Korean Soc Sci J (2025) 52:21-40

Between Blueprints and Bootlegs: Spatial Politics of Modernity in the Sewoon Plaza, Seoul

Ildong JOE[1]

Received: 5 April 2025 / Accepted: 29 April 2025 /
Published online: 1 June 2025

Abstract This paper examines the Sewoon Plaza in Seoul as a contested urban space shaped by both top-down planning and bottom-up improvisation. Originally conceived in the 1960s as South Korea's first large-scale mixed-use redevelopment project, the Sewoon embodied the state's vision of modernity through monumental architecture and centralized planning. However, the space was soon appropriated by grassroots actors like technicians and merchants who transformed it into a hub of repair, reverse engineering, and informal media circulation. Drawing on Lefebvre's theory of spatial production and post-colonial critiques of development, the study reveals how the plaza became a site where global technologies were localized and modernity was negotiated from the margins. Rather than viewing the Sewoon as a failed urban planning, I ㅱreframe it as a living archive of urban experimentation and other modernities. The case of the Sewoon Plaza demonstrates how modern cities are not only planned from above but continually reinvented through everyday practices on the ground.

Keywords Urban spatial production · Post-colonial urbanism · Social Space · Reverse engineering · Tech-culture

This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2021S1A5A2A03071488).

✉ Ildong JOE
heavyjoe@aks.ac.kr

[1] Associate Professor, Anthropology, Academy of Korean Studies

Introduction

The Sewoon Plaza(세운상가) is South Korea's first large-scale mixed-use residential and commercial complex, constructed in phases between 1967 and 1972. This massive structure stretches approximately 1.2 kilometers in a straight line from Jongno to Toegye-ro, cutting through the heart of Seoul's old city center. Even after more than six decades, the Sewoon complex plaza remains one of the largest concrete structures in the area. Inside the arcade-style buildings, one still finds a dense concentration of shops specializing in electronics and media technologies, including home audio systems, popular music albums, lighting equipment, watches, cameras, computers, karaoke machines, and arcade game consoles. The presence of such a long and monumental structure in the middle of the city is deeply intertwined with the elite vision of modernity in postwar South Korea. Large-scale architecture has long been perceived as a spatial manifestation of modern society.

This form of urban development has its origins in the industrial revolution of 19th-century Europe and, since the mid-20th century, the majority of the global population has come to reside in urban areas for the first time in human history (Jaffe & de Koning, 2016, p. 1). In this sense, the city has increasingly come to represent the quintessential space of modernity. Urban construction involving monumental architecture is often seen as rooted in industrialization and symbolic of modern transformation. With rapid urbanization, the city emerged as the focal point of social, cultural, political, and economic life in the modern era. Embedded within this discourse is the notion of the modern city as a radical break with the past. Harvey (2003), however, describes this notion as a myth. While modernization certainly marked dramatic change, it was less a break than a process of creative destruction and reconstruction (pp. 1-2).

About a century after the transformation of Paris, Korean elites in 1960s Seoul believed that dismantling the existing urban structure and building something entirely new constituted a practice of modernity. In this sense, they embodied what Harvey has called 'modernity as a myth'. For them, the destruction of the old and the construction of new architectural forms was understood as the very realization of modern urban life. However, the creative destruction of space does not automatically lead to the successful construction of a modern city. The demolition of old structures and their replacement with radically new buildings through top-down planning does not necessarily coincide with the creation of modern social space. Urban space, as Massey argues, does not have a single, pre-given identity. "For places, certainly when conceptualized as localities, are of course not internally uncontradictory. Given that they are constructed out of the juxtaposition, the intersection, the articulation, of multiple social relations they could hardly be so" (Massey, 2005, p. 137). Building on this insight, Pink (2012) deepens the discussion by shifting attention to the everyday practices within urban spaces. For Pink, urban materiality is not only a matter of physical structure but also the result of the political reconfiguration of people, discourse, and objects. Individuals living in these spaces navigate place and innovate as they carry out daily practices contingent on multiple elements. "This does not mean that the application of a sustainability agenda in a town as such will simply change, from above, the everyday practices of local people" (Pink, 2012, p. 122). In other words, the identity of a city is not dictated by top-down plans alone, but emerges through the complex interplay of bottom-up practices and lived experience.

For an architectural space to become a social space, it must be actively lived in and practiced

by its inhabitants. These practices, ways of moving through and being part of a town, vary across contexts. Therefore, modern cities do not contain just one kind of social space, but multiple, coexisting spatialities. Lefebvre (1991) argued that social space is not homogeneous or isotropic, but layered and diverse. It is formed through networks, paths, and relational bundles: "Social spaces interpenetrate one another and/or superimpose themselves upon one another" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 86). This theoretical lens in urban studies is applicable to the case explored in this paper, in which residents and merchants redefined the character and identity of a massive building complex originally filled with top-down visions and infrastructure.

In this theoretical context, I analyze the competing top-down and bottom-up spatial practices that shaped its transformation. This paper examines the Sewoon Plaza as a space constructed in South Korea about fifteen years after independence and roughly a decade after the Korean War —one that has persisted to this day. At first glance, top-down and bottom-up modes of engagement may appear entirely distinct, but this study suggests that both represent parallel yet divergent efforts to imagine modernity. One vision of modernity was embedded in the top-down planning and urban redevelopment initiated by a generation of young elites—an imagination rooted in creative destruction. The other emerged from the situated, bottom-up practices of users and residents who redefined the building's character in ways entirely absent from its original blueprints. Importantly, the top-down visions of the Sewoon's planners, and the everyday spatial practices of its users, cannot be reduced to fixed categories (Joe, Kim & Song, 2024). Both were dynamic and contextually driven. What is clear, however, is that despite their differences, both top-down plans and bottom-up adaptations were animated by aspirations for modern life.

Such spatial contestations in urban redevelopment are not unique to this case. Aiello (2011), for example, explores how spaces of exclusion and distinction have been reconfigured through urban renewal. Brillembourg and Klumpner (2012) examine how abandoned urban spaces were transformed into creative residential environments. Low (2022) emphasizes that the very establishment of public space is inseparable from the practices of urban inhabitants. Like these cases, the Sewoon Plaza was originally constructed as a luxury residential-commercial complex but eventually evolved into Korea's first electronics mall, filled not with prestige retailers but with repair shops and reverse-engineered technologies. Thus, the history of Sewoon Plaza, and the evolution of media technologies within it, offers both parallels and departures from existing literature. It sheds light on how modernity was imagined and practiced not only from above, but also from below, by merchants and city dwellers in a newly independent postcolonial nation-state. Postcolonial societies often experience multiple layers of exploitation: first under imperial domination, then through ongoing cultural subjugation, and finally via a third wave of elite-led modernization that re-invokes and re-compares itself to empire argues (Chow, 1995). The formation of the Sewoon Plaza reflects these complex layers: it was a space where South Koreans, having first encountered electric and electronic media under Japanese colonial rule and later reorganized their media environments in the context of the Cold War, reimagined modernity through both technological appropriation and everyday survival.

The culture of reverse engineering, which was repurposing and illegally replicating media devices, found in the Sewoon Plaza is not unique to Korea, but resonates with broader trends in postcolonial Asia. Sundaram (1999), for example, has analyzed how piracy and informal replication constitute a central axis of media modernity in many Asian megacities. The Sewoon

case echoes this perspective, demonstrating how alternate modernities take shape through friction, improvisation, and technological vernaculars distinct from Western developmental models. While earlier research on Sewoon Plaza often focused on its planning failures or its notoriety as a hub of piracy and pornography, especially after redevelopment debates emerged in the 1990s. More recent perspectives have emphasized its role as a technological and historical archive of modern Seoul. Yet few studies have fully framed the Sewoon Plaza as a product of urban social space, produced through layers of state ambition, informal appropriation, and evolving media practices. This paper seeks to fill that gap.

