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Essays by
The Global Social
Innovation Advisory
Committee for
Seoul City

Case studies by
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SEOUl METROPOLITAN
GOVERNMENT

Seoul
as a people-powered city
from local to global and back again
This collection of essays has been curated and edited by SIX, coordinators of the Global Social Innovation Advisory Committee for Seoul City, with the generous support and guidance of the Seoul Metropolitan Government. We are grateful to all those who have provided contributions, especially Ada Wong, Anil Gupta, Ezio Manzini, Gabriella Gomez-Mont, Geoff Mulgan, Louise Pulford and Peter Ramsden who are part of the Global Social Innovation Advisory Committee for Seoul City and So Jung Rim for compiling the case studies.

The purpose of this book is to introduce and promote the social innovation legacy of Seoul City to a global audience and to cities around the world grappling with similar challenges. The essays have been written from the perspectives of the leading global thinkers on the Social Innovation Advisory Committee.
SIX is the world’s primary network for social innovation, facilitating exchange and driving social change. Since we were established in 2008, SIX has connected like-minded social innovation pioneers to operate as an exchange and get social innovation on the public agenda. Now, ten years later, we have a unique insight into the field and a global network of policy makers, academics, funders, businesses, governments and students. Equipped with a proven methodology, unique insights and a truly diverse network of people, we use our experience to grow the field, engage new actors, provoke different conversations and drive social innovation globally.

Located at the centre of the Korean Peninsula, Seoul has been the capital city of Korea for more than 600 years. With more than 10 million inhabitants, Seoul is the largest metropolis in Korea and one of the largest cities in the world.

With 18,700 staff and more than 30 bureaus, Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) plays an essential role in serving its citizens and enhancing their quality of life, covering areas from urban planning, welfare, technology, economy, employment and transport to culture, youth, social inclusion and the environment. Increasingly, the SMG has expanded its scope and is playing an active role in the international arena.
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Why this book?

This collection of essays and case studies brings together innovators from around the world to reflect on the pioneering work of the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) over the last decade. Each of the contributors has been closely involved in the work of the SMG through the Global Social Innovation Advisory Committee of Seoul City and are therefore in a unique position to relate the initiatives undertaken in Seoul to create a ‘people-powered city’ to parallel innovations being undertaken in their own contexts, from Mexico and Hong Kong to India and Europe.

Since 2010 Seoul has exemplified a new breed of city that is hungry to learn from and share with others. It has been an active participant in many networks, hosting gatherings and speeding up the circulation of ideas in fields ranging from the circular economy and social innovation to smart cities and new thinking about the city as an urban commons.

Our hope is that some of the ideas in this book will inspire other cities. We also hope that it will help to sustain the dynamic cross-pollination and radical innovation that Seoul has shown in recent years, showing that cities can play leading roles in everything from action on climate change to welfare reform and democratic renewal.
Seoul as a people-powered city

Geoff Mulgan
Over the last decade Seoul became a magnet for innovators and city leaders from all over the world. This was a time when South Korea was becoming much more prominent globally, whether through digital products, or the work of musicians and film-makers. Seoul’s work complemented this upsurge of interest in all things Korean as the city administration showed just how dynamic and innovative a great city could become, pioneering new approaches to the environment, community, welfare and urban development.

Much of this was the result of the innovative approaches taken by SMG during the 2010s, and here we focus on the many practical and useful experiments undertaken in Seoul that offer lessons that can guide other cities. These have a relevance that goes far beyond individual programmes or leaders because Seoul was willing to take risks and experiment in ways that very few other cities were able to do.
The heart of this story is a very simple idea, that of empowering people. South Korea remains in some respects quite a traditional, authoritarian and patriarchal society. It is not much more than a generation since the end of the military dictatorship. The economy continues to be dominated by a small number of family-owned ‘chaebol’ conglomerates, which in turn exercise a very big influence on the mainstream media.

Yet SMG was able to turn these traditions on their head and show how to be serious about serving the people and listening, and embedding this spirit in the everyday working of the city.

That meant a radical shift to listening and not just broadcasting messages at citizens, an approach symbolised by the giant ear sculpture placed outside City Hall. It meant opening up the city and its decisions - governing with citizens rather than just doing things for and to them.

This marked a significant shift in the underlying patterns of power. South Korea has long had a very lively civil society, which grew in part out of fierce opposition to the dictatorship, and had regularly mobilised huge numbers of citizens onto the streets. But it had always been left outside the systems of power that fed off close ties between the chaebols, the ruling party, the dominant media and the military and intelligence services.

My first ever visit to Seoul was as a guest of the then Mayor in the 2000s who had brought together a group of global companies to give advice. Then it was clear that the city administration was closely tied to big business. Society was largely invisible, or expected to be at most a grateful observer of actions taken on their behalf. The approaches were all very top-down.

In the 2010s the approach was very different. Government was opened up to communities, NGOs and small businesses, without sacrificing the speed and competence which mark so many things in South Korea. SMG was tireless in trying things out, creating new intermediaries and new places – like the Social Innovation Park. It backed grassroots projects - many described in case studies here - and helped them to develop, rather than forcing them to fit the city’s top-down perspective. It brought new voices into government and was tireless in reaching out to groups of all kinds.
SMG also sought to deepen democracy, starting off with citizen engagement in small grants programmes and then extending this to much more ambitious programmes of participatory budgeting, and through the Democracy Seoul platform. This work connected into fields of innovation - the maker movement, open data, the commons and blockchain. And it linked Seoul to other like-minded change-makers around the world, for example through the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, recognising that the serious work on transforming energy and transport had to happen in big cities.

Meanwhile, City Hall was opened up to the public and the space in front of it became packed with events and stalls of all kinds. Big businesses were encouraged to show what they could do to help the city meet its goals.

SMG was also very engaged with technology - as is appropriate for the world’s most advanced digital city which has long had broadband speeds far ahead of North America or Europe. So there were big moves on data and its uses, on promoting AI and the Internet of Things, and turning the rhetoric of the smart city into projects that really were useful for the people.

There are some big messages for other cities from the last decade in Seoul:

First, on how to govern: governing with citizens is demanding but done well it unlocks energies of all kinds.

Second, a message about approach: constant experiment and iteration is normal in some other fields, including business and technology. But administrations tend to be the opposite: slow, bureaucratic and heavy. Seoul showed how a healthy restlessness could be made a virtue.

Third, a message about topics: SMG was not afraid to face the big questions head on, whether climate change, air quality or welfare. Too many cities get distracted by the more superficial or trivial issues.

Above all SMG showed how to combine being open and decisive; humble yet strong; leading but also serving.

The advisory council that I was honoured to chair brought together some of the most extraordinary innovators from around the world - from Mexico to India, Italy to the UK, Thailand to Hong Kong. Each of these individuals had shown in their own lives how to overcome barriers, how to see in any situation not just what it is but what it could be.

They were natural allies for SMG. Here we have asked them not just to reflect on what was learned from Seoul but also on how its experiments and initiatives connected to others around the world.

Hopefully, helped by this group of advisers and innovators, we can capture what was most valuable and enduring about Seoul’s work and spread some of its energy and creativity to other cities across the world.
The heart of this story is a very simple idea, that of empowering people.
Close to the citizen
A new idea of proximity

Ezio Manzini

The biggest cities are made up of neighbourhoods. These are the human scales at which most everyday life happens, even in an age when so much happens online. But they are too often ignored or even crushed by city planners with a helicopter view. Seoul is one of many cities working to re-emphasise neighbourhoods - echoing parallel initiatives such as the ‘15 minute city’ in Paris and Barcelona’s work on city ‘super-blocks’. Here Ezio Manzini, one of the world’s leading thinkers about the connections between design, social innovation and sustainability, offers his reflections on how to be local.
Can we look at a city of 10 million people and see it as a tangle of neighbourhood communities?

Yes, we can. And Seoul City has done so, turning this vision into concrete projects. This ability to challenge the way we would normally look at a city is part of the immense social innovation legacy of Seoul. And that’s what I’d like to address here: the ability to (re)think the city starting from citizens themselves and their daily lives; and the ability to re-imagine a new form of proximity that weaves together long networks, typical of a global city like Seoul, with the short ones of functionality, culture and neighbourhood-level economy.

In doing so, and going against all the dominant visions of contemporary cities, The Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) helped to realize the idea of a ‘city of proximity’, and demonstrated how this can help to make a city more collaborative, resilient and sustainable.

During the 9-year administration between 2011-2020, this idea, which at the beginning seemed almost unthinkable, has become more tangible and relevant. The maturity and diffusion of digital technologies underpin the technical networks that are the infrastructure of this city of proximity. Not only that, the worsening of the environmental crisis has made this urban form intrinsically more resilient, and an example to follow. Finally, the tragedy of Covid-19 has made clear the importance of proximity and the sociability that this proximity makes possible. Not only that: it is also showing how, in many situations, people have started to put this into practice, more than anyone had thought possible before the pandemic.

To argue this thesis, I will start from an emblematic project, and then extend the discussion to a broader and overall vision.

Reaching Out Community Service Centres (ROCS Centres)
The ROCS Centre initiative (see p44) is a social services project, established in 2014, to try to shift from a passive to an active model of welfare, one in which citizens are not only service users, but active and collaborative members of a caring community. To do this, it was necessary to act on three levels: to change the nature of neighbourhood offices from functional and administrative spaces to community centres; to promote and support neighbourhood-based participation and community autonomy; and to distribute these centres and these activities across the territory, to bring them “within 10 minutes reach of citizens”. Each of these three interventions were connected: the transformation of offices into social centres implies a different role for professional caregivers, who must also become community organisers. On the other hand, in order for...
Let’s imagine a city of proximity, based on a new combination of closeness and openness.
them to do so, they must operate in a space of proximity that facilitates meetings, allowing them to develop relationships of friendship and mutual trust.

Seoul is not the only city to have moved in the direction of collaborative welfare and its necessary territorial roots. A similar path was followed, for example, in Milan, with the WEMI-Welfare Milano project, and in Barcelona, with the Superilles Socials (Social Superblocks) project. These projects share an important feature with that of Seoul: the search for collaborative welfare requires the implementation of new care relationships. And these can only occur in conditions of proximity. Physical proximity is necessary to improve the accessibility of services for users and working conditions of professional caregivers, while social proximity is also needed to help build trust and familiarity which are required to transform a public service into a support platform for a community. That is, which allows citizens and caregivers to be transformed into ‘communities of care’.

A broader trend

This orientation, which has led to rethinking the role of citizens in the production of urban welfare, is the expression of a broader trend. One which leads us to look at the city starting from the experiences of its inhabitants, from the ways in which they live their lives, to the propensity, ability and practical possibility of citizens being the city’s co-designers and co-producers. What is emerging is a new vision, and one to which Seoul has greatly contributed.

The vision is this. Let’s imagine an urban space that allows citizens to find what they need in their everyday lives just a few minutes’ walk from home: a city that offers the practical and relational advantage of being close to what they need (as in a village), but, with all the openness and cultural dynamism of a large city. In other words, let’s imagine a city of proximity, based on a new combination of closeness and openness.

