin Build. ⁶	I	1979	1984	1986	628.93	43.61	15/4
Sungji Build.	I	1979	1981	1984	583.89	39.09	17/3
Sungwoo Build.	I	1979	1984	1985	687.6	45.5	16/4
KEPC	I	1979	1984	1988	110.86	42.58	4/3
Jungwoo Mansion	I	1979	1982	1983	438.32	39.97	15/3
Samchang Plaza	I	1979	1984	1987	657.36	42.58	16/5
Dongseo Build.	I	1979	1983	1985	414.29	44.83	10/3
Shinwon Build.	I	1979	1980	1981	377.43	46.90	10/2
Mapo Post Office	I	1979	1986	1988	173.81	39.69	5/1
Gangbyeon Hansin Core	I	1979	1986	1992	648.08	37.59	18/2
Hansin Build.	I	1979	1984	1987	657.79	36.78	18/4
Dabo Build.	I	1979	1983	1988	607.00	38.0	18/5
Doweon Build.	I	1979	1984	1988	479.42	33.33	15/4
Geosung Build.	I	1979	1983	1984	675.45	45.05	17/5
Jindo Build.	I	1979	1986	1988	669.47	49.28	15/5
Goryo Academytel II	I	1979	1984	1988	669.91	41.70	17/5
Changgang Build.	I	1979	1985	1988	669.94	38.67	19/5
SNU Alumni Hall	I	1979	1986	1988	182.40	36.80	5/1
Cheil Build.	I	1979	1983	1985	663.70	44.8	16/5
Poonglim VIP-tel	II	1979	1986	1991	644.81	36.41	18/4
LG Mapo Build.	II	1979	1984	1987	648.37	38.14	18/4
Credit Guarantee Fund	II	1979	1983	1985	719.50	38.95	20/5

Table 2. Completed Buildings before 1993. Source: Mapo District (1992: 316), Seoul Government (1994b: 73), Seoul Government (2010a: 267-310), <http://map.vworld.kr>.

⁴ FAR: Floor Area Ratio.

⁵ BCR: Building Coverage Ratio.

⁶ The height of Poonglim VIP-tel (18 floors) is 63.31 meters and that of Iljin Building (15 floors) is 60.9 meters.

Table 2 lists buildings constructed in the two Blocks from 1980 to 1992. Among them, the Shinwon Building was the first to be given a building permit from the Seoul government. This fifteen-floor high-rise building is the Headquarters of Shinwon Group. Over the following decade, many office buildings were constructed there; among them, Sungji Building, or ‘Sungji Apartment-Shops’, is referred to as one of the buildings that introduced the concept of officetel to Seoul.⁷ At that time, this 17-floor building had shops between the 1st and 3rd floors, offices between the 4th and 10th floors and apartments from the 11th floor up.

The process of redevelopment is roughly as follows: blocks or sections are designated for redevelopment, private investment is encouraged, applications are made for building permits, property is expropriated to be demolished and replaced by new buildings, and so on (Kim and Yoon 2003: 581-585). A big and new building can be designated as ‘retention section’ (a section to be kept as it is) even if it is located in the redevelopment Blocks (Seoul Government 2004a: 146).

Building Name	Block	Land Use	FAR (%)	BCR (%)	Height (m)	Floors/BSMT	Present Condition
Shintak Bank (Seoul Build.)	I	Office	212	35	19	5/1	To be rebuilt
SK Cheil Oil Station	I	Dangerous Material Storage	137	34	15	4/1	SK Yangji Oil Station
Red Cross	I	Office	148	21	22	6/1	Shilla Stay
Pungnong Fertilizer (Geonpung Build.)	I	Office	112	19	18	5/2	To be rebuilt
Seoul Garden Hotel	I	Hotel	1,108	70	55	15/3	Remodelled in 2014
National Council on Social Welfare (NCSW)	I	Office	390	37	29m	8/2	Renaissance Tower

Table 3. Retention sections of 1979. Source: Government of South Korea *Gwanbo*, No.8552 (May 24, 1980).

