Construction of the World Design Capital: Détournement of Spectacle in Dongdaemun Design Park & Plaza in Seoul

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Abstract

This paper analyzes how the city government-led project to promote Seoul as the world design capital has resulted in the construction of spectacular architecture, and how such a vision of Seoul is resisted by various actors. Construction of the Dongdaemun Design Park and Plaza, designed by Zaha Hadid, is an effort to rebrand Seoul's image from that of an industrial city relying on manufacturing to that of a post-industrial city emphasizing service industries. Although Hadid's design, which integrates the historical wall from the Chosun dynasty, was deemed respectful of Korean heritage by the city government, many sports fans, street vendors, and artists have criticized it as representing a continuation of the developmentalist project. By highlighting the controversial design campaign of the FF group, this paper illustrates how the technique of détournement, proposed by Guy Debord, the founding member of the Situationist International, can be used to undermine the spectacle generated by the star architect's design. Despite the tendency of dramatic visual statements to stifle the struggles of everyday life, the case of Dongdaemun shows that the potential for critical design still exists.

Keywords: spectacle; branding; architecture; Situationist; Seoul

1. Introduction

The Dongdaemun Stadium Station of the Seoul Metro was renamed Dongdaemun History and Culture Park Station in December 2009, when the existing sports stadium, which first opened in 1926, was demolished to make way for Dongdaemun Design Park and Plaza (DDPP). Designed by Zaha Hadid, completion of the plaza and park complex is planned for July 2013. The site is located on the eastern edge of historic Seoul, near the landmark Dongdaemun (Eastern Gate) and Dongdaemun Market. Occupying a total site area of 65,232 square meters (16 acres), it is considered a new landmark not only for the Dongdaemun Market but also for the city of Seoul. DDPP is being promoted not only as a public park that offers amenities to the existing fashion industry in the area, but also as a potentially world-famous landmark, like the Sydney Opera House or the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (Seoul: Seoul Design Foundation, 2009). Although the overall cost of demolition and construction is 375,500 million KRW (about 313 million USD), the presence of DDPP in Dongdaemun market is expected to generate tourist activities in Seoul that more than offset the cost (Lee, 2009). The construction of the DDPP, which started in 2010 when Seoul was selected World Design Capital by the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID), is part of the local government's Design Seoul campaign to elevate Seoul to the hub of the world design industry.

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wholesale markets. Although sales of goods in general plummeted during the Asian financial crisis, sales at newly constructed mega-shopping malls such as Doota and Migliore boasted phenomenal growth, coining the phrase "the myth of Dongdaemun." The presence of many tourists and foreign buyers ordering products are reported as signs of Seoul being the "global fashion town" that maintains the momentum of the recent hallyu phenomenon, the popularity of Korean movies and dramas overseas. Due to the continuous construction of high-rise shopping malls, the area exudes the youthful atmosphere of hip and fashionable lifestyles. In addition to high-rise shopping malls with trendy shops, the construction at DDPP, funded by the Seoul city government, is expected to generate profits by rebranding Seoul away from its image as an industrial city to a post-industrial "culture city."

This paper analyzes the deployment of nationalistic interpretations of tradition in justifying the large-scale urban development. At the same time, it examines the resistance to its developmentalist approach on the part of socially oriented artists who combat the construction of what Guy Debord described as the "society of the spectacle" (Debord, 1977). More specifically, the author considers the controversial design campaign by artists calling themselves the FF group, and how their campaign can be compared to the technique of détournement theorized by Guy Debord. In section 2, this paper traces the recent urban development of Dongdaemun Market leading to the demolition of the Dongdaemun sports stadium and the construction of DDPP. Section 3 moves on to discuss how those who oppose the construction of DDPP and the notion of design capital successfully engage in undermining the spectacle of Seoul as a design capital. This paper illustrates that the possibility of critical design still exists, despite the tendency of visually stimulating development to hide daily struggles.

This paper uses various methods. First, it examines journal articles, policy documents, popular media, and government brochures to analyze the process of promoting the Dongdaemun area as both a tourist attraction and the center of the fashion industry. It also makes use of interviews with FF group members to understand the process of their design campaign.

