

Historical Transition of Urban Space in Daehakro and its Cultural Implication

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1. Introduction

The Cultural Space has been growing for the last several years in Seoul, Korea. The 2002 world Cup led to making a new cultural space in Seoul. Thanks to the restoration of places and historical buildings, Seoul has a great historical and cultural value and the creation of new cultural spaces. Actually, Seoul has been more active than ever before.

Cultural space can be classified into two groups that are “The Space of Culture” and “The Cultured Space” in Seoul. What we call “The space of culture” is a place dedicated to cultural events and activities. Then “The cultured space” is a place that has its own history and particular culture. Since Korea was not Japanese colony anymore and thanks to these kinds of projects, the will to rediscover Korean culture has been spreading in the Korean society. This will to rehabilitate and rediscover Korean traditional culture by restoring historic places and creating new cultural spaces has been continuing in Korean society for a certain time. I think that this will was born from diverse tragic experiences that Korea suffered from: It is a well-known fact that Korea was a Japanese colony for 36 years and its population has been separated after the Korean War. In addition to that some “The Cultured space” became “The space of Culture”. It is said that these spaces already had an important cultural factor. That is, became places where are held different cultural events.

2. Daehakro as “The space of Culture”

This is the case of “Daehakro”. It is 1.1km long, has 6 lanes and is 30 meters large. Daehakro is one of the main roads of Seoul. It starts at Ewha-dong Rotary and stops at Hewha-dong Rotary. It passes through an area filled with many restaurants, bars and small theaters. For Seoulites¹ it is an easy to go place. This area is said to be “The city of youth and art”. The Seoulites have commonly given to this area the name of “Daehakro” since this road was in the very center of this place. It is said that the term “Daehakro” does not refer to road only but to the whole area, including the commercial and cultural area. Even if it is a popular way to call this area but it is not official. Really next to Daehakro road is the Maronnier-Park. It is a place where young people gather, especially on week-ends. Some amateurs and pros perform different events like concerts, dancing there. It is a

¹Seoullits means Seoul citizen.

place that people are willing to freely expression themselves. Daehakro, as I said it is “The space of culture” and “The cultured space”. It is a space of great importance for Seoul and its inhabitants. It is necessary to understand Daehakro area to know how it has been changing and what it will become.

3. History of Daehakro

Daehakro literally means “The university street”. In fact, the first part “Daehak” means university, while “ro” means street. In 1929 opened the “Keijyo Empire University” in Dong-sung-dong district. When the World War 2 was over in 1945 and Korea was set free from Japanese colonial empire, the university changed its name and became the “Seoul National University”. Seoul National University was built in such a way that it was split into two parts in its middle by Daehakro road. From 1979 it had been decided to move the campus to the Kanak Mountains. This took four years to do so and the medical school was the only part of the university that would stay in Dong-sung-Dong. For that reason, Seoul National university was a place of strong demonstrations against the government.

The “Korean Culture and Arts foundation” and the Maronnier-Park are situated in the old campus of Seoul National University Faculty of Literature.

3. Image of Daehakro

Let’s see how Daehakro was when Seoul National University was still there. To do this, my research was based on articles from different newspapers and interviews. In September 1981 the Korean newspaper “Chosun Ilbo” published an article entitled “The heart of Korean culture”. It is about Daehakro, “One day of autumn, Maronnier and Ginko’s leaves cover the place while we can not help noticing the buildings made of red bricks. In front of Maronnier park is the Art museum and on the left side is the Cultural art theater. Like the buildings here, created by the architect called Kim Su-gun, we can feel an artistic atmosphere in this place”. We can easily understand this article’s description that Daehakro is a place that has its own artistic atmosphere. The newspaper “Chosun Ilbo” also speaks of that Daehakro as an artistic place to go. Especially to escape from daily crowded places. In August 1983 the “Central Daily News” published an article about Daehakro. According to it, the customers of the surrounding restaurants are mainly university students about 80%-90%. What’s more they are also frequented by University professors, writers and painters. Reading the interviews of the antique shop’s owners in the same article, we can know that their clients are delicate parsons with artistic occupations.