In 1979, there were 6 retention sections in Blocks I and II. Nonetheless, two of these sections were rebuilt: in 2002, the 8-floor NCSW building was replaced by the 23-floor Renaissance Tower and in 2005 the 6-floor Red Cross building was replaced by the 26-floor Shilla Stay. The Pungnong Fertilizer and the Shintak Bank are currently scheduled to be replaced by high-rise buildings.⁸ Lastly, although the SNU Alumni Hall and the Post Office had been completed as 5-floor buildings by the downtown redevelopment project in 1988, the

⁷ See, ‘Officetel’ in *Kyunghang* newspaper, 29/7/2011.

⁸ See the newspaper articles, ‘A 24-story tourist hotel around Mapo bridge...the renewal of Garak-Samick Mansion puts on hold’ (*Moneta News*, 8/12/2016) and ‘Reconstruction of Seoul Mapo Garden Hotel to a 29-floor Tourist Hotel’ (*Yonhap News*, 10/4/2013).

buildings were later rebuilt; the former was rebuilt as the 18-floor building in 2011 and the latter was rebuilt as 16-floor in 2018.

Since the early 1980s, the Seoul government has repeatedly eased the regulations on the downtown redevelopment. In 1978, the redevelopment project established a Floor Area Ratio (FAR) limit of 670% and limited the number of floors to 15 (Yoon 2003: 136). In 1983, the FAR limit was increased to 1,000% and the height limit was abandoned (Sohn 2003: 187-188). As a result, the average FAR in the downtown redevelopment was higher than 600% per year in the early 1990s, and 900% per year in the late 1990s (Seoul Government 2010b: 24). The average number of floors of the newly constructed buildings was 17 in the 1980s and 19 in the 1990s (Seoul Government 2001: 82).

Section Name	Mixed-use	BLK	Completed (year)	FAR (%)	BCR (%)	Height (m)	Floors/BSMT
Masters Tower	Officetel, Shop	I	2000	951.46	39.88	91.80	26/6
Renaissance Tower	Officetel, Shop	I	2002	991.82	46.51	88.80	23/7
Sinyoung G-well	Officetel, Shop	I	2004	997.99	59.63	81.60	19/4
Hanwha Obelisk	Officetel, Shop, Apartment	I	2004	852.69	29.96	109.85	37/6
SK Hub-Green	Officetel, Shop	I	2005	1058.60	54.07	89.85	21/7
Daewoo Metro Dioville	Officetel, Shop, Apartment	I	2005	1082.93	55.41	104.70	30/8
Taeyoung Desian-LUV	Officetel, Shop	I	2006	894.49	54.73	64.15	17/7
Samsung Trapalace	Officetel, Shop, Apartment	I	2006	874.48	44.99	109.90	31/5
Daelim Acrotower	Officetel, Shop, Apartment	I	2007	763.43	58.15	79.64	20/5
KLHC ParkpalaceII	Shop, Apartment	II	2005	489.61	57.48	64.04	21/4
Hyundai Hyel	Officetel, Shop	II	2005	730.70	40.38	76.45	19/6
Daewoo World-Mark	Apartment, Shop	I	2011	448.66	55.36	60.9	20/7
Lotte Castle-President	Officetel, Shop, Hotel, Apart.	I	2009	1030.53	40.22	152.5	40/8
Jaram Build.	Officetel, Shop	I	2010	897.91	58.28	92.3	20/8
S-Oil	Office, Shop	I	2011	923.28	56.86	109.1	23/7
KCC Welltz Tower	Officetel, Shop, Apartment	I	2011	805.18	55.03	109.9	31/5
Silla Stay	Hotel, Shop	I	2015	996.15	57.92	91.8	26/3
SNU A. Hall	Officetel, Shop	I	2011	835.18	50.29	85.8	18/6
Hyosung Harrington (A)	Officetel, Shop, Hotel	I	2017	780.11	57.51	109.9	24/2

Table 4. Buildings Completed after 2000. Source: Seoul Government (2010a: 265-279), the unprinted document from Mapo-gu Offices, <http://map.vworld.kr>.

As the overdevelopment of downtown Seoul became a social issue, in 2000 the government reduced the FAR of the commercial areas to 200% (Seoul Government 2010b: 24). Nevertheless, the number of high-rise buildings continues to increase, as the government is offering FAR bonus to land donation for public use, to eco-friendly construction, to mixed-use buildings, and so on (See Table 4). In short, downtown redevelopment in Seoul has resulted in the increase of high-rise buildings.

