

# **Festivalising Design: Seoul's New Tourism**

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## **Introduction**

The Seoul Design Olympiad (SDO) was initiated by the Seoul Metropolitan Government in their effort to develop the image of Seoul, intending to transform the city from being just 'the capital of South Korea' to also being 'the city of Design'. The aim of this paper is to examine how the Seoul Metropolitan government has used 'Design' to encourage tourism and regeneration. The SDO was launched in 2008 as an annual event, celebrating the forthcoming designation of Seoul as the World Design Capital 2010. The SDO is not just a one-off fixed-term event, but rather a range of activities with a longer-term impact. The SDO is composed of a combination of conferences, exhibitions, design competitions, awards and educational events; this is a clear example of a 'cultural event' used to promote economic and cultural regeneration.

## **Cultural Festivals, Regeneration, and Tourism**

Cultural industries are increasingly important in countries around the world. It is commonly said that the cultural products of a country have a huge influence on its international reputation. This is culture as a 'soft power', with 'hard power' defined as such things as military strength and size. While culture can therefore be used to increase international standing, it also plays a key role in domestic urban development.

The debates of "culture-led" strategies for urban policy/regeneration constitute three factors: Firstly, economic impacts involving economic diversification (Bianchini, 1993), energising creativity and innovation (Pratt, 2007), and the revitalisation of the job market (Scott, 2004); Secondly, there the creation of iconic 'signature buildings' as part of urban strategies to develop a city image or 'brand' (Evan and Ford, 2008); Finally, the aim of the 'Art of City Making' (Landry, 2006) policy has increasingly been considered to be 'social cohesion' above all else (Matarasso, 1997).

As in Pratt's (2007) argument, the current trends in cultural policy have been changed by three forces: economy, culture and state. The 'USP' (Unique Selling Point) therefore became one of the most important marketing tools in competitive global cultural policy. This approach has been adopted in urban policy in forms such as 'Unique' buildings (such as the Guggenheim in Bilbao) or 'peculiar' cultural events and festivals (like Glastonbury). Hence, cultural consumption is the new 'hot' strategy for the "promotion of endogenous economic activity" (Pratt, 1997). It appears that cultural planning affects the creation of spaces of consumption and "enclaves of exclusivity" (Stevenson, 2004). The danger here is that such activities and events exclude local citizens at both the planning stage and during the event, neglecting to consider these vital 'stakeholders'.

However, although it became a significant part of a broader phenomenon that has seen increasing use of a 'new economic model' of city competitiveness in urban regeneration, the social impacts of culture in redevelopment are not always positive, as in the 'just add culture and stir' approach to urban regeneration (Gibson & Stevenson, 2004). Dicks (2003) discusses the underlying rationale behind the cultural flagship revitalisation project in which cultural projects attract new consumers/visitors/shoppers to come and therefore "is rarely directed primarily at improving the quality of life of existing residents".

Arguably the European capital of culture (launched in 1985) expresses this point. At the time the main idea was to "help to bring the peoples of the member state closer together" and was purely cultural, being concerned with cultural exchange, innovation and diversity (Griffiths, 2006). Nevertheless, while competition among cities for gaining the title was increasingly fierce, the original aims were transfigured differently such as non-cultural measurement (visitor numbers, ticket sales, job creation and amount of investment) to calculate the event's criterion of success.

Also, with such enormous stakes come huge risks: the failure of an expensive event can be financially damaging and humiliating to a reputation. Sensitivities need to be observed; one culture cannot just be imposed upon another. Equally current concerns need to be considered. The environment is one such consideration. With huge spectacle events, such as the floating opera stage in Bregenz festival, the environment can be an obvious issue. At Bregenz, the stage was a mass of earth resting on old oil barrels and other debris (Loomis, 2005). Montgomery (2003) argued that successful cultural economies are characterised by "increasing volumes of trade, constant innovation and the building up of new products and services, networks of suppliers and purchasers".

