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Marginality as centrality: South Korea's alternative creative cities

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This paper tries to present the parallel existence of a more publicized narrative of the global creative city of South Korea and the 'marginal' stories of self-organized artists and cultural activists. The study will begin with the official presentation of Seoul as a creative city in its application to join the UNESCO Creative Cities Network. Next, by discussing two case studies, 'Seoul Urban Art Project' and AGIT in Busan, the paper unfolds the different meanings of urban space created through languages, visual representations and events that happened outside the official narratives. I contend that there is an interesting relativity between the 'centrality' and 'marginality' of a particular space, city and a kind of market or community that is constantly changing not only with the shifts of subjectivities that tell the stories, but more importantly, with the ways where the spaces and visual tools are actually occupied, used and distributed. All these may prompt a re-contemplation of the concept of 'creative city' not just as a progressive modernist project obsessed with creating the new in the future, but also as a horizontally force field, where encounters of energies on various orders of magnitude may also constitute a powerful creative present.

Seoul as a creative city: application for UNESCO city of design (2009)

The trend of building a creative city has been warmly embraced in East Asia. A need to revive or accelerate the economic vibrancy in East Asia has emerged in the early 1990s; Japan's economic bubble burst in the early 1990s, the economic development of China has rapidly increased since the Southern Tour of Deng Xiaoping, and South Korea had an economic takeoff after its democratization in the late 1980s. Thus, the idea of 'creative city' has been proven to be overwhelmingly welcome in East Asian cities, but with a temporal lap in terms of its actual rise and practice in the region. In fact, 11 of the 38 members of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network in 2013 are East Asian cities.[1] We see not only the predominance of Korean TV dramas and popular cultural icons in the region, but also China's obsession in building new theaters, high-tech industrial parks, creative art gardens and numerous art biennales and triennales in Japan since 1999.[2] With these, it is easy to see the enthusiasm displayed by East Asian cities in mobilizing their rich cultural heritage as well as in using updated branding and marketing strategies to catch up with the latest development trends.

However, such logic may lead to a new series of uneven production of space. For example, those who are not considered members of the creative class will simply be ignored in the act of carefully designing an urban environment. Moreover, spatial changes occurring in making creative cities usually involve gentrification. Forming the creative face of the city often focuses less on sponsoring or supporting creative production and public participation or education and more on creating bigger space for consumption. Neo-liberal cities that constructed more private spaces as pseudo public spaces, such as

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shopping malls, have further alienated space from the community rather than realized the promised tolerance and convergence. Surveillance and policing have also become social norms that are internalized by the citizens themselves.

This paper discusses various streams of forces that form the status quo of a creative city in South Korea today, particularly focusing on its relation with street visual configurations. I will begin with the official presentation of Seoul as a creative city in its application to join the UNESCO Creative Cities Network. As the political, economic and cultural capital of South Korea, Seoul has been involved in fierce intercity competitions in the region and the world, similar to many other big cities in East Asia. South Korea has been eager to brand itself as a highly creative city by displaying its most up-to-date developments for modernization after recovering from the financial crisis in the late 1990s. Seoul was ready to show a new "miracle on the Han River" to the world in the mid-2000s[3]; this city was not only the host city of the Olympics in 1988, but also of the World Cup in 2002. Many say that Seoul has not only replaced Tokyo as the center of the electronics and car industries in Asia, but also in terms of popular and youth culture in the region.

During his term, Lee Myung-bak spared no effort to recreate the image of Seoul through large-scale urban renewal projects during his term as mayor of Seoul (2002−2006). He also changed the Chinese name of Seoul from hancheng 汉城, used since Seoul was established as the capital until 1910, to shouer 首尔, a pure imitation of the Korean pronunciation of Seoul, in 2005 to standardize the name of the city according to the international criteria. Cheonggyecheon Project is the most renowned urban renewal project, as it basically abandoned post-war traffic infrastructures and restored an 8.4 km-long hidden watercourse running through Downtown Seoul. The huge project was completed in 2005 and became widely known as a public space for recreation and climate adjustment. Another environmental project was Seoul Forest, which was opened in 2005 in Ttukseom (Ttuk Island).[4] All these efforts were intended for a brand-new visual image of Seoul as a global city in the 21st century. Therefore, Seoul applying to join the UNESCO Creative Cities Network under the rubric of design in 2009 is unsurprising.

The application was led by Oh Se-hoon, a politician from the conservative Grand Nation Party who succeeded Lee as the mayor of Seoul (2006−2011). Visual representation has always been the focus of Lee's administration, as discussed in the G20 Summit case. As the showcase of South Korea, Seoul needed to illustrate its capacity to complete a smooth transition into a post-industrial, eco-friendly and energetic place and possibly serve as a role model for other countries to be a member of the club of developed countries. Thus, transforming Seoul from a 'hard city' into 'soft city' was one of the main claims of the application (Park 2009, 40−41). This new focus on design entailed the shift of Seoul into a soft city, which focuses on culture and design to enhance its brand value, as the city has long been considered a hard one, which works on a development paradigm prioritizing construction and industrialization. Former Seoul Mayor Oh explained the transformation as follows:

> All of the policies of Seoul can be collectively expressed in a single key word: design. Urban design is the work of beautifying the cold urban exterior that projects no individuality, the streets disordered with mismatched signs and facilities and rectangular, matchbox like buildings. (Park 2009, 37)

Therefore, Seoul has implemented cultural policies to further enhance its 'sense of design' in both hard and soft aspects. The Urban Recreation Project of Seoul was intended

to redevelop the city center by demolishing many old, worn-out downtown areas constructed in the 1960s and 1970s.[5] The area around Gwanghwamun was reconstructed as a public square in 2009, becoming the representative of Seoul cityscape as well as an important venue for anti-government rallies after its completion.[6] Other city beautifying projects include the Street Renaissance Project, which aimed to 'integrate the street design related projects' and eradicate the existing 'disorderliness and confusion' of the street networks of Seoul (Park 2009, 77), and the Saewon Market Green Plaza Project, which razed an old residential and commercial complex for new green land and waterway that can be connected with the earlier Cheonggyecheon Stream Project (Park 2009, 79). World architect Zaha M. Hadid was invited to be the chief designer of the Dongdaemun Design Plaza, a multi-floored complex and park zone with a total land area of 65,232 m^2 located in the former historical site Seoul Fortress Wall, which was demolished during the Japanese occupation and to be reconstructed as part of the project. The Dongdaemun area is supposed to be a hub for Seoul's booming design industry with the completion of a Plaza in 2014, which was originally scheduled in 2001 (Park 2009, 89). However, all projects involved massive relocation and demolition, resulting in a daily scene of numerous construction sites, abandoned houses and ruins in the city in the early 2010s.