A new economic hypothesis also corresponds to this vision: the possibility of developing an economy of proximity that

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2. Barcelona has a set of social interventions within a wider urban strategy called Superblocks (Superilles in Catalan). It consists of three steps: (1) Superblocks - a programme which aims to reduce cars traffic in adjacent blocks and “give back the roads to the citizens”, (2) Social Superblocks - a programme which aims to reframe the care system by adopting a place-based approach, and (3) Integrated Superblocks - a place-based approach which aims to reorganise the whole urban infrastructure. Read more about Superblocks programme here: https://www.barcelona.cat/infobarcelona/en/tema/urban-planning-and-infrastructures/turning-barcelona-into-a-big-superblock_1005852.html
combines the regeneration of traditional commercial and productive activities in the neighbourhood, with the possibilities brought by digital manufacturing and online work (of which Covid-19 has shown the possibilities, redistributing it in the city towards private homes, but also, potentially, towards a new generation of neighbourhood co-working). Of course, this proximity economy, which is based on the advantages of short networks, is not proposed as a substitute, but as a complement to that which operates on long global networks. Thus, taken together, these diverse economies form a richer and potentially more resilient and sustainable socio-economic ecosystem.

Several cities around the world have started to move in this direction, giving it different names. For example: in Barcelona, this programme is called Superilles Integrals (Integrated SuperBlocks). In Milan, reference is made to the Modello Milano (the Milan Model). In Paris it’s ‘la ville du quart d’heure’ (the 15-minute city). This last example has been particularly effective at conveying what a city of proximity is and how it works, and is starting to spread. Indeed, the city of proximity tends to be the 15-minute city.

Seoul’s ‘urban villages’

In Seoul, the Reaching Out Community Service Centre (ROCS Centre) initiative proposes its own idea of a city of proximity. However, there are other projects based on the same idea. Addressing the problems of poverty, inequality, social exclusion and marginalisation, in 2012 the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) established the Seoul Community Support Centre (SCSC) to guide and facilitate the creation of ‘urban villages’ (see p80). And, with this, promote the participation of citizens in various local initiatives, based on the concept of the 15-minute city, without using this expression specifically.

This vision for a city of proximity is a theme which runs through many, very different projects developed in Seoul in the last nine years. For example, the Seongdaegol Energy Independent Village (see p52) which, through the proactive commitment of citizens, aims to minimize the need for external energy sources, enriching the city of proximity also with energy autonomy. Or various smart city projects (see p88), when the smartness they deal with has been oriented towards providing digital platforms and services to support citizens’ ability to get in touch, collaborate or help each other also, and above all, in the physical world.

In conclusion

These moves towards a city of proximity in Seoul is only the beginning of a long journey. But breaking consolidated ideas and doing something concrete in a new direction is always the most difficult move. It was necessary to be able to think that this idea of the city was also applicable in a metropolis like Seoul. Steps in this direction have taken place. Now others will be able to move forward in this direction.
Innovating at many scales: political imagination meets social ingenuity in Seoul

Gabriella Gómez-Mont

To transform a city or innovate, it is vital to operate at multiple levels, and Seoul did this well. It did so at the level of the neighbourhood; through nurturing specialised districts, like maker spaces, which could become magnets for new energies; and through big urban developments. Each was a way to harness the city’s collective talent and capability. Gabriella Gómez-Mont founded Mexico City’s Laboratorio para la Ciudad which gained a reputation as one of the world’s most imaginative innovation teams within a city government. Here she reflects on how Seoul managed creativity at multiple scales.
Innovation at many scales: political imagination meets social ingenuity in Seoul

Local governments are often enamoured of flashy legacy projects - building large infrastructures and grand development plans. In other words: visible changes to the infrastructure of a city. But recent global events - the pandemic most notably, but also the democratic crisis sweeping the world - have reminded us that there are ever-shifting and elusive dynamics at play in any city that are just as important and monumental, albeit invisible to the naked eye. So governments need to think about the built environment, yes, but also prioritise the creation of collective purpose, public value and wellbeing and harness the most powerful and underutilised resources that a society has: the individual and collective talent of its citizens.

This is where seemingly small projects can take on a disproportionally large role, especially with the government promoting not only vertical ties (listening deeply to citizens) but also horizontal ones: creating public and civic infrastructure that allows citizens to meet, collaborate, help shape their society through access to knowledge, tools, resources, spaces that enable this to happen. The right to the city. A city for all. It is the sum of multiple, nested systems and networks at many scales that can and should cover the urbanscape.

Seoul City is one of the cities around the world that understood the importance of grassroots solutions, continuously exploring different ways of amplifying the energy of talented individuals, community collectives and social movements, channeling it all into an institutional response.

The first time I visited Seoul was in 2014, when Seoul City’s citizen-centred policies were getting noticed in the urban policy circles. Besides the city’s commitment to human rights and progressive policy, I had heard that Seoul City was brilliantly balancing impressive economic growth (Seoul is one of the wealthiest cities in the world) with an equally impressive investment in community life; interested in ideas from every corner of the megalopolis, not just from city hall or the usual suspects. Seoul was working on a rare balance between big-picture thinking and grassroots potential; macro and micro politics working in sync; GDP and long-term infrastructure just as important as the intimate, daily life of a city, instead of being at odds with one another.

In other words: the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) was one of the first cities to allow for supple citizen networks to create a collective response, articulating political imagination and social ingenuity. This is the basis for novel and evolving social contracts that should also be at the heart of policy.
governments to adopt strategic and transversal policies to augment citizens’ capacity to create public value. Seoul started placing important bets on social innovation by building incubators, co-working offices and other communal spaces across the city – such as the Social Innovation Park - or by launching a programme that opened up rooftops and other underutilised spaces to artists and entrepreneurs. Seoul was also one of the first cities to become a Sharing City: promoting trust-based relationships between people, investing in private-sector capabilities, expanding platform-based infrastructure and existing sharing enterprises; incubating sharing economy startups, utilizing idle public resources, installing tool libraries and shared bookshelves in communities throughout the city. And also thinking about open and shared knowledge as a resource - by providing more access to data plus supporting sharing in the digital realm in partnership with Creative Commons Korea for example.

At the same time, besides creating an enabling environment, the city placed its own bets on the sharing economy: introducing a car sharing service for example. And also by creating novel social policies, such as one of my favorite social programmes: connecting senior citizens who had extra rooms with students who need a place to stay, with accompanying tax incentives. (In this way Seoul tackled two different urban challenges at once: the lack of affordable housing for young people who were being forced to leave the city, and also the loneliness epidemic amongst the elderly.)

Even the city was sprawling widely, it never lost sight of the importance of the neighbourhood unit. Seoul also started supporting neighbourhoods to organise their own energy cooperatives, and introduced new feed-in tariffs to encourage even more investment, pushing for a solar and wind energy transition at the same time that horizontal citizen ties become strengthened.

Also, in 2014 the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) announced its plan to develop the capital through eight redevelopment projects that would both preserve and refurbish current historical buildings, and simultaneously bring new life and a revitalised identity to communities. Projects such as Seoullo 7017, Sewoon Makercity, Mapo Oil Tank projects created interesting and specialised epicentres for people to congregate around common interests.
If there is one lesson from Seoul it’s that tapping into the talent of citizens has to be multifaceted and run deep in the DNA of City Hall.
In the garment industry the SMG both helped protect and support small, traditional, family-run businesses, as well as bring in cutting edge design and fashion entrepreneurs so that cross-pollination would occur.

Throughout, the SMG emphasised the importance of creating spaces for joint experimentation, such as the public Maker Spaces programme. And through this continuous combination of macro and micro politics, tradition and innovation, Seoul City was able to think about the possibilities of the human-scale city, understanding the potential of neighbourhood collectives and other forms of self-organisation, supported by urban policy and long-term visions.

There is still a long way to go for any city to truly take advantage of the collective and creative capacities within its streets. But there is a growing acknowledgement that deep societal transformations will require all of us. As former Chief Creative Officer of Mexico City, I led the Laboratorio para la Ciudad, an experimental and creative office of the Mexico City Government reporting to the Mayor. The Lab was created to tackle urban challenges - from experiments in democracy and mobility to projects related to spatial justice, play as a city making tool, new models of governance and tech platforms - creating novel transdisciplinary methodologies and participatory practices, exploring ways to find common ground in a gargantuan, diverse (and often divided) city. Our projects included crowdsourcing the Mexico City Constitution with the participation of one million followers and 300,000 signers to Mapatón, which generated previously unavailable data on the informal bus system that provides 14 million journeys a day.

Many other cities have explored different policies meant to open government in different ways to its citizens. The UK had an ambitious open data programme that inspired many governments. Brazil created the world’s first participatory budgets (which Seoul has also implemented). Taiwan has been exploring digital democracy in fascinating ways. The list goes on. But if there is one lesson from Seoul it’s that tapping into the talent of citizens has to be multifaceted and run deep in the DNA of City Hall. Urban governance cannot be one single policy or project, but will happen at the intersection of many of them, and a new way of thinking about the role of government.

This, in the end is what is needed: for governments to create an enabling environment where people can easily find the infrastructure, resources, platforms, funds and connections to help solve social, economic and environmental problems in innovative ways, maximizing the city’s resources and budget, taking on a life of its own. A city where political imagination is capable of instigating social ingenuity, and vice versa. At the scale of an individual, at the scale of a neighbourhood, at the scale of a megalopolis - and beyond.
Seoul as a people-powered city - from local to global and back again

Civil servants from the Cheong-Ok Community Service Centre going on home visits.

Image provided by SMG
CASE STUDY

Reaching Out Community Service Centre

 찾동

The Reaching Out Community Service Centre programme identifies at-risk groups and approaches the problems they face in an integrated manner, thereby solving their challenges more effectively. It decentralises the social care delivery system in Seoul and makes services more accessible to citizens.
Seoul as a people-powered city - from local to global and back again

Background

Even though South Korea has gone through rapid economic growth, it remains a highly unequal society as shown by the recent satirical film, Parasite. The most vulnerable groups include women, the young and the old.

In the Songpa District in 2014, a mother and her two adult daughters committed suicide due to poverty. This incident shocked the public and highlighted the gaps in the Korean social welfare system. At-risk families were falling through the cracks and the city recognised the need for a citizen-centred approach to social care. As a result, the Reaching Out Community Service Centre (ROCS Centre) programme was launched in 2014.

How does it work?

The SMG’s ROCS Centre policy aimed to turn the focus of the welfare delivery system from supply to demand. This meant that the city administration shifted from a passive, responsive approach (where the system waits for citizens to apply for services) to a more active approach (where the system goes out and engages with the community).

The SMG made the following changes as part of this policy:

- The SMG increased the number of social workers at the community level to better serve welfare beneficiaries. Since 2014, the number of social welfare personnel has more than doubled. The SMG has also consistently increased the annual welfare budget since its inception.

- The SMG also tried to experiment with a more universal model of welfare. However, universal welfare requires a huge budget and there are limitations for a city government to adopt a universal approach. So the SMG targeted the policy for households going through particular transitions in their lives - for example, families with small children (birth to early childhood) and those leaving the workplace and heading into retirement.

