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The Urban Identity Recovery in Seoul: The Case of the Outdoor Markets

Djamil BENGHIDA *

Abstract

Seoul has lived up to its reputation as a truly urbanized cosmopolitan Asian city and despite rapid industrialization; the authentic identity of market architecture is still maintained in many regions. However, the form and character of many markets is intrinsically connected with the evolution of trading. With the rapid economic development of Seoul since the 1990s, modern markets were created, the seller-customer relationship changed, and many other factors led to a tangible decline in the consumer use of outdoor markets in Seoul. That is why it is important to revitalize these markets and make them into pedestrianized and inviting neighborhoods where locals can have a shopping experience that is informed by a “non-McDonaldized” architecture. This paper will examine the space vitality and urban identity in Seoul market areas. More specifically this paper will explore the importance of rejuvenation of self-contained developments through the revival of distinctive outdoor markets that have historic significance as a focus for social and communal activities. The paper suggests that a new and improved version of Seoul outdoor markets can be developed combining their rough and unplanned character with architectural adjustments to make them more attractive, beneficial, and resilient, especially in tourism spots. Thereby the focus is to revive the market as a space, improve its physical image, develop the domestic economy, and increase regional revenue.

Keywords : outdoor markets, urban regeneration, urban identity, mcdonaldization, urban vitality

1. Introduction

The rapid industrialization and the economic growth in South Korea (hereafter Korea) has led to an important urbanization of the country because of the strategy that the Korean government has adopted since the 1960s (Lee, 2000). With its extraordinary economic success, cities in Korea have undergone tremendous state-led urban change (Kyung, 2011), with Seoul having undergone the fastest urban development in the world (Kim and Han, 2012).

Massive constructions were imposed and reinforced grey concrete structures across the country without regard to architectural style or architectural heritage; their main focus was on the functional aspect of the built environment. Buildings are rising every three months everywhere through the present day, with concentration being on the building form, neglecting the importance of urban open spaces. This process of mass production shares the same rationalization of fast-food chains where “McDonaldized” strategies are neglecting quality. In Seoul, this strategy of rampant urbanization resulted in the outdoor markets being negatively influenced; reducing their importance and potentiality. However, since 1991 when local governments were created (Hermanns, 2009), Seoul has been slowly renovated into a city with good design. Outdoor markets have also been recently selected as urban spaces to be revived.

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2. Outdoor Markets in Seoul, Potentials for Revitalization

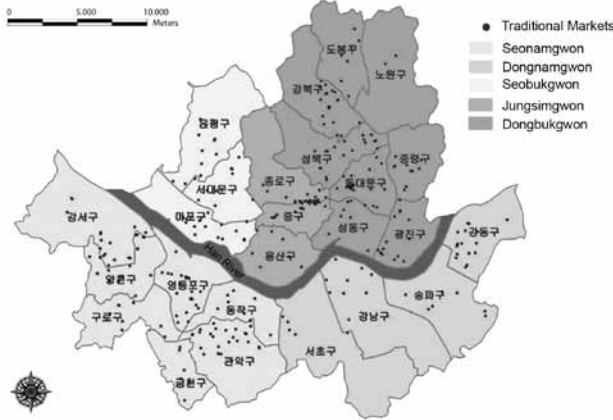


Fig. 1 Outdoor markets in Seoul, South Korea. Seoul Development Institute.

participate in giving the city its touch of cultural uniqueness. For example, in Seoul there is Gwangjang Outdoor Market for Korean foods, Dongdaemun Market for the Korean textile industry, Namdaemun Market, for an overwhelming variety of goods, the fish markets such as Noryangjin Fisheries Wholesale Market and Garak Market, Gyeongdong Market for medicinal herbs, and the 24 hour Garak Market, a wholesale food market. Figure 1 below illustrates the condensation and location of different outdoor markets in the city of Seoul. (Fig. 1) below illustrates the condensation and location of different outdoor markets in the city of Seoul.

More than just places to buy a diverse range of products fitting with local needs and tastes, outdoor marketplaces give evidence of the institutional, social and urban transformation at a micro-level. These markets can be highly effective drivers for economic development and urban regeneration.

Nevertheless, the rapid economic development of Seoul has contributed to the creation of modern markets: supermarkets, department stores, shopping centers, discount stores, etc. This led to the emergence of conflicts such as the increase of traffic jams and contributed significantly to lessening the value of the outdoor markets and the closure of many shops within the markets. Many internal and external factors are responsible for this decline as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Problems facing outdoor market, 2012. Choi.

Internal problems	External problems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Fail to follow changes in consumption, environmental management capacity ✓ Aging facilities ✓ Lack of customer facilities ✓ Weak management capacity ✓ Logistics systems modernization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The emergence of new business ✓ Diversification of consumer tastes ✓ Changes in consumer buying styles ✓ New city commercial

According to the data in 2012, there were 178 outdoor markets and 632 super markets spread over the city within the 25 districts (5 dong)

¹ The McDonaldization of Society is a concept induced by George Ritzer who expanded on Max Weber's work and produced an analysis of the impact of structural and rapid change on the society. So, it is not about McDonald's itself.

which all drive the country's economic growth (Joe, 2012). However, the data does not indicate if the totalities of these markets are still operational. The data presented by Seoul City Hall in 2011 counted 156 registered markets, out of which only 139 were verified and many markets closed due to financial hardships (Yu, 2013).