These urban renewal redevelopment and reconstruction projects maintained a continuation and reaffirmation of Lee's urban policies, which stressed the macro, scale-based, consistent and orderly visual system. For the 'soft' side, the Design Seoul Guidelines established on 28 May 2008 'set the standards for structures, including public buildings, public facilities, public spaces, public visual media and outdoor signs, which have a significant impact on urban design' (Park 2009, 61). The guidelines have been set up to make up for the lack of consistent visual identity of Seoul because of its rapid and haphazard economic developments in Seoul in the past decades (Park 2009, 61). Among others, these guidelines cover various facets of public visual orders in terms of public design, architecture, public facility and public visual media (Park 2009, 62). Seoul regarded the guidelines as the solution to 'disorder and confusion' of public visual systems (Park 2009, 63). For instance, 'the goal of enhancing the public visual media is to provide improved readability, usability, sustainability and integration of information delivery and to create calm and orderly urban image design by improving the traffic safety signs, traffic signs, traffic lights, bus station signs, as well as subway station signs' (Park 2009, 62). Interestingly, the example of good design for the sake of easier communication can be traced back to the application for the invention of Hangul or the Korean alphabets in history, as a significant historical moment for the cultural identity of Korea, which has long been reliant on the Chinese culture, particularly in its writing system (Park 2009, 6, 11). This emphasis seemed logical when the application proposed the re-invention of the Seoul typeface alongside the Seoul symbol and the Seoul colors as a visual strategy to create a distinctive urban identity (Park 2009, 65).

Most cities in the world that apply the idea of 'city font' are European cities, such as Bristol, Rome and Berlin, but Seoul is the only and first Asian city to implement such a city-branding strategy. The Seoul typeface consists of two types, namely, Seoul Nan-san-che and Seoul Han-kang-che. A Japanese font promotion project, called 'city font.com', stated that a legible city font has to embrace three major elements of being regional, being consistent and ensuring publicness.[7] Both Seoul Nan-san-che and Han-kang-che were reworked in detail to indicate the characteristics of the history and culture of the city. For example, the 'motif of a traditional house "Han-ok" and a curve of roof tile' were incorporated into the typeface design.[8] The use of the typeface has been

promoted in most public visual presentations, such as 'documents of the city, sign system, uniforms of public institutions and taxi'.[9]

The redesign of the city's typeface conjured up a curious contrast to the idea of styled graffiti writing, which is also a matter of typeface design for many people. Of course, the design of the city font is much more powerful and sweeping in the public visual world than styled graffiti writing. Moreover, the new Seoul typeface targets visual uniformity and stability by redesigning writing systems in public space, unlike the individualistic and nomadic typeface creation of graffitists. Aside from unifying the visual style of texts in public space, Seoul also initiated public art projects, such as the 'Urban Gallery Project', supported by the Public Arts Commission under the municipal government. The Urban Gallery Project is also connected with Seoul Design Olympiad, an annual major international design festival in Seoul that started in 2008 and then renamed as Seoul Design Fair in 2010 (Park 2009,13, 87, 89).

Seoul successfully became a member of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, but the discussions on its creativity have continued. In general, the application showed a comprehensive picture of how the idea of 'creative city' is premised on creating 'the new' at both national and municipal level. Boris Groys insightfully pointed out that this modernist view of creativity 'is celebrated as the origin of all things', but 'the actual form of all things is due not to creativity but to their limitation, their interruption, their closure by under-financing' (Groys 2009, 95). The sustainability of this creativity can be at stake, as reports have indicated that the debt of the government 'has jumped three-fold' because of the above-mentioned large-scale redevelopment projects during Oh's administration. According to the observation of the Seoul Metropolitan Council supported by the main opposition Democratic Party in South Korea, the Design Seoul Project is one of 'the main culprit(s) behind the deteriorating financial soundness of the city government' (Lee 2011). The Seoul City Government's obsession in creating new space for creative industries has also concentrated only on creative consumption, rather than production. Redevelopment and public visual projects seem to have been conducted by a grand designer, the Government, in its 'creative space' (i.e., Seoul) without mentioning any creating spaces for individual designers.

SUP: walking in the city as a bottom-up creative city project

In fact, the creative people in Seoul were not mentioned in the application. Who were they? What were they doing? How did they perceive Seoul? Did their understanding of the city and creativity differ from the narrative of the government? The case I am going to scrutinize in the following section may provide some answers to these questions.

The Seoul Urban Art Project (SUP; http://www.sup-project.com/) is a loose group consisting of 15 to 20 Seoul-based visual artists. The members of the group have various background and include street artists (Junk House, the key figure in initiating the project, Garoo, Hez, Jamie Bruno, Eric Davis, Monster Ara, Moz and Frenemy), graffiti writers (Handy and Basara), painters (Jazoo Yang, Jung won Hwang and Kildren), a visual artist (Vakki), an illustrator (Si hoon Kim), photographers/video producers (Hun soo Kim, Juno Hwang, Jun seok Seo, TJ Choe and Joni Els) and a visual communication designer (Jong oh Lim).[10] The works of SUP include different art forms, such as wall paintings, installations, spray-paint graffiti, plaster and photography of a shared or individual motif, but each episode is based on the same venue. Seoul's urban space is the 'open gallery' of SUP, and the artists explore how diverse genres of street visuals and Seoul may lend new vibrancy and meaning to each other. The SUP members completed five areas in Seoul for

a period of two to three months in 2012 and finished five episodes named after the spot they worked at. One of the earliest members, Garoo, said that they prepare and go on a field trip to the spot before they make any decision to 'occupy' the space. Thus, 'space' is a key element in their project. This means that they try to find a place that not only best fits into their aesthetic purpose, but also help them understand Seoul in their own structure of feelings.[11]