- The role of the civil servant changed from a passive receiver of complaints to that of an active community outreach worker, conducting home visits and building close relationships with citizens in a small locality. The SMG also assigned visiting nurses to the community centres to do medical check-ups for residents.

- The neighbourhood community service centres (which used to be a space for general administrative affairs) became more of a communal space for residents. The physical spaces of these administrative offices were redesigned and renovated in line with the new focus and function of community spaces. The aim was to make ROCS Centres the focal point for each neighbourhood and to ensure that residents were within a 10-minute distance of any centre.7

- Seoul City connected this initiative with neighbourhood planning (“urban village making initiatives”), strengthening local governance. The idea was to strengthen and empower local communities to support each other, identify and solve local challenges together by discussing and making decisions through various resident meetings. The SMG considered strong relationships and empowerment of local communities a fertile ground for effective public welfare services.

7. Presentation by JE Bae, ‘About SMG’s Social Innovation: Reaching Out Community Service Centre’, 14 September 2017
Scaling

The SMG scaled up the ROCS Centre programme over a 5-year period, starting with 80 neighbourhoods in 13 districts in 2014. And as of July 2019, all 424 neighbourhoods in 25 districts have a ROCS Centre. Even though the ROCS Centre policy improved the identification of at-risk households, referrals and connections to the appropriate services still needed improvement. In 2018, the SMG announced that the ROCS Centre policy would go from ‘my neighbourhood’ level to ‘my street’ level. The SMG updated the existing programme with the aim of strengthening local communities and the public safety net. Local residents can now have a direct say in local decision making through a Community Council and can use residence tax as a budget. Also, the SMG increased the budget for emergency welfare support and the Care SOS Centre was established to provide a one-stop service for citizens. The ‘care manager’ at the Care SOS Centre must refer to necessary services such as health centres, social welfare centres or dementia centres, within 72 hours.

Impact

In South Korea, the central government holds the welfare policy agenda and a large portion of the budget; the role of local authorities tends to be passive and ancillary. However, the SMG has unique conditions and high financial independence which means it can develop and test new welfare policies and programmes, without central government support.

Many people regard the Reaching Out Community Service Centres as a public service innovation rather than a welfare innovation. The policy changed the way civil servants work - shifting from administrative tasks to active problem-solving, beyond their departmental silos. Recognising that social problems are complex and interconnected, rather than separating out the problem, the policy focused on starting from the individual and addressing the multiple needs they have.

In 2017, when a new president, Moon Jae-in took office in South Korea after months of protests which led to the impeachment of Park Geun-hye, the new administration’s pledge was to take the Reaching Out Community Service Centre policy to the national level. Since then, it has been adopted nationally.

Resources

- Seo Young-ji, ‘The suffering in the blindspots of Korea’s welfare system’, Hankyoreh, 17th March 2014
- Presentation by JE Bae, ‘About the SMG’s Social Innovation Initiatives: Reaching Out Community Service Centre’, 14 September 2017
- Interview with Lee Taesoo
CASE STUDY

Seongdaegol Energy Independent Village
성대골 에너지 자립마을

Seongdaegol Village, a small neighbourhood (Sangdo 3 & 4) in Seoul City near the Seongdae traditional market in Dongjak District, was deeply influenced by the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan and started an energy movement which has grown significantly over the last ten years. The Seongdaegol community has become a beacon for the energy transition movement in South Korea.
Seoul as a people-powered city - from local to global and back again

How the movement grew

The Seongdaegol community did not start out as an energy movement but as a movement to build a local primary school. The area had a high concentration of old low rise buildings and there was no primary school nearby. The local residents, mainly women with young children, began a book club and set up a small community library for children in 2010. The community paid for the rental space and the library was run with volunteers. It became a base for other community activities such as a neighbourhood market, talks, a local newspaper, music recitals, theatre performances etc. These were Seongdaegol’s early experiences of building community solidarity and bonding.

The Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster was a pivotal moment for the Seongdaegol community. Shocked by the scale of the disaster and driven by the need to do something about it, the director of the library contacted various environmental organisations and began organising talks for residents on the topic of the environment. The residents learned about other citizen-led energy communities and set the community goal of becoming an energy independent village. In 2011, the community started a series of activities to reduce energy consumption, establishing a ‘Power Saving Plant’ (as opposed to a power plant).

SMG’s energy policies

The majority of South Korea’s energy is obtained from fossil fuels, with less than 7% from renewable sources. It also has the highest density of nuclear reactors in the world and nuclear power provides 26.8% of South Korea’s power. The Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant disaster in 2011 (which led to major blackouts in Seoul) prompted a major rethink about Seoul’s energy policy.

The SMG started policies such as the ‘One Less Nuclear Power Initiative’ as a way of responding to future energy crises and reducing Seoul’s reliability on nuclear energy. The SMG started policies such as the ‘One Less Nuclear Power Initiative’ as a way of responding to future energy crises and reducing Seoul’s reliability on nuclear energy. The SMG committed to increasing its energy independence by 20% and set out a vision of being an ‘energy independent city’, which was in line with the Seongdaegol community’s vision. In 2012, the SMG started the Energy Independent Neighbourhood initiative, which aimed to create neighbourhoods with increased energy independence through energy saving, energy efficiency and the production of renewable energy, thereby minimising consumption of energy produced from external sources. Seongdaegol joined the SMG’s Energy Independent Neighbourhood initiative between 2012-2014 and expanded the scale of their transition experiments. The SMG provided a framework for developing energy independent neighbourhoods across Seoul and Seongdaegol’s experience became a source of inspiration and living example for others to follow. The SMG invited Seongdaegol community members to be on the advisory committee. As of 2017, 55 energy-independent neighbourhoods were in operation around Seoul.

SMG’s Energy Independent Neighbourhood Initiative plans

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Local children in front of a bicycle-powered fruit juice maker
Image provided by SMG
Seongdaegol’s energy transition experiments

The Seongdaegol community’s energy transition experiments consisted of three types of activities:

1. Energy education and the energy saving movement

At the heart of Seongdaegol’s energy transition are energy education activities and the energy saving movement. Households/residents that participate in energy saving are called ‘kind energy protectors’, and participating businesses are called ‘kind stores’. Energy consumption statistics are visually displayed in the children’s library, triggering a friendly competition among local households and businesses.

Energy saving is encouraged through various community and cultural activities including annual energy festivals, concerts, flea markets, theatre performances and exhibitions. The ‘kind energy protectors’ also run a series of education programmes at a local secondary school and act as energy saving consultants for households (planning energy saving strategies for households through home visits).

2. Improving the energy efficiency of buildings

In 2012, the residents started a village school for children’s activities and rented out a hall. The residents discussed how they could heat the space without using fossil fuels, gas or electricity so they started an energy efficiency improvement project. With support from the SMG, they installed double glazing windows and insulation and changed the lighting. This experience made residents realise the importance of building insulation and the community started a co-operative, Village Dot Salim, focused on energy efficient home improvements and solar panel installation. Organisations that participated in the co-operative included local social enterprises, carpenters, builders, decorators, interior designers and architects.

In 2012, the co-operators opened the Energy Supermarket, a physical space for energy education, awareness raising and a store for energy saving products. Recognising the limitations of unpaid, voluntary activities for long-term sustainability and participation, the Seongdaegol community focused on activities that would help residents save money through energy conservation.
3. Adoption of renewable energy

In 2015, the Seongdaegol community also started experimenting with the idea of local energy production as a way of increasing the neighbourhood’s energy independence as part of the Seongdaegol Energy Transition Living Lab. Through this initiative, 40% of local businesses in the Seongdae traditional market participated in installing solar power on rooftops. This experience led to the setup of the Seongdaegol Energy Co-operative in 2018, an energy trading company. In the initial stage, the energy co-operative recruited 18 members and raised 100 million KRW (approx £68,000).

Resources

- Seoul: Make Seoul a City of Sunlight https://www.c40.org/profiles/2014-seoul
- Seongdaegol People http://sdgpeople.or.kr/
- Interview with Kim Soyoung
Growing relationships with empathy
For people to feel empowered over their own lives it’s vital that they have a say in how their neighbourhoods are run - from the scale of a few thousand people to tens of thousands of people and not just at the scale of districts which may be half a million people or more. Here Peter Ramsden, a leading thinker in Europe’s URBACT programme which connects cities, discusses the parallels between Seoul’s projects and those of other cities around the world.
Neighbourhoods: where top down meets bottom up

Context
Visiting neighbourhoods in Seoul which were experimenting with ‘place-based’ decision-making and empowerment approaches brought to mind similar visits in Berlin and Lisbon which have an extensive track record of enabling bottom-up participative processes for deprived neighbourhoods through a top-down framework.

Seoul has been experimenting with a wide range of participative forms of decentralised management. The city is divided into 25 urban districts, but because of the huge size of the city at nearly 10 million people these average 400,000 people and may feel as distant from the street as City Hall. The challenge Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) has faced is how to bring the city closer to the citizen at neighbourhood (dong) or village (maul) level.

From early on the Mobile Mayor’s Office (see p152) brought the administration to problem areas of the city to address local problems over short time scales – typically a fortnight. The most well-known case involved the policymakers and civil servants working for two weeks in Eunpyeong New Town built by the city near to a former military base where many apartments had remained unsold and were weighing heavily on the SMG deficit. Every 24 hours problems brought by local people were crunched by the senior policymakers and his team. Issues around local facilities, childcare and other services were addressed. Within a few months the remaining apartments had been sold reducing the city’s debt. Smaller problems have used shorter mostly two-day formats and the approach was used extensively between 2011-2017.

From 2012, inspired by Sungmisan urban village, the SMG launched an urban village programme to decentralise initiative to local communities. Sungmisan had developed organically without state support from a community-led campaign over environmental protection of a hill-top. The local group went on to set up a childcare co-operative, a local store and ultimately a co-operative school. Using this approach as a model, the focus of community building projects has been the idea of the ‘Maul’ or village. The Village Community Movement has been supported organisationally by the Seoul Community Support Centre which started in 2012 (see p80). The idea at the centre of this movement has been the establishment of Resident Self-Governing committees which can put forward project ideas and provide local coordination and animation. There are other local committees for participative budgeting, community planning and preparatory urban regeneration which often have cross membership.
Through these approaches, Seoul City shifted the emphasis of urban renewal away from ‘demolish and rebuild’ to a more collaborative approach that sought to work with local people to co-design a future and preserve large parts of the neighbourhood. Among the neighbourhoods targeted, 37 declining areas have become Urban Regeneration Areas in which a ‘softer’ approach to urban regeneration has been followed. These local committees in Seoul are very similar in conception to the Quartiers-management programme in Berlin. This approach has been developed in 34 urban neighbourhoods over a 20 year period. It has strengthened social cohesion by a community based approach in which decisions over projects to be funded are delegated to local communities through neighbourhood organisations supported by a local team. The types of projects might range from improving a pocket park to addressing gender-based violence in a migrant community.

Lisbon used a top down framework of an annual neighbourhood competition launched by the city to empower local communities to act for themselves. They designated 67 local areas and for over a decade have been funding small projects coming up from these areas with a value of up to 50,000 Euros and a timescale of 12 months. Six neighbourhoods covering 16 of these local areas have become urban regeneration areas called GABIPs each with a Task Force to implement local plans.

