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Arts-led revitalization, overtourism and community responses: Ihwa Mural Village, Seoul

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ABSTRACT

Arts-led revitalization projects are increasingly being undertaken in South Korean cities to improve residential areas in decline. One of the more common initiatives involves the beautification of residential neighbourhoods through mural art. Seoul's “Ihwa Mural Village” is one of the most representative examples of the murals-based regeneration trend. The residential area's transformation by artists in 2006 has made it one of the most popular murals tourism destinations, albeit to the displeasure of a segment of the local population. In 2016, two of Ihwa Village's most iconic murals were destroyed by several residents. This paper explores the context behind the incident through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders. Our research reveals that the Ihwa mural incident was not simply a local reaction to overtourism, but also a response to the perceived unequal economic benefits accruing from the murals tourism. We offer recommendations for policy makers considering similar revitalization projects in residential neighbourhoods.

1. Introduction

Located in north central Seoul, “Ihwa Mural Village” (hereafter also simply Ihwa) owes its reputation as a popular destination for domestic and international travellers to a 2006 state public art initiative meant to revitalize old residential neighbourhoods in decline. Dozens of professional artists were involved in the government-led initiative to beautify the alleyways and stairs in the hilly residential district of late 1950s-era two storey housing stock. Among the numerous murals that emerged that year and within the decade to follow, one of the more iconic was of koi fish seemingly swimming up and down a steep staircase. Although depicted on postcards still sold in a local gift shop, this artistic work no longer existed at the time of the authors' initial visit to Ihwa Mural Village in 2018; it had been vandalized two years prior by several of the area's residents. The individuals involved had done their best to sabotage the tourism base of their neighbourhood, presumably, according to news media reports, in response to the excessive numbers of visitors traveling to the area each day. Although still visited by many domestic and international sight-seers, the damaged “mural village” that the authors encountered was characterized by a mix of old, fading artworks intended to encourage tourism, and anti-tourism graffiti meant to do the opposite. While the graffiti has since been painted over and while another destroyed staircase mural is expected to be repainted, there remains lingering concern and tensions within this popular visitor destination, as in the case of several others in South Korea's capital, over overtourism.

Although there is a considerable amount of research on arts and culture-led urban regeneration, including specialized works on formal and informal arts and culture districts (Brooks & Kushner, 2001; Kim, 2011; Mathews, 2010, 2014; McCarthy, 1998, 2005a, 2005b; McCarthy & Wang, 2016; Montgomery, 2003, 2004; Park, 2016; Porter & Barber, 2007) and the related mural and street art district (Koster & Randall, 2005; Osborne, 2002; Ross, 2016; Skinner & Jolliffe, 2017), little attention has been placed on the potential negative impacts of district designation and formation apart from the long addressed issue of gentrification (Rich, 2017). In particular, the problem of excessive visitor numbers at such cultural tourist sites has not been seriously addressed by scholars, which is surprising given longstanding concerns with mass tourism and social carrying capacity. Recently, the powerful buzzword of “overtourism” has gained attention from scholars, tourism professionals, and international tourism organizations (Capocchi, Vallone, Pierotti, & Amaduzzi, 2019). This term captures the decades-long concerns surrounding excessive tourist numbers and the implication that this has on both the quality of life of residents and on the quality of the tourist experience. Overtourism also captured a new reality, particularly evident in news media reports from many well-known tourist historic cities in Europe prior to the 2019/20 coronavirus pandemic; that of growing grass-roots, anti-tourism movements.

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According to the UNWTO, 2018, overtourism refers to “the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitors’ experiences in a negative way.” Various alternative definitions have also been developed as pointed out by Capocchi et al. (2019) in their review article on the topic, but the underlying meaning remains the same. Perhaps not surprising given that the term only gained popular academic usage in the last four or five years, overtourism has largely been addressed in the European context (e.g. Diaz-Parrá & Jover, 2020; Milano, Novelli, & Cheer, 2019; Oklevik et al., 2019). Although a recent edited book on the topic (Milano, Cheer, & Novelli, 2019) has contributed to rectifying the scarcity of research outside of Europe, as have a few recently published academic papers (Cheung & Li, 2019; Jang & Park, 2020; Kim & Kang, 2020; Koh & Fakfare, 2019), there is a need for the topic to be further addressed elsewhere, particularly in countries with growing international tourist flows. Despite a steady growth in both international and domestic tourists, to the best of our knowledge published academic research in the English language on this issue in South Korea is limited to two papers on the role of social media in encouraging it (Jang & Park, 2020; Oh, 2020) and a paper on anti-tourist attitudes in one such affected destination (Kim & Kang, 2020). The lack of academic research, apart from these very recent exceptions, has been surprising given the frequent Korean-language news media references in a negative way.” Various alternative definitions have also been developed as pointed out by Capocchi et al. (2019) in their review article on the topic, but the underlying meaning remains the same.