The first episode was done in Buk Ahyun Dong (북아현동), which lies in the middle of a downtown redevelopment between Ewha Women's University and the central business district in Seoul. The area (900,000 m^2) was experiencing large scale but rapid demolition, leaving a giant vacuum space without much human traces and life. Fifteen of the SUP artists found an ideal stage for their works through abundant uninhibited houses, alleys and rubbles and ruins of architecture. The members painted interior and exterior walls, mirrors, stairways and other surfaces they could find. The existence of their works visualized the abandoned stories of spaces in a stunning way through the pasted photos in wrecked rooms, lit up candles in unknown buildings and steles wrapped up with a blue plastic sheet (Figure 1). The episode was actually completed as a long-term project prior to the birth of SUP. The success and excitement of the Buk Ahyun Dong Project propelled Junk House and other artists to continue doing it as a regular 'get-together' of artists from Korea or abroad in Seoul. The project soon became a unique way for the artists to get to know various faces of the city in its hasty transformations.

Their later episodes were in places all over Seoul to avoid working at similar spots. Episode 2 was in Itaewon (이태원), the seat of the US military base (Yongsan Garrison) in Seoul since the end of the Korean War. Itaewon holds memories of the post-war cultural and political changes in Seoul. As in the case of Roppongi in Tokyo, Itaewon has long nurtured a multinational atmosphere with its mixed population. It has developed from a red light district and a commercial area servicing the stationed US personnel, and
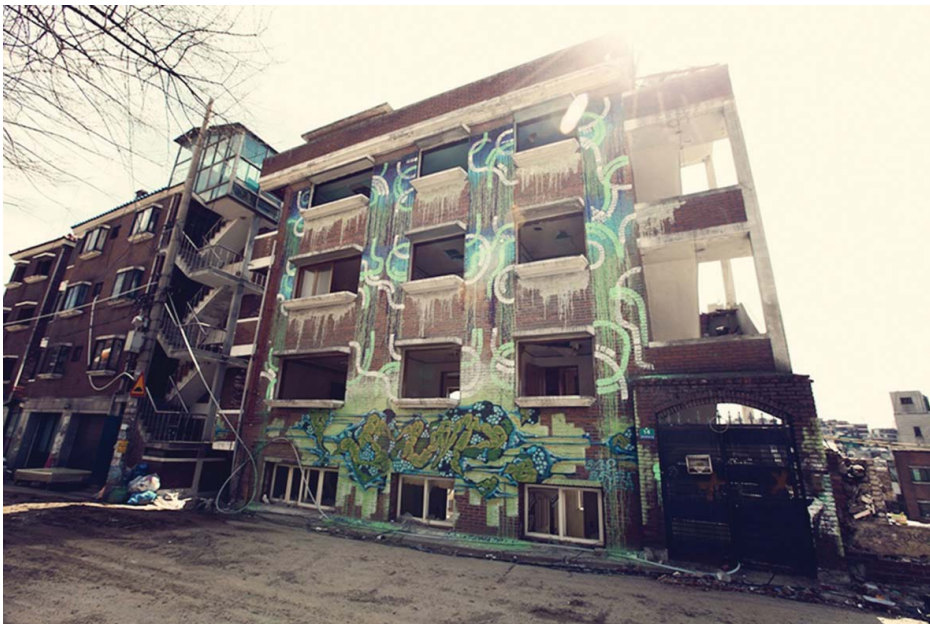

Figure 1.   Basara (Buk ahyeon dong), courtesy of Garoo.

later became a tourist spot. Jung-ang Seongweon (서울 중앙 성원) was the first Islamic mosque in South Korea that was opened in Itaewon in 1976 for Muslims in Seoul. However, the artists' interpretation of the space was on a more micro level. By joining the field trips of SUP, A-Ram Lee discovered an Itaewon that is far different from her expectation. She found a house that had been abandoned for 5 years after the death of its former owner. The lone-standing house in the most cosmopolitan district in Seoul rendered her inspirations and memories of Korean culture. She then painted golden chains around the house (Figure 2). She explained:

> I used to think Itaewon was a commercial and scary town full of foreigners up to things. But if you take a closer look at the town, it is really a quiet secluded community of old residents. Through this project, I tried to guard empty houses by drawing golden chains on the walls, rather than straw ropes. In Korea, it is traditional to hang golden rope [which is] made by twisting a straw rope and is a symbol of protection.[12]

Artist Jungwon Hwang (황정원) made plasters of deer and children and placed them on various surfaces in the area (Figure 3). She expressed her perception of Itaewon through tranquil images popping up at unexpected spots. Artists have become wanderers through the project and in the fluid meaning production of the city through these dairy-style notes. Jungwon Hwang discussed her experiences as follows:

> Itaewon is a place where a large number of foreigners, buzzing nightlife, old shops, exotic scenes and Korean culture mix together. The strongest feeling I had in this complicated place was 'wandering'; foreigners in search of something and Koreans trying to preserve something. I couldn't help but sense that these two just don't mix together, only wandering around without any direction or motivation. So I tried to express the uneasiness of these unstable people by drawing unmatched deer on the walls of multiple dwellings, the children who are looking after unknown illusions on busy streets filled with passing cars, and the children who are riding atop unsafe paper boats.[13]