In this paper, I adopt the term 'the Sewoon Plaza' to refer to this large-scale linear complex in english. Existing literature displays a variety of English spellings and names for the site, including Seun Sangga, Seun Shopping Center, Seun Complex, the Sewoon, Sewoon Arcade, and Sewoon Plaza. Here, I follow the standardized English rendering "Sewoon" as adopted by the Seoul Metropolitan Government after its 2014 decision to preserve the structure and promote the area under the 'Maker City Sewoon' initiative.

The Desire for Modernity on the Construction of the Sewoon Plaza

'The Sewoon Plaza' may refer to the entire chain of eight interconnected shopping centers—Sewoon Shopping Center Ga-dong (a.k.a. Asia Shopping Center), Cheonggye Shopping Center, Daerim Shopping Center, Sampung Shopping Center, Pungjeon Hotel, Shinsung Shopping Center, Jinyang Shopping Center, and Hyundai Shopping Center (now demolished)—or, in a narrower sense, it may denote only Sewoon Shopping Center Gae-dong (Kim, 2022: 32). Since the early 1960s, redevelopment plan for this area had been proposed several times to solve the problems of housing, transportation, and unauthorized construction that Seoul was facing at the time. However, due to the vast scale of the area, these plans were repeatedly thwarted by the enormous costs associated with demolition and reconstruction.

In 1966, a new plan was formulated and executed, leading to the demolition of the densely packed shantytown in the area. Within just a few years, a massive structure spanning 50 meters in width and 1.2 kilometers in length was built. Unlike a typical slum, the reason why the width and length of the area was defined clearly, will be discussed further later. The construction of the Sewoon Plaza buildings had the symbolic meaning of proclaiming the success of the economic development policies pursued by the Park Chung-hee administration in the 1960s and 1970s, as like the slogan 'Modernization of the Motherland.' The architecture of the Sewoon Plaza embodied the aspirations to build a completely new modern Seoul at once, from the design to the construction process.

The massive structures of Sewoon Plaza have been regarded as an urban symbol of economic growth in South Korea. Reigh (2015) points two kind of buildings that symbolize Korea's industrialization and modernization in the 1960s, a period characterized by rapid and compressed development. The first category consists of high-rise apartment complexes built along the Han River, while the second includes large-scale urban residential and commercial complexes, such as the Sewoon Plaza and the Nakwon Building. The Sewoon Plaza was conceived as an ideological project embodying the concept of a 'city within a city', where nearly all aspects of urban life were condensed into a single architectural space. One of the key elements of the

design was the creation of a pedestrian-only walkway by incorporating an artificial aerial deck that connects all the buildings (Kim, 2022). Despite its original as a high-end residential and commercial complex designed by a prominent architect in collaboration with government officials, the Sewoon Plaza has gradually become more associated with unauthorized reproductions, improvised repairs, and reverse-engineered reassemblies rather than its initial vision.

This study argues that the transformation of the Sewoon Plaza's character and composition should not be merely regarded as a failed urban planning project. Instead, following Lefebvre's (1991) perspective for social space, the Sewoon Plaza "is is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity - their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder" (Lefebvre, 1991, p.73). This case illustrates the dynamic and generative nature of urban spatial environments. In a broader sense, both the original developers and those who later appropriated this space contributed, in their own ways, to realizing the expansive and often ambiguous goal of modernity. This process was deeply intertwined with the prevailing social and cultural trends of the time, reflecting the complexities of urban transformation in the modern era.

Building Land: Top-downed Evacuation Site

The Sewoon Plaza, a massive structure stretching north to south in the heart of downtown Seoul, stands amid low-rise, aging buildings—except for the skyscrapers concentrated around Cheonggyecheon Stream. Towering at 13 stories in front of Jongmyo Shrine, the Sewoon Plaza has long been an imposing and somewhat intimidating concrete building. The image of this vertical structure is even more striking when contrasted with the green, horizontal expanse of Jongmyo. Extending over one kilometer from Jongmyo Shrine, this structure, built from chunks of concrete, is described as "a glittering monument flaunting the country's economic miracle and a political symbol proclaiming the ultimate victory of monarchy" (Lee, 2005, p. 197). According to Lee, the monumentality of this massive building is further emphasized by its strategic architectural composition. This massive complex, stretching over one kilometer, features tower-like buildings rising 13 to 22 stories—significantly taller than the average—at key points where it meets major roads such as Jongno, Euljiro, and Toegye-ro.

How was it possible for such a massive urban project to be realized in the very heart of the city? The area was originally designated as a special open space during the colonial period, intended as a precautionary measure against potential air raids on Seoul. In the 1930s, as Japan intensified its expansionist military campaigns on the Asian continent, the need for enhanced wartime preparedness became more urgent. In 1936, Japan enacted the *City Defense Order*, which introduced regulations for fire-prevention zones and urban dispersal strategies. These measures aimed to mitigate the risks of large-scale fires caused by aerial bombings. As part of this initiative, green belts and artificial waterways were planned for central urban areas to act as firebreaks (Kim, 2022, p. 34). By 1944, with U.S. air raids devastating major Japanese cities, American bombers were also observed flying over Jeju Island and Busan. In March 1945, the Governor-General of Korea announced a plan to demolish buildings in five specific areas of Seoul as part of a broader urban defense strategy. Citizens were ordered to evacuate, and preparations for the construction of evacuation sites in the city center were initiated in earnest.

The first phase involved the forced clearance of a 50-meter-wide, 1.2-kilometer-long corridor extending from Jongno to Pil-dong. This operation, which commenced on May 11, 1945, was completed by the end of June under the slogan 'Fighting City, Completion of the March.' A second phase, originally scheduled for August, was never carried out due to Japan's surrender and the subsequent liberation of the Korean Peninsula (Ahn, 2005; Lim & Youm, 2019). Originally a vibrant commercial and residential district with roots tracing back to the Joseon Dynasty, the area was entirely razed of its built environment and population. Under Japanese colonial rule, the intersecting logics of 'wartime exigency' and 'civilian control' rendered it virtually impossible for original landowners to exercise their property rights. In the aftermath of the war, the absence of clearly defined ownership led to the area's reclassification as public land (Yum, 2016, p. 191). In subsequent decades, this urban void—devoid of private claims—was appropriated as the site of the Sewoon Plaza, a large-scale redevelopment project emblematic of the state-led modernization initiatives of the postwar era.

Bottom-up Decline: Evacuation Site into Slum

Amid the turmoil of the Korean War, this vast and vacant tract of land was rapidly transformed into an unregulated shantytown, called 'Jong Sam', as waves of war refugees sought shelter in the area. 'Jong Sam' was also an abbreviation for Jongno 3-ga, but it soon became the name for the huge informal red-light district that emerged in this area. Within this illegal settlement eventually becoming known as the largest red-light district in South Korea (Lee, 2005, p. 198). From the perspective of the Seoul municipal government, these ad hoc settlements and brothels, situated in the heart of the city on a large expanse of public land, were increasingly viewed as urban threats. However, the government lacked a clear legal or administrative basis to intervene or redevelop the area. During the colonial period, a 50-meter-wide, 1,200-meter-long strip of land had been converted into municipal land under Gyeongseong-bu (colonial-era Seoul) as part of Japanese urban defense planning. Although this land was eventually transferred to the ownership of the Seoul Metropolitan Government, it was neither designated as a road nor formally registered as residential land (Yoon, 1994, p. 15). Until the 1960s, this area, along with the Cheonggyecheon Stream, was considered one of the most underdeveloped and marginalized slums of Seoul.