Perhaps not surprising given that the term only gained popular academic usage in the last four or five years, overtourism has largely been addressed in the European context (e.g. Diaz-Parrá & Jover, 2020; Milano, Novelli, & Cheer, 2019; Oklevik et al., 2019). Although a recent edited book on the topic (Milano, Cheer, & Novelli, 2019) has contributed to rectifying the scarcity of research outside of Europe, as have a few recently published academic papers (Cheung & Li, 2019; Jang & Park, 2020; Kim & Kang, 2020; Koh & Fakfare, 2019), there is a need for the topic to be further addressed elsewhere, particularly in countries with growing international tourist flows. Despite a steady growth in both international and domestic tourists, to the best of our knowledge published academic research in the English language on this issue in South Korea is limited to two papers on the role of social media in encouraging it (Jang & Park, 2020; Oh, 2020) and a paper on anti-tourist attitudes in one such affected destination (Kim & Kang, 2020).

The lack of academic research, apart from these very recent exceptions, has been surprising given the frequent Korean-language news media reports that have emerged over the years concerning growing public frustration towards the tourist saturation of popular visitor sites and destinations. This paper aims to address the limited amount of research on overtourism in South Korea while also contributing to the literatures on murals tourism and murals-based revitalization through a case study of Seoul’s Ihwa Mural Village. In particular, the goal of this paper is to examine the origins and evolution of the problem, paying careful attention through stakeholder interviews and newspaper analysis to past as well as more recent government decisions that have either exacerbated or ameliorated tensions among the area’s residents. The paper will conclude with recommendations for policymakers wishing to undertake similar arts-led revitalization projects in residential neighbourhoods.

2. Approach and methods

Case studies are recognized for the opportunity they afford in exploring how and why questions that underlie a phenomenon in a specific context (Yin, 2014). In particular, the case study approach allows researchers to investigate policies, processes, and programmes in great depth using a variety of data collecting procedures, including interviews with a range of individuals (Creswel, 2003). In this study, narrative data were gathered through 8 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the former lead artist and project director (Interviewee A), a recently appointed community planner (Interviewee B), two community group representatives (Interviewees C, D), a resident and researcher in the community (Interviewee E), and three local business entrepreneurs (Interviewees F, G, H). In addition, questions were posed to participants of a local seminar and workshop concerning the future of Ihwa’s murals. Four areas of questions were explored: the origins of and initial public reception of the mural-based revitalization project; perceptions and problems concerning the growing popularity of Ihwa Village as a visitor destination; insights into the 2016 mural vandalism incident; and developments in the residential area since, including conciliation efforts and strategies. In addition, regular site visits were made over the course of the study (September 2018–March 2020) and all media reports and relevant policy documents and published studies were examined. It is expected that the findings from this case study will offer insights of relevance to the development and management of future arts-led revitalization initiatives in South Korea; an expectation that is timely given the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism's (MCST) commitment to invest further into such urban regeneration initiatives (OECD, 2019).

3. Case background: revitalization rather than urban renewal

Naksan Public Art Project, which was the official title of the mural art project in Ihwa Village, was the first of 11 projects implemented under the MCST’s 2006 “Art in City” program, which in Seoul was executed in coordination with local district offices (Jongno-gu in the case of the Naksan project). Although an original plan to redevelop the area would have directly addressed many of the residents’ longstanding concerns regarding aging infrastructure and an overall poor housing environment, the goal of the new public art project was also meant to improve the local environment, albeit through a more limited and incremental arts-led revitalization approach. The initiative predated the eventual transition in policy focus of Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) from urban renewal and redevelopment to regeneration and revitalization, often through minor modifications to the built environment (e.g. addition of hand-rails in steep alleyways, streetlight improvements, introduction of green spaces and rest areas) as well as through the application of culture and historic district designation. Ihwa Village’s transformation has been widely regarded as a benchmark for revitalization through art as well as a benchmark for what Kim and Park (2016: 519) note as “urban village regeneration”; a type of regeneration that focusses on rehabilitating and retaining existing structures.

The beautification of Ihwa Village – a small residential area of 134 households (Oh & Hwang, 2018) – through the work of 68 artists was undertaken over the course of a three-month period.3 Despite the seemingly rushed nature of the project, which owed to the shuffling of project directors, 70 artworks were completed by year’s end in 2006. The walls of residential homes and businesses were quickly transformed through the mural art as were some of the community’s steep stairways. The residential area soon became a popular tourist attraction. The airing of a popular reality-variety show (“2 Days & 1 Night”) in the district in 2010 and subsequent filming of dramas there especially contributed to the “touristification” of Ihwa Village, transforming the mural district in to a must-visit destination. By 2016, Ihwa Mural Village ranked fifth in most searched visitor destination in Seoul by Chinese tourists (Han, 2016). However, tensions arose that same year to the point where some residents began defacing the artworks and protesting the presence of tourists with the spray-painting of messages directed at both government and tourists alike.4 In particular, two of

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1 Such tourist sites and destinations that are also associated with overtourism as reported in news articles and government surveys, include Bukchon Hanok Village (Seoul), Gamcheon Culture Village (Busan), Gyeongridan-gil (Itaewon, Seoul), Huiinnyeoul Culture Village (Seoul), Jeonju Hanok Village, Seochon Hanok Village (Seoul), and South Korea’s largest island, Jeju-do.