Globalisation has been a major influence around the world since the 1980s, and many cities have therefore actively invested in the 'production of image' and used culture in attempts to gain capital and inward investment (Harvey 1989). For many cities around the world, globalisation is not just 'happening'; it is actively pursued. These cities also follow the same pathway as traditional enterprises; urban regeneration used to be associated with industry but is now linked to enhancing cultural landmarks with globally branded arts and entertainment destinations, encapsulated in the 'fantasy city' (Hanningan 1998). Many major creative activities have become 'brands' in their own right. City governments' use creativity in spectacles and entertainment to attract visitors and customers to a place. Local retailers and city managers also endeavour to benefit from the attractiveness of the city's cultural image.

However, this cultural tourism and the entertainment economy have been used to justify investment in an urban cultural infrastructure that brings an increase in rent costs for flats and rooms, and as a consequence, poorer inhabitants and shop keepers have been pushed out, putting neighbourhoods "on the road to gentrification" (Zukin 1982). According to an OECD Policy Report (OECD, 2005) about the Cheonggyecheon Restoration project,<sup>1</sup> the SMG forced the relocation of low-wage residents and merchants previously based there. The stated intention of the urban

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<sup>1</sup> The Cheonggyecheon Restoration Project created a 5.8km landscaped green pathway that runs alongside the revitalised Cheonggyecheon stream in Seoul, South Korea, at a cost of US\$360 million.

regeneration project was to ensure a benefit for all stakeholders involved; this was clearly not prioritised or achieved. From a design perspective, also, the project's irregular surfaces and congested tunnels brought mobility problems for elderly and disabled people (CABE, 2009). Although well-cleaned and attractively designed for 'rest and relaxation', the true democratic success of this project was never achieved. Social regeneration was clearly much less of a priority than a bid for a new, globalised tourist-centric image. Pratt (2008) argues that this trend to sell cities using public money is a socially regressive form of taxation; it is also politically divisive. It would be difficult to meet the vying demands of citizenry, local government and the national tourist board, all of who have different priorities in these kinds of design-led cultural activities.

The festivalisation of cities is a further example of the instrumental usage of culture. In these cases, festivals are used primarily politically, for the benefit of reputation and city images more generally, rather than being 'for the people' in any meaningful sense. In the case of the Seoul Design Olympiad and the city's range of other design-related events and activities, we can see a specific case of the instrumental use of design.

### **The Image of Seoul**

To understand the significance of the Seoul Design Olympic (SDO), it is worth considering the history of Seoul, and its global image. In the 1980s, South Korea was known for its export-led industrialisation, and had been named one of the 'Four Tigers' (a group of South East Asian countries recognised for their economic growth, also including Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan). However, according to a recent article in the *Korea Times*, Korea is "still widely unknown to a majority in Europe and the West" (Na, 2009). Nation-branding expert Simon Anholt argues that "Japan and China are far more relevant to people in other parts of the world for political, cultural, economic, commercial and historical reasons [...] Korea just doesn't have very much impact on people's lives in Europe and the West" (as cited in Na, 2009). After the Asian financial crisis hit South Korea in 1997, the local and central government and the private sectors aimed to bring about the country's economic recovery by switching focus from the manufacturing industries to cultural industries such as film, music and information technology.<sup>2</sup>

The vast majority of South Korea's culture industries are produced in its capital city, Seoul. Seoul has a centralised population (about 10 million) of about a quarter of the total population of the country (Statistics Korea 2005, 2010). Under the administrative status of "special city", Seoul's hosting of the 1988 Olympics was not only widely recognized around the world, but also an example of the use of culture as "image politics" (Simons, 2006). The government at the time, a military dictatorship headed by Chun Doo-Hwan, relaxed many of its culturally and politically restrictive policies in order to appear more open and democratic to the rest of the world. The central government's attempts to present Seoul as a modern, international city continued, and

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<sup>2</sup> Since early 1997, the 'Korean Wave' (*Hallyu*) has become one of the biggest cultural phenomena across the Asia Pacific region with TV dramas, pop music, films and on-line games dominating these foreign markets. The popularity of these cultural exports (the 'Korean Wave effect') contributed 0.2% of Korea's GDP in 2004, amounting to approximately US\$2 billion ('The Korean wave', 2008).

when preparing to co-host the 2002 Football World Cup, the Seoul Metropolitan government (SMG) announced the formation of its first 'city marketing' department.