Landscapes, Heat Wave and the Smell of Exhaust Fumes

The street quarter of Mapo-ro has many office and multi-use buildings, which affect the street landscapes both directly and indirectly. In the morning, the sidewalks of Mapo-ro mainly function as pedestrian passage ways. Between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. Monday to Friday the streets are crowded with people going to work. They walk without glancing round. Regardless of the seasons, many wear earphones or hold a smartphone in their hand. In the hot summer, many hold in front of their face a portable USB-powered fan. Large buildings generally have a coffee shop or a convenience store ('Pyeonuijerm' in Korean) on the first floor. The coffee shops are opened between 7 a.m. and 8 a.m. and closed after 10 p.m. The convenience stores are open 24 hours a day.

The sidewalks of the street quarter look different during lunch time. Half an hour before noon, people start to appear with an employ card around their necks or holding a wallet and a smart phone in their hand. After about one hour, we can see many people with a large paper coffee cup with the logos of cafes like Starbucks, Hollys Coffee or Twosome Place which frequently appear as Product Placement (PPL) in Korean dramas. A cup of Americano coffee usually costs over 4,000 won in the cafes, the price of a coffee thus being almost equivalent to the cost of a simple meal. However, take-out specialty stores without seating arrangements sell coffee at half the price. Even after 1 p.m., these stores are crowded with people waiting to order. As I observe these comings and goings, the people walking with coffee cups look to me as if they were dragging heels, as if iron balls were hanging by their ankles. Even in the hot summer, it is not easy to see a female employee holding a parasol during lunch time. I think that they love the sunshine.

After 6 p.m., the sidewalks regain vitality. Some people walk straight to bus stops or metro stations. Others go to a pub or a restaurant in groups of four or five. If we follow them, we sometimes reach an underground hostess bar ('room-salon') or a karaoke establishment. At night, the buildings are brighter and more transparent because the ground floor walls are usually made of glass. So, pedestrians can see an information desk, security guards in suits, access control gates, the elevators in the lobby, and so on. The presence of ATMs is also emphasized by the bright lights that illuminate them.

The high-rise buildings generally block outsiders' access. However, one can tell whether they accommodate residential units or offices by looking at the lights in the windows. Lights in the residential units or officetels have an irregular pattern and different colours; some are yellowish, while others are milky white. The buildings that emit such lights at night are the Hanwha Obelisk, Samsung Trapalace, SK Hub-Green, Sinyoung G-Well, Lotte

Castle-President, Daewoo Metro Dioville, etc. In the office buildings, the lights are on in long rows of windows and they are all the same colour; also, the number of windows with lights on varies on each floor.

On Christmas 2017, the Seoul Garden Hotel and Shinwon Building were colourfully decorated with small lights framing the entrances. At the main entrance there were also banners declaring, 'The Love of Christmas' and 'Jesus Love You'. These decorations stimulated my interest in the local buildings. Through research, I found out that the Seoul Garden Hotel is a franchise of Best Western International, Inc., which has its headquarters in the U.S.A., and that the Shiwon Group promotes a Christian corporation culture and has a chapel in its headquarters. I also observed a few buildings, such as the Iljin building and S-Oil building, with the English words, '2018 Season's Greeting' written over the entrances. I found it interesting that the buildings did not carry popular greetings, like 'Happy New Year', but were decorated with greetings written in a literary style that is unfamiliar to ordinary Koreans.

Attention also needs to be paid to the metro and rail ventilation. In the middle of July, I have regularly felt strong heat waves coming from the metro ventilation opposite the pedestrian crossing between the S-Oil Headquarters and the Sinyoung Building. The heat waves were so strong that, when having to cross, I found it impossible to wait at the traffic lights near the ventilation; I took detours to avoid that crossing. The heat waves made me realize that the area around the ventilation outlets has underground spaces as vast as the tall aboveground buildings. This specific crossing is located near the ventilation outlet of the Gongdeok station, at the junction of three Metro lines and the Airport Train line. The station has five basement levels. These deep underground spaces emit heat waves to ground level with effects as negative as those caused by the shadows cast by the high-rise buildings and by the wind effect that they create. The air expelled at ground level by the ventilation outlets of these underground spaces is also polluted. Pedestrians, however, know little about the quality and quantity of the air. I think it reasonable that the demand for such information should be included in 'the right to the city'.