It can be inferred that Park Chung-hee, who rose to power through a military coup, perceived the redevelopment of this neglected urban core as an opportunity to symbolically transform both the capital city of Seoul and the Republic of Korea itself. Accordingly, plans to redevelop the area were consistently proposed following the coup. The area's inclusion in the 1962 White Paper on Urban Planning and the 1965 Seoul Urban Planning Report reflects its perceived strategic importance. However, these early post-coup plans largely reproduced the framework set forth in the 1928 Gyeongseong City Planning Survey initiated under Japanese colonial rule, lacking both the institutional capacity and political will for effective implementation.

A significant turning point came in 1966 with the appointment of Kim Hyon-ok as mayor of Seoul. Nicknamed the 'Bulldozer Mayor' for his aggressive urban initiatives, Mayor Kim introduced a new Seoul City Basic Plan that explicitly sought to break from the long-standing urban planning paradigm inherited from the colonial era (Park, 2020, p. 102-103). Central to this plan was the redevelopment of the evacuation site area. According to Yoon (1994), who

oversaw the plan as head of urban planning, the idea for the Sewoon Plaza originated from Mayor Kim and architect Kim Swoo Geun Kim. One day Mayor Kim asked Swoo Geun, how best to utilize the evacuation site. Kim Swoo Geun reportedly presented the concept of pedestrian malls, elevated pedestrian decks, and a three-dimensional urban structure in a compelling manner, which gained the immediate support of both the mayor and vice mayor, leading to the project's initiation (Yoon, 1994, p. 15). However, the Seoul Metropolitan Government lacked the financial resources to carry out such an ambitious project independently. To secure the necessary funding for the project, the Seoul Metropolitan Government mobilized private investment. As a result, leading construction firms, including Hyundai and Daelim, were involved in the implementation of the Sewoon Plaza redevelopment initiative (Ahn, 2005, pp. 251-252).

Top-downed the Modern City Vision and Elite

In South Korea, extensive efforts to reconstruct Seoul as a symbol of modernity began in the 1960s, nearly a decade after the end of the Korean War. Among these, I focus on a group formed in January 1968—the Korean Sculptors & Artists Association(한국조형작가회의). Established by 41 artists in their 30s and 40s, the association aimed to herald new era through the integrated creation of spatial art. Its members emphasized the urgency of transforming Seoul into a modern metropolis, envisioning the city's (re)construction from the ruins of war as both a cultural and civic imperative. Under the slogan 'Participation in Urban Civilization,' they expressed their aspiration to usher in a new era through artistic engagement. While this initiative represented a bold and independent challenge by young artists, it was also aligned with the government's broader agenda of 'Modernization of the Motherland.' The members of this association included painters, sculptors, and architects, many of whom had studied abroad (Shin, 2014, p.199).

The Sewoon Plaza, South Korea's first urban redevelopment project, stood as a monumental infrastructure that integrated new motorway sections with apartments, commercial complex, and artistic spaces. It was planned by Kim Swoo Geun, a member of the Korean Sculptors & Artists Association. The large murals adorning the four floors of the Sewoon Plaza were created by Kim Young Ju, another member of the same association. This project offered a valuable glimpse into the modern urban architecture envisioned by the artists and intellectuals of the time, reflecting their aspiration of urban civilization. It also illustrated how they collaborated to bring the vision into reality of urban life.

Kim Young Ju's mural evokes the post‐World War II urban artworks of Le Corbusier in France. In the works of Le Corbusier, the architect who championed 'the artist as architect movement', were encouraged to abandon political affiliations and unite on a humanistic level to rebuild nations and societies devastated by war and further underscores the vision of modernity embraced by the Korean Sculptors & Artists Association, an elite artistic collective of the time. For this mural, Kim utilized earthenware pots, lidded jars, earthenware pots, and porcelain shards, creating a zigzag-patterned object. This fusion of materials has been interpreted as an artistic reconciliation of Korean heritage with the artificiality and structured regularity of Western modern architecture (Shin, 2014, p. 200-201). This is directly linked to the debate over balancing between modernity and tradition at that time (Park, 2020). Similarly, the construction

of the Sewoon Plaza reflected the tensions within the newly independent nation's elite, caught between their admiration for the modernity and the preservation of Korean identity.

Between Ideals and Realities of Making Modern City

In July 1966, Seoul Mayor Kim Hyon-ok commissioned Kim Swoo Geun to design a redevelopment plan. By October of the same year, the site where the Sewoon Plaza now stands was officially designated as South Korea's first redevelopment zone. Soon thereafter, demolition began on 1,708 makeshift structures, referred to as "substandard buildings," and the removal of over 2,200 households living in the area between Jongno 3-ga, near Jongmyo Shrine, and Daehan Theater on Toegye-ro. At the same time, publicly owned land in this zone was leased free of charge to private entities to facilitate the construction of a large-scale, mixed-use residential-commercial complex funded by private capital. This approach recalls the 19th-century urban transformation of Paris under Georges-Eugène Haussmann, who restructured the traditional city with a vision grounded in "hygienic science" and "surgery." Haussmann viewed the city of Paris as an object to be "more generally saw the city dispassionately as an artifact that could be understood and shaped according to mechanical, natural scientific principles and techniques" (Harvey, 2003, p. 255). Haussmann radically demolished old residential neighborhoods and replaced them with straight boulevards and modern buildings. A similar mode of top-down urban restructuring was unfolding in Seoul. In 1966, Seoul began the Cheonggyecheon Stream covering project and launched beautification campaigns in nearby markets such as Pyeonghwa Market and Bangsan Market along the 50-meter-wide corridor (Kim, 2022, p. 45). Since the 1920s, local residents had called for river control and covering of the stream to prevent flooding, but those plans had long stalled under Japanese colonial rule. It was only in the mid-1960s that the project gained serious momentum. The covering work continued into the early 1970s, eventually enclosing a 3.5-kilometer section stretching to the vicinity of Majang-dong (Yum, 2016, pp. 241-243).

Kim Swoo Geun proposed to Mayor Kim a vision for a new kind of urban form in which vehicular and pedestrian traffic would be completely separated. He described the Sewoon Plaza as embodying the concept of a "future city," a notion that resonated strongly with Mayor Kim. In November 1966, following President Park Chung-hee's directive to gather inspiration for transforming Seoul into a modern metropolis, Kim Hyon-ok embarked on a study tour of advanced cities in the United States, including San Francisco, New York, Washington, D.C., and Reston. He was particularly impressed by the urban structure of Manhattan and the riverside expressways along the Hudson River, which he sought to adapt for Seoul's development. In this context, Kim Swoo Geun envisioned the redevelopment zone as a new urban core where commercial and residential functions would coexist with shopping, entertainment, education, and public services. At the heart of this plan was a 7.5-meter-high elevated pedestrian deck that physically separated foot traffic from vehicles. Kim Swoo Geun aimed to create a 15-meter-wide pedestrian corridor stretching 1.2 kilometers from Jongno to Toegye-ro (Kim, 2022, p. 45). This elevated walkway would connect all eight buildings along the Sewoon Plaza, forming a pedestrian-friendly space entirely separated from vehicle roadways.