2 Much of the literature on murals tourism and mural-based regeneration is focused on the issues of heritage, identity and politics (see Skinner & Jolliffe, 2017), authenticity (Osborne, 2002; Park, Hwang, Lee, & Heo, 2018; Widdis, 2000), economic development (Koster, 2009; Koster & Randall, 2005), and place image and place identity (McCarthy, 2006). To date, little has been said about the connections between mural art and overtourism with very recent South Korean exceptions being associated with Ihwa Mural Village (Jang & Park, 2020; Oh, 2020) and Gamcheon Culture Village (Kim & Kang, 2020). For a recent overview on the specialized literature on murals, as well as specific insights into common mural policies, practices and regulations, see Mendelson-Shwartz and Muallam (2020).

3 The length of the project given in most studies on Ihwa Village ranges from six to nine months. However, the implementation of the project only began in earnest in late September, 2006 and the urban village's transformation was completed by the end of that year.

4 This was not the first incident of vandalism by local residents. Some of the original artworks, including a dozen murals along a middle school wall that...
the village’s most representative artworks – “koi fish” and “flower” staircase murals – were severely damaged by local residents in April, 2016 (Fig. 1). While some of the culprits were caught and fined, media reports on the startling news soon revealed that many complaints by residents had been filed with the district office over the years, only to be allegedly ignored. The filed complaints were linked to excessive litter in the narrow alleyways, as well as noise in the late evening and early morning hours.

The destruction of the artworks was preceded weeks earlier with spray painted messages like “tourists go home” and “we oppose urban regeneration” appearing on the walls of several residential homes. The 2016 incidents of art vandalism and graffiti forced the local municipal office of Jongno district to act. A guideline to ease the conflict was developed, with recommendations being made, including the continued posting of banners reminding visitors they are in a residential neighbourhood (part of a 2013 “Silent Tourism Campaign” initiative), as well as the recruitment of residents to interact with and convey the same message to tourists.

While the story of Ihwa Mural Village as an example of overtourism has remained largely unknown outside of Korea, the transformation of the residential area through mural art and its effect since has received much media as well as academic attention within the country. With regards to scholarly research, no less than five unpublished theses (Jeong, 2014; Kim, 2016; Kim, 2017a; Kim, 2017b; Lee, 2015) and an equal number of published papers (Jeong & Kim, 2016; Kim & Son, 2017; Kim, Son, Lee, & Lee, 2019; Oh & Hwang, 2018; Woo, Kim, & Nam, 2017) in Korean can be found on the area’s revitalization, together with a handful of studies published in English (Kim & Park, 2016; Mersmann, 2018; Oh, 2020). This large body of work has addressed, among other specialized topics (Kim & Son, 2017; Mersmann, 2018), the development history of Ihwa (Lee, 2015), resident perceptions towards the cultural regeneration project (Kim, 2017a; Kim, 2017b; Kim & Park, 2016), satisfaction levels since the district’s transformation (Jeong, 2014; Kim, 2016), and the role of social media in making Ihwa Village into a tourist hotspot for photo taking (Oh, 2020) and in contributing to the overtourism problem (Jang & Park, 2020).

While most studies have acknowledged the importance of the murals as a tourist attraction, the problem of overtourism has most often been overlooked. However, there are exceptions, including some very recent contributions to the subject. First, Jeong and Kim (2016) explored the 2016 vandalism incident using Hannah Arendt’s theory of public space and realm. While they offer a theoretical basis for conflict resolution and several recommendations, their paper does not examine how specific government interventions have either served to ameliorate or worsen the problem. On the other hand, while Woo et al. (2017) examined the impacts of “touristification” on residents, their study drew conclusions from a combination of interviews conducted in both Ihwa Mural Village and nearby Bukchon Hanok Village – a residential historic district noted for its traditional houses (hanoks) – without distinguishing potentially differing views from two markedly different tourist destinations. Nevertheless, their paper captures some of the current problems facing popular tourist destinations in South Korea’s capital. While they offer a theoretical basis for conflict resolution and several recommendations, their paper does not examine how specific government interventions have either served to ameliorate or worsen the problem. On the other hand, while Woo et al. (2017) examined the impacts of “touristification” on residents, their study drew conclusions from a combination of interviews conducted in both Ihwa Mural Village and nearby Bukchon Hanok Village – a residential historic district noted for its traditional houses (hanoks) – without distinguishing potentially differing views from two markedly different tourist destinations. Nevertheless, their paper captures some of the current problems facing popular tourist destinations in South Korea’s capital. In addition, although focused more on the impact of the village’s regeneration on residential satisfaction, Kim and Park’s (2016) survey-based study offers an array of quotes from Ihwa’s residents, many of which concern tourism and how it has impacted residents’ quality of life. More recently, Jang and Park (2020) examine the role of social media in the touristification of Ihwa Village via big data analysis of news articles and personal blogs. Similarly, Oh (2020) analyzes the importance of Instagram and other forms of social media in transforming Ihwa Village into one of South Korea’s “best photo spots” for tourists. While Oh refers to the 2016 vandalism incident and