Most of Seoul outdoor markets do not have parking spaces because in their construction period cars were uncommon. The Namdaemun Market, for example, was the first established market in Korea 600 years ago. According to a study on Gwangju city outdoor markets, a total of 69.5% of the markets have no parking space (Kim Sung-woo, 2006: 18, cited by Yu, 2013). Many of the internal problems that influence the vitality of markets are related to the old fashioned management style and the inadequate facilities; however these can be renovated and changed. Subsequently, what matters most are the external factors especially the outdoor markets competitiveness with the modern types of markets.

The appearance of online shopping has also changed the selling and buying styles dramatically; it narrowed the social mediated function of the seller-customer relationship and turned the communication into a non-physical electronic activity in a cyber space. The outdoor markets, on the contrary, enhance strong social values and ties social relationships between people in a public space.

Because there is a decline in the consumer use of outdoor markets in Seoul, self-rescue plans should be established for revitalizing these markets at the national and local level. The government should also promote such plans by improving the market environment and modernizing the facilities within the outdoor markets.

3. Outdoor market rejuvenation strategy

In order to make these markets icons of the nation's economy, their urban revitalization is necessary. Not only it will have an impact on the economic pulse of the area, but it will also reinforce the socio-economic identity and the national culture.

Outdoor markets = Unique culture + Local economy

Outdoor markets policies have been under development since the 1960s until a special law in 2010 was enacted promising their improvement by outlining the following:

1. Placing stores
2. Information Center
3. Public Toilets
4. Shopping Carts
5. Lighting Infrastructure facilities
6. Storage
7. Sewer : heating and cooling
8. Market assistance
9. Accessibility : subystation
10. Designated parking (one market = one parking)

This means to work on the location of the market, an access road within and around the outdoor market, distribution of vendors' shop spaces, waste handling know-how, shops cleanliness, market maintenance and safety and the physical form of the market itself, etc.

4. Urban vitality and viability in Seoul

In the contemporary city of Seoul, the functions of a space depend on the planning choices in the urban project of the city. The functions are of different types as these can be commercial, recreational, cultural, or residential. At the same time, the functions that can be found on a site can be different yet share the same space, correlating and leading to synergies. After all the urban life is combination of many elements that are physical, economic, social, and sustainable. Outdoor markets as public spaces act as 'self-organizing public service', i.e., a shared resource in which experiences and value are created (Mean and Tims, 2005).

The outdoor market is basically a commercial type. It is particularly representative of the urban functions knowing that economy is an essential factor for the vitality of a city. The principal need of sellers is to be visible and accessible to buyers. The market becomes a meeting place between different mobility flows of pedestrians. Successful outdoor markets are successful with the diversity of their activities, services and experiences to active customers. The movement of pedestrians within the site overlaps brings dynamism and thus stimulates the vitality of the market and this in itself stimulates the city's vitality.

The success of a particular public space is in the hands of the architect, urban designer or town planner, but it also relies on people adopting, using and managing the space. An attractive city is the one which is alive and well animated with a high level of pedestrian activity. If this public space lacks vitality, then its revitalization is a priority. Therefore, analyzing this space is an essential element in the revitalization process. Spatial plans, image maps, social data, economic boundaries, urban space features, the sense of the place, are all elements to be taken into consideration.

A recent study conducted by an Italian design company in 2013 (XpecteDesign) came up with a new architectonic affordable design providing façade, structure, colour and utility to the outdoor market in Busan (Benghida, 2013). The idea was to develop removable floral and colourful structures that may be can be assembled, disassembled and changed in less than three hours. These resistant canvas and metal structures help to:

- ✓ Improve the aesthetics of the place of the market.
- ✓ Provide protection against the elements of nature to this specialized market in the sale of fish, particularly perishable goods.
- ✓ Respect the site where no transformation is required with easy to assemble and disassemble structures.
- ✓ Can be placed/displaced in any location.
- ✓ Are not expensive: Low cost design which can be estimated between \$ 20,000 and \$ 35,000 USD.
- ✓ Revitalize the area's economy.
- ✓ Add colours and create a hip, urban and lively atmosphere (in contrast to the imposing grey concrete which oddly symbolizes sadness and pollution)

The interest in these structures is that they offer flexible design parts to cover any type of space. They change the image of the street without the need to make any modifications on the street in itself. The most interesting part is that the total budget for this kind of designs including the construction, assembly, and disassembly is very affordable. They also give the open air street markets a unique architectural identity which respects the micro-climatic conditions. The project won the excellence prize for its revitalization idea.

5. Conclusion

For Seoul to be the source of vitality in the 21st century, it must create the conditions that stimulate activities on a continuous basis. Seoul, the image of the growing Korea, needs to create action plans that regenerate local communities, stimulate interaction among people, develop sustainable living, and create jobs and business in and around outdoor markets. The Action Plan of Seoul that urban professionals need to identify leads, in my opinion, to three major challenges closely relate to each other. The first challenge is to define the potential of the outdoor market to help improve the economic competitiveness and employment in order to improve the human and social capital, and enhance the urban environment and infrastructure. The second challenge is the need to encourage a range of actions in the market, as a well-defined urban area, to accelerate innovative decision-making process between planners and architects. The third challenge is to make outdoor markets more sustainable without imposing high costs for their urban development. Improved outdoor markets in Seoul are a major challenge; architectural adjustments associated with an urban visionary spirit of this city will lead it into a real urban renaissance.

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