All three cities have brought together local committees and engaged with existing and new civil society organisations. A pragmatic mix of nomination, election and co-option has been used to bring together local knowledge and energy with expertise.

Some conclusions
All three examples show that the capacity of a neighbourhood to act is not an instant recipe. To quote Geoff Mulgan: “Capacities can’t be built in a linear way. Like so much learning they are better thought of as being like muscles, built up through exercise, repetition and coaching.” In these three examples of urban neighbourhoods, capacity has been developed by the local action group developing and implementing projects. As actors become more experienced, they are able to take on higher level discussions, plan more ambitious projects and manage the difficulties that emerge. All this takes time and requires investment in facilitation and in funding the projects themselves.

However, there are also questions that can be asked about these processes. First, there is always an issue about representativeness. Committees...
Seoul City shifted the emphasis of urban renewal away from ‘demolish and rebuild’ to a more collaborative approach that sought to work with local people to co-design a future and preserve large parts of the neighbourhood.

Second is the question of sustainability into the future. Here, the Berlin example is interesting. Despite running for more than 20 years, only four areas have graduated, and arguably these have done so through gentrification and thereby through the displacement of poorer people priced out of the rental market. In many areas it is likely that if city support was withdrawn, activity would tail off. Without resources for animation and facilitation it is difficult to sustain activity.

Third, communities need access to expert help. While they know more about the precise nature of their problems, they rarely have the skills to design and deliver solutions. For this, co-design partnerships with civil servants in the city authority is needed as well as other expertise from community builders, architect-planners and service designers. This in turn requires a different type of capacity building as these same officials and experts also need new skills - especially in listening and communication - that go beyond their technical training.

Community based neighbourhood development opens up new opportunities in urban regeneration through a deep participative approach. The city provides a top-down framework, the community delivers bottom-up energy.
Innovating and rebuilding relationships via citizens’ empowerment and collaborative local governance

Ada Wong

Seoul has worked hard to involve citizens in decision-making - governing with the people rather than doing things to or for the people. Ada Wong has decades of experience in Hong Kong working as an elected representative, innovator, social entrepreneur and educator. Here she discusses her experiences of seeing Seoul’s experiments with collaborative governance in practice.
Let the citizens of Seoul be the Mayor of Seoul.
In June 2019, I led the Hong Kong ‘Make A Difference’ (MaD) social lab team’s 20 young members to spend five days in Seoul to understand social labs and public sector innovation. MaD is a creative intermediary platform to empower young people to be changemakers. With the support of the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG), we visited many sites and met with officials and social innovation leaders. The team was amazed by the real life local governance experiments we saw and began to understand how the SMG empowered citizens through a collaborative and co-creative lab approach. I will cite two examples in this short article and conclude with some thoughts on how other cities in Asia could use similar co-creation processes in their own local contexts.

On the first day, we paid a visit to the Gusan Dong Village Library which was built with the community. From site selection to curatorial direction and operational details, the residents were collaborators, and the process was much more than listening to their views.

**Gusan Library – a collaborative empowerment approach**

The participatory process started with an unusual site and a historic building at its core surrounded by a group of eclectic buildings which the architect cleverly joined up via connecting spaces and human-centered design. The young people from Hong Kong immediately felt the difference – it was a vibrant community hub co-owned by residents, rather than a traditional public facility, and this kind of result must have stemmed from many open conversations with local residents, unencumbered by issues of hierarchy. In addition to its collection of books, the Gusan Library has rooms and quiet spaces for different activities, and it is also a memory space: a village archive was set up to preserve its history, managed by an archivist who is a life-long resident of the area.

I run an innovation intermediary and undertake tri-sector collaborative projects in Hong Kong, and often find cross-sector (government and civil society) relationship (re)building daunting. But the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) had the patience and methods to make this collaborative approach easy, and excelled in building relationships with diverse stakeholders. This is indeed the extraordinary social innovation legacy of Seoul City.

With the new administration in 2011, the SMG became more open and collaborative for its citizens. The famous phrase “let the citizens of Seoul be the Mayor of Seoul” was more than a catchphrase – Seoul City led policy changes with civic participation and co-operative governance. The policymakers also led by example and
sometimes preferred to start from ground zero – such as staying in a rooftop apartment of a working class neighbourhood in excruciating summer heat for nearly a month, to empathize with residents and understand housing policy pain points.

In the Gusan case, residents advocated ideas while librarians provided resources and shaped the proposals professionally (and later got a budget for it). Residents went through a rigorous and data driven process and were energized by the opportunity to shape their library, while civil servants came out of it as changemakers with a new understanding of the direction of community libraries. Both sides walked through processes that led them to better embrace the idea of a commons, from me to we.

Obviously, digital innovations and shifts in community needs have resulted in the decommissioning of many small libraries across cities and towns globally. The fact that Seoul is still building new ones and re-engineering its operational model is remarkable. The key, the MaD team found out, lies in ensuring that the library is the core of the community itself, and is a part of people’s everyday lives.

On the second day, the MaD social lab team met with Mr You Changbok, a civic leader of the co-operative movement and founder of Seongmisan Village. We learnt of their local labs concept and also visited Samyang-dong, the site where Mr You and his team of community organisers set up workshops for residents.

Local Labs as an intermediary platform
In late 2018, Mr You was invited to lead a local governance empowerment project called Local Labs. As a long time practitioner of urban commons and social economy, Mr You’s main concept is “innovating innovation” – how to build better relationships and enable residents’ views to become projects and policies at the neighbourhood level. His idea of change is “from complaints to actions” – people are empowered to be responsible citizens, via a framework of residents’ self-governing councils and democracy-based committees.

A large part of the work of Local Labs is capacity building, including training of organisers in community building and the mapping of tri-sector networks. There is also capacity building for civil servants on how to build new relationships with residents, as well as workshops for civil society organisations, on the good practices of direct democracy and citizens’ empowerment. Local Labs believe in the power of three – and will facilitate a nucleus of any three residents to talk about neighbourhood issues of concern. Over 5,000 of these nucleus
meetings were held to hear residents’ views and enable more autonomy in solving community pain points.

The input from citizens will remain unfilled ideas for micro improvements without the champions and resources needed to realise them. The Local Labs’ work includes methods of bottom up bidding of subsidies. Moreover, after much discussion, the SMG agreed to earmark 5% of the city’s budget for local governance projects via participatory budgeting, a democratic public process.

No issue is too small for the Local Labs. Samyang-dong is a neighbourhood with an elderly population. A workshop space for community care was set up and the organisers set out to understand the residents’ needs. One day the team got a letter from an elderly gentleman who suggested that the local authorities build a small shelter at a certain roadside. At first Mr You thought the old man wanted a place for social exchange and leisure. But after meeting him, he understood the real need – Samyang-dong is a hillside community with steep roads and elderly people cannot walk up to their homes in one go. Such a shelter would be useful for short rests, especially in inclement weather. This discovery enabled Mr You to work with designers for a simple yet effective roadside pavilion for the community.

In Hong Kong, the young members of the Make A Difference social lab team often find it hard to work out a ‘fusion’ of ideas to converge diverse views. How does Mr You facilitate this kind of fusion to take place? He said, the answer is in the field. If there is a problem, everyone who wants to solve the problem must come together to solve it. A caring attitude is important. The role of the administration and its delivery methods should facilitate on-site convergence of public opinion.

So what is the takeaway for other cities in Asia, whose governments might be more wary of citizens’ empowerment and participation?

My first thought is on people-to-people relationships: building empathy among different voices is a good first step. Residents need to step into other people’s shoes and forge trusting relationships with each other in order to overcome obstacles and find solutions. Collective endeavours and decisions can only happen when there is trust, otherwise people will retract into self-preservation mode and their own cocoons.

My second thought is on mayors-to-people relationships. Mayors are sometimes more effective than presidents simply because their relationship with the people is closer. Then how should we interpret the slogan “let citizens of Seoul be the Mayor of Seoul”? The deeper meaning of citizens becoming mayors is more than giving them a voice. It is about behaviour change and in this case, perhaps it is towards more altruism instead of just benefiting oneself. Mayors must find methods to empower the people to see an issue from a 360-degree view, with the community at large in view, and not just from his/her stance.

This leads me to my final thought: the process, the work of civil servants and intermediaries in building relationships. If there are compassionate leaders in each community, local governance could be more people-powered. However, we still need innovation and new mindsets to build cross-sector relationships so that both civil servants and citizens feel empowered to work with each other. To achieve this, I do think a co-creation lab approach with empathy mixed with responsibility, like the Gusan Library and the Samyang-dong Local Labs, might be worth further experimentation.

Seoul City has left us with a rich legacy in experiments of citizens’ empowerment and collaborative local governance, and the key values behind these ideas are capable of being translated and adopted in other local contexts.
Background

South Korea’s rapid economic growth after the country’s independence did not come without a cost. Economic inequality grew with it and social isolation became a prevalent social issue. Even though the economy continues to grow, it no longer brings new employment and the jobs available are precarious.

Seoul City’s focus on building empowerment, governance and autonomy at the local level grew out of necessity and a recognition that relationships at the local neighbourhood level are key to solving urban challenges. Inspired by examples of thriving local neighbourhood co-operation in places such as Sungmisan Village located in the Mapo District, the Seoul Metropolitan Government’s vision was to spread these types of neighbourhoods across the city.
Local empowerment across three terms

First term (2011-2014)

The Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) started by building relationships and capabilities at the local level. The idea of the ‘village community’ was introduced, defined as “place-based relationships that form between people in the process of complaining, discussing and finding solutions to local everyday needs”. While the term may seem nostalgic, the policy did not include the terms rural or traditional. Instead, at the heart of the policy was the recognition that neither the city administration nor civic organisations could solve complex social challenges alone and that the SMG needed to work with citizens at the local level.

A number of initiatives were introduced under the urban village community policy to bring forward diverse actors at the local level. The SMG introduced new rules allowing any group of more than three citizens to receive grants from the SMG, where previously only organisations that were legally constituted could apply to projects, effectively preventing citizens from participating. By 2017, 230,000 citizens participated in small scale initiatives to solve local challenges and there were 10,000 neighbourhood meetings.9

In order to further support citizens to form groups and networks, the SMG set up a new intermediary organisation, Seoul Community Support Centre (SCSC). SCSC used methods such as ‘Network Parties’ which brought together the citizen groups of grantees in the same district to create new relationships, exchange ideas and experiences and share knowledge and learning. In addition, ‘Citizen-led Judging Systems’ selected grantees through peer review. Generally, 10-15 teams were put on the same table to present their ideas and the group voted on which teams would receive the project grant.