Kim Swoo Geun's original architectural proposal included a ground-level vehicular road, with underground and first-floor areas designated for parking. The third floor would host an

outdoor promenade and sky gardens connecting all buildings. Commercial spaces were planned for the second through fourth floors, while residential units were arranged above the fifth floor. These residential sections also featured rooftop gardens, aerial walkways, glass ceilings, and ventilation systems, allowing for natural light and airflow—hallmarks of modernist design with a human-centered focus. The entire mixed-use complex was to be divided into four main building groups, with multi-level pedestrian connections planned to intersect with Seoul's existing commercial districts such as Jongno, Euljiro, and Chungmuro. Mayor Kim eventually named the 'Sewoon(世運)' Plaza, meaning 'where the energy of the world converges,'(Choi, 2015, p. 52) reflecting the ambitious vision for the site as a global center of modern urban life.

At the time, the envisioned mega-structure, spanning 200,000 square meters and requiring an estimated construction cost of 4.46 billion KRW, was far beyond the fiscal capacity of the Seoul Metropolitan Government, whose annual budget was approximately 13.5 billion KRW. From the outset, it was unrealistic for the city to directly undertake such an ambitious project. As a result, the redevelopment and construction of this large-scale district were ultimately entrusted to six private construction companies. The Sewoon Plaza was divided into four zones: Zone A (Jongno - Cheonggyecheon), Zone B (Cheonggyecheon - Euljiro), Zone C (Euljiro - Mareunnae-gil), and Zone D (Mareunnae-gil - Toegye-ro). A set of four building clusters was planned, all to be connected by a continuous 1.2-kilometer-long pedestrian deck. However, as each of the six companies proceeded with construction independently, inconsistencies emerged and the initial master plan began to unravel (Lee, 2005, p. 213). The project devolved into six separate developments, loosely assembled within a single spatial framework. Among the many modifications made to the original plan, the most significant was the complete omission of the pedestrian deck connecting Zones C and D, due to disagreements among the construction companies. Additionally, the width of the pedestrian walkway varied from 6 to 10 meters depending on the contractor, deviating from the uniform 15-meter width originally proposed by Kim Swoo Geun. The street-level roadway intended to pass through the center of the complex was also constructed with a narrower width than planned, which later contributed to persistent traffic congestion. From the perspective of the developers, maximizing profitable retail and residential floor area was paramount. Kim Swoo Geun's complex design, which called for a ground-level vehicular road and an extensive elevated pedestrian network on the third floor, was viewed as costly and inefficient. In practice, the elevated walkway that began at the Hyundai Shopping Center near Jongno was constructed inconsistently: at Cheonggyecheon, it split east and west, but at Euljiro, it crossed only through the central axis; beyond Euljiro, at Mareunnae-gil, it abruptly ended without extending east or west. After crossing Mareunnae-gil, it resumed but ultimately terminated at Toegye-ro (Seoul Museum of History, 2010, p. 60). Because the project was entirely financed by private capital, with the land subdivided and sold to developers, the city government had relinquished meaningful control. As a result, it was unable to intervene in or enforce adherence to the original plan. The pedestrian deck, intended as an innovative feature for urban circulation, was eventually repurposed as a storage area for goods by businesses occupying the complex, due to its impractical layout. Likewise, the intended skylights meant to illuminate the internal courtyards were downsized during construction, and instead of glass, lower-quality PVC materials were used. These skylights quickly became discolored and covered in dust, rendering them functionally obsolete.

The original blueprint for the Sewoon Plaza included a number of bold and forward-thinking

design elements. These included the complete separation of vehicle and pedestrian circulation, spatial separation of commercial and residential functions within the incorporation of aerial gardens. Essential public services such as community offices, police substations, banks, post offices, and theaters were to be distributed across different zones, ensuring accessibility to leisure and civic amenities. Even more radically, the rooftops were designed to accommodate elementary schools, thus addressing educational needs within the complex (Son, 2019, pp. 270-271). The original plans were already in place to include supermarkets, fitness centers, and indoor golf facilities, reflecting an astonishingly advanced vision of urban life (Choi, 2015, p. 54). However, this ambitious architectural endeavor, designed to embody the ideals of modernity in the heart of Seoul, soon became entangled in the competing realities of design vision, construction companies' profit motives, and the technological limitations of the time. The dream of the Sewoon Plaza to realize the ideals of modernity through architecture existed only on the drawing board and in the architect's mind; the accumulated experience and the technical processes necessary to bring it into reality were simply lacking (Lee, 2009, p. 268). A critical incident that revealed the gap between vision and reality occurred on March 7, 1969, when a fire broke out in the Sewoon Plaza. Post-incident investigations revealed several alarming deficiencies: the emergency staircases were not properly connected to the exterior as originally designed, and temporary electrical distribution facilities installed during construction, lacking any safety features remained in use even after the complex had opened. Shockingly, as of one year and five months after its completion, Sewoon Shopping Center Ga-dong had not yet undergone formal building inspection and approval.

Despite numerous problems that arose during the construction process, the symbolic significance of the Sewoon Plaza, a vast complex of interconnected buildings, was considerable, even from a contemporary perspective. Completed in the late 1960s, the project marked a dramatic transformation of an area previously known as one of Seoul's biggest red-light and delinquent districts. Within the span of just two years, this space was redeveloped into a concentration of high-end residential units and large-scale commercial facilities. Such rapid urban change appeared to substantiate the regime's developmental slogan, 'Let's live well(잘 살아보세),' which was central to its broader ideological project of the "modernization of the motherland." In this context, the Sewoon Plaza functioned as a potent public relations instrument for the state. A number of media-publicized events, hosted under the patronage of First Lady Yuk Young-soo, were held at the complex, further reinforcing its symbolic importance. By 1967, when the Sewoon Shopping Center Ga-dong was completed, the foundations of the Government Complex in Gwanghwamun, another monumental state project at that time, had already been laid, gradually becoming visible to the urban public. In 1970, the 15-story Nakwon Building arcade, a luxury residential and commercial complex, was constructed surpassing earlier projects such as the Namsan Citizen Apartments and the Sewoon Plaza. The following year saw the completion of the 31-story Samil Building along the newly covered Cheonggyecheon Stream. Together, these developments marked a shift in Seoul's urban morphology, as modern high-rises with distinctly rectilinear forms began to dominate the city's core. Architecturally, these structures adhered to the principles of the so-called International Style, characterized by minimalist aesthetics and a functionalist. This stylistic choice not only served to visually differentiate the emerging Seoul from its premodern past but also positioned the city as comparable to global urban centers such as Tokyo and Hong Kong. In doing so, these developments were

perceived as concrete manifestations of the regime's modernization agenda and its vision for a new national identity grounded in urban progress.