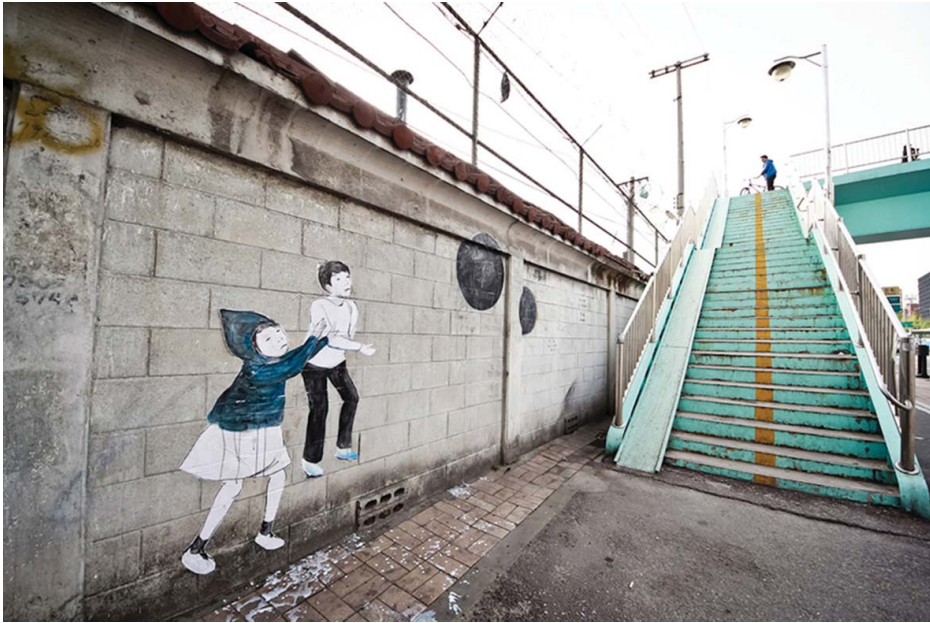Figure 2.   MonsterAram (Itaewon), courtesy of Garoo.

Figure 3.   Jungwon Hwang (Itaewon), courtesy of Garoo.

The first two episodes were held in the north of the Han River, but Doha Troop or Doha Army Base (도하부대), a closed military installation, was chosen for Episode 3. The base was inaccessible to civilians, thus it became a 'black hole' in the mental city mapping of people in Seoul. The massive area was surrounded by tall walls. Entering through the back door, one could see that the former forbidden land, which provided facilities for emergency bridge construction during war, is only dotted with some scattered structures, such as guard towers and storage barns. The land was bought by a development company upon its closure, and redevelopments were planned. However, the reconstruction was delayed because of the discovery of archaeological assets in the land (Dunbar 2012). The temporarily unused lot was then transformed to Geumcheon Arts Camp, under the supervision of the Geumcheon District Government since 2012. The Arts Camp had an artists-in-residence project called, 'Doha Project', which attracted a small group of artists working on fine arts, music and film from the north bank of the Han River. These artists previously held their activities only within a building at Doha Base, but they asked and obtained permission from the local district government to work inside the structures at the base. Doha Project leader Hareem showed his gratitude toward the local authorities for their support and interest in their projects in an interview by relating the existence of the Arts Cam with the nomadic nature of the life of artists, post-Cold War urban changes, and a new trend in forming an artist community (Dunbar 2012). However, the SUP artists found that the Arts Camp, which occupies around a quarter of the military base, still set boundaries for them to create artwork. Jun-seok Seo complained in his notes to the Doha Troop project: '[A]lthough we were permitted to do whatever we liked, we had to report to the public servant in charge every time we did something. We were also limited in choosing the name for our project.'[14] The artists later decided to go over the fences to the real site (designated as a construction site) where the military base was, instead of the readymade site of the Arts Camp (Figure 4).

Figure 4.   Sihoon Kim(Doha troops), courtesy of Garoo.

After their next episode back to the city center in Euljiro (을지로) (Figure 5), the SUP artists moved to Danggogae (당고개) as their 'final' destination. Danggogae is located at the northeast tip of the city. A namesake subway station is at the end of Seoul Subway Line 4 in the same direction. This name is only meaningful as a subway terminus even for Seoul residents. In the winter of 2012, the artists were packed with anticipation and enthusiasm for their last project in this remote, seemingly ordinary, forgotten place. The place was also experiencing redevelopment and turned out to be a difficult neighborhood to work in. The hillside area is deserted and dark, but has many empty houses; people were suspicious about and even hostile to the strangers who seemed unwelcomed troublemakers with their paints and tapes. Finding a wall or any workable place in the rundown houses was difficult. Furthermore, it was almost impossible to obtain permission from landlords and residents. Jun-seok Seo wrote in his journal, 'We could have done "bombing" (painting without permission) but we wanted to do something that can be shared and enjoyed. So we did some work in conflict with the residents, some with permission'.[15]

The artists tried to enliven memories in these spaces that are otherwise submerged unnoticed in dusts and history. They tried to make new connections among themselves, their works, the city and its people. Vakki (빠키) described the artistic process as a kind of 'healing' process when she discovered an empty pray house, which seemed abandoned hurriedly with unknown reasons (Figure 6).[16] Eric Davis, one of the non-Korean SUP artists, drew portraits of food servers he encountered almost every day. The idea came from his curiosity toward the food servers he met and his frustration in communicating with them because of his lack of fluency in the Korean language. The artist's understanding of the 'mysterious' life of others with whom he cannot converse with unfolded in his work. He drew and pasted an image of a female coffee shop owner he met in Danggogae. Eric noted, 'The coffee wasn't bad and she was very friendly. Perhaps if I lived there I would be a regular at her shop.'[17] However, the local people's reaction to his work was

Figure 5.   Jamie Bruno (Eul ji ro), courtesy of Garoo.