When I interviews people in Daehakro, I heard such answers as “It is beautiful under the rain” or “It is a calm place to have a date”. I could know that Daehakro is a place with a stylish ambience that is loved by the young women studying at university.

We can know that not only Daehakro was a sophisticated place, frequented by intellectuals, with

an artistic ambiance but also Seoulites have this vision on this area.

4. Daehakro 1981 to 1984

In 1981 the Cultural art hall was established and in 1984 it was decided to change the names given to several arteries and streets of Seoul. As a matter of fact, the road passing through the buildings of the university called “Puk-Pyong-ro” was renamed Daehakro. Since the Seoulites remembered this street to be in the center of the university their voice was granted.

In 1981 the “New cultural art policy of the 1980’s” was announced by the government. The authorities started to think about the problem of the cultural policy of Seoul. The city of Seoul provided spaces for cultural activities but it was not aimed to have normal Seoulites using these infrastructures as spaces of free cultural and artistic expression. Mass medias constantly said that developing an appropriate cultural program and preserving open cultural spaces were necessary notions to have a good cultural level within the Seoulites. It is also started to make comments about the environment of Seoul’s streets. For example, it was said that they were desolate and free of any cultural activity, there was not any expectation about their future. From this point the Seoul city heard the voices of its citizens and began to elaborate open cultural spaces and environment mainly focusing its efforts on the streets. The Asian Game and the Seoul Olympics were two events decided to be held in Seoul. The coming of these two events brought a lot of changes in the same period of time.

The Korean Culture and Arts foundation from the beginning of the year 1984, had decided to promote Daehakro as a famous place in Seoul. It was planned by the city of Seoul to make Daehakro the street without cars allowed. It should have a great importance for the city, as Paris’s Montparnasse and Montmartre, London’s Piccadilly, New York’s Broadway or Tokyo’s Harajuku. For the government and the Seoulites, having Daehakro any vehicle was a perfect idea.

5. “Street without cars” in Daehakro 1985 to 1989

From May 5th, 1985, “Street without cars” in Daehakro and it became a pedestrian zone. On Saturdays 18-22 and on Sundays 12-22 the Daehakro Street was closed on a notion of 700 meters in order to facilitate the access of cultural and artistic activities to the Seoulites. The government changing Daehakro in a way that citizen world enjoys also thought about improving its own image as a military regime. In fact, to have a better image than his predecessor Park Jeong-hee, the new president Chun Doo-hwan opened “the street without cars”. Even if by different means as martial law Park Jeong-hee oppressed the youth; by doing such thing for the Seoulites it was aimed to give a different image of himself and his government. To avoid any protest from the students, government planned to create in Daehakro several amusements places for them. Spending time with various distractions they would forget about their anger and feelings toward the government. It is also

important to mention that the Asian Game and the Olympic taking place in Korea, the government wanted to show to the world the cultural aspects of Korea. The time of internationalism changes was coming and this was one of the reasons why Daehakro has been developed in such a way. "The street without cars" was mainly frequented by junior high school students, high school students, university students and youth. They were coming here to have fun.

About this "the street without cars" there were different point of views. The people going to the "the street without cars" to entertained themselves similarly, did the same things. It is said that they came here to drink alcohol, sing and meet with the other people coming here, too.

However, at the same time, there are different connotations linked to the "the street without cars". We can classify these connotations according to different social classes.

High school students; at this time there was not any place where forget about the rules, so they used "the street without cars" as if it were a space where they could go wild.

University students; for university students the "the street without cars" was a place where they could meet. Moreover, in this space, they felt relieved from the political oppression and saw it as a place where they felt more freedom. However they were kind of nostalgic about the ambiance of the previous era, being skeptical about the new image of this place.

Youth; for the youths, "the street without cars" was somewhere to meet or make friends, lovers.

Theater participant; they were worried about the cleaning of the garbage and the process of the restaurants getting more expansive.

Inhabitants; the inhabitants thought that the "the street without cars" was not necessary. According to them it was too noisy, the garbage thrown away made the place dirty. They could not use their cars as they wanted to.

In September 1989, the "the street without cars" was closed. The official reason was that some construction work had to be performed. However, there were other reasons, the youth coming here was seen as depraved and it was a place where were held demonstrations against the political power.