*Fig. 1. A postcard (left) of one of two of Ihwa Mural Village’s once iconic staircase murals and a photograph (right) of what remains of the artwork at the time of writing. Photo taken by the authors (November 12, 2019).*

(footnote continued)
depicted the lives of the area’s textile workers were destroyed within a year of the area’s transformation, albeit not as a local reaction against tourism. According to the former lead artist, some of the figurative mural art that portrayed working class people were disliked by the elderly residents who preferred landscape paintings over what they considered to be ‘frightening’ life-like works of art.
acknowledges some of the underlying issues behind it, including property rights issues and excessive tourist numbers, these issues are not fully explored and developments since the incident are not addressed. Finally, the authors of this paper address Ihwa Village's transformation in a forthcoming book chapter, albeit through the lens of creative placemaking (Kovacs & Park, forthcoming). While that short work does acknowledge the issue of overtourism, the focus is more on the initial failures in implementation and management of the 2006 public art project and on the current role of the artist in rectifying these issues as contextualized through recent interpretations of creative placemaking.

Despite the limitations of previous studies, several insights emerge, which will be further explored in this paper and also used to contextualize our findings. In particular, previous research has pointed to the inadequate level of stakeholder participation as well as to the inadequate buy-in of many residents into the mural project. Previous studies have also called for a more sustainable approach to marketing the place to outsiders, with some suggestions being offered (Jeong & Kim, 2016; Kim & Park, 2016; Oh & Hwang, 2018). Building on all of the above works, our interviews with key stakeholders sought to shed further light onto the widely perceived overtourism problem in the community, particularly with regard to the 2016 mural vandalism incident. Unlike other studies, this paper also aimed to reveal the specific ways in which government and community members have sought to address the problem since the incident.

4. Findings

4.1. Mural project goals and initial public perceptions

The 2006 “Art in City” initiative, which led to the transformation of Ihwa Village, was intended to improve the residential environment of 11 disadvantaged areas in South Korea through the application of art. In particular, the overall purpose of the MCST’s project, which was also known by a second and much longer official title “Public Art Enterprise for Neighbourhood Improvement of Neglected Regions” was to improve the selected residential communities through “residents’ participatory art”, wherein residents would participate with artists in improving their environment. As the executive director of the Public Art Program Committee explained, “the target is neglected region[s], the goal is neighborhood improvement, and the instrument is public art” (Choi, 2006: 1). The purpose of the project as outlined in an official report included: 1) tackling social polarization, especially in terms of the unequal concentration of art and culture in higher income residential spaces; 2) realizing the right of all citizens to live in a pleasant environment, with art contributing to enhancing the social and cultural infrastructure of marginalized residential communities; and, 3) creating a new model of public art based on resident participation (Korea Arts Management Service, 2007?: 22). Tourism and economic development did not figure in the project’s overall purpose or within the associated strategic goals. That said, the transformation of Ihwa Village into a “travel spot” was one of several anticipated outcomes. Thus, rather than being centred on bolstering tourism, the purpose of the Art in City initiative, particularly with respect to the mural project in Ihwa, clearly fit into what Amore (2020: 67) refers to as tourism-oriented urban regeneration – a form of regeneration, which unlike tourism-led regeneration, does “not directly identify tourism as the main development goal”, but rather identifies it as a likely outcome.

While all other affected sites competed in a contest for inclusion in the Art in City initiative, which was allocated 1125 million KRW worth of lottery commission funds, Ihwa Village was specially chosen by members of the project’s public art promotion committee. Their decision tied in to the area’s location near to a university street and cultural hotspot (Daehak-ro) as well as to its character as a traditional post-Korean War residential area in need of improvement. According to the former project director and lead artist, part of the thinking behind Ihwa Village’s selection (Naksan Public Art Project) was that the beautified residential area would encourage university students to explore the traditional residential area. It would connect a trendy, creative area of post-secondary education, theater and performing arts with a more traditional cultural area of the city that still possessed a “countryside atmosphere.” As one artist who was also involved in the project stated, “You come up, and you’re in a village where everybody knows everybody, and then you go down and you’re in the city” (Flinn, 2015).

The transformation of Ihwa Village was funded through a 350 million KRW portion of funds from the Art in City program. Interviews with community leaders revealed that there was initially little opposition to the mural project, despite the fact that it was a government-led rather than grassroots initiative. This is confirmed from findings from a government survey (Korea Arts Management Service, 2007) conducted between early December, 2006 and late January 2007. Of the 100 residents surveyed, the majority (80%) were satisfied with the area’s transformation through art. Moreover, the majority (73%) indicated their approval of outsiders visiting the transformed community. This was in spite of the fact that most respondents were not satisfied with the way in which the mural project unfolded. Concerns were specifically raised on the inadequate level of resident participation in the project (62% discontented) – one of the cornerstones of the project’s purpose. Indeed, our interviewees admitted that a key problem of the mural project was that there was little to no input from locals and that only a handful of murals had actually involved residents in their creation (Interviewees C, D, E, F). This issue very likely owed to the rushed nature of the project due in part to the original project director’s resignation less than a half year before the project’s completion deadline. The responses made by most of the residents surveyed for the initial evaluation report suggest that ineffective communication on the part of the project operators and government officials involved was also a contributing factor to the problem. This concern has not gone away. In fact, it has become one of the key issues contributing to residents dissatisfaction and anger.