By supporting groups of citizens to form initial seeds of communities, the SMG enabled an environment where people can extend beyond their own personal needs to consider the needs and interests of their local community, as well as their wider neighbourhoods. By building relational assets, the SMG also increased the capability of citizens to solve social, economic and environmental problems at the local level. For example, a mother with two young children needed someone to take care of her older child. By connecting with four other mothers in the neighbourhood, she formed a group which took turns to look after the children. When this issue was brought forward at a neighbourhood level, people agreed to share the costs of hiring a space for children’s activities. The ‘care’ issue of one person expanded to a shared agenda of five mothers and then became the common agenda of the neighbourhood and unlocked the problem solving capability of the community.10

10. Different neighbourhoods have different entry points in building local relational assets. Many successful co-operative urban neighbourhoods such as Sungmisan and Seongdaegol started with the shared challenge (to save a local hill or save energy) and grew to address shared needs of the community such as childcare and education.
Seoul as a people-powered city - from local to global and back again

Second term (2014-2018)

The focus of the 2014-2018 administration was on neighbourhood planning, which aimed to create and accelerate consensus processes at the local level through democratic discussions. While the initial idea was to start neighbourhood planning from the bottom up with self-identified groups and communities, the plan was adjusted to a more administrative neighbourhood (dong) level to align with the welfare policy which created a decentralised service delivery system at the local level (see p44).

Urban neighbourhoods (dong) can be quite large administrative units with populations ranging from 10,000 to 50,000 people. In order to connect and deepen the micro local relationships built in the first term into neighbourhood level networks, neighbourhood planning and neighbourhood assembly were used as tools. A ‘neighbourhood planning’ group consisting of around 100 residents would go through six months of discussion and deliberation to develop a neighbourhood plan and 300-400 residents would participate in the ‘neighbourhood assembly’ to make a final decision.

Also, at the administrative level, each neighbourhood centre hired a civil servant to act as a community organiser to focus on promoting participation at the neighbourhood level and to act as a bridge between the different languages and cultures of the administration and local community.

The SMG aimed to encourage democracy at the local level by nurturing and expanding participation in ‘neighbourhood planning’ and ‘neighbourhood assemblies’ and linking them directly to the administrative level decision-making. However, the biggest critics of these initiatives were the local community leaders who had occupied the traditional resident council positions for a long time. The new initiatives disrupted power at the local level sparking a more dynamic and participatory form of local democracy with a broader and more diverse range of participants.

Third term (2018-2020)

The 2018-2020 administration focused on developing strategies to enable and embed more sustained governance structures between city government and citizens. The SMG also started Local Labs, which are platforms for place-based experimentation to solve local challenges (see p70). Through these local Labs, citizens can become co-creators of local services and economic activities needed for the community. The SMG also refined the governance mechanisms and improved the operational challenges of existing participation models by connecting agency/action, decision-making and budget/resources at the local level.

- Seoul Democracy Committee changed its previous role as an advisory committee (previously called the Governance Committee) to an operational unit under the Mayor’s Office and is tasked with promoting and improving the governance system.

- Deliberative Democracy - Democracy Seoul was set up as an online/offline platform for deliberative democracy. The Seoul Citizen Assembly was formed with 3000 citizens and the SMG ran separate citizen participation committees for each policy agenda. The committee selects and manages a pool of citizen representatives (randomly) balancing details such as neighbourhoods, sex and age. The committee identifies issues, conducts research, determines policy priorities, allocates the budget, and performs monitoring and evaluation.

- 5% participatory budget - In 2018, around 5% of the SMG’s budget (1 trillion KRW) was used as a citizen participation budget. Earlier models of participatory budgets allocated budgets to the most popular citizen proposals and ideas (through votes) but in the third term, the SMG aimed to strengthen and embed deliberation into the participatory budgeting process.

Resources
- Interview with You Changbok

Growing relationships with empathy
Empowering the people
Seoul as a Smart City

Geoff Mulgan

Smart cities used to be only about hardware, usually concentrated in prestigious central locations. But Seoul has redefined the meaning of the smart city both by addressing digital inequality and by using data and skills to allow many more people to contribute to the digital life of the city. In this piece Geoff Mulgan, who has worked on digital projects in business, civil society and government, situates Seoul’s work in the broader context of a shift in how ‘smartness’ is thought about.
Seoul has been in the forefront of efforts to make cities smart for many decades. For much of that period ‘smartness’ was mainly thought of in terms of hardware. Seoul achieved very high levels of connectivity both through fibre broadband and successive generations of mobile communications. Nearby projects like New Songdo, next to Incheon, became showcases for big tech companies to demonstrate a possible future of enhanced homes and infrastructures.

But in South Korea, as elsewhere, these visions of the smart city struggled. They turned out not to be very attractive to people, lacking the warmth and dynamism of the best cities. And, partly as a result, they didn’t deliver much in terms of value for money. So, in the 2010s the approach of many cities shifted, to a broader definition of smartness and a bigger role for citizens.

Seoul was very much part of this shift, which ultimately redefines smartness in terms of the capabilities of the city as a whole, rather than just the capabilities of hardware and infrastructures.

Here I summarise five of the main strands of activity, all of which offer important lessons and inspirations for other cities.

Seoul has continued to improve hardware, in particular through SNet, a programme that combines a municipal broadband network, deployment of a free wifi network, increased integration of IoT infrastructure to address digital inequality. But it has also placed as much emphasis on how digital is used and making the city smart in ways that go far beyond hardware in the ground.

**Solving problems with data and open data**
The first part of this strategy involved the use of data for problem solving and planning - notably in transport with real-time monitoring of roads and rail and air quality. Seoul has long been in the forefront of these techniques, for example planning bus routes informed by observed patterns of mobile phone movement and where these didn’t correspond to existing routes. The city has also long had control rooms in City Hall able to monitor in real time the state of congestion around the city. The very power of these tools has also required care in protecting privacy – for example deliberately degrading the data from taxi services so that it wouldn’t be too easy to see exactly who went where and when. Other cities have moved in similar directions, using open data to create new services: London for example opened up transport data in the late 2000s and generated hundreds of new services and companies.

**Using testbeds**
The second strand of work has been the promotion of testbeds - using the city as a real life laboratory to ensure that the new technology applications really did meet peoples’ needs. Bukcheon’s Internet of Things
testbed is a good example of this, experimenting in a real urban context with smart lampposts, transport and energy and encouraging close collaboration between city bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, big companies and the community. Other cities have tried to do similar things – with the various projects of the Living Labs movement, testbeds in assistive tech for the elderly, and the use of drones or smart cars in China. A recent Nesta survey showed how many of them work and argued that such testbeds need to become much more central to innovation policy to avoid the waste of so many past smart city and other initiatives. Seoul’s is one of the best.

Digital skills for citizens and civil society
A third priority was promoting capacity amongst citizens. There are valid fears everywhere that the key technical skills needed for the Fourth Industrial Revolution will be monopolised by big business and big government, leaving citizens and civil society ever further behind. But very few cities have done much to address this gap. Seoul’s Big Data Academy and related programmes were an impressive attempt to skill up society, paralleled by other initiatives around the world like Ciber Voluntarias in Spain, DataKind and TechSoup in the US. The same is true of actions to provide community level and neighbourhood free wifi which are now underway, building on earlier moves to provide free wifi in central and tourist areas.

Innovation and movements
A fourth theme was innovation around digital, and the many subcultures and movements on the edges of the digital economy. During the 2010s Seoul became a hotbed of imagination and experiment around multiple technology currents, from AI to Blockchain, in each case trying to ensure a dialogue between the bottom up innovators and the big companies and government. This has been a fascinating example of how the multiple subcultures of digital – from the maker movement to open data - can both challenge and enhance city government, and the city has helped with spaces and meetups. There are even residential centres – like Nonce, near Gangnam, that have tried to embody a new set of values linked to blockchain. Such movements are radical and often challenging for city bureaucrats. But they represent a healthy shift away from the default of many governments which has been to engage only with big corporates.

What kind of society or city do we want to live in? How much should people be thought of as passive consumers or as active shapers? How much should digital tools be used to change patterns of power?
Platforms for engagement
Fifth and by no means last, the city has experimented with platforms that allow citizens to take part in decision making (see p98). Here there are parallels with initiatives in other cities like Reykjavik, Madrid and Barcelona, as well as national programmes like Taiwan’s vTaiwan. These allow cities to make proposals, comment and vote, whether on budgets or local projects. They point to a much more engaged future for democracy, an idea wholly missing in previous generation smart city programmes which assumed a largely passive public.

What kind of society?
All of these initiatives bring to the surface questions about what kind of society or city we want to live in. How much should people be thought of as passive consumers or as active shapers? How much should digital tools be used to change patterns of power?

Over the last decade cities have become one of the great battle grounds for the next phase of digital, as attitudes to big tech firms changed dramatically. Toronto became a test case for this battle, when Google’s Sidewalk Labs announced a partnership with the city and the national government to create a model smart city on its waterfront. Sidewalk Labs said that it ‘imagines, designs, tests, and builds urban innovations to help cities’, and through the Quayside project promised to spend well over $1bn to create an urban utopia, with heated and illuminated sidewalks, public Wi-Fi, and ubiquitous cameras and sensors to monitor traffic and street life. But many of the city’s citizens were never convinced that the project had their interests at heart. It was seen as unaccountable, predatory, and tone deaf to concerns about privacy. In the spring of 2020 it was closed down.

Ada Colau of Barcelona became a promoter of an alternative with more overt citizen control over data with important initiatives around the use of platforms for citizen decision making, squeezing out the commercial platforms, while also acting as a host for big industry initiatives like the World Mobile Congress. It proved difficult to operationalise some of the rhetoric of citizen control but there are now enough cities that have experimented, particularly with participatory budgeting at a local level that some clear lessons have emerged. Other cities have looked at procurement – should they only procure open source? How should they back digital social innovation? How much transparency should there be in key algorithms – whether for traffic control or healthcare? How should data in cities be governed?

Seoul attempted to combine enthusiasm for the potential and frontiers of technology with a closer attention to citizens and society. Seoul attempted to combine enthusiasm for the potential and frontiers of technology with a closer attention to citizens and society. My own view is that cities will need radically new models of governance – organised around various forms of data trust – if they are to combine the benefits of linking multiple kinds of data with adequate protection of privacy. But the key – on which Seoul has been a pioneer – is to recapture the idea of smartness from its often cold, narrow definition in big tech towards a richer idea that reflects the city’s true collective intelligence.
CASE STUDY

Democracy Seoul, a platform for digital democracy
민주주의 서울

Democracy Seoul is a digital citizen participation platform developed in 2017 with the goal of increasing practical usage of citizens’ suggestions by streamlining the process of co-creating city policies with citizens.
Background

From the start of a new administration in 2011, Seoul tried to put citizen participation at the heart of its strategy, opening up various online and offline channels through which citizens could make complaints and suggestions. While these channels started opening up communication between citizens and public servants, the process of refining, deliberating and turning them into a policy agenda remained difficult and inconsistent.

How does it work?

Parti, a social co-operative made up of digital democracy activists, partnered with the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) from 2017 to 2019 to create and run the Democracy Seoul platform - an online space to suggest ideas, lodge complaints and discuss everyday issues as well as the policy agenda of Seoul. Rather than the traditional approach of civil servants responding to a citizen’s proposal or complaint, the platform aimed to create a citizen participation model where a small group of citizens can propose new ideas and widen the discussion with more citizens by opening up spaces for deliberation/discussion and this public discussion leads to policy change.