Figure 6.   Vakki (Danggogae), courtesy of Garoo.

unenthusiastic. The portrait of the woman was soon destroyed by a man passing by. Eric said, 'I suspect this man who passed when I was pasting it and remarked that it was scary. Maybe, he didn't like the color. Anyhow, that's just one of those things that happen when you put your art up in public.'[18]

However, the planned end of SUP with the project in Danggogae did not come. In 2013, they completed one more episode in Dongninmmum (독립문) (Figure 7). The artists were aware of what temporariness meant for them and for the city, probably like their works on the Seoul streets and neighborhoods, whether SUP continued or not. In this sense, SUP is similar to a combination of a research project about Seoul public space and an experimental project about art in its primitive state, without the mediation of religion, museums and the art market. SUP members also differentiated themselves from the public art 'that fits the taste of the masses' and claimed that they want to show 'real art on real streets'.[19] Likewise, SUP is a project that aims to help more artists come out of their studios and work in front of a public audience in everyday spaces; thus, in such context, the position of the artists is not that of an enlightener or aestheticizer, implying either hierarchy or deception. Apart from the passersby, anyone who saw their work in the areas they visited 'could easily become an audience by confronting art in a familiar environment and they might reconsider forgotten and buried memories in retrospect' through the project. People who see the artwork were also re-discovering and re-interpreting Seoul as concentrative audience while creating new visual and tactile moments as performers.[20] In contrast to the government's representation of Seoul as a creative city of design, SUP teased out a way to recreate the image of Seoul by engaging an artistic relationship with its surface.

This relationship may not be necessarily nostalgic or resistant, but can be seen as the 'tactics' of walking in a city. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau juxtaposed two ways of perceiving and making the city, namely, strategic and tactic. A modern

Figure 7.   Moz (Dongnimmun), courtesy of Garoo.

city normally belongs to the consequences of strategic process. The rationalization with numerous calculations and hypotheses prioritizes 'a panoptic view of the city and its constant progress toward the future' (de Certeau 1984, 95). A modern city is a 'concept city' planned under such strategic and functionalist 'transformations and appropriations' and 'the object of various kinds of interference but also a subject that is constantly enriched by new attributes, it is simultaneously the machinery and the hero of modernity' (de Certeau 1984, 95). The space itself is to be forgotten and 'becomes the blind spot in a scientific and political technology' (de Certeau 1984, 95). For example, the tactics used by walkers in the city speak a different language. de Certeau suggested three characteristics of a pedestrian speech act, namely present, discrete and phatic. These characteristics 'distinguish it at the outset from the spatial system' (de Certeau 1984, 95).

In relation to the above, I see SUP members as those 'walking artists' in Seoul, showing the three characteristics in their tempo−spatial activities. First, 'the present' is the willingness to leave walking to a non-linear play of both space and time, ridden with improvisations and unexpected spatial choices. The artists 'transform[ed] each spatial signifier into something else' (de Certeau 1984, 98) by walking, per se, and putting up their artworks on the encounters they made with the urban artifacts. Second, the artists used the discreteness of their individual materials, emotions and imaginations to 'condemn certain places to inertia or disappearance and composes with others spatial "turns of phrase" that are "rare", "accidental", or illegitimate' (de Certeau 1984, 99). The ruins and rubbles they have been working on became alive with their reinterpretations through the shapes, colors and images they create. Third, their works (and even the artists themselves) were prepared to have a phatic relationship with the city and the unknown people, who will see the works. In this manner, the artists communicated without words by leaving their traces in the real site of human life. They believed in the power of aesthetics per se, rather than clear messages to create such a phatic possibility. The artists also contemplated on the possibility by erasing the traces they created; they retrieved all materials after their activity in Danggogae. Garoo explained that the idea came from a feeling that the traces left by graffiti and street art might turn out to be a burden. Garoo said, 'We don't usually go back to the places that we worked on, but the people living there constantly come across it.' The artists then discussed whether 'graffiti without a trace' exists (Yoo 2013). Thus, their walking, which 'alternately follows a path and has followers, creates a mobile organicity in the environment, a sequence of phatic topoi' (de Certeau 1984, 99). This creativity of travelling and walking in a city opened up new spaces through 'an exploration of the deserted places' of the memories of human and the city as they returned 'to nearby exoticism by way of a detour through distant places, and the "discovery" of relics and legends…' (de Certeau 1984, 107). In this sense, Seoul became a creative city constructed on the invisible side of the creative city in the UNESCO application pamphlet. SUP members tried to create space of art production for themselves, who are motivated by their obligation to know the city with their own tactics, tell another story of a creative city, as well as communicate among themselves and with the general public unmediated by institutional rules and restrictions.

Marginality as centrality: Busan

If Seoul is the center of creativity and design culture in South Korea, Busan seems to be its marginal 'sister' in terms of cultural production. Known as 'Pusan' until 2000, Busan is the second largest city and the largest port city in the country. It is also a famous tourist destination because of two beautiful beaches and seafood markets, but its cultural

reputation has been mostly associated with the Busan International Film Festival (BIFF), which has become one of the most popular film events in Asia since 1996.

However, the success of government-funded and international cultural events, such as BIFF, may have overshadowed the alternative cultural spaces and events in the city. For example, street art and graffiti scene were actually lively around 10 years ago because of, ironically, the Oncheoncheon. It is a north−south stream in Busan, running partly under the new elevated subway line (Line 1). The watercourse was ill managed, so it smelled like dung. The stream area was also not of any aesthetic value for most people, because the streambed, bridge and embankment were made of drab, gray concrete. Of course, the 'dung bridge' area repelled many local residents, but it became a paradise for graffitists and students, especially those from the nearby Busan National University, who were looking for their own free 'territory'. Thus, Oncheoncheon grew into a gathering spot for these young people for painting, drinking and playing. Naturally, a (sub)cultural space that was not only formed based on its physical existence, but more on the people who used it for their own purposes came into being. In that area, graffitists used to have a well-connected network.[21] The walls along Oncheoncheon, particularly the 1 km-long section between the Oncheonjang and Jangjeon-dong subway stations, used to be the biggest and most famous graffiti space in South Korea. Dynamic graffiti works started to appear on this wall in the late 1990s (Park 2012).