Despite a generally favourable view of the area’s transformation, the initial government survey also showed that the vast majority of residents (93%) understood that the murals could potentially become a nuisance to residents in the future. Moreover, while satisfied with the visible improvements, residents “did not feel any duty to maintain the murals” (Korea Arts Management Service, 2007). According to our interviewees, resistance to the mural project remained dampened largely due to the fact that residents believed the project to be temporary in nature (Interviewees C, D, E, F). Most assumed that Ihwa Village would soon enough be transformed through urban renewal rather than the incremental revitalization that has been going on in Ihwa Village and in adjacent residential communities along Seoul’s historic city walls ever since. Indeed, our research revealed that even the former lead artist and project manager had assumed that redevelopment would occur within a decade of the area’s transformation through art. The beautification of the residential community after all was preceded only some three years prior with a redevelopment proposal that called for the replacement of the old two-storey housing stock with modern apartment buildings. While the proposed plan was eventually scrapped due to rigid building...
height restrictions in place – a consequence of Ihwa’s location adjacent to Seoul’s historic city walls – it was still under consideration along with an alternative proposal for less profitable low-rise apartments during the community’s transformation. The lead artist also acknowledged that while there was no overt resistance to the murals, there was a great deal of difficulty securing suitable places to paint the murals since some residents declined the use of their homes as canvasses for art, believing that the proposed urban renewal plan they sought might not go ahead if the village’s transformation was too successful. This difficulty contributed to the use of the area’s staircases for art, which ultimately proved to be key attractions in later years.

While tourism was not explicitly listed in the project’s purpose or strategic goals, all levels of government were involved in bolstering this activity. As one of our informants explained: “MCST posted information about Ihwa Mural Village on their website to encourage more tourists to come here. SMG and Jongno-gu (local government) supported tourism development too. For example, Jongno district office created and distributed the mural village map for free while SMG was responsible for the Ihwa Village information map sign board at the entrance of the village” (Interviewee E).

4.2. Overtourism, antagonism and unequal benefits

The initial stages of euphoria and apathy as predicted in Doxey’s classic Irritation Index model of tourism development (Doxey, 1975) gradually gave way to irritation and antagonism with growing tourist numbers. In 2010, one artist insisted that her artwork be removed and re-sited to a less conspicuous place due to growing complaints by residents. The artist’s “angel wings” mural became too popular as a backdrop for visitors who wished to copy the actions of a popular entertainer who had their photo taken in front of it (Oh, 2020). Despite this incident, the transformation of Ihwa Village continued to gain momentum, particularly in the following years during an intense phase of “tourism gentrification” (Cocola-Gant, 2018), where several outsiders purchased homes in Ihwa, converting many of them into private museums, galleries, workshops, bistros and cafes. For example, one of these individuals, who later became the SMG-appointed director (hereafter simply “master planner”) of urban regeneration for Seoul’s city wall neighbourhoods (2014), opened up a folk craft museum in one of the transformed homes as well as a number of other small commercial enterprises in the area in the early 2010s. Several artists and other private developers were also encouraged to invest in the residential community and contribute to its further transformation. In addition, funding from the MCST was used in 2013 to reinforce the image of Ihwa as a mural village. Some of the already deteriorating murals from 2006 were re-painted or replaced through the work of professional artists. Notably, the former lead artist of Ihwa Mural Village was temporarily re-appointed to oversee this work. He reworked one of his popular staircase murals (“flowers”) using more durable tile in place of the original worn out paint. That same year he reworked another staircase into the “koi fish” staircase mural. It is important to note here the role that social media has had in reinforcing the importance of these and other artworks in the place branding of Ihwa Village (Oh, 2020). In particular, visitors to Ihwa often arrive with the intention of having multiple photos of themselves, their family members and friends taken in front of such murals with the goal of posting the very best shots online via Instagram, blogs and other social media tools (ibid.).