From Modern Landmark to Illicit Media Tech Hub

Alongside other monumental developments that emerged around Gwanghwamun and the Cheonggyecheon Stream, the Sewoon Plaza, once celebrated as a symbol of technological advancement and urban modernity, underwent a noticeable decline less than a decade after its initial heyday. This perception of decline was largely shaped by elite and bureaucratic circles who had overseen the planning and construction of Seoul's postwar urban core. Their assessment was influenced by a broader redirection of urban development toward the southern part of the city, particularly under the South Seoul Development Plan, which strategically followed the axis of the Gyeongbu Expressway. From the mid-1970s onward, the state implemented policies that effectively suppressed development north of the Han River. These included strict building regulations and reduced floor area ratios, while capital investment and planning attention were increasingly concentrated in the rapidly expanding Gangnam district. As a result of these policy shifts, the Sewoon Plaza, originally envisioned as a high-end commercial complex featuring specialized retailers in electronics, fashion, lighting, printing, and entertainment, gradually transformed. Its commercial focus moved away from premium electronic goods toward the repair, modification, and often illicit reproduction of imported electronics. This emergent activity, grounded in reverse engineering and the unauthorized circulation of technology, gave rise to an informal yet vibrant ecosystem of technological production, one not foreseen in the plaza's original blueprint.

But these architectural and institutional failures did not mark an endpoint. Instead, they opened possibilities for the emergence of alternative spatial practices, practices that did not rely on master plans, but on improvisation and grassroots technological creativity. Rather than viewing these changes purely as symptoms of urban decline, it is more productive to interpret them through Henri Lefebvre's concept of the production of space. Urban space is not a neutral container but a social product, continuously reshaped by the interaction of political, economic, and everyday social forces (Lefebvre, 1991). The case of the Sewoon Plaza exemplifies this spatial production: it reflects the convergence of shifting state policies, enduring networks of craftsmanship rooted in colonial and even pre-colonial histories, and the improvisational tactics of urban residents. For those who equate modernity with monumental architecture, luxury consumption, and formally structured economic growth, the transformation of the Sewoon Plaza may appear as deterioration. However, from another perspective, especially one attentive to informal practices and the development of localized, appropriate technologies, this transformation can be understood as a form of spatial revitalization. Though the Sewoon Plaza has deviated from the state-led, top-down vision of modernity, it has become a site where alternative forms of modern life are enacted through situated practices of repair, innovation, and survival. In this sense, the transformation of the Sewoon Plaza offers a compelling example of how urban space functions as a medium through which competing visions of development are negotiated and materialized. It reveals the generative capacity of urban space, shaped not only by formal planning, but also by bottom-up appropriation, reinterpretation, and resistance.

Background of Piracy, Repair and Youth in 1970s

The original blueprints of the Sewoon Plaza made no provision for smuggled radios, audio equipment, copied electronic game consoles, or the underground circulation of pornography. Yet in practice, the plaza evolved into a space where such goods, often unavailable elsewhere, were gathered, modified, combined, and reassembled by users and technicians, then copied and redistributed. In short, it became a technological heterotopia: a vibrant hub operating within the ambiguous space between legality and illegality. In the 1970s, the popularization of affordable small radios and FM broadcasting broadened access to popular culture, particularly among youth. In addition to domestic Korean broadcasts, listeners could tune in to AFKN (American Forces Korea Network), which introduced American music to young Korean audiences. The spread of inexpensive audio devices contributed to rising demand for music records, including pirated copies of the latest hits from the United States. These records, which circumvented state censorship, were widely distributed in the Sewoon Plaza.

At the time, pirated music served not only as entertainment for many music-loving teenagers but also as a kind of cultural textbook. As Kim (2012) notes, "The revitalisation of pirated music has given rise to a large number of 'music examinees' who are succeeding as Western-style musicians through 'self-study' or 'home-study'" (p. 64). Some of these youths, introduced to Western music through bootlegs purchased in the Sewoon Plaza, went on to rent instruments and performance equipment from the nearby Nakwon Building and organized their own performances at the Pagoda Theater in Nakwon-dong or other small venues (Joe, 2021). All of these practices, assembling radios, producing pirated records, circulating arcade games, and experimenting with early personal computers, were actively taking place in and around the Sewoon Plaza throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In here, I examine this alternative history of the Sewoon Plaza: not as a failed modernist utopia, but as an emergent electronics mall operating within a legal grey zone, where modern desires were expressed not through state-led planning but through grassroots improvisation, technological appropriation, and cultural resistance. This re-reading invites a reconsideration of how modernity was negotiated, lived, and produced on the margins of official narratives.

Bottom-up Pirate Culture in the Sewoon Plaza

When the Sewoon Plaza was completed in 1967, there were fewer than 20,000 registered vehicles in Seoul. Nevertheless, architect Kim Swoo-geun envisioned the entire first floor of the 1.2-kilometre-long complex as indoor parking facility. However, during construction, contractors reduced both the width of the roadways and the size of the designated parking areas, deviating from the original architectural plans. As a result, soon after commercial occupancy began, the first floor vacant space was repurposed into retail space, as former parking areas were converted into storefronts. The original design sought to separate vehicular traffic from pedestrian movement and to establish a pleasant civic space by directing foot traffic along an elevated pedestrian deck on the third floor. However, this vision was altered twice: first during the construction phase and again when tenants began setting up shops. The first floor, being more easily accessible from the street, attracted both retailers and consumers, while the elevated

third-floor deck, where shops were initially intended to be located, quickly fell out of use. “The pedestrian deck eventually failed to become the main passageway for pedestrians and was left unused as a storage area for goods from the shops on the third floor, or in the late 1970s and 1980s, the space was occupied by street vendors selling colouring magazines, pornographic tapes, and foreign bootlegs” (Seoul Museum of History, 2010, p. 61). The Sewoon Plaza, which initially promoted a sophisticated and modern image, also began to attract upscale nightclubs and bars. This shift led some residents of the complex to express concerns over the declining educational and residential environment within the mixed-use structure (Oh, 2017, pp. 234-235).

Plans to establish a private elementary school on the rooftop of the Sewoon Plaza, an area with ample natural lighting, were eventually cancelled. The decision was based on a combination of factors: revised legislation regulating the establishment of private schools, the education authorities’ concerns about student safety in high-rise settings, and the government’s broader policy to strengthen public education. Although the Sewoon Plaza also temporarily housed the offices of the National Assembly Secretariat, the building’s original residential design made it ill-suited for this purpose. Complaints arose regarding the impracticality of accommodating the high volume of visitors typically received by National Assembly members in a space designed primarily for housing. As these limitations became apparent, residents gradually began to vacate the residential-commercial complex.

In their absence, and as rental prices declined, empty residential units were repurposed as workspaces and storage facilities by merchants operating on the commercial floors, particularly those involved in electronics sales and repair. In this way, the Sewoon Plaza shifted away from its original mixed-use intent and evolved into a unique urban ecosystem composed of small-scale repair shops. The small business site and limited technology naturally encourage collaboration between each process unit (Oh, 2017). Over time, this led to the formation of a collaborative cluster system, in which dismantling, processing, reassembling, modification, and production of electronic goods and precision machinery were carried out in close spatial and functional proximity. From this perspective, Jo (2017) argues that “the existing self-sustaining technology market that had been displaced by the construction of the Sewoon Plaza was revived—not as a conventional home appliance shopping mall, but as a technology market reconstituted in the form of an electronics mall” (p. 47). This transformation reflects not only adaptive reuse but also a reassertion of localized technological practices in a rapidly modernizing urban context.

The Sewoon Plaza’s rapid transformation from a basic site of electronics sales and repair into a technology market capable of modifying and manufacturing electronic products is closely tied to the historical background of the Cheonggyecheon tool markets and the Cheonggyecheon machine and metal Factories. These industries, concentrated in areas such as Jangsadong, Ipjeong-dong, and Sangnam-dong along the Cheonggyecheon Stream, have existed since the Japanese colonial period and provided a crucial technological and cultural infrastructure. This historical context, embedded in the region’s artisanal and industrial traditions, helped shape the unique ecosystem that later emerged within the Sewoon Plaza. The following section elaborates on the technological lineage and socio-spatial dynamics that underpinned this transformation. From the outset, merchants dealing in imported home appliances, many of which had smuggling or entered Korea through U.S. military bases, set up shop in the Sewoon Plaza. At the time, it was taken for granted that the sale of electronic goods would go hand-in-hand with repair services.