2. History of Urban Development in Dongdaemun

The history of Dongdaemun cannot be separated from the market established in 1905 when Korean merchants formed the Gwangjang Corporation. After a brief cessation of commercial activities during the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, Dongdaemun Market expanded. Under the developmental regime of President Park, industrialized manufacturing enabled accelerated production of goods; these met with an explosive demand from war–deprived consumers in the late 1950s and 1960s. The rise of Dongdaemun was in large part due to the long hours of labor provided by young women who migrated to Seoul from the rural countryside (Fig.3.). Most of these worked fifteen hours a day in very cramped environments for minimal wages (Cumings, 2005). By the late 1970s,
Dongdaemun Market had become the biggest clothing market in Seoul (Fig.4).

Although individual shoppers could purchase items in Dongdaemun, most commercial activity was centered on wholesale distribution (Kim and Shin, 2001). The clustering of manufacturing functions and economies of scale enabled the production of cheaper goods in Dongdaemun Market. Small business owners leased lots in a larger market structure called the sang-ga. By 1970, when the Dongdaemun General Market was established, Dongdaemun Market was responsible for 70% of domestic production and distribution of clothing items (Shin, 2005). The abolition of the nighttime curfew as well as the construction of highways around the country facilitated the movement of local merchants to and from Seoul. Beginning in the early 1980s, it became common for groups of local merchants to travel in reserved buses on overnight trips to Dongdaemun (Seoul Metropolitan City, 2007). Due to the dominance of wholesale activities, the economy of the market relied more on its production and sales network than on the visual attractions of its shopping mall, or the comfort level experienced by shoppers. As such, Dongdaemun Market was different from department stores, which emphasized leisurely shopping experiences.

However, the economic conditions that allowed the spectacular growth of light industry began to change in the mid-1980s. Labor organizations began to gain strength as a result of the democratic movement. When the military dictatorship ended in 1987, the suppressed labor movements brought issues of worker's rights to the forefront of the democratization process. When confronted with labor disputes and strikes, many small and medium-sized businesses simply took the option of temporarily closing down their businesses (Chang, 2009: 108). As a result, those employed in small and medium-sized sewing factories in Dongdaemun experienced a high level of job insecurity.

In addition to institutional changes, the outbreak of the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s resulted in a disruption of the existing production and distribution networks of small businesses. Overall sales of goods decreased rapidly due to the recession, and in the context of financial difficulty and the downsizing trend prevalent in the aftermath of the IMF crisis, the success of the new retail shopping mall named Migliore in Dongdaemun seemed miraculous. Economists and urban scholars have attributed the success of Migliore in the late 1990s to an entrepreneurial sensitivity to the emergent consumption habits of teenagers (Yu, 2002: 68). Indeed, the merchants at Migliore engaged in the novel marketing strategy of targeting teenagers. The success of large retail shopping malls in Dongdaemun led to the construction of department store like shopping malls in Dongdaemun Market. Doota, Hello APM, and Good Morning City are examples of the retail shopping malls built in the 2000s following the strategy of catering to the casual fashion interests of the young.

It was in this political and institutional context that Seoul was selected World Design Capital (WDC) by the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) in 2007. Immediately after the selection of Seoul as the WDC, the Seoul city government embarked on the Design Seoul project, which included construction of the Dongdaemun Design Plaza and Park (DDPP), re-designing the landscape of Nam Mountain, and hosting the Seoul Design Olympics. The Seoul city government established an organization called Design Seoul Directing Headquarters in order to implement its various projects. As part of the renovation efforts, the Seoul Sports Stadium (also known as Dongdaemun Stadium), considered obsolete by some urban planners, was scheduled for demolition to make a way for the park (Fig.5.).

While Dongdaemun Stadium had hosted many historically important sports activities in Seoul, its presence was no longer considered essential because of “traffic issues, low level of use, and weakening competitive edge.” (Dongdaemun Forum, 2001: 82). Supporters of the park argued that Dongdaemun Market desperately needed a public space where pedestrians could take a rest. Meanwhile, the brochure promoting DDPP emphasized the fact that the old sports stadium had first been constructed during the Japanese colonial period to commemorate the marriage of the Japanese crown prince (Seoul Metropolitan City, 2010). Amid considerable controversy surrounding the demolition of the stadium, design competitions for a new park began in 2007. Among the many contestants, Hadid's design was chosen as the winning project. Its integration of the rediscovered city walls dating back to the fourteenth century became part of the rationale allowing Oh, then mayor of Seoul, to consider Hadid's metonymic architecture as respecting Korean tradition (Lee, 2009). The selection of Hadid's design reflected a desire to not only provide appropriate urban amenities, but also promote Seoul as a world center of the fashion
industry by using the brand power of a star architect.

