



## City profile

## “Dynamic Busan”: Envisioning a global hub city in Korea

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 12 July 2014

Received in revised form 31 March 2015

Accepted 31 March 2015

Available online 16 May 2015

## Keywords:

Urban visions

Urban restructuring

Global transportation hub

‘Soft power’ city

Busan

Korea

## ABSTRACT

Busan is the largest port city and second largest city in Korea. Through the last decade, the city has experienced intensified competition within a domestic and international port hierarchy, rapid de-industrialisation, population ageing, and hollowing-out processes. As a response to these challenges, the city has been striving to transform itself into a global hub that facilitates sea, air and land transportation and a ‘soft power’ city with improved living environments. The latter comprises developments and enhancements in urban infrastructure, cultural and education experiences, and welfare services. This profile analyses these urban visions and argues that they pay insufficient attention to the distribution of liveability and political dynamism, which are crucial to re-vitalise local governance and co-operation. In order to improve growth and liveability across the city, the profile concludes that the city government should pay more attention to *intra-urban* complexities that arise from the port function reinforcement and post-industrial urban restructuring.

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## Introduction

This profile examines the current urban policies of Busan Metropolitan City (BMC) as it aims to transform itself into a global hub city. Busan, with a population of almost 3.6 million, is the largest port city and second largest city in Korea. Here we examine the post-industrial urban restructuring processes taking place in a de-industrialising port city, which includes port development and re-development, and the attempt to create of a ‘soft power’ urbanism. The profile highlights the nuanced understandings of the intra-urban complexities and liveability of a port city undergoing spatial, economic, and social transition. For port cities, their port and land-based urban functions create diverse forms of port–city relations (Hoyle, 2000; Norcliffe, Bassett, & Hoare, 1996; Notteboom & Rodrigue, 2005). Ports are particularly sensitive to global markets and technological changes. As such, port cities, whether they are global cities or not, experience severe competition within a global port hierarchy. At the same time, their urban functions are dependent on the local, regional and national urban systems and conditions. The degree of this interdependency between a port function and a city function has a direct impact on the characteristics and development of port cities. In particular, scholars working on Asian port cities emphasise the differentiated

process of port–city interfaces resulting from the diverse forms of global–local relations, geo-political relations, technological innovation, and policy strategies (Cheung, Tong, & Slack, 2003; Ducreuet, 2006; Lee, Song, & Ducreuet, 2008; Slack & Wang, 2003). In this respect, port cities are urban frontiers where urban complexity and diversity emerge due to encounters at the local, regional, national and global levels; they constitute multi-scalar urban complexes.

Busan has the fifth biggest container port in the world, where 75% of the nationwide total container traffic transits. Busan was the leader of the rapid development of light manufacturing industries in the 1960s and 1970s, which contributed to Korea’s status as one of the four ‘tigers’ or ‘dragons’ in Asia in the 1980s. Yet, through the last decade, the city has experienced intensified competition for domestic and international port hierarchy, rapid de-industrialisation, population ageing, and hollowing-out processes. As a response to these challenges, the city authorities have been striving to strengthen Busan’s global port city status and to create new economic engines based on “soft power” strategies. In 1990, Nye (1990) coined the term “soft power”, which refers to the power of culture, values and institutions. The concept emphasises that attraction, rather than military and economic coercion, is an influential determinant for achieving international political stability (Nye, 1990). This concept was adopted as Seoul’s municipal vision in 2006 in order to improve the city’s competitiveness in the global economy. It triggered the fostering of the cultural industries and urban design innovations in Seoul

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(Ra, 2010). Busan has also harnessed the importance of “soft power” to attract citizens, visitors, and companies as well as to improve the quality of living conditions (Park, 2012). Under the contours of a “soft power city”, the city authorities have begun to improve the conditions of living environments, reorganise urban infrastructure, pursue urban regeneration and conservation, develop urban tourism provision, as well as provide cultural experiences and welfare, education, and medical services (Park, 2012). Such strategies aim to achieve both post-industrial urban growth and improved liveability. As such, “soft power” initiatives are playing important roles in the re-envisioning and re-development of Busan. It is part of the ‘dynamism’ of the city’s branding title, “Dynamic Busan”.