In this environment, where high-end foreign appliances were concentrated, technicians gained early access to the latest machines. By dismantling and reassembling these devices, they quickly accumulated technical knowledge and expertise. The challenges and limitations encountered during processes of disassembly, modification, and repair were addressed through collaboration among small businesses operating within the same building, forming a kind of informal guild system. As the small business site and limited technology naturally encourage collaboration between each process unit. Within this collaborative ecosystem, technical knowledge, production tasks, and pricing structures were negotiated and shared. For instance, manufacturing a single refrigerator valve required a multistep process, all from designing, prototyping, assembly, to final productization, that could not be carried out by any single workshop. Instead, this was achieved through flexible partnerships among specialists, each contributing to a specific part of the production chain. The presence of small workshops capable of responding quickly and flexibly to diverse consumer demands, combined with the physical proximity of technicians, enabled a rapid and secure system of production and delivery (Oh, 2017, pp. 237-239). As a result, the Sewoon Plaza developed the infrastructure and know-how to handle customized repairs and modifications with speed and precision. This evolution illustrates how localized networks of informal labor and technical expertise could generate a system of distributed innovation within the constraints of a single building.

The Historical Context of Techno-Culture in the Sewoon Plaza Area

In front of the main gate of the Kukdong Building on Toegye-ro, where the Sewoon Plaza is jointed with, a stone monument commemorates the site's historical role as the Jujaseo (鑄字署), the official government office responsible for casting metal type during the Joseon Dynasty. This indicates that the area has been a specialized site for printing and mechanical work since at least the Joseon period. Historical records suggest that a market once existed on the southern side of the Cheonggyecheon Stream, where members of the middle class and government officials resided and engaged in the trade of construction materials and mechanical tools. In other words, the area has maintained a continuous association with machinery and industry for centuries (Song, 2004, pp. 243-244). Even before the construction of the Sewoon Plaza, informal junk markets had emerged around the Cheonggyecheon Stream. These markets served as a site for the repair and resale secondhand goods, particularly surplus items from U.S. military bases in Korea They became bustling centers for the exchange of electronic and electrical components, including smuggled goods from the United States and Japan. Among the items available were high-frequency vacuum tubes, capacitors, resistors, and precision bolts and nuts. In the Jangsa-dong area along the stream, industrial workshops assembled and sold vacuum tube radios, record players, and loudspeakers. In 1964, as Tongyang Broadcasting Company (TBC) prepared for its official launch, part of its television broadcasting system was assembled within the district surrounding the Cheonggyecheon (Jo, 2017, p. 48). The term 'assembled in this context primarily refers to a form of reverse engineering, "a method of creating functioning products by combining parts sourced from various used items" (Oh, 2017, p. 237). Technicians skilled in this technique quickly occupied available spaces in the Sewoon Plaza commercial complex and continued their repair-based enterprises. As their technical capabilities advanced, these practitioners gradually moved beyond part-based recombination and began to engage in the manufacture of

entirely new products.

Secondhand radios and electrical appliances that had been distributed through U.S. military units in the 1950s, as well as micro-transistor radios imported from Japan in the 1960s, were also dismantled and reassembled within the Sewoon Plaza. These activities contributed to the accumulation of technological expertise that became a hallmark of the Sewoon Plaza's industrial ecosystem. Following South Korean Army's participation in the Vietnam War, some Korean soldiers returning from deployment brought with them American supplies originally provided by the U.S. military. These goods, which bypassed official customs procedures, were sold in informal markets surrounding the Cheonggyecheon Stream. A wide range of items circulated through these markets, including machine tools, radios, televisions, and even everyday consumer goods such as razor blades. Some tool merchants who had previously operated stalls along the Cheonggyecheon relocated their businesses to shops in or near the Sewoon Plaza. There, they sold advanced electrical and electronic goods sourced from U.S. military bases, Vietnam, and Japan to the emerging class of affluent Seoul residents who began moving into the apartment complexes within the Sewoon Plaza during the late 1960s (Song, 2004, pp. 252-254). Naturally, these shops also provided repair services for the products they sold, further reinforcing the Plaza's reputation as a hub of practical technical expertise and market responsiveness.

The official history of Korea's electronics industry is typically framed around institutional achievements and corporate milestones, such as GoldStar (Geumseongsa), which first marketed domestically produced radios during the Korean War; the establishment of the Korea Institute of Science and Technology (KIST) in 1969; and the founding of Samsung-Sanyo Electronics (now Samsung Electronics) in partnership with Japan's Sanyo. Within this dominant narrative, the contributions of the Sewoon Plaza, where technological know-how was acquired through reverse engineering or disassembly of smuggled and secondhand products, have received little attention. In many cases, these practices have been marginalized or dismissed as belonging to a shadowy domain where illegality, informality, and risk intersected. Yet, strictly speaking, the Sewoon Plaza occupied an ambiguous position between the official and the unofficial spheres. At the time, formal distribution channels for imported electronic goods were limited in South Korea, and the Sewoon Plaza functioned as the country's first comprehensive electronics marketplace. A vast array of consumer electronics, including radios, record players, cassette decks, televisions, and arcade game machines, were not only bought and sold here but also repaired on-site. In response to localized consumer needs, products were reverse-engineered, modified, and reassembled to create affordable alternatives in desired forms. The Plaza also became a distribution hub for pirated media, like bootleg records, game cartridges, and videotapes, further embedding electronic and media technologies into the everyday lives of ordinary Koreans. In this way, the Sewoon Plaza played a key role in the vernacular popularization of technology in South Korea. Its ecosystem blurred the boundaries between production and consumption, formal and informal, legal and illegal, offering a parallel pathway to modernization that was not rooted in state-led industrial policy, but in grassroots innovation and improvisation.

The Sewoon Plaza should be understood as a socially produced space, one that gave rise to a vernacular form of technological modernity, distinct from the sanitized and institutionally sanctioned versions promoted by the state and corporate capital. It was here that a different kind of urban and technological modernity was lived and negotiated: not through master plans or policy blueprints, but through improvisation, adaptation, and informal collaboration. In

Lefebvre's terms, the lived space of Sewoon Plaza subverted the abstract space of the developmental state, producing a heterogeneous and dynamic urban space grounded in everyday practices.