Moreover, metro platforms and corridors require many lights and air conditioning units. The operating costs are high, as lights, air conditioners and air cleaners are on throughout the opening hours.

The Dohwa by-street is another urban area that I tried to avoid. The traffic light between Dohwa by-street and Saechang road often causes traffic jams. Whenever I walked near cars waiting for the green light at the intersection, I was forced to inhale the fumes produced by their engine idles. The by-street is just 8 meters wide. The carriage road adjacent to the pedestrian path and the high-rise buildings on its west side contribute to the poor circulation of air. I found the smell of fumes in the Dohwa by-street stronger and more unpleasant than in the 8-lane (40meters) or 10-lane (50 metres) Mapo-ro.

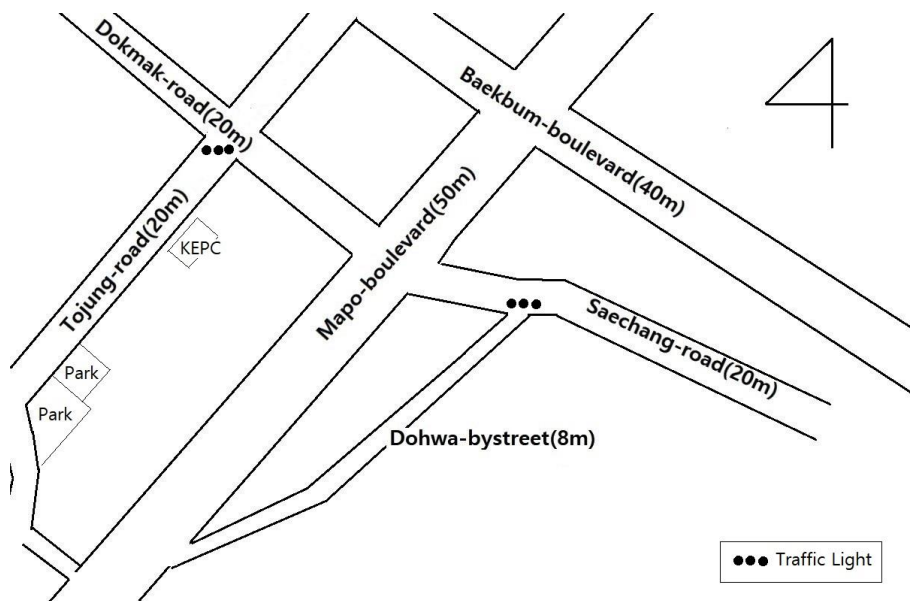


Figure 6. Dohwa by-street and Tojung-road. Photo by Kim, Young-Jin

In contrast, Tojung road has good sidewalks. The road is 20 meters wide, is tree-lined and there are roadside benches. Thanks to the trees, the road is cool in the Summer. On the east side, there are also two parks and the 5-floor KEPC (Korea Electric Power Corp.) building. The sidewalk in front of the public KEPC building is covered with uneven cobblestones for foot acupressure. In brief, the key differences between the Dohwa by-street and the Tojung road lie in their width, the existence or lack of roadside trees, their distance from Mapo-ro and in the presence or absence of high-rise buildings. In the interest of the health of the residents and merchants the size of the Dohwa by-street should be deemed unsuitable for its current purpose. It needs to become a road for pedestrians only.

The Sociocultural Meanings of High-rise Buildings

Access Control Systems and the 'Family Names' of Buildings

Let us now look at the new social orders brought by the structural transformation in the street quarter of Seoul.