The concept of liveability aims to expand on the issue of quality in the built environment beyond purely functional and utilitarian orientations (Southworth, 2003<sup>1</sup>). While some attention has been directed towards the environment, the relationship between liveability and sustainability has not been elaborated comprehensively (Howley, Scott, & Redmond, 2009). For example, evaluations of a liveable city do not mean that it has to be sustainable. It remains unclear how notions of sustainability (essentially a longer-term concept with its set of attendant concerns) gel with liveability (a concept with comparatively shorter-term goals). Moreover, the notion of liveability has increasingly become the basis on which city authorities measure their own performances, and for cities to stand out in the global arena. The idea of liveability has hence morphed into a means of branding a city, as well as an exercise in legitimacy for urban re-development (Ooi & Yuen, 2010).

In this Profile we scrutinise Busan’s schemes for urban growth and improved quality of life. We offer insights as to how a balance between pursuing liveability in the short-term and achieving long-term effects in a port city that is undergoing significant social, infrastructural and technological transformations might be reached.

### Busan’s challenge: Becoming a de-industrialised port city?

Busan is located in the south easternmost tip of the Korean peninsula and adjoins the Pacific Ocean (Map 1).

Owing to the fame of its beautiful beaches and the Busan International Film Festival, the city has become known as a city of maritime leisure and culture. Ports, however, have been a dominant factor that has shaped the identity and urbanity of Busan. When Busanpo (known as the North Port) was established in 1876, Busan became a trading place, albeit on a relatively small scale, between Korea, Japan, and China. Since 1914, when the city’s administrative districts became systematically organised, Busan began to develop as a modern city (Yim, 2013).

In the early 1950s, however, after the outbreak of the Korean War (1950–1953), Busan experienced unregulated urban expansion because of the extreme conditions the city faced during the war (Jung, 1997). Busan was one of the few places in South Korea that North Korea did not invade and therefore war refugees from all over the country, including the provisional government, flocked to the city (Park, 1997). Busan served as a crucial port for receiving war materials and a range of aid. Using the aid supplied, the city exported light manufacturing products, such as processed food and fabrics designed to keep some elements of the economy going (Jung, 1997). In the 1960s, Busan’s population reached 1 million and Busan emerged as a port city equipped with modern infrastructure and established administrative boundaries (Map



**Map 1.** The Location of Busan and City Pacific Ports in China, Japan and South Korea. Source: Co created by Lee Li Kheng, Jeong Kyung Seo and Tracey Skelton.

2). Rapid urban growth continued in the 1970s because of the launch of a new expressway that linked Seoul to Busan, facilitating the movement of goods and people (Jung, 1997). At the same time, there was a boom in the footwear and veneer industries, which induced a massive migration of factory workers into Busan (Jung, 1997). The population thus surged from 1.8 to 3 million. Until the 1980s, the substantive export of manufacturing products from Busan was a key driver in national economic development (Lee & Jang, 2010).

During the 1980s, South Korea<sup>2</sup> became more internationally connected and visible through large-scale national activities such as the hosting of international events (i.e. the Asian Games in 1986 and the Olympics in 1988) and expanding diplomatic ties. Accordingly, Busan became known throughout the world as the biggest port city of Korea. At the same time, large-scale housing and transportation projects were implemented in Busan and its urban growth continued. In the 1990s, when nation-wide economic stagnation took place, Busan adopted the notion of sustainable environments and began to develop new towns, logistics industries, port and transportation infrastructure, and energy systems (BMC, accessed in 2013). In 1995, Busan was designated as a Metropolitan City and its administrative districts were further expanded. As of 2008, its geographical area was 765.94 km, which comprises 0.77% of the national territory (BMC, accessed in 2013). In the following two sections, we explore and analyse the key challenges that Busan faces as a de-industrialising port city.

### Port hierarchy competition and de-industrialisation

Busan’s economy has been dependent on the maritime industry. The maritime industry contributes 22.5% of the total industry income in Busan, while the income from the shipping, port, and logistics industries combined comprises 34.5% of the entire mar-

<sup>1</sup> Two of the most popular liveability indices are the Mercer’s Quality of Living Survey and the Economist’s World’s Most Liveable Cities. Both indices measure quality in urban living along several diverse criteria such as safety, education, culture, political stability, environment and recreation.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the rest of the paper, we use the term Korea to denote South Korea. The latter is the term used by the population of the country and in Busan.

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