Localization of Reverse Engineering and Replica Technology

Reverse engineering generally refers to the practice of disassembling an object to analyze its components and production methods to reconstruct or reinterpret its original design. In industrial contexts, it is widely employed to develop new products or apply improvements by analyzing existing technologies. However, reverse engineering also plays a significant role in the informal domain, including the development of hacking techniques such as viruses, software cracks, and devices that bypass copy protection, which allow users to illegally copy or alter software and hardware beyond their intended functions. (Jeong, 2006). This dual nature of reverse engineering, as both a legitimate industrial strategy and an informal or illicit practice, complicates its position within dominant narratives of technological development. Frequently, when the technical skills accumulated through repeated disassembly and reassembly by non-experts reach a certain level of refinement, larger institutions and capital interests intervene. At that point, these previously informal practices are appropriated, rebranded, and regulated within the formal domain. The same techniques that were once considered illegal or unstructured are legitimized under new names and institutional frameworks. In this sense, the prototype technologies cultivated in informal contexts, often characterized by improvisation and necessity, have long been overlooked or dismissed in academic and public discourse due to their marginal or illegal status. It is only recently that the significance of these practices has begun to be acknowledged and analyzed more seriously. As Zimmermann (2019) argues, reverse engineering and other counter-processes reject the notion that materials, systems, or worldviews are fixed or immutable. Instead, they represent a strategic mode of engagement, often utilized by those lacking access to capital or infrastructure. These practices emerge from environments of scarcity and constraint, yet they generate new imaginaries and novel configurations through localized innovation (Zimmermann, 2019, pp. 2-3). Within this framework, reverse engineering at sites like the Sewoon Plaza can be understood not merely as a technical workaround, but as a culturally embedded form of technological localization. It is a process that adapts global technologies to local conditions, enabling users and technicians to assert agency in shaping the material and functional possibilities of modern life, often in defiance of formal economic and legal systems.

By the 1980s, the Sewoon Plaza had acquired the technical expertise to replicate newly released Japanese electronic game consoles within as little as five days, using reverse-engineered chip boards. This remarkable capability emerged from a cluster of informal game console manufacturers that began establishing themselves in the area around 1977. Many of these companies were formed by reorganizing the skilled labor force that had previously specialized in repairing televisions and other electronic devices within the Sewoon Plaza. By 1983, approximately 300 (often illegal or unlicensed) manufacturers were operating in the Sewoon Plaza vicinity. These enterprises replicated and assembled more than 100 types of Japanese arcade games. Many of these were distributed domestically, while some were even exported overseas (Jo, 2017, p. 52). The Sewoon Arcade thus became Korea's largest site of arcade game console production, forming a key node in an informal but highly productive technology network.

In the process of replication and reverse engineering, the internal circuitry of the replicated consoles often became larger than that of the original models. This required modifications to the exterior form, resulting in new and creative designs. For instance, rather than reproducing the joystick of an original racing game, local technicians sometimes repurposed and mounted a steering wheel from a used car, machining it to function as part of the console. While the performance of these replicated and modified consoles often fell short of the originals, they nonetheless offered users a distinct and altered gameplay experience, sometimes perceived as a creative reinterpretation rather than simple imitation. These modified machines gained considerable popularity. Within just three years of the start of such replication practices, more than three million units had been sold. This remarkable commercial success was made possible not only by domestic demand, but also through exports to Southeast Asia and other regions (Oh, 2017, pp. 224-225). The Sewoon Plaza, therefore, functioned not merely as a site of technological imitation, but as a vibrant space of innovation, adaptation, and transnational distribution, where economic necessity met inventive technological practice.

Cause of the low rental costs within the Sewoon Plaza, the pirated records also were produced in approximately 33 square meters(10평) units, making them a quintessential example of grassroots reverse engineering. The process typically involved sourcing records from U.S. military bases in Dongducheon, Uijeongbu, and Yongsan, or from private collectors who had acquired foreign records. These were then duplicated by creating a replicated 'mother plate' that mimicked the grooves of the original. The mother plate was electroplated to produce a metal stamper, which was used in pressing machines to mass-produce vinyl copies. The pirated records were sold not only at small booths tucked into the pedestrian deck of the Sewoon Plaza, but also distributed nationwide through a network of intermediaries (Seoul Museum of History, 2017, p. 66). A similar process was applied to the duplication of foreign pornographic films, classic cinema, and art-house works, which bypassed government censorship and were reproduced as VHS tapes for home use and informal distribution (Jo, 2017, p. 50). While these practices operated outside the bounds of legality, they also constituted a form of creative cultural production. As Ramon Lobato (2012) argues, informal media economies should not be understood solely as sites of theft or violation, but as 'shadow economies' that generate alternative pathways for cultural access and grassroots distribution. Within this framework, the Sewoon Plaza emerges not only as a hub of unauthorized copying, but as a vernacular innovation zone, where reverse engineering served as a means of localizing global media technologies under conditions of material scarcity and regulatory constraint. Thus, Sewoon Plaza facilitated the informal circulation of both technological know-how and foreign media content, blurring the boundary between illegality and creativity. It became a space where formal regulatory logics were subverted through bottom-up practices, giving rise to an improvised infrastructure for the domestication and reinterpretation of modern media culture.

The reverse engineering and replication practices that emerged in the Sewoon Plaza were not the result of centralized planning or any master design. Rather, they unfolded through modes of improvisation, as adaptations to changing material conditions, regulatory environments, and local consumer needs. In this sense, the Sewoon Plaza operated less as a formal industrial zone and more as a bottom-up market that exploited the cracks and fissures within elite-driven, top-down urban planning efforts aimed at restructuring Seoul. The character of the market, including its spatial configuration and the types of goods that were manufactured and sold,

shifted dynamically in response to local conditions. Sewoon Plaza, therefore, can be understood not simply as a recipient of externally developed technologies, but as a site of local improvisation: a space where technologies were adapted, reconfigured, and even re-invented in situ. Improvisational practice goes beyond the application of predefined plans. It involves embedding technological acts within the contingencies of local realities, generating new forms of action in the process (Suchman, 2002, P. 139). Seen in this light, the Sewoon Plaza exemplifies the productive character of the modern city. It can be said a space not merely shaped by blueprints and policy, but actively constituted through situated practices of adaptation, resistance, and reinvention of its residents. It offers an interesting example of how modern urban spaces after the Korean War became places where formal development visions were negotiated and reshaped from the bottom up.

Conclusion

The case of the Sewoon Plaza is more than a story of architectural ambition or urban decline. It offers a complex kaleidoscope of post-colonial aspiration, fragmented modernity, and everyday spatial negotiation. What began as a state-led project to implement a vision of national modernization, which embodied in the slogan ‘modernization of the motherland’, was ultimately reshaped by unpredictable and often unauthorized practices by users. Rather than completing the blueprint of a ‘city within a city,’ the Sewoon Plaza evolved into an urban field layered with improvisation, illegality, and technological localization, exposing the gap between national imagination and lived urban experience.

Kwon (2013) argues that the Cold War in Asia, unlike in Europe or the West, must be understood in relation to the region’s colonial history, which he describes as a ‘history from below.’ Whereas the Cold War in the West was largely a conflict between states, its manifestation in Asia emphasized individual agency and informal ties. Within this framework, postcolonial modernity in newly independent countries was often shaped by emulating the very empires they sought to resist (Kwon, 2010, p. 125). The Sewoon Plaza reflects this dynamic. Its master plan followed the rationalism and symbolic aesthetics of European modernism, but its actual social life unfolded along very different lines. Viewed through Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of spatial production, the Sewoon Plaza becomes more than a material structure; it is a space actively produced through the convergence of infrastructure, symbolism, and everyday practice. National visions were overlapped, interrupted, and subverted by localized improvisation. The result was a multi-layered urban ecosystem, circulating not only imported electronics but also pirated, modified, and reassembled products. The smuggled radios, hacked game consoles, and pirated records that circulated through the Sewoon Plaza were more than symptoms of illegality; they were practices of technological adaptation and cultural appropriation under conditions of scarcity. These acts operated outside formal institutions, yet they constituted vital modes of knowledge production and social participation. As Sundaram (1999) has argued in the context of other Asian cities, such ‘shadow economies’ form alternative infrastructures that challenge the binaries of legal/illegal and global/local. In the Sewoon, this shadow infrastructure sustained not only economic survival but also transnational flows of culture and grassroots technical expertise, especially among working-class youth, repair technicians, and small-scale entrepreneurs.