6. Daehakro in 1990's

Since "the street without cars" was closed, it has been a runaway street as used to be. It was frequently reported by mass media that youths, like the junior high school students, high school students were given to drinking, a fight in Daehakro.

Besides, a small theater which came into existence from the late 1980's has been increasing largely since the 1990's. For 5years from 1990 it increased more than thirty and changed to a play center in seoul. But a decline in the standard of a playing became an issue for an obscene performance at some theaters. During that time, a reconstruction movement of Daehakro carried out by "The theaters Union" in Daehakro. In the 1990, the first Daehakro festival was held on purpose to restore Daehakro which had already been reduced to an amusement center to natural condition as a

real cultural center. It was considered that if the nature of Daehakro as a cultural center settled down, the growth of a playing would get accomplished. However, many of a small theater in Daehakro were a basement turned into a theater.

In the 1993, a small theater in Daehakro was at a crisis of closure when it was exposed as an illegal structure by the Seoul Metropolitan Government. In the 1994, Jongno-gu has declared Daehakro as a center of the culture and they made an open-stage in Marronnier-Park. In the 1999, the law about public performance was reformed that permits establishment of theater without any authorization or inspection. And the Ministry of Culture and Tourism appointed Daehakro as a district of culture in Seoul.

7. Daehakro from the 2000's to the present

In 2002, The Ministry of Culture and Tourism announced that Daehakro will become a “District of culture” in Seoul. A district of culture means that a region which is a mayor is decided on as an area of culture by the law about a cultural promotion. It can promote cultural growth in that area intensively. Daehakro was reserved as a district of culture in Seoul on purpose to make it a public performance and cultural center.

From 2000's Daehakro changed greatly. For example, a sculpture on display at a sidewalk in Daehakro, repair of a park, and a road of Marronnier became "the street without cars". In 2007, opened the “Seoul Play Center”. But even nowadays, Daehakro have got some problems. There are various demonstrations and political meetings. For example, there were 161 demonstrations in Daehakro in 2004. It means that there were about three demonstrations per week. There were on week-ends and holidays some meetings and demonstrations where gathered more than 4000 people. For these reasons the number of people coming to Daehakro reduced, the cultural area was threatened, lot of traffic jams occurred and the sales of the area's restaurants decreased.

8. Daehakro as “District of culture”

Daehakro was reserved as a “District of culture” on May, 2004. The system of “District of culture” permits to support the improving of the area's environment, the holding of cultural events and the inhabitant consultation. The cultural fund is used to supervise and bring up the cultural area. Daehakro, which is becoming an “amusement” street, must be adjusted, too.

The manager of Daehakro can be classified into three groups that are Government organizations, the theater groups and the region groups.

Government organizations: Preserve the cultural identity of Daehakro, maintain and preserve harmony between the regional culture and the commercial activities of the area.

The theater groups: Promote and help the small theaters since they pay a rent and that curative plays have been increasing. This is the wish of the small theaters.

The region groups: They cannot solve the problems of the region. They try to create strong relationships between the shop owners of the area. There is a chance for artists that have no occasions to show or perform their work to do it in Daehakro.

9. Summary

Daehakro was popular as an area of high-class culture with Seoulites before 1980'S. However, government made "a street without cars" that have free for Asian game and Seoul Olympics. The government tried to external affairs and change a bad image like a military regime into good image. Daehakro have been a experimental, cultural region by political means and there were many a mass demonstration after democratization.

Since Daehakro was decided to be "District of culture", the government has controlled its development and situation. The relations between the area and such groups as regional groups or theater related groups are really strong. However, even if Daehakro's region and its inhabitant's relations are strong the shop owners and the inhabitants do not have the power to decide about the management of Daehakro and are not willing to. Because the area was decided to be "District of culture" the price of the land increased, it became kind of amusement place and that is why play groups left Daehakro.

Different infrastructures were built for the Seoulites and they had the chance to assist or participate to artistic and cultural events. On the other hand the theatrical troupes groups and groups of people from the region just have a superficial relationship with the region.

Being "The space of Culture" should permit a free and willing communication with Seoulites. However, my opinion is Daehakro's audience is rather passive. In brief, Daehakro is not free space for that space has been controlled (managed) by government.