Kunwoo, a cultural planner who was a part of this community, said that this more 'organic' scene differed from that in Seoul, because graffiti may be treated commonly as a form of art and design, which may be sold as a designed piece for the interior design or a commercial event; thus, the graffiti artist can earn a living. The consumer demand for graffiti is larger in Seoul, and hence, more graffiti 'designers' and works are based in the city. People in Busan, particularly in places such as Oncheoncheon, purely took graffiti writing as having fun, experimenting and writing without restrictions even if it is only partially legal. However, the space disappeared in 2007−2008, as the Government began to reconstruct and 'green' the Oncheoncheon area in an effort to bring the 'nature' back to the overly urbanized environment. The concrete streambed and banks were destroyed and replaced by natural rocks and green plants. Much of the graffiti pieces were lost as redevelopment constructions in the Oncheoncheon were carried out. Today, Oncheon-cheon no longer smells, and more local people come to enjoy the beautified space. Hardly known is the disappearance of the 'paradise' for graffiti writers, many of whom left Busan later and went to Seoul. In an interview, KAY2, probably the most experienced graffitist in Busan, told me that Busan actually has only five writers as of August 2013.

The rise and fall of the graffiti scene in Busan speaks to an ambivalence-ridden, rapid urbanization and equally rapid 'de-urbanization' in South Korean cities in the past 10−15 years. Only a few pieces of graffiti can be found in the streets of Busan; however, graffiti in Busan is not so foreign, given its history. In fact, one could not miss the fisherman's portrait, a piece of street artwork in Busan that still exists today.

The above-mentioned artwork was painted on the walls of Busan Fisherman Union Building, close to Gwangalli Beach, one of the most famous beaches in the city; the 7 m × 56 m piece is a realistic style portrayal of a fisherman in Millak-dong, Suyeong-gu, Busan (Figure 8). The photo plaster-like image was created by ECB (Hendrick Beikirch), a German graffiti artist, who was inspired by his visit to the local fish market close to the beach. He became interested in the sharp contrast between the localness of the market and the hyper-modern landscape that surrounded it. ECB has been focusing on painting portraits of ordinary and imaginary people in public space and is fascinated by how the faces of local residents can show stories of the place. He found no better way to

Figure 8.   Fisherman mural by ECB, Busan.

paint these faces than directly on the 'skin' of the city. ECB also chose to paint the face of an old man, full of wrinkles and traces of time, and the effect was huge. The face, which represents the laborious lives of the grassroots, is vividly contrasted by the surrounding fancy, modern and material-oriented civilization the city has become. This mural and the 20 m × 12 m image of a child holding a magnifying glass on a wall near Gwangnam Primary School in Namcheon-dong created by KAY2 were completed for the 'Busan Festa' in August 2012 and September 2012, respectively. Busan Festa started from Gwangalli Sound Wave Festival, a beach music event in Gwangalli on 18—19 August 2012, and then expanded to include two more components for promoting youth culture in other fields, namely Graffiti Busan and Busan Culture Academy (Jung 2012). Busan Festa aimed to build the unique cultural identity of Busan as a youth cultural hub in Asia. Artists and creative people from fields, such as hip-hop, street dance, graffiti, independent music, alternative space and flea markets were expected to come together to share their knowledge and imagination during the festival. The festival was funded by Busan Metropolitan City, Busan Cultural Foundation, Suyeong-gu Office, Geumjeong-gu Office, and Arts Council Korea, but the event was organized and managed by various independent cultural organizations in collaboration with groups of young artists in the country and from abroad. For that year, the festival had ECB and KAY2 on one side and local cultural magazine Hello Gwangalli, alternative cultural movement Jaeminan Boksoo/independent cultural space AGIT, social enterprise Busan Noridan and lifestyle planning space Tong on the other (Jung 2012). In addition, the groups in the project collaboration included not only local independent cultural organizations, but also young artist organizations from Japan and other Asian countries, making this project an opportunity for Asian youth culture exchange. In its

maiden run, the participating groups included the following: Media Bassak, Geumjeong Art Spot, Stroyzine, Shinpo Salon, Art Market Amazon, Alphasound, Indi053, Chosun Groove, Culture Club Nevermind, Elephant Stage, Foundation Record, Amateur Riot, BROZWAY, FOLA STUDIO, GUNBONG, Hidden Agenda, Almostfamous and Fudgenable (Jung 2012).

AGIT, which is a Latin term meaning 'to set in action' or 'to do', is a significant case for Busan-based independent cultural space for street art, graffiti and other subcultural forms (Figure 9). I define AGIT from two perspectives. First, AGIT is a non-governmental cultural organization managed daily by a group of young cultural planners and activists. Second, it is a physical space, which basically became a regular meeting place for local, Asian and even global independent artists, after the death of Oncheoncheon alternative space. Located within the walking distance from Busan National University (or BNU), the two-story bungalow is in the foothills, surrounded by newly built apartment buildings in Jangjeong-dong.[22]

The forerunner of AGIT was an independent art network group called Funny Revenge, which was established in 2003. The group was initiated mainly by a group of street festival planners, including street dancers, indie musicians and street artists, who held a street festival each month.[23] The group squatted on a small space at Busan National University before they found the current building where AGIT is now located. Funny Revenge has also been involved in numerous events and projects aside from the festival. The illegally squatted room no longer suited the demand, as more people from different places and with different interests came to visit, drink and play; the group considered not only having a gathering space but also one for creation and work. The group found the
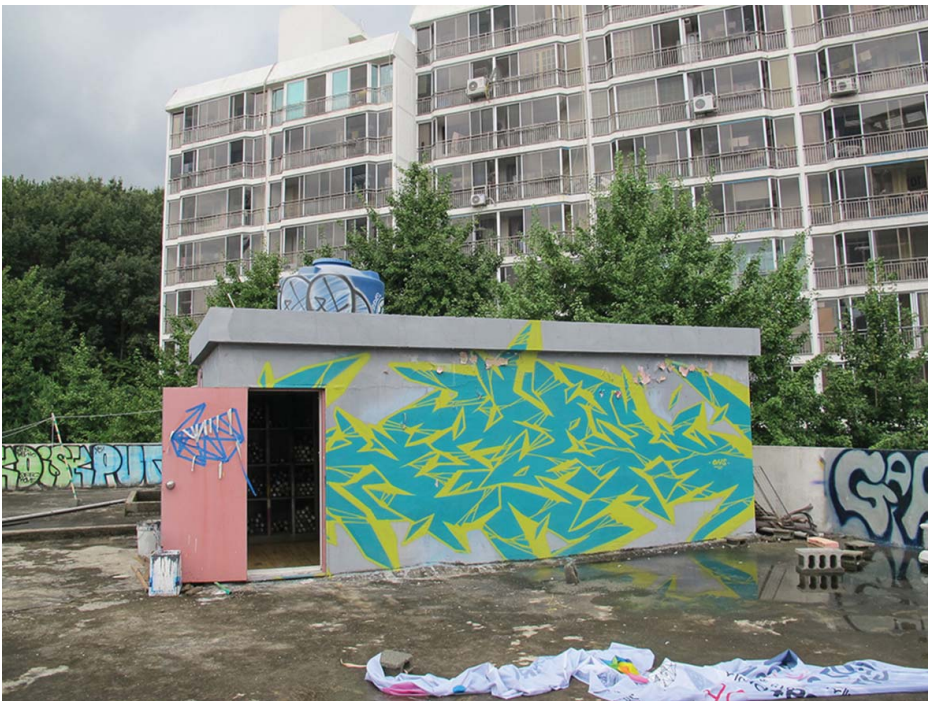