However, in spite of these events occurring in the capital city (such as various urban functions and socio-economic activities), South Korea's international reputation arguably remains marginal, compared to the Communist power of China, the technological sophistication of Japan, and the military paranoia surrounding North Korea. This controversial image was the very reason why the new SMG started to increase its efforts in city branding through culture to attract potential tourists. In fact, there is arguably an unbalanced concentration on events occurring in the capital city only; the central government effectively neglects all of South Korea's other cities. The SMG, therefore, has aggressively attempted to improve its tourism image.

In a survey commissioned and conducted by the SMG, results revealed that foreign visitors associated the city of Seoul with images related to the whole of Korea (Han 2007). The top results were 'Kimchi (20.7%)' (with another popular dish, 'bulgogi', at 2.8%), 'kindness (7.6%)', 'shopping (3.1%)'; relatively few visitors mentioned Seoul-specific cultural events such as the '1988 Seoul Olympics' (which got just a 2.5% result). Therefore, it seems that Seoul lacks an individual image or appeal beyond being part of Korea. This is in contrast to other Asian cities: a survey of Tokyo's tourists revealed that the majority visit in order to 'explore the city' (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2009), and Beijing is now associated primarily with the recent Olympic Games (a city-specific cultural event) ('China', 2008).

Even in 2010, Seoul's international brand identity seems contradictory: for example, in January of this year, the city appeared in the *New York Times* ranked third among '31 places to go in 2010' (The *New York Times*, 2010). Yet when travel journalists talk about Seoul, specifically its culture and appeal to tourists, they have only bad things to say. For example, Seoul was also named one of the worst cities in the world by a recent *Lonely Planet* poll ('Wolverhampton', 2009).

Globalisation through city branding is clearly vitally important in South Korea. Korean policy makers at the national and regional level are continually devising city branding strategies. Disgracefully, however, according to the Seoul Welfare Foundation (2007), Seoul citizens had ranked as the most unsatisfied with the happiness (quality) of life in their city among 10 major metropolises of the world. Therefore, the Seoul Metropolitan government has decided to focus on 'design' as a way to improve its brand / tourist image, and to cement its reputation as a 'Creative City' (Landry and Bianchini 1995).

### **The Seoul Design Olympiad: Transforming the image of Seoul**

*"Design is a shortcut to become a global city"*  
*Chief Seoul Design Officer Kyung-won Chung (as cited in Kwon, 2009b)*

The SDO seems to be a combination of the globalisation and the brand value of the city in terms of design and culture to increase the competitiveness of Seoul (Kwon, 2009a). It's a specific cultural event, and 'design' is its particular 'USP' (Unique Selling Point). Since Seoul Mayor Se-hoon Oh took office in 2006, he has launched

ambitious design-conscious redevelopment plans. Mayor Oh believes “Design means everything in the sense that it makes the city safer and cleaner, while it also improves the city’s economic development that as a result enhances the overall quality of life” (as cited in Zhi, 2010). The ‘Seoul Design Headquarters,’ established in 2007 in order to make Seoul into a design city and support design industry systemically, has adopted a ‘Designomics’<sup>3</sup> strategy to extend the economic role of design to manage with the current recession. Bruce Nussbaum directly associated Design with economic growth in a speech he gave at the ‘Design Korea’ 2009 International Conference: in a paper titled “Designomics: How Design Navigates A World In Change And Creates Global Economic Growth And Prosperity”, Nussbaum argued “design has moved from creating artifacts to shaping human interactions; from focusing on materiality to shaping social systems” (Nussbaum, 2009).

Examples of the kind of big-budget projects underway in Seoul include the US\$98 million Dongdaemun Design Plaza, designed by British architect Zaha Hadid and due to open in 2011; the construction of artificial floating islands on the Han river for the ‘Han River Renaissance Project’, a scheme replacing the riverfront’s concrete embankments with promenades which will open in 2010; and Banpo Bridge’s Moonlight Rainbow, a nighttime waterfall light show.