The construction of DDPP in Dongdaemun Market is part of a larger stratagem deploying urban design to facilitate the transformation of Seoul. The Design Seoul campaign, which started in 2008, is an effort to re-situate South Korea within the global economic structure by transforming it from a "hard city" to a "soft city" (Kwon, 2010: 197). Whereas Seoul is represented in the global imagination as an industrial "hard city" emphasizing quantities such as speed and efficiency, the concept of a soft city emphasizes "qualitative" aspects of a city such as appreciation for "traditional culture." Within this urban discourse, the contemporary South Korean society is imagined to have "lost touch" with emotional well-being and other values because of its emphasis on rapid economic growth. Planners have argued that it is time to reverse this tendency by "rediscovering" the cultural heritage of South Korea (Yang, 1995). Consequently, architectural patrimony and historical relics need to be actively incorporated as elements of the new urban landscape. Doing so, it is hoped, will help improve residents' (and tourists') appreciation of "Korean culture".

Fig.6. Posters Advertising the Design Seoul Campaign Became Ubiquitous in Seoul in 2009. At Top a Poster Placed on the Roof of a Subway Train Car Reads: "It is Worth Living Thanks to (Good) Design." At Bottom, a Poster Shows a Businessman Smiling with a Bubble Reading "Seoul is Great!"

The official rhetoric of the Design Seoul campaign posited residents as the clients and beneficiaries of the campaign. The mission statement of Design Seoul includes five kinds of considerations—rather than policies—for the economy, the environment, everyday life, culture, and empathy (Design Seoul Website, 2011). These five considerations are constructed to fulfill the ultimate objective of caring for citizens. Compared to government-led projects under the previous authoritarian regime, the language describing the project is much softer, emphasizing friendliness and sensibility rather than containing a top-down command. The primary objective of caring for citizens is to be carried out by improving the quality of public space through design. As such, improving the appearance of public spaces such as sidewalks and streets is considered to contribute to the pleasant experience of everyday life. To promote the concept of Design Seoul, the city government has actively utilized friendly images in its posters and signs emphasizing the novelty of the project in transforming Seoul's urban landscape (Fig.6.). These images convey the message that unlike previous development projects, contemporary urban projects are designed to satisfy individual needs and comforts rather than fulfilling abstract national goals.

In Design Seoul, adding a "sense of history" to the city involved the resurrection of certain artifacts at the expense of others. Supporters of DDPP argued that the rationale for demolishing the sports stadium was not only based on practical concerns—meaning, that the stadium was not used frequently—but also on the historical fact that the stadium was built during colonial times to celebrate the wedding of the Japanese crown prince. This fact made the stadium appear an obsolete artifact of colonialism rather than the center of recreational activities in the recent past. While acknowledging the role of Dongdaemun Stadium in modern Korean sports culture, the government brochure emphasizes the fact that older "castle walls were destroyed for the construction of the stadium" (Seoul Design Foundation, 2010). In comparison to the older historical forms associated with the Chosun Dynasty, the stadium is relatively new, and bears the stigma of its colonial history. Furthermore, the discovery of old city walls during the demolition process and the architect's decision to integrate them into DDPP have added a sense of urgency to the removal of this colonial relic in order to "rescue" the older cultural heritage.

Yet it becomes difficult to delineate what kind of relationship Hadid's design has with South Korean traditions. The rendering of DDPP has changed several times, and one rendering shows a historical wall continuously lining the street, while another shows a series of shorter walls divided by the landscape. Rather, it is more accurate to say that the historic wall becomes a mere element of the modern project to rebrand Seoul. The Seoul Design Foundation's emphasis on the role of landmarks, such as its comparison of DDPP to the Sydney Opera House and Guggenheim Museum, shows that the creation of spectacular architecture here takes precedence over the preservation of historical forms.

Architectural scholars have observed various ways of architectural surfaces functioning as a means to express "urban aesthetics of spectacle" (Jeon et al., 2009: 70). Not only is DDPP a spectacle in the sense that it uses very expressive and dramatic curves, but also in the sense that it is representative of a certain world view and social relation. The belief that spectacular design can further economic growth is a spectacle in and of itself; Debord describes spectacle
as not simply a group of visual elements, but "a social relation between people that is mediated by images." (Debord, 2000: p4) It is also a "world view that has actually been materialized, a view of a world that has become objective." (Debord, 2000: p5). DDPP is representative of a world where Seoul has become the center of the design industry, and accordingly, determines social relations among various actors, including city government, architect, tourists, and the residents. Adopting Debord's description of a spectacle as a "visual reflection of the ruling economic order" (Debord, 2000: p6), DDPP is a kind of spectacle reflecting the capitalist logic of accumulation and the role architectural design plays in the process of accumulation. Unlike traditional relations, in which a factory floor represents capitalist oppression, the relations of spectacle are constantly changing. In other words, there is no fixed space that represents oppression. Thus, the relation of spectacle always includes alienation, as spectacle fools individuals and prevents people from engaging in political struggle.

