

Special Section “Urban Palimpsests: Seoul between Local Pasts and Global Presents”

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Introduction

In conducting research on urban landscapes, where dominant social discourses are layered into spatial forms, material environments, and human interactions, I often find myself questioning whether my observations will remain valid even a year later, especially in a city like Seoul where rapid and large-scale urban transformations are a constant feature. These swift changes have become the norm in increasingly competitive urban spaces shaped by market-driven logics. However, these concerns are eased as I come to see my work as a form of urban archiving that documents evolving social relations and provides a foundation for future research agendas. The four articles included in this special section share this commitment to continuously documenting sociocultural changes within urban contexts. As Jean Gebser (1984) proposed in *The Ever-Present Origin*, human history is not merely a linear progression but an unfolding of multiple structures of consciousness that remain latent within the present. In this sense, the local past is not erased by urban change but is embedded within it, forming strata of meaning that surface through everyday practices, built environments, and symbolic expressions.

While directing analytical attention to individual cases that may initially appear unrelated, the articles in this special section collectively show how the broader socio-spatial context of Seoul, formed through the accrual of rapid sociocultural changes, interacts with specific local sites. These interactions reflect complex social relations that are often made visible through the spatial practices of people and materials. In the legacy of Henri Lefebvre’s theorization of the production of social space (1991) and his critique of everyday life (2014), these social relations underscore the ongoing tensions that shape urban space. These tensions unfold between opposing forces such as the local and the global, the top-down and the bottom-up, and the dominant modes of production and the resistant, everyday practices that challenge them. Rather than being static or one-dimensional, urban space is continually produced and reproduced through these tensions, revealing layered negotiations of power, identity, and meaning in the lived environment.

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The four articles in this special section address the succinctly articulated tensions embedded within the urban fabric of Seoul. Ildong Joe's study on Sewoon Plaza illustrates how power-driven urban development has been periodically interrupted by grassroots spatial practices, resulting in alternative social spaces where undesigned urban users share their lived experiences. Sejung Ahn's article examines the commercial transformation of an old cinema within a traditional market, revealing how capitalist development, often stylized through cosmopolitan tastes, exerts pressure on marginal everyday spaces while commodifying local history. Jong-Su Ahn's study of Seongsu-dong explores how the neighborhood, rapidly transitioning from an industrial past to a cosmopolitan commercial hub, has become further commercialized through the competitive visibility of the self and commercial activities, intensified by digitally mediated communication. Departing from a focus on spatial practices, the final article by Jung Ha Park captures a distinctive juncture between the local and the global through opportunistic language education choices, situated in Gangnam as a symbolic enclave of competitive education and a site of economic and sociocultural proximity to the West, particularly the United States.

As mentioned above, this special section represents an early step in the ongoing documentation of urban transformation as it becomes increasingly intertwined with sociocultural, political-economic, and, more importantly, rapidly evolving technological changes. Despite being a modest beginning, it is intended to benefit all contributing authors as well as other researchers in related fields by encouraging sustained analytical engagement with the relentless changes in built environments and their discursive interactions with surrounding material and human actors (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). These dynamics, in turn, reflect broader interplays between global and local contexts, offering fertile ground for future critical inquiry by presenting continuously evolving urban landscapes as readable texts.

Especially in Seoul, where massive urban transformation has become the norm, urban megastructures such as Sewoon Plaza not only reshape the physical landscape but also amplify dominant discourses by visually overwhelming their surroundings and functioning as new communicative repertoires (Canagarajah, 2018). Seoul, the capital city, is now confronting the world's fastest rate of population aging. The demographic imbalance, particularly the growing number of retirees and their partial replacement by foreign residents, is intensifying tensions in various urban margins such as Kyungdong Market. Aligned with the city's first metro line, these demographic shifts are transforming the social fabric of older neighborhoods. Multiple vernacular landscapes, shaped by the everyday practices of diverse populations, are increasingly subjected to relentless development pressures (Jackson, 1984; Kim, 2001). These layered tensions not only reshape the built environment but also present challenges in documenting the fleeting social relations produced within these disrupted spaces. This situation highlights the need for sustained critical attention. Whereas urban users once produced social space primarily through perception and lived experience, they are now contributing additional layers to this process by integrating themselves into both spatial and digital continuums. This is evident in neighborhoods such as Seongsu-dong, where people increasingly represent and recognize themselves through their associations with physical spaces and their presence on digital platforms (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015). In doing so, they reshape the production of urban space through mediated self-expression, spatial affiliation, and networked visibility. This calls for more robust transmodal studies that transcend different modes of communication as well as spatial production. In addition, seemingly non-spatial practices such as language education are deeply integrated into

the reshaping of both social and physical spaces. As these practices drive the mobilization of resources to optimize educational and economic outcomes, spatial arrangements are continually reconfigured. Crucially, access to these resources is largely determined by geographic location, which contributes to the formation of symbolic enclaves characterized by their proximity to concentrated resources. While these areas are often separated from surrounding localities, they are simultaneously connected to global networks, which blurs spatial and national borders. This paradox of urban borders, being at once bounded and fluid, requires ongoing documentation and critical analysis. The four articles in this special section are offered as a contribution to these discussions, inviting deeper scholarly engagement with the evolving tensions, challenges, and possibilities embedded in Seoul’s urban landscapes.

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