This study thus shows that modernity is not a singular trajectory imposed from above, but a multiplicity of contested processes negotiated from below. As Williams (2019) notes, we often think of cities in terms of design and intent, but what they become is shaped largely by process. Similarly, Hanakata (2015), drawing on Lefebvre, writes that "spaces, which bear the potential for these urban qualities to grow and develop, are challenged by often conflicting local, regional and global agendas" (p. 92). The Sewoon Plaza exemplifies this tension. It is not simply a failed modernist dream, nor merely a symbol of decay. It is a postcolonial urban site where formal and informal forces collide to co-produce new spatial forms.

In this sense, the Sewoon Plaza emerges as a key site for negotiating modernity from the margins. Unlike state planners, architects, or corporate developers, the official agents of modernization, those who recycled, repaired, and reinvented the Sewoon had no access to institutional power or cultural authority. Yet their practices were neither derivative nor passive. Through hacking, piracy, bricolage, and improvisation, these actors engaged with global technologies in deeply localized ways, producing hybrid forms of urban life that were neither fully modern nor traditionally premodern. Their actions reflect a tactical and situated engagement with modernity, one grounded in necessity, creativity, and context.

This negotiation of modernity from both above and below challenges dominant development paradigms that equate modernization with order, legality, and planning. Instead, it calls for a more plural and open understanding of how modern life is assembled. The political stakes of urban space are revealed in the disjuncture between blueprints and bootlegs, between formal design and informal use. In this context, the Sewoon Plaza is not simply an architectural object, but an urban archive—a social space where competing visions of the modern city are enacted, challenged, and continually reworked from below.

References

Ahn, Chang Mo. (2005). The Sewoon Plaza - a War Orphan of the Pacific War, and for 60 years after Liberation, a Stage for the Extremes of Urban Life. *Architecture & Society*, 2, 248-258. (in Korean)

Aiello, Giorgia. (2011). From Wound to Enclave: The Visual-Material Performance of Urban Renewal in Bologna's Manifattura delle Arti. *Western Journal of Communication*, 75(4), 341-366.

Brillembourg, Alfredo & Klumpner, Hubert. (2012). *Torre David: Informal Vertical Communities*. Zurich: Lars Muller Publishers.

Choi, Jun-seok. (2015). Seoul Sewoon Plaza, where all the energy of the world comes together. *Urban Issues*, 50, 52-55. (in Korean)

Chow, Ray. (1995). *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hanakata, Naomi C. (2015). Relearning the Art of Crafting Space, In Vitnarae Kang and Hyeri Park(Ed.), *Beyond Seunsangga* (pp. 88-97). Seoul: Space Books.

Harvey, David. 2003. *Paris, Capital of Modernity*. New York: Routledge.

Jaffe, Rivke and Anouk de Koning. (2016). *Introducing Urban Anthropology*. Oxon: Routledge.

Jeong, Jin Keun. (2006). Study on the Legal System for Control of Standardized Technology. *KWLR*, 22, 101-136. (in Korean)

Jo, Dongwon. (2017). Cheonggyecheon electronics market, a technical culture of copying, and the shaping of digital culture in Korea. *Korean Journal of Urban Studies*, 11, 37-78.

Joe, Ildong, Byung O Kim and Jiyoung Song. A Study on the Placeness of Sewoon Shopping Street by Urban Planning. *Journal of Seoul Studies*, XCIV, 79-109. (in Korean)

Joe, Ildong. (2021). Popular Music Listening, Cultural Capital and Class: Cultural Politics of Korea's Heavy Metal Formation in the 1980s. *Journal of the Science and Practice of Music*, 46, 169-204. (in Korean)

Kim, Byung O. (2012). A study on the process of bootleg records popularization in Korea during 1960-80`s. *The Research of Performance Art and Culture*, 24, 47-78. (in Korean)

Kim, Soo Ja. (2022). Seoul's Urban Planning and the 'Future City' Initiative in the 1960s - Focusing on the Construction of Sewoon Shopping Center, *Trans-Humanities*, 15(2), 31-53. (in Korean)

Kown, Heonik. (2010). *The Other Cold War*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lee, Dong Yeun. (2009). The Modern Desire of Sewoonsanga: The Transformation and Refraction of Korean Arcade Project. *Society and History*, 82, 249-282. (in Korean)

Lee, Se-young. (2005). The Sewoon Plaza, a Spatial Allegory of Modernity in Korea. *Culture and Science*, 41, 194-215. (in Korean)

Lefebvre, Henri. (1991). *The Production of Space (Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith)*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Lim, Ga-Young & Sang-Hoon Youm. (2019). An Analysis of Piloti-type Pedestrian Passage at 60~70s Multipurpose Building - Focused on Nakwon, Sewoon, Yujin Arcade. *Proceedings of the 2019 Autumn Conference, Architectural Institute of Korea*, 123-130. (in Korean)

Lobato, R. (2012). *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Low, Setha. (2022). *Why Public Space Matters*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Massey, Doreen. (1994). *Space, Place, and Gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Oh, Youngjin. (2017). The Rise and Fall of the Electronics Market: Sewoon Sangga, In Lim, Taehun(Ed.), *A Chronology of Korean Technoculture* (pp.231-243). Seoul: Alma Books. (in Korean)

Park, Jung-Hyun. (2020). *What Has Architecture Done: Modern Korean Architecture During The Development State Period*. Seoul: Workroom Press. (in Korean)

Pink, Sarah. (2012). *Situating Everyday Life*. London: Sage.

Reigh, Young Bum. (2015). Revitalization of Seunsangga and the Potential for Urban Planning Based on Citizen Participation, In Vitnarae Kang and Hyeri Park(Ed.), *Beyond Seunsangga* (pp. 34-47). Seoul: Space Books.

Seoul Museum of History. (2010). *The Sewoon Plaza and its Neighbors*. Seoul: Seoul Museum of History. (in Korean)

Seoul Museum of History. (2017). *Made in Cheonggyecheon, Era of Pirated Pop Culture*. Seoul: Seoul Museum of History. (in Korean)

Shin, Chunghoon. (2014). 'Participation in Urban Civilization' in Korean Art of the Late 1960s. *Art History*, 28, 189-217. (in Korean)

Son, Jung-mok. (2019). *Seoul Urban Planning Story 1*. Paju: Hanul. (in Korean)

Song, Do Young. (2024). *Reading Seoul*. Seoul: Sowha. (in Korean)

Suchman, Lucy A. (2002). Practice-Based Design of Information Systems: Notes from the Hyperdeveloped World. *The Information Society*, 18(2), 139-144.

Sundaram, Ravi. (1999). Recycling modernity: Pirate electronic cultures in India. *Third Text*, 47, 59-65.

Williams, Richard J. (2019). *Why Cities Look the Way They Do*. Cambridge: Polity.

Yoon, Seung-Joong. (1994). Retrospects on Sewoon MXD-use Apartment Complex. *Architecture*, 38(7), 14-17. (in Korean)

Yum, Bok Kyu. (2016). *The Origins of Seoul: The Birth of Gyeongseong, 1910-1945 - Urban Planning under Colonial Rule*. Seoul: Idea. (in Korean)

Zimmermann, Patricia R. (2019). *Documentary Across Platforms: Reverse Engineering Media, Place, and Politics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.