Parti’s principle for Democracy Seoul was to make participation easy and effective by refining the participation process. Democracy Seoul consists of three main stages: (1) suggestions (2) public deliberation (3) implementation.

12. https://parti.coop
1. Suggestions

Citizen proposals can be made by an individual or a group of citizens, through the Democracy Seoul online platform or through in-person workshops organised by Parti and civil servants. These workshops relate to different topics, for example, on Children’s Day, Parti will engage families visiting Seoul Grand Park. Once a suggestion is submitted, other citizens can respond and comment on the proposal, support the proposal by ‘liking’ the suggestion and share the idea with others. If the proposal acquires more than 50 ‘likes’, the proposal is reviewed for further consideration and relevant departments within the SMG must respond. If the proposal gains more than 500 ‘likes’, then a public debate is required.

During the suggestion stage, the SMG and Parti check the proposal to ensure that different perspectives have been included for public debate. If needed, they commission independent research to better understand the background and review existing related policies. Then, a proposal selection committee (consisting of academics, experts, practitioners and ex-civil servants) reviews the information and determines whether the proposal should be put forward for public debate. This committee advises on how the issue should be framed and ensures that information is balanced and easy for citizens to understand. Then a citizen-led committee, selected at random, makes the final selection.

2. Public deliberation

Once a proposal is put forward, both online and offline channels are used to widen participation in public debates. The Parti team uses social media tools to promote engagement, explicitly bringing in people who agree and disagree with the proposal. They also run in-person workshops targeting people with limited access to the internet and the suggestions gathered by the team are fed back into the online platform.

The public discussions create broader support for the proposal and enable deeper and wider consideration of the issue from multiple perspectives. The proposal gets refined through this
process and is put up for online voting. If the proposal receives over 5,000 positive votes (as of March 2020, this number changed to 1,000 positive votes), the Mayor of Seoul must directly respond to the proposal. Also, the ramifications of implementing the proposal are considered in a series of expert meetings and conferences.

Another feature of this stage is ‘Seoul City Asks’, which allows SMG officers to ask citizens for their opinions before a policy is implemented. Issues such as sanitary products in public institutions, and cycling safety have been discussed as part of the ‘Seoul City Asks’ function.

3. Implementation

During the implementation stage, the mayor holds a town hall meeting to address the proposal that has received over 5,000 positive votes. The meeting is open to anyone and citizens with relevant experience join to share their stories. The SMG creates an action plan and/or makes a commitment to make necessary changes to its policy to resolve the issue and the progress is monitored. As of 2020, there is a participatory budget allocated for citizen proposals that go through a public deliberation process.

Since the opening of the platform, a total of 5,963 citizen suggestions were registered and 59 of them have been reflected in the SMG’s policies, including support for fertility treatment and protection for stray cats.

Impact and lessons learnt

Parti has documented the lessons learned from Democracy Seoul in an open-source manual and the Democracy Seoul template has been adapted for many cities in South Korea, including Ulsan, Daejeon and Busan.

Democracy Seoul has shown the citizens of Seoul that everyday digital democracy is possible, despite the context of polarised online spaces, often filled with hate and conflict. Citizens and civil servants have started to understand the value of nuanced public discussions to understand differing perspectives and to create resonance and collaboration with other citizens. Digital democracy is not about technical tools but all about building trust and understanding between people.

Resources

- Citizen Participation Platform Demos X - https://demosx.org/
- Presentation - New ways of Collaboration with Citizens and Governments, Democracy Seoul
- Interview with Kweon Ohyeon & Hwang Hyunsook
Section 4

Animating spaces
Creating dynamic spaces in the city for citizen life to flourish

Louise Pulford

Cities can be big while at the same time leaving little space for citizens. The greatest cities get the most from their size but also provide a mix of very different kinds of space for people to connect, interact and live life to the full. Here Louise Pulford, head of the global Social Innovation Exchange, looks at how Seoul nurtured the conditions for innovation.
Creating dynamic spaces in the city for citizen life to flourish

The first thing any visitor notices about Seoul is its scale - the city stretches over 605km², and has almost 10 million citizens living in the centre (with 14 million in the wider metropolitan area). As you enter the city from the airport, it is immediately obvious that it is one of the most highly populated, highly motorised and complex cities in the world. At first glance the urban infrastructure does not look well set up for citizens. The roads in parts of the city centre are 12 lanes wide, and are impossible to cross; the highrise tower blocks loom over the highways as far as the eye can see. But hidden between the foreboding skyscrapers and mountains across the city, there is a maze of small alleyways, micro factories, traditional neighbourhoods, bustling with citizen life.

Opening and using space creatively has been a key part of creating the conditions for a culture of participation and citizen action. Despite the size and complexity of Seoul’s urban landscape, Seoul City saw space as an opportunity, rather than a barrier.

The organisation I lead, SIX, has always been fascinated by the Seoul story. SIX is a global network, established to connect innovators across the world to enable the exchange and cross pollination of new ideas and approaches. When we first brought the global SIX community to Seoul in 2013 for the SIX Summer School, innovation leaders were invited to see as many corners of Seoul as possible. It was worth spending several hours traversing the city in minibuses - we saw empty buildings, disused factories and industrialised land, old railway tracks, oil tanks - all being repurposed in new ways by and with citizens, at the same time as honouring past traditions. Now, every time I visit Seoul, I visit a new place that shows how space is being used to reduce the barriers between the city and its inhabitants, to drive innovation and create a city for all its residents to participate.

The three examples below show some of the ways that spaces in Seoul have been used to encourage participation and reconnect the physical infrastructure of the city to the people who live there.

1. Sharing space with citizens

Seoul is full of underutilised space and SMG made it a key priority to share these spaces with citizens. Transforming City Hall into ‘Citizens’ Hall’ - City Halls in many cities in the world are sterile, bureaucratic buildings, cold and forbidding to citizens. This is not the case in Seoul - in fact, I’ve spent many more hours in Seoul’s City Hall than I have in my own in London (where I’ve only been a handful of times for meetings). Opening up City Hall was one of Seoul City’s first projects, and with
that, it symbolised the city’s dedication to the opening up of decision making to the citizens at the same time. ‘Citizens’ Hall’ is a dynamic and busy space consisting of two floors of City Hall, and the square outside the building and aims to help citizens actively express opinions and take initiative on local issues. It is the beating heart of the city. More than 5,000 people visit every day for concerts, bazaars, art markets, weddings, conferences, lectures, workshops, and exhibitions, or just to have a coffee and relax. The square in front of City Hall is also regularly buzzing with markets, people relaxing, and protests.

Sharing public space across the city - The idea of connecting the city to its citizens is not just demonstrated by this approach to City Hall. There was a commitment that the city would share all of its public spaces with citizens for free, or for very low cost. So, when public spaces and buildings are not being used, on weeknights or at weekends, anyone can access the spaces easily through a central website. Since April 2014, 970 spaces were open to the public and they have been used by members of the public on approximately 23,000 occasions.

Using space to empower citizens - Seoul City supported various citizen groups to experiment with the use of unused or abandoned urban spaces. One civic group started a citizen market in the abandoned ‘meanwhile space’ at the site of the Gyeongui Line, which became the start of the urban commons movement in Seoul (see p120).

Another example is empowering young people. This ethos of sharing spaces trickled down to the local council level, enabling many different groups to propose new ideas for underutilised public spaces. One example of this was the Cheongchun Building, where young people co-created a public space for them and their peers through the Seoul Metropolitan Government’s (SMG’s) participatory budgeting process (see p128).

2. Using space as a catalyst for innovation

From health innovation to social innovation - Seoul’s Social Innovation Park

Cities have long been using innovation districts as a way to stimulate innovation activity in cities. Traditionally based on technological innovation, these clusters of activity encourage cities to think more strategically about their innovation assets. By encouraging them all into one space, the hope is improved connectivity and collaboration which sparks more activity. MaRS Discovery District in Toronto is one the world’s best known examples. In the mid 2000s, there
Seoul as a people-powered city - from local to global and back again

were experiments in Bilbao and Singapore to establish social innovation parks, or ‘social silicon valleys’ - spaces dedicated to clusters of social innovation activity: start ups, regional and governmental organisations, social enterprises and co-operatives. Neither of these experiments came to fruition.

But many officials liked the model and wanted to copy it for Seoul. So when the site of the Korean Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC), which had been there for more than 50 years, became available in 2010, the SMG declared that this site should become a Social Innovation Park.

Seoul’s SI Park opened in 2013. It sits over an area of 100,000m². The first group of organisations to populate the SI Park were closely connected to the SMG - social economy organisations, co-operatives and a vibrant youth hub. Seven years later, the 235 residents are now joined by companies, NGOs, knowledge economy organisations and connectors, with some presence of global institutions.

It is not without criticism - the innovation community of the SI Park remains disconnected to other tech industries and other innovation clusters across the city. But the SI Park is still there, still growing, and has big ideas for the future including developing a global social innovation cluster which combines education, research and practice.

3. Rethinking the purpose of spaces - Seoul as a ‘Human Scale City’

The SMG was inspired by the concept of the ‘human scale city’ pioneered by the Danish architect Jan Gehl, whose designs were inspired by people, rather than buildings. The connection between Seoul citizens and the urban infrastructure is visible in several cases across the city.

Seoul Street - transforming a highway bridge into a Skygarden

Seullo 7017 (or Seoul Street) is often compared to New York’s High Line. It might be seen on the surface as ‘another garden bridge’, but this project has been designed to make the city more walkable, fair and equal, improving the lives of citizens, connecting people from different parts of the city who would never usually interact.

Seoul Street turned the former Seoul Station overpass (originally constructed in 1970) into a 1,000 metre long public park, with over 24,000 plants and other family amenities, both revitalizing the surrounding areas, as well as preserving the city’s history. It opened in 2017 and within the first 100 days of opening, Seullo 7017 attracted more than three million visitors. It continues to attract locals and tourists to the whole area.

Dynamic spaces make dynamic cities. And now more than ever, COVID-19 has shown how important being together can be. Citizens need spaces, as well as governance structures, to come together to debate, exchange and actively participate in the decisions that affect their lives. In Seoul, space is a key part of the SMG’s success in opening up governance and involving citizens in decision making - indeed, there is a direct connection between...
the use of space and citizen participation policies. There are three features that make the above examples successful:

First is inclusivity. The examples all demonstrate how engaging people in the design or decisions regarding the use of space - whether it is young people or old, or people inside and outside the formal economy - means that those spaces are more actively used. By doing things with people in the sharing space, people who would not usually meet may connect at a deeper level.

Second, several of the examples creatively make use of every part of the city - disused highways, old tankers, empty land. Making spaces for citizens doesn’t need to mean building new spaces.