The pragmatic benefits of attention-seeking events are well-known to city governments around the world. Since the 1980s, due to the fact that developed countries have changed from a production-based to a consumption-based economy, cities have increasingly recognised that they have to draw a consuming public in order to support the local economic infrastructure and strategies for revitalisation. The dramatic distension of cultural events or festivals in cities is arguably a reflection of this context. The Cannes Film Festival, Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Arena di Verona Opera Festival, Glastonbury Festival and Venice biennale can be exemplars. It is not surprising that many cities use festival/cultural events with positive associations (sociability, playfulness and joyfulness and so on) for fixing their image. Hosting cultural events could accelerate diffusion of a desirable image to potential tourists and investors. Having a culture-related title awarded can be of great value for marketing purposes (Evans, 2003).

Indeed, one of the most visible of Seoul’s design projects is the city’s current status as ‘World Design Capital’. The title of World Design Capital is awarded to cities by the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) for a period of one calendar year every two years. According to journalists in *The China Post*, reporting on the 2010 ‘World Design Cities Summit’ held in Seoul, the World Design Capital is “a designation that provides an opportunity for cities to feature their accomplishments in innovative design and to highlight their success in urban revitalization strategies” (as cited in Chiang & Hsu, 2010). Conceived in 2008, the first selected city was Torino in Italy (2012’s World Design Capital will be Helsinki), with the focus of the project on the “broader essence of design’s impact on urban space, economies and citizens” (WDC, 2010).

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Designomics’ is a compound word from ‘design’ and ‘economics’. The term was first used in *Designomics: A New Concept in Management Design* (Jung & Choi, 2008), which argued that design drives economics to generate growth and prosperity in the world.

Bolstered by the World Design Capital title, and under the slogan ‘Design for All’, the city of Seoul has been “promoting and encouraging the use of design to further social, economic and cultural development,” with a budget of US\$83 for around 130 design events underway in the city (WDC, 2010).

Among these many design events in Seoul, the most important is the Seoul Design Olympiad. The first SDO was held in October 2008 for 20 days, at the Jamsil Sports Complex, and is now an annual event, having undergone remarkable changes in just two years. The SDO was created after it was announced that Seoul would be granted the 2010 WDC title, and the festival’s stated aim is “cultural enrichment and promoting the quality of people’s lives through design” (Seoul Design Olympiad [SDO], 2009). It is particularly significant that the SDO takes place mainly in the Olympic Stadium: it creates links and associations with the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, and demonstrates one of the principles of the importance of design by reutilising this large public stadium (H.J. Park, personal interview, April 8, 2010).<sup>4</sup>

Hyeong-jung Park, Manager of the Seoul Design Fair, emphasises that it is the intention of the SDO to maximise the design experience and change the citizens’ awareness of design. He strongly believes that design can start a ripple effect throughout the economy, causing job creation and welfare. He, moreover, stresses that the SDO is not just an exhibition but also a platform for design business (H.J. Park, personal interview, April 8, 2010).

### **All style and no substance?**

Nonetheless, in a survey about the strategy of urban design of Seoul conducted by the Seoul Development Institute (Baek, 2008), 53% of design professionals and 71% of civil servants (in design-related departments) said that Seoul design projects are too grandiose. In addition, professionals think that compared to other design-related events in Seoul, the SDO and WDCC are not going well (33%). This dissatisfaction is even clearer among design students, who have organised campaigns through online social media which directly criticise current design policy as being superficial and a waste of money.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, Graeme Evans (2005) warns regenerative effects typically centralise a financial ‘number’ (even with an intangible effect) and user-related outputs, for instant visitor numbers, direct employment and so on. It does not seem they estimate the outcome of the events or non-users. In the Report and Results of Seoul Design Olympiad 2009 (2009), they neglected to measure residents’ (non-visitors) perception of the impacts of the event. Yet, crucially, ‘non-visited’ residents could be (and, according to the stated ‘inclusive’ aim of the event, *should* be) one of the major

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<sup>4</sup> The Seoul Design Olympiad has now (from 2010) officially changed its name to the ‘Seoul Design Fair’. This is the result of objections to the use of the term “Olympiad” without permission from the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

<sup>5</sup> Another interesting aspect of this event is the environmental effect. The Seoul Design Foundation planned to build a new Design Centre in the Dongdaemoon area of the city. However, before construction began, a historical heritage site was discovered and construction is currently halted while various organisations debate the best way to continue.

stakeholders.