While Debord and other members of Situationist International (SI) were wary of the late capitalist regime's ability to shift the boundary of alienation, they also suggested a strategy for resisting such tactics. Instead of allowing oneself to be engulfed in the image of consumer culture, one can choose to behave differently according to ever-changing situations. Aptly naming themselves Situationists, Guy Debord, Michele Bernstein, and Asger Jorn sought to break out of the master narrative of modernization using techniques they called dérive (drifting) and détournement (turning aside). Although translated as drift, the concept of dérive is anything but mindless drifting. Rather, one is rejecting the established control, and engaging in a very radical mode of sociability. It is a journey in which new experiences and sensations outside capitalism are gained. To encourage such experiences, SI constructed a hypothetical map called the naked city (Fig.7.). As a map connecting a series of underdeveloped neighborhoods in Paris, it contrasts with thoughtfully planned routes designed to engulf visitors within the spectacle of a modern urban environment. Another technique, called détournement, twists the original message of a consumerist media work to generate an antithetical message. In the next section, the author will examine how the construction of DDPP was met by a counter movement made up of entities like the FF group's LikeSeoul campaign, employing the technique of détournement.

3. FF Group's LikeSeoul Campaign as Détournement

Notwithstanding the warm reception and favorable portrayal of DDPP by official sources, voices of dissent and criticism toward the project came from various camps. Sports fans who associated the Dongdaemun Stadium with cherished memories of urban sports activities and historically significant events opposed its demolition. Contrary to assertions that the demolition of the stadium was necessary to eliminate the remnants of colonialism, sports authorities argued that the stadium had accumulated different meanings, as layers of positive memories replaced faded histories of the colonial period. Baseball fans opposed the demolition by arguing that the stadium was the "Mecca of amateur baseball games" and "the cradle of many sports stars" (Choi, 2007: 37). Others noted that the decision to demolish the eighty-year-old sports structure reflected how "more attention is given to development and profit rather than everyday memories associated with urban space." (Kil, 2007: 38).

More successful attacks on the Design Seoul campaign came from those who politicized the urban projects to their advantage by drawing attention to socioeconomic issues. Young artists started to use guerilla design tactics to question the legitimacy of the project by using humor directed at the sanctimonious tone of the government campaign. The local government's strategy of manufacturing consent through images backfired when exaggerated portrayals of residents as progressive and satisfied people were met by counter-images of disgruntled individuals. A significant portion of Seoul's residents do not share the official rosy view of the Design Seoul campaign and do not hesitate to express their opposition. Some have said that an excessive campaign that blankets public space with posters and stickers is irritating, sometimes inducing "design nausea" (Park, 2010). More adventurous individuals have engaged in guerilla design strategies by creating parodies of the government posters and displaying them in strategic places.

For instance, an organization called FF Group, made up of freelance artists, has engaged in its LikeSeoul campaign by placing stickers over the official Design Seoul posters that twist their original message. While the original word bubbles said "design is good" and "Seoul is great," the new bubbles on the stickers read "children skip meals because [the city government
Members of FF Group questioned the way the Seoul city government used the term design to promote urban redevelopment. The contrast between smiling faces and dissatisfied comments in the bubble comes across as a comical spin on the original poster. However, it is more than a simple prank commenting on the official campaign. With relatively little investment, such tactics have successfully subverted the image of contented citizens happily carrying out their routines in the city by delivering counter-narratives such as that of the regional inequality between Gangbuk (North of the Han River) and Gangnam (South of the Han River). The LikeSeoul campaign also questions the current city government’s emphasis on design-oriented developments, arguing that public funds spent on the Design Seoul campaign could have been spent on more pressing issues such as the provision of free school meals for all children.