First, private gated spaces have increased. Office buildings generally have access control gates or a numeric keypad on the access floor. Therefore, it is difficult for a stranger to explore freely the inside of the buildings. The mixed-use buildings, too, do not allow outsiders to enter freely. In order to protect the residents' privacy, the redevelopment masterplan forced mixed-use buildings to separate the entry to residential floors from that to commercial and office floors (Seoul Government 2004b: 33). Today, in the area under study we can easily see gates marked with words such as 'Entry to Officetel', 'Entry to Apartments' or 'Entry to Hotel'. These entry gates have automatic doors with a numeric keypad and allow in only people who have an access card or know the correct numeric code. So, the stairs, corridors and rooms of these buildings have become closed spaces. We can often see a

postman who ‘rings a bell’ at the entry of a building to deliver a parcel; he must do this twice, at the gate of a building and at the door of the apartment where he has to deliver. These buildings broaden the gap between private space and public space.

Second, in this area buildings generally have ‘family names’. Each building bears a long family name or the logo of a corporation; for example, SK Hub-Green, Hanwha Obelisk, Lotte Castle-President, Samsung Trapalace, KCC Welltz-Tower, Sinyoung G-well, Taeyoung Desian-LUV (Luxury View Villadom), Hyosung Harrington Square A-building, and so on. Walking in the street quarter, we observe family names such as SK, KCC, Hyosung, Lotte or S-Oil attached to the walls of buildings, which indicates that most of the area is occupied by large corporations. On the other hand, the given names identify the buildings. In his book, *Building the Skyline* (2016), Barr discusses the identity of skyscrapers. According to him (2016: 184, 202), the skyscraper, because of its size, naturally presents an opportunity for grand self-expression that can be independent of financial considerations and can be used for multiple purposes, including advertising, ego-boosting, competition and conspicuous consumption. In the case of Mapo-ro, the buildings’ given names or nicknames tell us what identity the buildings want to have. Their given names are straightforward. For example, there are names to symbolize ‘well-being’, like G-Well or Welltz; to mean ‘centre’, like Hub, Trapalace or World-Mark; to indicate ‘higher height’, like Acro-tower or Tower; to signify ‘political power’, like President, Palace or Castle.

The high-rise buildings around Mapo-ro mainly accommodate franchises or company-operated stores on the ground floor. Interestingly, coffee shops, restaurants and convenience stores have no special names. The names of the franchise stores or company branches are usually composed of two parts. One part is the brand name of the franchise or the name of the headquarters such as Seven-eleven, Starbucks, the other is the location of shop such as Obelisk (building name), Gongdeok (neighbourhood name), Iljin (building name); for example, ‘Obelisk-store of Seven-eleven’, ‘Gongdeok-store of Starbucks’, ‘Iljin building-store of Starbucks’. These stores are run by a shop manager instead of an owner, do not have their own unique identity and tend to provide the same service as that of the head store. They keep to the management guidelines and have the same content in menu, price and interior design. It all looks familiar to me even when I walk into a store for the first time.

Thus, the street quarter of Mapo-ro has become an area where it is difficult to find a building without a family name or a franchise without a brand name, which usually signifies a family’s fame and wealth. These stores’ given names clearly signify their ambition, to be higher, richer and more powerful. Parallel to this, we observe that the coffee shops have replaced the social functions of the streets. People no longer wait for someone or chat with acquaintances in the streets. Instead, they use cafes for such social activities. Now, one has to pay a fee to engage in social activities that used to be carried out without cost in the streets. In short, in the street quarter social life has become expensive.

State-led Gentrification

The Downtown Redevelopment of Seoul affected the increase of the high-rise buildings in the street quarter of Mapo-ro. At the same time, land value soared, which was followed by the gentrification of both the surrounding areas and the street quarter. Let us look at this process.

The high-density redevelopment of the street quarter was closely related to the development of Yeoui-island, which was an empty lot until the mid-1960s. When the government relocated there the Capitol and the Korean Stock Exchange, the island was turned into an important area politically and economically. At the same time, Mapo-ro was given a new function as a passage connecting the island to downtown Seoul, and the government started to beautify the boulevard to show off Seoul as a modernized city. In spite of being located outside downtown Seoul, in 1979 the street quarter of Mapo-ro was added to the target areas of Downtown Redevelopment. The redevelopment project is still going on. The location of Mapo-ro, I note, contributed to attract government development interest both in the surrounding areas and in the boulevard.