Over time more concerns began to be raised about the growing tourist flows to the area. That the growth in tourist numbers was promoting growing irritation within the community was acknowledged by most interviewees. It was pointed out that alongside the issues of litter and noise pollution a specific problem to emerge from tourism was residents’ perceived loss of privacy (Interviewees B, F). We were informed of one particular case in which a former resident had begun to experience anxiety attacks due to the constant presence of tourists congregating in close proximity to her home, near enough to the window of her bathroom that she constantly worried about not leaving the window or drapes fully closed. Other complaints were directed at tourists frequently requesting the use of the restroom in the local community hall or sometimes not even asking permission to enter the building and use it (Interviewees C, D). Media reports after the 2016 incidents continued to focus on all of these effects of overtourism, with some interviews being made with those who wished the murals to be removed. For example, one resident who was sympathetic with the perpetrators that destroyed the murals was quoted as saying: “I can’t even leave the windows open because people will try to look in. I would like the artists who made those murals to come and try to live here! [As for] those people who are talking about ‘cultural destruction’ [], they should also try to do the same!” (KBSN, 2016). This last statement was clearly directed towards visitors who had conveyed to news reporters their dismay at the destruction of the “beautiful pieces of art” (Jackson, 2016). However, with regard to the 2016 vandalism incident, our research revealed a trigger that was largely lost in the news media coverage which had focused almost exclusively on the problems of litter, noise pollution and privacy concerns. According to our interviewees, a draft of a regeneration plan that was revealed a few days ahead of a public hearing caused immediate outrage among some residents. The problematic aspect of the proposed plan was a simple land use map (Fig. 2) that delineated particular areas of Ihwa Mural Village for commercial-residential or residential only use. Interviewees suggested that the map served to magnify concerns regarding “who benefits?” That is, the inequality of economic benefits, as pointed out by Kim et al. (2019: 1 Abstract), “intensified the conflicts among the residents”. Most of our informants pointed out that while overtourism has remained a lingering and very serious concern which contributed to the graffiti directed against local officials and tourists, the vandalism of the murals had more to do with the fact that the proposed development plan would allow for some sections of the residential community to engage in commercial ventures while others were to be excluded (Interviewees A, B, C, D, F, G). Specifically, residents in select areas of the community could, in theory, transform their residential homes into souvenir shops or cafes and thus profit from the continued arrival of daily visitors while those falling in the residential only zone had no hope of gaining any such benefits, all under the pretext that their two-storey homes should be preserved as heritage. Additionally, the designation of some of the area’s late 1950s-era housing stock as heritage was also problematic for many residents since it would effectively serve to deter any future discussion over Ihwa Village’s redevelopment via urban renewal.

One of the more problematic aspects of the land-use plan was the fact that the businesses run by those who had arrived during the area’s intense phase of tourism gentrification were located within the mixed-use zone; including the master planner who possessed close ties to government and as previously mentioned operated no less than a half dozen businesses in Ihwa. To make matters more complicated, this
individual who many of our interviewees acknowledged had done a great deal of good for the community in terms of its revitalization, was also at the time consulting with the government on the community's behalf despite not having been elected locally to do so. Thus, while media reports and published research pointed to various factors that contributed to the 2016 incident, including excess littering, noise pollution, public urination, and privacy issues as well as insufficient tourism infrastructure, such as public restrooms and garbage cans (Jeong, 2014; Kim & Park, 2016; Woo et al., 2017), our interviews with key stakeholders revealed a specific trigger in the form of a proposed land-use plan. This finding which touches on the all-important question of "who benefits" in tourism development also revealed another issue: that of perceptions of conflict of interest with regards to one of the community's chief business entrepreneurs and proponents of tourism development with ties to government whose investments in the community would not be negatively impacted by the proposed plan.

When asked about the draft regeneration plan, a community planner stated that mistakes had obviously been made. He maintained that "SMG seemingly tried to avoid explaining the regeneration plan. Some angered residents immediately sent letters to the local district office, including warnings that the artworks would be removed should the plan go ahead. People were so upset with the evasive attitude of the public officers." The lack of any official response led things to boil over. On April 15th, 2016, several buckets of paint were poured over the popular flower mosaic-tiled staircase mural, and nine days later the same was done to the koi fish staircase mural (Jackson, 2016). While those benefiting from the murals tourism were upset at the destruction of integral components of the tourism resource base, some including the former project director and lead artist whose works were destroyed were more understanding. According to the artist, "in the end, the act committed by some of the angry residents accomplished what it was meant to achieve. It finally drew much needed government attention to the problems." As others explained, the residents had enough with the unexpected shift in urban development, the unfair nature of who was profiting from the new focus on tourism rather than on solving the original problems, and the feeling of exclusion that came from a lack of real communication with government (Interviewees B, F). Inaction by local authorities has been identified by Colomb and Novy (2017) as one of the greatest challenges when it comes to overtourism and this issue certainly pertains to Ihwa Mural Village.

4.3. Conciliation efforts and the future of Ihwa's murals

According to the majority of our informants, the community of Ihwa was fragmented into three distinct groups even before the 2016 incident: 1) those with commercial interests who have been allied with the master planner who formerly ran a local community group and still operates several businesses in the area; 2) those who have largely been left out of the economic benefits of Ihwa's transformation into a tourist hotspot – the quality of life of this silent majority has been negatively affected by overtourism but most members of this group remain indifferent or actually supportive of tourism due to the perceived long-term positive effects tourism may play on property values, particularly should the area ever be given official designation as a special tourist zone; and 3) a very vocal minority of residents who have also not benefitted socially or economically through the presence of tourists and are actively opposed to what has been going on; they are in search of a better resolution to the various problems and are seeking a more sustainable future for their community. It is in this overall social scenario that recent efforts at community conciliation are especially noteworthy, particularly given the difficulty of harmonizing a shared vision for the future of Ihwa Village.