Finally, all the examples demonstrate a key feature of social innovation - the changing of relationships, between the city and the citizens or between citizens who would not usually meet. The creative animation of spaces in Seoul is a key part of building the people powered city.
“Citizens need spaces, as well as governance structures, to come together to debate, exchange and actively participate in the decisions that affect their lives.”
CASE STUDY

The Gyeongui Line Commons

경의선 공유지

The Gyeongui Line Commons was an urban experiment to challenge the prevailing individual ownership rationale of city spaces and provide a temporary space for ‘excluded’ people to stay in what the activists called “a camp for urban refugees”. It was a significant starting point of the current Commons movement in Seoul and inspired the Sharing City model of Seoul City.
Background

In 2013, civic groups started reimagining the use of public land near Gongdeok Station, a site (approximately 3000m²) that was left unused when the overground railway line moved underground. The land was owned by Korea Rail Network Authority (KRNA), the central government agency in charge of constructing and maintaining railways in South Korea. A retail company E-land was given permission to develop the site into commercial space, however, the process was slow and the site had been left vacant for a long time.

Here the citizens action group started an urban commons movement that reimagined the way we make and use city spaces based on the needs of the citizens rather than through the lens of master city planning and private development processes.

In 2011, the SMG introduced a new ‘Citizen Market’ policy across the city and a group of citizens proposed to use this vacant space for market activities. The SMG had also begun to see the potential in opening up more spaces for citizens and making better use of unused or abandoned urban spaces. The group agreed with the city to run a market, Nul Jang, between 2013-2016. Even after the agreement period ended, there was little progress in development plans and the citizen groups decided to occupy the space and form a new civic group, Citizen Action for the Gyeongui Line Commons, in 2017.

In September 2017, a street food vendor, Ahyeon Pocha, who was evicted from a nearby location in Mapo, other street vendors evicted from the Cheonggyecheon area, and young people who had been made homeless in the redevelopment process started living on the site. The space was used by people who were evicted and excluded from using spaces in the city centre.

They declared the area the ‘26th autonomous district’ of Seoul and experimented with the urban space from 2017 to May 2020. The site had mixed usage -- as commercial space as well as temporary living spaces and the open square in the middle was used for multiple purposes such as temporary space for disability awareness raising campaigns, cafes, food trucks and various cultural activities for citizens (concerts, public debates, exhibitions etc.). The space was used by citizens who needed space temporarily and quickly.
The making of the commons

There were two groups of people who formed the loose membership within the commons: activists interested in the commons movement and; people who were interested in using the space. If you participated in the regular meetings (fortnightly or monthly) and decision-making, you could be a member. The organisation did not have a sustainable financing structure - the activities organised were temporary and could not be planned more than six months ahead.

The commons activists and users of the space gained valuable experience in building an urban commons. They had regular meetings about how to use the space - they learnt to share the space, solve problems and make collective decisions with the limited resources and space available to them. While no written rules were created, there were a few principles which guided their actions:

• If no one is using the space, other people can use the space and you have to share your space. To make this possible, there were very few items that were privately owned. The resources within the space (such as the refrigerator, furniture etc.) were shared and recycled.

• If a cost is involved, people who can afford to pay should do so.

• Users pay a percentage of their daily profit as a fee for using the space. Even though the fee wasn’t specified, the process was transparent so that everyone could be held to account.

• If there is a new person/group wanting to use the space, the group tries to find a common ground.

Three years of experimenting with this temporary space came to an end when Citizen Action for the Gyeongui Line Commons was served a lawsuit by the Government of the Republic of Korea, for illegally occupying state-owned land and ‘costing the country a total of 3.6 billion KRW (2.45 million GBP)’. While Citizen Action for the Gyeongui Line Commons had the will to fight this lawsuit, they could not afford the economic cost involved in the legal process. In May 2020, the group voluntarily left the site on the condition that the lawsuit was dropped.

The activists strategically proposed Gyeongui Line Commons as an agenda item for the Governance Committee discussion in Seoul City and tried to publicise the space through various SMG events. While the SMG played an important role in the beginning in terms of publicising and raising awareness of the urban commons movement, its hands were tied on the matter since there was no legal means for the city government to determine the usage of state-owned land.
Lessons learnt

The commons was not about solely protecting the most marginalised from a city, but creating a transition space, ‘a 26th district’ where people can continue economic activities in the interim before moving back to the other 25 districts.

Gyeongui Line Commons also raised the question of ‘who owns the city?’ While some residents that lived near the site actively participated in the cultural and educational activities that took place at the site, local representatives were somewhat guilty of a NIMBY mindset and made complaints about noise levels. By engaging in discussions with civil servants, residents and other urban space users, the commons movement tried to redefine and broaden the meaning of public ownership of city spaces.

Gyeongui Line Commons was a catalyst in sparking questions and discussions about commons in South Korea. At the beginning, activists called for ‘public spaces’ but soon realised that this model would be limited to the city giving permission and managing the space for the service users. Eventually, they developed and spread the concept of a commons, a space which citizens themselves could co-create, own and manage. While the site is no longer occupied and used, the experience of Gyeongui Line Commons continues to inspire other emerging commons movements in South Korea.

Resources

- Lee Suh-yoon, ‘Where Seoul’s evictees end up’, The Korea Times, 19th June 2019
- Kim Sang-cheol, ‘The social value of Gyeongui-line Commons’, 13th August 2018
- Interview with Kim Sangchul
The Geumcheon Youth Centre Cheongchun Building is a youth-led space started in the Geumcheon district in 2015. A group of young people proposed an idea to the local district council in 2014 to turn an underutilised public study room building into a youth-led space. In collaboration with the council, they submitted the idea as a proposal for Seoul City’s participatory budget and were selected. The youth group (Ggumjirak Network) was contracted to manage the building in 2016 and has been running the community space ever since.
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Do It Talk Concert, Cheongchun Building
Image provided by SMG
Cheongchun Building

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How the Cheongchun Building began

Seoul City’s participatory budgeting process provided part of the funds required for renovating the three-story building. Despite a lack of funding, there was an unexpected energy from the youth group who saw this as an opportunity to co-create the unfinished space with other young people from the area by organising various cultural events and conducting focus group interviews with the young people in the area. When the building opened in 2016, they already had a strong, actively involved community base.

Youth policy context

South Korea’s share of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), is considerably higher than the OECD average, and is particularly high among college and university graduates. Furthermore, young people in South Korea report low life satisfaction compared to their peers in other OECD countries. Young people have limited access to decent housing and the lack of job opportunities and prospects for the future are leading to mental health issues.

Recognising both the difficulties that young people face and the potential they represent, ‘youth’ became one of the biggest focal points of the SMG from the beginning of the new administration in 2011. SMG opened Seoul Youth Hub in 2013 at the Seoul Innovation Park and has supported youth communities through various youth directed policies and initiatives. In 2015, SMG launched The Seoul Youth Guarantee 2020, a five-year plan to (1) support young people into the job market and provide a safety net, (2) build capacity of young people to participate in society, (3) support decent housing and stable living conditions and (4) establish an ecosystem for youth activities and expand its policy base. In 2016, SMG also introduced the controversial “Youth Allowance” policy, which gives a cash allowance to young people seeking employment.

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Image provided by Geumcheon Youth Center, Cheongchun Building
The Cheongchun Building runs three main youth activities (age 18-39) as part of their core programme:

1. **A community concierge service:** During the focus group interviews conducted in the initial phase, the youth group discovered that young people in the area were mainly living in one-person households and working in the nearby Guro Industrial Area. These young people could not receive any deliveries while they were at work so the Cheongchun Building started to accept deliveries on their behalf.

2. **The ‘Daedae Restaurant’ supper club:** The social dining programme for young people living alone, became one of the most popular events at the Cheongchun Building. For the last five years, they have run a supper club every Thursday at 7pm, where young people cook and eat together. The youth club thought creatively about how best to engage local residents. They created a fictional character, Daedae, who hosts the supper clubs and the menu is announced through a series of digital comics. The menu is designed not only to be nutritious but also to include dishes which someone living alone may not be inclined to prepare.

3. **‘Do It’** is a community programme that supports young people to try out new things with their peers. Recognising that a lot of activities that young people enjoy tend to be individual and in isolation, the programme encourages young people to meet other like-minded people to organise activities. These include cultural and art activities ranging from photography, film, animation, comics, art, music, dance, games and make-up. The purpose of the programme is for young people to build relationships and collaborate with one another.
Impact

The Cheongchun Building is located in one of the more deprived neighbourhoods in Geumcheon District. Many ethnic Koreans from China (joseon-jok), who face discrimination in Korean society, live in this area. The Cheongchun Building became a community space that can bridge differences and change the perception of the area.

The Cheongchun Building’s strength lies in seeing young people as important revitalising actors in local communities and cities. The space and activities are co-created and shared with young people rather than being offered as a youth service. For example, they have a shared refrigerator where young people can share ingredients/food they have bought. The building also has its own steering committee consisting of young people, local residents and local shop owners.

The relationship between the youth group and the civil servants from the local council has gone through various challenges and conflict resolutions. This process was vital in building trust. Over time, both parties learnt to understand each other’s perspectives and languages. And this process was vital in building trust.

District-level projects such as the Cheongchun Building were possible because of the bigger context of this ecosystem and narrative of citizen participation that Seoul City had paved the way for. There is communication and flow between the metropolis-level youth policy and youth initiatives on the ground through various governance mechanisms such as the ‘Youth Autonomous Government’, an administrative unit within the SMG run by young people and civil servants.

Resources

- SMG, Seoul provides “Youth Allowance” for 100,000 young people for the next three years at least once in a lifetime Cheongchun Building, 24th October, 2019
- Interview with Park Seokjoon
Section 5

Thinking big and seeing small
Learning walks: can grassroots innovations enrich the urban crucible of creativity?

Anil Gupta

How should cities tap into the ideas and creativity of children, or attend to the natural world? Here Anil Gupta, one of India's most successful innovators, shows how cities can be re-imagined from the ground up.
We did much of our work on foot - seeing, talking, smelling and hearing. That’s how you get to love a city, and to see its potential.
Sometimes to understand a city you have to see things from the ground up - and grasp the small things that make cities tick. As an advisory committee we did much of our work on foot - seeing, talking, smelling and hearing. That’s how you get to love a city, and to see its potential. Senior policy makers in the city used walking as a tool to listen, learn and leverage the wisdom from the bottom up. These walks were very similar to the ‘shodhyatras’ we have had in every state of India over the last 25-30 years.

As an activist and innovator from India I tried to bring to Seoul some of our perspectives and experiences and also learn from the bottom up policy modulation process.

I am interested in landscapes of love, dotted with sacred spaces where people can pause, feed birds and squirrels and the ants. The inclusion of not just other humans but also non-human sentient beings in city futures truly makes space for inclusive and compassionate urban development. If we are not kind to other life forms, will we be kind to unborn and unseen and even to the disadvantaged members of our society?

Such urban spaces should be created where an artist can leave her canvas, a sculpture can leave a sculpture, and installation artists can display their installations on some social theme. In other words, self-organising space where art, culture, literature happens, people come and read their poetry, tell stories, paint and even organise workshops for children, play with pets which they may not be able to keep in their house.