Figure 9.   AGIT's rooftop.

current AGIT building, which was originally a kindergarten school, in 2008. The school had to close down, as the area started to undergo redevelopment, leaving the space empty and unused for two to three years. The group then found this place, rented it and renovated it by themselves. The diversity of their street festivals assured the diversity of AGIT as a multi-functional headquarters for indie and subcultural communities in Busan. AGIT was then born primarily as a space where various types of works (e.g., music, dance, video and visual art) presented in street festivals can be produced (Figure 10).

Currently, AGIT is also known as Indie Art Space and covered by graffiti pieces, which are painted and re-painted over by artists from different places. Former classrooms have been changed to art studios, exhibition spaces, a recording studio, party rooms and event rooms. AGIT expanded into a space for more diverse creative production of festivals, projects and artworks, as well as for performance and exhibition. AGIT has built a more sophisticated global network through their street festivals, art exhibits, graffiti projects, freestyle rap events, activist forums and live concerts, and people from more diverse genres of subculture can join the group. AGIT also provides artist-in-residence programs for foreign artists who are staying in Busan for up to one month.

The significance of AGIT as a physical space not only lies in its role in the subcultural community of Busan, but also in the proximate neighborhood as its organic component. When AGIT took over the former kindergarten school building, many people living around were afraid after hearing a rumor that the group who painted graffiti all over the building were dealing drugs or engaging in other criminal activities. The communication had been low because of the lack of familiarity. In response, AGIT began to develop programs that facilitated more exchanges. For example, they opened a woodwork studio on

Figure 10.   ECB's mural at AGIT.

the second floor of the building for residents who were interested in making wooden crafts. The workshop was actually led by a graffiti artist, who also knew how to make things from wood. On the ground floor, a band practice room was opened to the public where young musicians taught middle-aged housewives Djembe. Thus, a local connection was built through these programs, and more people started to come and go to the space.

AGIT is also concerned with the local issue on spatial justice. The group has been holding the Zero Festival since 2010, with the aim of highlighting the issues of the struggles of the local people and their cultural rights to public spaces in the local community. The theme of the festival for 2013 is the story of the nearby Jangjeon Market.[24] The local market is almost closing down, because the construction of the large-scale Lotte Mart resulted in soaring rental prices. Meanwhile, the politics of public space is also part of the crisis the AGIT is facing. For example, the street in front of the Busan National University has always been a place for young people and their spirit of resistance, but the NC Department Store, the biggest multi-brand fashion shopping mall in South Korea, took over the street; hence, depriving AGIT the space for the street festivals and other cultural events held by the group. Moreover, AGIT is also actively supporting various art and cultural events in Busan, 'such as the Busan Independent Film Festival, Asia Short Film Festival, Busan International Performing Art Festival, Busan Biennale and Youth Culture Festival, as well as environmental conservation events and Anti-APEC movements' (Newton 2010).

In this sense, AGIT has transformed into a space for the production of street visuals in a more general sense through which human relations are reinvented, new networks are created and public issues are made visible. This bottom-up model of creating space for cultural production, rather than consumption, has been searching for the possibilities of sustaining themselves as a 'marginal' but resilient survival in the limited physical and social space. AGIT faced the prospect of losing its space at the time of the interview in 2013 − the building landlord asked them to move out, because they wanted to sell the land. For the community, if AGIT ceased to exist, not only the space would disappear, the network that has been maintained by the team since the time of Funny Revenge would also disappear. In the case of Oncheoncheon, the disappearance of the space resulted in the disappearance of the entire graffiti scene in Busan. Likewise, if the oldest Busan-based organization that has continuously been working to maintain this kind of culture disappears, this type of alternative cultural scene may disappear, decline or be ultimately replaced by a consumerist culture.

The Busan Cultural Foundation currently obtains the budget from Arts Council Korea and provides funding for the residency program in AGIT. The local district council of Geumjeong-gu sometimes offers resources and funding. As an NPO (Nonprofit Organization), AGIT takes care of other costs, such as rental and daily expenditure. The model was even unavailable until the late 2000s, when the government was totally oblivious to the field of indie cultural and art space but became willing to 'invest' in such spaces as a trend, mimicking the popular idea of a 'creative city'. However, Kunwoo of AGIT explained that the focus and purpose of the government policy is mainly concerned on improving the appearance of the city. Kunwoo said, 'For them, it's a cheap way to revitalize an old district. When young people move in and start something new, they give the place a new look and atmosphere. They (the government) are putting a lot of money into building spaces, such an "Indie Station" to revitalize indie music. But if you look more closely, it's not concerned with preserving or vitalizing the indie spirit or history, it's only another way to rob the style and image off indie culture.'[25] Kunwoo thinks that AGIT has major conflicts with the government's cultural policies in terms of creating

space for using, instead of viewing. Kunwoo claimed, 'They are only concerned with creating more spaces, but lacking in content. When you create spaces, then you also need to work with the artists to create contents, and provide them a stable foundation to create their works, but at the moment, the policy doesn't look like that.'[26]

With all these crises, AGIT prepared a very political festival, where one of the strongest messages is that we need to highlight the importance of alternative, non-commercial and local cultural activities and spaces by linking the problem AGIT faces with the larger structural problems of South Korean society. In a way, AGIT wants to carve a way out of 'the vicious system where the link between the creators of youth culture and its consumers are dominated by capital', making surviving without surrendering to big capital impossible for young artists. The struggles of AGIT for survival crystallize the immense limitations when they are trying to be independent or create an alternative market. Therefore, as Kunwoo said, their goal is 'to create a model that could become a starting point'. Through this festival, the AGIT team hopes to publicize these types of issues, look for new possibilities of funding and request negotiations with the government and corporations in multiple ways.