Such counter-narratives demonstrate that the depiction of Seoul’s residents as contented beneficiaries of the urban park project is far from being the whole truth. Many protesters and artists refuse to accept the claim that urban projects are designed to “care for citizens.” By their actions, they awakened policymakers and planners to the fact that citizens are not mere followers, but recalcitrant political constituents who might not give their consent to the project in the first place. At the same time, they redefined the geographical boundaries of this sociopolitical issue from a global scale to a local one, by implicitly arguing that local problems—such as inequality between the South and North parts of Seoul—should be addressed before taking on the task of making Seoul a global design capital.

As a campaign that redefined a problem and shifted the focus of social relation inherent in spectacles, FF group’s work can be considered an example of détournement. Debord and Wolman described détournement as a strategy that goes beyond simple mockery of the bourgeoisie’s notion of art and culture (Debord, 2003). Establishing a distance from Dadaist works such as Marcel Duchamp’s Mona Lisa, they defined détournement as an act in which “mutual interference of two worlds of feeling, or the juxtaposition of two independent expressions, supersedes the original elements and produces a synthetic organization of greater efficacy” (Knabb, 2006: 15). As such, works of détournement always contain an element of propaganda and “a real means of proletarian artistic education” (Knabb, 2006: 18). FF group’s LikeSeoul campaign has achieved a similar effect, by mocking the original message while at the same time drawing attention to other problems relating to the ruling economic order in South Korea. As such, it is different from artworks that use urban space simply to fulfill personal aesthetic desires. Such works have the effect of dehypnotizing those who might otherwise have allowed themselves to be immersed in the spectacle of the design capital.
The government's vision of keeping up with other cities by aggressively marketing newly designed urban environments is not only predicated on structural inequalities, but also threatens to intensify the negative externalities associated with liberalizing labor conditions. Despite the reported success of the small business owners of Dongdaemun Market in the late 1990s, not everyone who put faith in the possibility of continuous material growth was awarded entrepreneurial success. In 2003, the embezzlement of the lot distribution fund (paid by the prospective tenants) by a representative of the shopping mall called Good Morning City generated a crisis among 3,400 prospective tenants who had invested capital for the right to manage a lot in the mall. Since the costs of constructing the shopping mall had not yet been paid, it was declared bankrupt. The tenants formed a contractors' council and borrowed money from banks to recover the construction costs. The shopping mall finally opened for business in November 2008. Located adjacent to DDPP, the building stands twenty stories tall, containing about 4,500 lots for shops. This case of embezzlement brought national attention to the existence of problematic real estate transactions in Dongdaemun Market.

Unlike in the late 1990s, many shop lots in big shopping malls currently remain empty due to oversupply of space. According to Yil-san Kim, representative of the Korean International Trade Association in Dongdaemun, there is a joke that "there are a greater number of shops than merchants" and that "agents (who sell lots) leave with big money while merchants have to engage in repechage" (Kim, 2002: 74). Seung Il Jung, a small business consultant, explained that many shopping malls have closed down due to the oversupply of lots (Jung, 2000). Furthermore, the global recession that began in 2009 also threatens the long-term viability of landmark-led developments.

4. Conclusion

This article has analyzed urban development in Dongdaemun Market in Seoul and subsequent reactions to the construction of landmark architecture there. While the provision of amenities and the preservation of history have been used as justifications for selecting international iconic architecture, such factors appear secondary to the economic impact generated by the building's presence. In the meantime, the imagined distinction between "hard" and "soft" to characterize the recent past and present of Seoul—as a city—functions as the new developmental paradigm which enables the implementation of constant urban re-design in many areas, including Dongdaemun. However, the rhetoric of "caring for citizens" did not guarantee acceptance of the new development projects in everyday practice. Defining the appropriate cultural representations of Dongdaemun became a hotly controversial issue, as sports fans, young artists, and street vendors actively participated in the renegotiations. Resistance to official urban design strategies by guerilla design groups demonstrate that an emphasis on constructing visual landmarks can be subverted by the technique of détournement and the production of counter-narratives. The FF group's questioning of the Seoul city government's urban policies demonstrates that citizens are not simply beneficiaries of construction projects but also political agents capable of judging the legitimacy of such projects.

It is difficult to predict what kind of economic benefits or misfortunes the construction of Dongdaemun Design Park and Plaza will bring to Dongdaemun Market. However, the challenges to the government's vision of urban environments suggest that there are ways to escape from a society dominated by spectacles. Few spectacles are free of charge. And with a critical eye you can gauge the price of admission. Urban politics will never see the dominance of the image over the real world. Despite the trend of the spectacle colonizing everyday life, new meanings can always be discovered through continuous questioning and active engagement with urban space.

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