The organisation I set up in India - the Honey Bee Network - has mapped the creativity of scattered communities all over the country and in many parts of the world. Cross-pollination of ideas, overcoming anonymity of creative people and sharing of benefits were the key principles. It ventured in scouting and documenting, validation and value addition in both contemporary ideas but also outstanding traditional knowledge (e.g. medical science is slowly recognizing that traditional squatting position is better for mothers to deliver a child rather than horizontal positions for which hospital delivery beds are designed world over), IP protection, business development and diffusion through commercial and non-commercial channels as Do-It-Yourself (DIY) solutions. Aesthetic commons were blended with technology and knowledge commons. These are a few of the methods we used which can be adapted to any city.

**Shodhyatras:** Learning walks in almost every state of India have revealed a very deep, empathetic pedagogical approach to learning about creativity and unmet social needs at the grassroots
level. Maybe we can have similar shodhyatras on the shop floors of large corporations, urban slums and low income areas and talk to workers, supervisors and discover creative and innovative ideas not only for the civic administration, corporations concerned but also for the larger society.

Children creativity workshops: next we showed how children can be animators of positive change. When children from mixed backgrounds, affluent and disadvantaged, do research together on social problems, they can come out with strikingly original ideas which adults often miss. Such workshops in schools and community spaces can be a powerful way of triggering social innovation and also groom future compassionate leaders not just in South Korea but all over the world. To illustrate, Adarsh Barnwal, a school student from Bihar, India was awarded by the Honey Bee Network and the National Innovation Foundation-India for suggesting a fourth blue light at traffic junctions. When there is a traffic jam ahead, the blue light would encourage the driver to take a left or right turn or a U-turn to avoid getting stuck in the traffic jam. Such innovative ideas have universal applications. Children can be a very powerful source of innovation.

Frugal innovation and engagement with young people: then we showed the value of frugal innovations to complement the classic expensive R&D of governments and corporations. Frugal innovations the world over require understanding nuances of frugal design, development and deployment. Techpedia\(^\text{14}\) is a global platform which has pooled abstracts or titles of over 200,000 projects pursued by 550,000 engineering/technology students in India from over 500 institutions. Originality is bound to be articulated through such platforms. Can South Korea also decide to upload similar information from all colleges in South Korea so that Indian, Korean and global students co-create frugal, socially useful IP as well as open source solutions for small and medium industries the world over. Big corporations can throw challenges of futuristic technologies and discover young geniuses in the process.

Food can be a great connector: we have shown how community food kitchen Labs can animate communities: elders can come and share with the younger generation about traditional and organic food and keep families happy and healthy. City councils can encourage ‘Sattvik’ festivals\(^\text{15}\) to connect urban communities with rural organic and traditional food communities.

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14. [https://techpedia.in/](https://techpedia.in/)
Traditional Knowledge: in South Korea, as in India, there is valuable traditional knowledge that often goes to waste. There are elderly community members all over the world who are not going to stay with us too long. But they have time tested sustainable practices/knowledge which may provide solutions to many global and local problems of the future. Why not campaign with the Honey Bee Network to document their knowledge and wisdom urgently through school and college children. We should pay particular attention to the knowledge of centenarians. Public policy for inclusive frugal and grassroots innovations may also be molded by Gandhian values of compassion, collaboration and co-creation. These can help to guide funds and programmes - giving awards and prizes, providing risk funds/micro venture funds to help citizens convert their ideas about overcoming problems of disadvantaged communities and city councils are needed to encourage social innovations and entrepreneurship; curating databases of ideas, offering challenge awards for solving unmet social urban needs (as Gandhi did back in the 1920s): how to cool a top floor room in summer without using air conditioner, for instance; how to segregate, recycle, repurpose and rejuvenate the waste so that sanitation and livelihoods are connected in a circular economy.

The urban commons and Seoul
In every visit to Seoul, I witnessed the many types of commons that help a city thrive - a theme that SMG repeatedly emphasised. Mobile libraries, public wifi hotspots, co-working spaces, community innovation labs, playgrounds, gardens, walking stretches. Some of these can be thought of as aesthetic commons, and shared experiences. The Mobile Mayors’ office policy (see p152) was based on the concept of moving closer to citizens to listen and leverage local ideas for collective wellbeing. This is the true Gandhian spirit of practicing what one preaches. Beauty in such situations is visible to a community when pain is ameliorated. Urban commons can provide a crucible for unleashing creativity of children, youth, artists, workers and all others who believe in listening, leveraging and legitimizing bottom up solutions for inclusive governance.

“Public policy for inclusive frugal and grassroots innovations may also be molded by Gandhian values of compassion, collaboration and co-creation.”
Seoul as a people-powered city - from local to global and back again

The rooftop shack where Mobile Mayor's Office was set up in the summer of 2018,
Background

The philosophy of “the citizens are the mayors” was reflected in the SMG’s policies. Senior policy makers regarded understanding of citizens’ issues through direct meetings and communication on the ground as a key to resolving entrenched issues. An important aspect of the city’s so called Listening Policy was going beyond a one-off citizen consultation and bringing the city administration closer to the everyday lives of citizens.

The Mobile Mayoral Office (MMO) was one of these Listening Policies which created a place-based rapid mobilisation of citizens, experts, civil servants and policymakers to identify and address local challenges. In order to accomplish this rapid mobilisation, ‘a mobile office’ would be established local setting, to understand the issues deeply and identify the root causes of unresolved and hidden problems of a place.
How did it work?

The SMG ran two types of MMOs: place-based MMOs (district level) and issue-based MMOs. District-level MMOs took place regularly, while MMOs for selected issues only took place when a certain issue became pressing.

**Place-based MMOs (district level)**

Typically running for two days, district-level MMOs required preparation and collaboration between the SMG’s Local Authority Team and the district office. A team of civil servants from the SMG and the district office would collectively select ten major issues in the district, prepare a visiting plan and arrange citizen meetings. The first day was about understanding the issues and the MMO started with a briefing for key decision makers on the issues, followed by site visits and meetings with local representatives. At the end of the day, the local decision makers and the team would discuss immediate action plans. The second day would start with a presentation from the City on the initial action plan, followed by a town hall meeting with citizens. The whole process was broadcast live on the website. As a final step, a new governance committee, consisting of civil servants at district and city level and citizen representatives, was set up to monitor and discuss agreed actions after the completion of the MMO.

**Issue-based MMOs**

The issue-based MMOs were designed to address high profile issues. For example, the SMG ran an MMO to revitalise traditional markets, which were rapidly declining and struggling to compete with big supermarket chains. Another famous example is the MMO that was run to address the issue of unsold apartments of Eunpyeong New Town development, which put a significant burden on the city finances. A large number of apartments had been left empty for a long period of time and residents complained of major infrastructure problems such as a shortage of nurseries, libraries and public transportation and the existence of an army base near the complex. The Mayor’s office was moved to one of the unsold units. SMG civil servants went on site visits, met with residents to understand the nature of the problem and held various town hall meetings where residents suggested new ideas. Within three months of running the MMO, 615 empty apartments were sold.
Challenges

However, there were challenges in running MMOs. Due to the high-profile nature and ability to directly meet and propose ideas to the mayor, it raised citizen expectations for quick action. However, the implementation stage was tied to a slow budget process, often leaving citizens feeling deflated. Also, the intensity and pressure of running MMOs was high for civil servants. In many cases, they would stay at the location with the senior policy makers for 2-3 days. In Eunpyeong, the MMO lasted for a month. In Samyang-dong, the MMO was set up during the hottest month of the year in 2018 to experience the lives of the citizens living in difficult housing conditions. Between 2011-2013, the SMG ran MMOs for 380 days and during the first six years, the MMO went to over 150 locations and over 400 projects were identified.

Impact

The power of these MMOs lay in the ability to ideate and prototype solutions with key stakeholders quickly, which could potentially lead to new future collaborations. The MMO was also a way to build trust between citizens and city hall. The citizens felt that their voices were being heard and the fact that the key decision-makers are face-to-face with the citizens made the commitments more difficult to break. The open and ‘live’ nature of the meetings also provided legitimacy to the decisions made.

Resources

- Park Won-soon, a mayor close to citizens, identify 400 projects in 6 years, 11th August 2018

The next generation of urban social innovation

Conclusion
Seoul has been a pioneer not just in its own work but also in the way it has connected with and learnt from other cities around the world.

Over the last decade, the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) brought together cities to work on climate change, smart cities, social economy, as well as social innovation. It convened global gatherings such as the Global Social Economy Forum (GSEF), the Future Innovation Forum and more recently, Cities Against COVID-19 (CAC). Seoul has also been an active part of ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability.

This outward looking approach where cities link up and share learning globally is a relatively new phenomenon. But it is part of a broader strengthening of global networks at every level, from municipalities to civil society.

SIX - the Social Innovation Exchange - has been proud to be part of this journey. For more than a decade SIX has been connecting innovators, hosting events, and advocating for social innovation in national agendas. Indeed Seoul’s policy makers, SMG civil servants and a range of civil society actors have been active participants in SIX activities for many years.

We believe that by exchanging the best examples globally, we can better tackle challenges locally. Everywhere is different with distinct cultures and history. But most of the challenges we face are similar - whether it's climate change, youth unemployment, mental ill-health or growing inequality.

That’s why we believe in being open to the world, why we see such value in linking up people grappling with similar dilemmas, and why SIX convenes the next generation of urban innovators so that together we can tackle the increasingly complex challenges we face.

**How SIX can help**

We believe that the exchange of experiences and knowledge drives positive social change. It’s always useful to talk to people dealing with similar challenges. Over the years we have worked with governments, foundations, NGOs and universities – always aiming to speed up and deepen collaboration and learning. We’ve worked on topics as varied as care for the elderly and racial divides, new forms of democracy and the frontiers of data and AI.

Our work helps create and spread social innovation knowledge and learning throughout the field, as well as externally with other people and sectors. Specifically, we work with cities on:

- **Advice and support on collaboration**
  As a global exchange, SIX can facilitate the right relationships, help find the right organisations to work with, and support next generation urban social innovators to work with partners from different countries.

- **Curating knowledge and insights**
  SIX designs learning exchanges and curates knowledge - scanning and synthesising global learning and activities. Our horizon scanning work tracks and reports on the current global state of innovation, focusing on pressing challenges and innovation opportunities.

- **Learning exchange**
  SIX curates learning exchanges through immersive events to share the innovative practices and methods as well as understanding the conditions and contexts of innovation. We also create bespoke learning journeys designed around the needs of organisations – the Global Innovation Academy supports young innovators whilst our study tours leverage our 10 year experience to help organisations navigate the global social innovation community.

If you would like to know more, please get in touch: info@socialinnovationexchange.org
Songjeong Jebang-gil
Photograph: Seoul Citizen Reporter, Lim Do-bin
Ada Wong founded the Make A Difference (MaD) initiative, a platform to nurture the next generation of innovative changemakers in Asia. She is also the Founder of the Hong Kong Institute of Contemporary Culture (HKICC) and, most recently, The Good Lab – a social innovation hub and do tank in Hong Kong.

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Louise Pulford is the Chief Executive Officer at SIX, a social innovation exchange built on mutual value, relationships and knowledge. Louise has been responsible for building SIX over the last 12 years. Under her leadership, SIX spun out of the Young Foundation in 2013. Louise has worked on social innovation with the European Commission since 2010.

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