This vision may very well be one of the reasons why Busan has become the hub of alternative space and networks in Asia, instead of Seoul. Growing Asian networks of indie cultures have been formed around AGIT. Busan and its space, such as AGIT, transmute their peripheral and so-called culturally inferior position into its precious assets, while Seoul takes up too much burden of being a truly cosmopolitan, internationalized and modernized capital city, which symbolizes the latest developments of the South Korean nation. Japanese groups from similar spaces in cities, such as Tokyo and Fukuoka visit AGIT when they go to Busan or anywhere in Korea. Only a few individuals went to AGIT initially, but they told their friends back home, and thus more and more eventually came to stay or visit. The 'word-of-mouth' network spread to Taiwan, Mainland China, Hong Kong and other places in Asia. Friends from different places connected by AGIT also gathered in Japan in 2012 and in Hong Kong in 2013 to organize a concert, talk or symposium, which aimed to question the ways artists in Asia can form a network of solidarity in the middle of a shared cultural background and similarly harsh and confusing political atmosphere. Off the spotlight and, therefore, beyond the radar of intensive expectation and supervision, loosely organized space such as AGIT can make constant trials in new networking patterns and markets, making it a very unique case based on local, bottom-up and publicly concerned stories. ECB was also able to work in Busan through the network of AGIT, which may be a prelude to the rising position of AGIT in the indie cultural nexus at a global level.

Conclusion

This paper tries to present the parallel existence of a more publicized narrative of the global creative city of South Korea and the 'marginal' stories of self-organized artists and cultural activists. The different meanings of urban space created through different languages, visual representations and events that happened in these spaces may overlap, conflict and negotiate with one other. Overall, what I see is an interesting relativity between the 'centrality' and 'marginality' of a particular space, city and a kind of market or community that is constantly changing not only with the shifts of subjectivities that tell the stories, but more importantly, with the ways where the spaces and visual tools are actually occupied, used and distributed. All these may prompt a re-contemplation of the concept of 'creative city' not just as a progressive modernist project obsessed with creating the new

in the future, but also as a horizontally force field, where encounters of energies on various orders of magnitude may also constitute a powerful creative present.

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Notes

1. They are Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu, Shenzhen and Hangzhou in China; Kanazawa, Kobe and Nagoya in Japan; Seoul, Icheon and Jeonju in Korea.
2. By 2010, East Asia has nine biennales and triennales, namely Gwangju Biennale (starting 1995), Shanghai Biennale (1996), Taipei Biennale (1998), Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale (1999), Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale (2000), Yokohama Triennale (2001), Kobe Biennale (2007), Aichi Triennale (2010) and Setouchi International Art Festival (2010).
3. The post-war rapid development of Seoul gained the reputation of being the 'Miracle on the Han River'.
4. See 'Seoul Forest', 'The forest had been a royal hunting ground for kings and served as a military inspection facility. However, the area served a wide variety of functions in later decades. Ttukseom initially served as a water-treatment facility and later as golf course, horse racing track and eventually a sports park. Consisting of five parks spread over 350,000 pyeong (approximately 1.16 million ㎡) of land, Seoul Forest is an eco-friendly zone appreciated not only by the people of the city but also by visitors. Seoul Forest is rapidly developing into the premium city−park of Korea, similar to Hyde Park in London and Central Park in New York'. http://english.visitkorea. or.kr/enu/SI/SI_EN_3_1_1_1.jsp?cid=789696&nearBy=tran&#nearbyMap, accessed on January 3 2014.
5. In the project, the central part of Seoul is divided into four sectors with four main themes, namely history, culture, tourism and green land.
6. Details about the social movement (see Oh 2009, 71).
7. See 'City Font Project', http://www.cityfont.com/en/concept/, accessed on January 3 2014.
8. See 'A new typeface brought by the traditional beauty of Seoul', http://www.cityfont.com/en/ casestudy/seoul.html, accessed on January 3 2014.
9. Ibid.
10. See 'Seoul Urban Art Project', http://www.sup-project.com/2012/main.html, accessed on January 4 2014.
11. As for legality, the artists worked sometimes with and other times without permission from the authorities.
12. See http://www.sup-project.com/2012/main.html and 'Culture meets A Ram Lee-Seoul Urban art Project', http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vTkXfVPnWc, accessed on January 4 2014.
13. 'Seoul Urban ArtProject', http://www.sup-project.com/2012/main.html, accessed on January 4 2014.

14. Jun-seok Seo, See Episode 3, 'Doha Troop', http://www.sup-project.com/2012/journal/jour-nal_ep3.htm, accessed on January 7 2014.
15. Jun-seok Seo, See Episode 5 'Danggogae', http://www.sup-project.com/2012/journal/jour-nal_ep5.htm, accessed on January 7 2014.
16. See 'Seoul Urban Art Project', http://www.sup-project.com/2012/main.html, accessed on January 5, 2014.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Interview with Kunwoo, a key member in AGIT, on 22 August 2013 'If someone from a different town came to visit, they would always meet in Oncheoncheon, because there would always be somebody painting down there.' Translation by Eunsoo Lee.
22. AGIT at this location was closed down in summer 2014.
23. Most information about AGIT in the following comes from my interview with Kunwoo.
24. Interview with Cheon Hyeonjin, who also works in AGIT, on 22 August 2013.
25. Kunwoo interview, translation by Eunsoo Lee.
26. Ibid.

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