The redevelopment is characterized by wholesale clearance and private investment (Kim and Yoon 2003: 581). Due to lack of public funds, the Seoul government offered favourable terms to developers in order to attract private capital (Kim and Yoon 2003: 587). Firstly, a developer could expropriate the whole land earmarked for redevelopment and for this it was sufficient to have the agreement of two-thirds of the land and building owners (Kim and Yoon 2003: 585). Yoon (1987: 57-61) argues that thus the redevelopment mainly benefited large corporations. Hackworth and Smith (2001: 466) point out that while the involvement of the state was often justified with the need to stop the decline, the effect was highly class specific. Scholars have suggested that the property expropriation for renewal are very unfair, but the law has not yet been changed in South Korea. Secondly, the redevelopment involved a dual compensation system. Compensation for the expropriated land was to be made in cash. Compensation for downtown redevelopment was to be made in kind, either in land or in buildings after the development was completed. This compensation system was criticized as unfair because the land price generally increased after the redevelopment was completed and all the profit went to the developers (Kim and Yoon. 2003: 585). Thirdly, the government has intensified the incentives for mixed-use construction in order to prevent, it was said, the hollowing of downtown Seoul since 1994 (Seoul Government 1994a: 116 and 122; 1996: 144-146; 2001: 145-146; 2004a: 84-87). For example, mixed-use construction could obtain a FAR incentive of 50% for buildings with residential units over 30%, of 100% for those with residential units over 50% and of 150% for those with residential units over 70% in 2004 (Seoul Government 2004a: 85).

After the Korean financial crisis of 1997, the country's economy underwent a slowdown and the demand for office buildings decreased. Nonetheless, high-rise buildings are continuously built in the areas around Mapo-ro due to policies, like FAR bonus, in support of the mixed-use construction. One thinks, for example, of the 40-floor Lotte Castle-President,

the 35-floor Hanwha Obelisk and the 31-floor Samsung Trapalace (See Table 4).⁹ These policies were closely related to the Korean economic crisis of 1997. In the crisis' aftermath, the redevelopment masterplan of 2001 assumed that the temporary demand for residential and commercial buildings would increase, while the demand for offices would shrink. The plan pointed out that in order to revitalize development the government needed to lift some restrictions on land use and respond quickly to market demands (Seoul Government 2001: 163).

The development of mixed-use buildings also affected apartment prices. An apartment in a new mixed-use building is generally sold for higher price than one in an exclusively residential building. Notably, this happens because the price cap system for new houses does not apply to mixed-use buildings. Furthermore, as the mixed-use buildings contributed to improving the image of the surrounding areas, the overall land value increased. For example, in February 2017 a warehouse of the Daehan Floor Corporation, which is located on the west side of Mapo-ro, was sold for 105-million Korean won (KRW) per pyeong.¹⁰ Opposite the warehouse, on the east side of Mapo-ro, there is the Seoul Garden Hotel; in 1998, the official land value of the site was 25 to 30 million KRW per pyeong — that is, 3 or 4 times lower than in 2007. In the case of the lots around the Gongdeok rotary, the land price was about 15 million KRW in 1998, when the Gyeongui-line near the rotary still run on ground level; in 2017, it was 7 times higher (Seoul Government 2001: 143).

As we have seen, despite the economic recession that followed the financial crisis of 1997, both the height of high-rise buildings and land values have increased in Mapo-ro. Thanks to the aforementioned incentives, some buildings even exceed the existing height limit. The columnists Alex Marshall (2013) and Barr (2016) have offered helpful ideas in their analysis of this physical change and its sociocultural impact. Marshall argues that income inequality promotes the proliferation of skyscrapers. For him, nations that have relatively equal incomes have few skyscrapers, whereas nations with great wealth and great poverty have more. There, citizens can put pressure on the government during the negotiation process between developers and the government over building height. On the other hand, Barr (2016: 202) draws on statistical evidence to argue the relationship between social inequality and skyscraper height. For him, periods of extreme inequality are associated with periods of extreme height. In the US, he argues, in a year in which the top 1% of the population earned more than 20% of the nation's income, additions to the skyline nearly doubled, increasing by about 12 floors. In South Korea, after the crisis of 1997 many companies were restructured and unemployment sharply increased. This roughly coincided with the period when buildings

⁹ 'Seoul Mapo District Announcement, No.2008-573: Permission of Plan Change of Urban Environment Redevelopment at the 22nd section of Block I, Mapo-ro'.