Since the 2016 incident, efforts on the part of SMG and the local district office to deal with the tensions in the community have included the appointment of a community planner tasked with promoting conflict resolution, as well as continued government support of the area's ongoing "Silent Tourism Campaign" initiative which has sought to lessen the problems of overtourism by educating visitors on the concerns of the community through various means (e.g. banners, pamphlets, volunteers). The local district office has also continued to actively support Ihwa's "united" community group; a voluntary community organization originally established under the direction of the local government in years preceding the incident when SMG was actively pursuing UNESCO district designation for Seoul's historic, albeit largely reconstructed city walls for which any local initiatives would have to be properly managed and organized so as to not jeopardize the city's planned application. The community group was meant to act as a bridge between residents and government, although all of our informants stated that it has never effectively accomplished the task of relaying local concerns to municipal officials. While this recently re-titled community organization was once led by those with vested interests in the continued growth of tourism (members of group 1), it is, at the time of writing, now led by residents who have always felt left out of the economic benefits of tourism and who are consequently opposed to its continued development (members of group 3). Thus, the vast divide between groups 1 and 3 will remain despite the presence of the "united community group," at least for the foreseeable future until a common agreed upon vision can be achieved. Community divisions surrounding community-based murals have also been documented in other international case studies. For example, Osborne (2002) pointed out in his article on the tunnels and murals of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan that divisions initially emerged between a private business group and a non-profit organization during the onset of that Canadian city's downtown rejuvenation project, a project which was based on marketing a historically questionable interpretation of the city's past to tourists. Additionally, Osborne pointed out that some local businessmen were angered at being left out of the city's heritage tourism venture.

In addition to the government-led responses to dealing with the tensions in Ihwa Village, a notable development since 2016 has been the involvement of the former lead artist who has reluctantly taken on, at times, the important role of intermediary between the two polarized groups, all through a non-official, voluntary capacity – this despite having been ridiculed by some members of group 1 for working with those likely responsible for the vandalism of his own murals. As he stated, "I gladly accepted the request by the united community group to act as a consultant on art-related decisions. At the same time I was ridiculed very much by others as I joined hands with the perpetrators.” The artist has also acted as a facilitator in encouraging dialogue on the future of the community, including its mural artworks, with members of the larger in-between group (group 2). In particular, he has encouraged community meetings since the incident, including those organized by the united community group as well as his own.

When asked about the future of the murals, the former lead artist, who has in the recent past encouraged the visioning of Ihwa's future with its residents asserted that there is a desire by some to give the mural project a second chance: “many locals are now invested in the mural project, despite the problems. There is growing acceptance by the shop owners to maintain and even expand on the artworks in the future.” He acknowledged that greater buy-in to the project necessitated better communication with residents and a greater effort to understand the needs of the community. Further, recognizing that many of the murals lacked a real connection to the place identity of Ihwa Village, he stated “part of the problem is that many of the artworks were either kitschy (having been made by volunteers and students) or lacked..."
meaning. Artists are often too narrowly focused on their own artistic visions and consequently overlook local history or context when undertaking their works.” As Oh (2020: 4) recently notes, the vibrantly coloured “cartoonish” murals of Ihwa Village are aesthetic rather than political, they lack an overarching theme, and could have been made anywhere; “however, ironically [they] have come to ‘represent’ Ihwa Village due to their palpable noticeability.” The former lead artist acknowledged that artists need to have a comprehensive knowledge of an area they are to work in and asserted that he would make more of an effort to listen to residents and to get their input on proposed artworks. That said, he did point out that while most artworks lacked any close meaning to Ihwa Village and were in some cases of questionable artistic quality, he and several others had made a real effort in 2006 to capture the local history and culture in mural art form, although their efforts were not well received, particularly by the elderly population at that time (see footnote 4).

While the future of Ihwa as a mural village remains uncertain, efforts on the part of the former lead artist of Ihwa Village to act as an intermediary between the socially fragmented community and as a facilitator in encouraging local dialogue on the future of the murals may be serving to motivate some residents to re-think objections they once had to the murals, at least as indicated by their participation in recent discussions with the artist over the community’s future. At the time of writing, the anti-tourism graffiti is no longer to be found and some artworks, including the re-sited “angel wings” mural have been re-painted. Although the 2016 incident reportedly did have a negative impact on the popularity of Ihwa Mural Village, estimates based on big data analysis of telecommunications and financial transaction data placed the average number of monthly visitors at 325,225 between October, 2016 and June 2017 with 450,186 given as the estimate for the final month of the examined period (Jongno District Office, 2017). Moreover, many international tourists were still to be seen by the authors during their visits to the district in the autumn months of 2019, likely owing to the fact that some recent travel books still show the once iconic staircase murals among other artworks as things to see in the old residential district. Tellingly, tourist maps meant to direct visitors to the most prominent artworks left acknowledge the problems of overtourism. A section in English entitled “Introduction to the Mural Village” at the base of one such outdoor wall map concludes with “The increasing number of tourist visits has led to an increase in inconveniences for residents, such as disruptions caused by the noise of tourists, damages to the village landscape, and unauthorized dumping of waste. Our concern and participation are necessary to preserve this humble neighbourhood, Ihwa-dong Mural Village.” Finally, some new artworks have purposely been added to remind visitors to be mindful of this issue as they explore the area (e.g. Fig. 3).