Even more significantly, Manager Park admits that he has no expertise in design. However, this is a clear indication of the way the SMG neglects to develop a sincere understanding of design (and designers), in spite of the many events: the SDO is run by a government administrator with no particular knowledge of (or passion for) design (H.J. Park, personal interview, April 8, 2010).

According to Hyeong-jung Park, the SDO does not have any specific marketing strategies for foreigners/tourists, as he believes that it will bring tourists automatically. Therefore, although the SDO was intended to be a major international design event, policymakers have neglected to engage in any international marketing at all (H.J. Park, personal interview, April 8, 2010).

In spite of this, the SDO and Seoul's status as World Design Capital 2010 have successfully raised the profile of the city. In 2010, *Wallpaper* magazine selected Seoul as one of the 'Best City 2010' for its annual Design Awards ('Design Awards', 2010). Seoul, however, is being recommended *only* for this new, design-related event rather than for its pre-existing city culture. This is a problem of policy: the SDO doesn't encourage or require exploration of the city of Seoul or of Korean culture in any meaningful way. Therefore, the event is a 'soft power' success in only very superficial ways. Ultimately, for culture tourism and promoting *Korean* culture, the SDO is a failure.

## **Conclusion**

According to the *Korea Times*, internationally famous architect Daniel Libeskind insists that design is a linkage between cities' own past, present and future as well as their environment (Kim, 2008a). Rolf Jensen, also, the chief imagination officer of Dream Company, emphasises that traditional and old buildings connect modern life to history and "Seoul must make sure that it does not look like any other metropolis" (as cited in Kwon, 2010). The importance of history and heritage to modern design is increasingly acknowledged as crucial. Trend analyst and futurist Matthias Horx insists, "Design is connected to history, to identity and spirituality. Only through design can we understand and create reality" (as cited in Bae, 2010).

One of the major problems of the SDO and Seoul's other design-led regeneration is its clear rejection of the past, its neglect of heritage. According to the narrow view held by Seoul policymakers, design can only be 'new' and modern, and requires the literal destruction of the past to bring forward modernisation. In fact, since 1953 and the end of Korean War, South Korea has modernised incredibly rapidly. However, modernisation has brought culturally counterproductive consequences, such as the physical destruction of huge amount of Korean architecture in favour of westernised design. As Korea has no architectural heritage organisation, countless buildings have been demolished, particularly in Seoul, where the emphasis on new and modern architectural design defines the city's buildings.

Likewise, the SDO is emphasises the value of the present and the future while

neglecting the past. Without over-romanticising the past, heritage design should be a major priority of designers and architects hoping to emphasise quintessentially Korean culture through these kinds of events. Indeed, a minority of designers have argued that traditional Korean architecture is not merely culturally valuable, but can also serve as a tourist attraction, citing examples of the appeal of Tokyo's traditional Japanese inns to Western tourists (Kim, 2008b). This is one of the many shortsighted failings of the Seoul Metropolitan Government's current policy, and it demonstrates a major lack of understanding of what 'Design' really is (and can be).

Yet even with a good understanding of 'Design', the way to use this concept for tourism must be limited. Design is a niche topic: obviously many international designers will be interested in the 'world design capital', but that title will be irrelevant for most people. The problem is that Seoul tries to use this event for mainstream branding and tourism, yet it is an event of interest to very few people.

Arguably, the organisers of the SDO have failed to understand the central concept of the 'Creative City', as the event does not accommodate the needs of all the various urban stakeholders.

In cities around the world, policy makers have increasingly used cultural events and creative planning as a potential 'quick fix' for problems in society and in the economy. However, without a balanced emphasis on appealing to and satisfying both local citizens and a wide global market, such cultural events are essentially undemocratic, and can only appeal to a small sector of the (inter/national) community.

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