¹⁰ The pyeong is the South Korean standard traditional measure for real estate floorspace. 0.3025 pyeong equal 1 square metre. See the article, 'Dahanjebun, the sale of real estate of Korean won 71,3 billion' (*Yonhap News*, 14/7/2017).

height increased in the redevelopment areas. There, on average, the height of buildings was below 17 stories until 1997, rising to above 20 stories after 1998 (Seoul Government 2010b: 22-23).

High-rise buildings bring about costs of various kinds that are not met by developers. As I have mentioned, they contribute to create a microclimate, casting shadows on the streets and causing ‘wind effect’. It is not only the icicles hanging from the upper floors that sometimes threaten to fall on pedestrians; a person who jumped from a high building fell on a passer-by, killing both. As we know, high-rise buildings generally have several floors deep underground; the necessary excavation can potentially cause damage to the adjacent buildings. However, high-rise buildings proliferate, for they meet the interests of certain classes. We have considered the various benefits offered by the government to large companies for the renewal of downtown Seoul, including property expropriation, FAR bonuses and tax benefits. A tall building exceeding in height the surrounding buildings is a visual representation of these incentives and of the wealth and power that made the construction possible.

Citizens’ Activity in the Public Space

The Gyeongui Railroad was demolished in 2006. The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport (MLIT) owns the empty land. The Korea Rail Network Authority (KRNA) has the right of management. In 2007, the KRNA and the Mapo District agreed to create a commercial zone. In 2011, the E-Land Group was chosen as developer. A multi-purpose building of 20 stories was supposed to be completed by 2015. While the E-Land Group waited for the building permit, the KRNA allowed the Neuljang Cooperative Federation (NCF) to run a traditional market on the empty land.¹¹ When the KRNA asked the NCF to stop using the land, the latter refused to do so and, in November 2016, together with the CAGPS declared this public space to be the ‘26th Autonomous Region’. These two organizations have appropriated the space for their activities, claiming that the land should be used for citizens’ activities, not for the commercial purposes of large companies. Their argument is supported by scholars and activists who maintain that public space should be used by citizens (*Hankyoreh*, Oct. 7, 2017).¹² So, members of the CAGPS sell food, clothes or accessories. Also, a ‘gallery’ has been built with plywood, where photographs of local buildings to be expropriated and demolished are displayed and concerts are occasionally organized. However, the merchants usually have few customers and the activists have little interaction with the residents. As a whole, this public space looks like an isolated island and the landscape contrasts sharply with the surrounding areas and their tall buildings. Nevertheless, the activists continue to attempt to create new possibilities by investing time

¹¹ For reference, ‘Neuljang’ means a large field where goods can be sold.

¹² See the newspaper article, ‘A year since that they were expelled for “Luxury Residence”... Ahyeon street carts are still alive’ (*Hankyoreh*, 7/10/2017).

http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/813573.html

and energy, as opposed to big money. For analytical purposes, their efforts to preserve this open space may be compared to those aimed at conserving spaces for social interaction.

Conclusion

In the street quarter of Mapo-ro, the number of high-rise buildings has increased since 1980s and new buildings tend to be higher. When the overdevelopment of downtown Seoul became a social issue in the early 2000s, the government reduced the FAR limit. However, the number of high-rise buildings has continued to increase because the government offers several incentives to developers in order to attract private investment. In short, the increase in the number of high-rise buildings is closely intertwined with the government's FAR incentive policies.

Today, the street quarter is crowded with the buildings of large corporations and the commercial and residential buildings for the middle class. We have seen that the high-rise buildings have 'family names' that correspond to the names of large corporations. We have also seen that their given names are followed by words like 'higher', 'more wealth' or 'more powerful'. We have found that, like gated communities, the residential and commercial buildings are closed to the public, thus broadening the gap between private space and public space. Lastly, we have considered the activities of the CAGPS, whose members not only speak out for citizens' right to the public space but also put their ideas into practice.

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