It must be noted that as in the case of other tourist hotspots in this and other countries around the globe, the future prospects for the revival of mass tourism and with that, all of the problems associated with overtourism remains unclear as national and city governments try to cope with COVID-19. While it can be expected that there may be a shift in research from overtourism to “undertourism” in formerly popular tourist destinations, the popularity of key attractions cannot be expected to simply go away, particularly among domestic visitors and tourists. Indeed, while there were no international tourists in sight, Ihwa Mural Village was still being frequented by a significant number of domestic visitors in late March 2020 during the authors’ most recent visit to the mural village despite the coronavirus pandemic situation. Consequently, while overtourism may not be apparent at the time of this writing, the possibility for its resurgence with domestic visitors and tourists making up a larger share of sightseers than before, should not be dismissed by researchers or policymakers.

5. Recommendations and conclusion

Several recommendations emerge from our study on Ihwa Mural Village as well as from previously published studies in the Korean language. These recommendations should be considered in the future when similar arts-led revitalization projects are proposed.

- **Clear explanation of project** – the purpose and expected timeline of Ihwa’s mural project was unclear to those affected; a project timeline should be offered in advance of the implementation of any mural project
- **Responsibility and coordination** – the responsibility of different levels of government and government departments should be clearly identified (see footnote 5). More effective coordination should also be promoted between government and artists, local community planners and other stakeholders
- **Community capacity building** – the need for more effective communication and leadership has been identified in previous studies on Ihwa Mural Village; community-based capacity building as seen in the recent formation of a community organization should be encouraged as should the role of intermediaries (i.e. the artist in the Ihwa case)
- **Transparency and conflict of interest** – greater transparency should be encouraged to avoid the public perception that stakeholder views are not taken seriously; conflict of interest should also be avoided when it comes to government-appointed individuals engaging in private sector development
- **Artists and the community** – artists should be more knowledgeable about the communities they are working in. Meaningful artworks tied to the place identity of a community are more likely to be appreciated and hence cared for and maintained. Cooperative painting between artists and residents should also be encouraged
- **Tourism development and potential consequences** – the tourism management process should be considered at the onset of any similar project; the potential consequence of overtourism and possible solutions to it should also be considered as should the implications of development proposals that economically favour some residents but not others

While much has been written on Ihwa Mural Village, few studies...
have addressed the issue of overtourism, with exceptions being focused on either resident perceptions towards the problem (Kim & Park, 2016; Woo et al., 2017) or on the role social media has played in encouraging it (Jang & Park, 2020). Moreover, few studies have attempted to explain the specific reasons for the dramatic event in 2016 when several individuals attempted to destroy the tourism resource base of their own residential area (Jeong & Kim, 2016). That a principal factor behind the mural vandalism incident was lost in most news reports and even in subsequent academic studies underscores the importance of in-depth case studies and the need for such research in the field of overtourism research and, we might add, the expected new area of interest in “undertourism” in formerly popular visitor sites that have been negatively impacted as a result of COVID-19. Aside from revealing a key trigger behind the 2016 incident, this paper has also revealed some of the responses undertaken since the event by government and community members to ameliorate the situation. In addition, this paper has offered a list of recommendations for city officials seeking to promote similar “urban village” and “tourism-oriented” regeneration projects. Finally, while resistance to tourism is commonly associated with well-known examples from Europe, this paper has served to shed light on the challenges posed by overtourism in a residential area-turned-murals tourism hotspot in Seoul. Future research should be conducted on other popular mural, culture and historic districts in South Korea to gauge how effectively visitor flows have been managed, to explore how residents have dealt with the touristification of their communities, and to address the important question of “who benefits” which has clearly been a key issue underlying local concerns about overtourism in Ihwa Mural Village.

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Author contribution

Hayun Park informed the second author of this case example of overtourism, conducted the interviews, collected and translated relevant plans, news articles and academic studies, and verified the accuracy of the paper’s content. Jason F. Kovacs developed the research questions, conducted a review of the relevant literatures, and wrote the manuscript based on the first author’s key interview findings.

Appendix A. Main interview questions

1. Why was Ihwa Village selected for the Art in City initiative? How long did the transformation of Ihwa take? How many artists were involved and what role did local residents play?
2. What role did government departments (district, metropolitan, and state level) have in the original project and in later maintenance and place promotion efforts?
3. What were initial and subsequent community reactions to the mural project?
4. When did the first problems with overtourism arise? Can you provide specific examples of the problem?
5. What specific issues contributed to the 2016 vandalism incident? What were local reactions to the incident?
6. What developments have emerged in Ihwa Village since the incident? Have tensions within the community been resolved?
7. What lessons might be learned from the arts-led redevelopment project in Ihwa Mural Village and the 2016 incident?

Note: Not all of the questions listed above were suitable for the different community members interviewed. Consequently, questions were adjusted according to the informant’s role in the community, and additional and more specific questions were also posed as the interviews proceeded. Interviews were conducted in Korean.

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