



Can we implant an artist community? A reflection on government-led cultural districts in Korea



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 January 2015

Received in revised form 30 August 2015

Accepted 5 September 2015

Available online 26 September 2015

Keywords:

Cultural district

Cultural policy

Artist community

Urban regeneration

South Korea

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to broaden knowledge on policy governance of cultural districts, particularly those utilizing artist communities for urban revitalization. With the rise of the cultural economy in post-industrial cities in South Korea, cultural strategies have become key components in almost every urban regeneration project. The tactic of encouraging groups of community artists to work and live in distressed neighborhoods has been regarded as a low-budget and easy-to-implement tool for urban revitalization. Over the past few years, however, these strategies have failed to meet expectations and have often resulted in conflicts between artists and the government. To understand the factors behind the strategies' positive and negative consequences, this paper examines three projects with different degrees of government intervention: the Totatoga project in Busan City, the Daein Art Market project in Gwangju City, and the Changdong Art Village project in Changwon City. The analysis focuses on the mode of government intervention in the relationships among the government, artists, intermediary agencies, and local citizens. By putting the mode of government intervention in the context of social relations of related players in the cultural districts, this paper tries to understand how similar policy schemes created different consequences.

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1. Introduction

As in many other countries across the globe, culture-led urban regeneration has become a buzzword in urban policy circles in South Korea (hereafter referred to as Korea). In Korea, which had gone through an unbridled pace of modernization throughout its developmental era from the 1960s to the 1990s, the term *urban redevelopment* has often indicated physical developments, forced relocations, and juicy capital gain. Entering into the new millennium, however, a new term, *urban regeneration*, began to replace urban redevelopment in both the academic literature and in policy documents, signaling a move to embrace the humanized aspects of urban life, such as identity, culture, and participation. Accelerated post-industrialization and sluggish real estate markets have combined to propel this shift further (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport, 2014).

Reflecting harsh economic conditions and a renewed sense of culture, strategies to mobilize artists have emerged as alternative development tools for city governments. Artists are increasingly seen as agents who can bring people and capital back to city centers troubled by population loss and physical deterioration (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010; Hall & Robertson, 2001). In a situation where large-scale development projects are not feasible, the establishment of cultural activities by artists has become a popular option for ailing cities. Incheon Metropolitan

City, for example, renovated abandoned warehouses into fancy art studios to attract artists and cultural activities to its distressed central districts. On the other hand, Busan Metropolitan City introduced an artist residency program using vacant offices in once-bustling commercial areas of the city. These strategies are not just artist-supporting programs, but also urban regeneration projects intended to revitalize the city centers. These types of cultural strategies have become the norm for almost every city government that seriously pursues urban regeneration (Park *et al.*, 2011).

Amid high expectations, however, the outcomes of these strategies have not been impressive so far. Although city governments have intended to create revitalized cultural districts, the policies have often ended up as short-term artist residency projects, or at worst, generated conflicts among participants. Given the burgeoning practices of making cultural districts in city governments in Korea, this paper aims to show how different modes of government interventions and how different social relation among actors generate different consequences. To understand the factors behind the strategies' positive and negative consequences, this paper examines three projects with different degrees of government intervention: the Totatoga project in Busan City, the Daein Art Market project in Gwangju City, and the Changdong Art Village project in Changwon City. The analysis focuses on the mode of government intervention in the relationships among the government, artists, intermediary agencies, and local citizens. By putting the mode of government intervention in the context of the social relations of related players in the cultural districts, this paper tries to understand how

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similar policy schemes with different governance structures create different consequences.

2. Planning cultural districts for urban regeneration

A cultural district is generally defined as “the geographical area which contains the highest concentration of cultural and entertainment facilities in a city or town,” (Wynne, 1992) or “demarcated, named mixed-use precincts anchored by cultural facilities” (Brooks & Kushner, 2001).¹ The classic examples of a cultural district are Montmartre in Paris and SoHo in New York, where independent artists seeking low-cost working spaces agglomerated and led a process of neighborhood transformation into high-end art galleries surrounded by luxury residential lofts (Vivant, 2010; Zukin, 1982). The types of cultural districts vary depending on their major activities, such as the consumption or production functions of culture and the degree of government intervention, whether formal or informal (Hitters & Richards, 2002; Chapple, Jackson, & Martin, 2011). Among the various types of cultural districts, the study will deal with artists' agglomeration and the art production function rather than commercialized entertainment zones or cultural industry districts.

The previous literature has demonstrated that cultural districts can bring economic and social benefits, such as boosting retail businesses, job creation, social cohesion, re-imagining of the city, and cultural promotion (Bailey, Miles, & Stark, 2004; Kunzmann, 2004; Miles & Paddison, 2005; Department for Culture, Media, and Sport, 2004; Evans, 2005). For instance, Hall and Robertson, after reviewing previous practices of “public art in urban regeneration,” identified several positive impacts on neighborhoods, such as developing a sense of community, addressing community needs, and tackling social exclusion (Hall & Robertson, 2001). In a similar way, Stern and Seifert demonstrated that there is correlation between cultural districts and social inclusion (poverty alleviation) by analyzing cultural clusters in Minnesota and Philadelphia in the United States (Stern & Seifert, 2007).

Cultural districts as artists' agglomerations are increasingly common in European and American cities, as culture has gained currency as a means for urban regeneration in distressed cities. In East Asia as well, cultural districts, whether they are natural or planned, have become important policy objects in major cities (Kong, 2013; Kim, 2011; Sasajima, 2013; Wang, 2009; Zhong, 2011). Despite the myriad experiences of cultural district planning across the world, the conditions under which cultural districts can grow successfully and sustainably remain uncertain. As cultural clusters, like other creative activities in the city, are place sensitive and non-transferable from one place to another (Lazzeretti, 2008; Montgomery, 2003), many attempts at fostering cultural districts have often failed to generate tangible benefits or have been supplanted by market-led, tourist-oriented property redevelopment.

A number of studies have paid attention to the role of government in planning cultural districts. One prominent argument in the previous research is that natural and organic cultural districts are more sustainable and beneficial to local communities than formal, government-initiated cultural districts (Moss, 2002; Porter & Barber, 2007; Stern & Seifert, 2005). Because cultural actors, such as artists, activists, and cultural planners, play a pivotal role in cultural districts and because they are mostly very sensitive to bureaucratic control, the role of government seems ambiguous. In this light, the contrasting cases of Manchester's Northern Quarter and Sheffield's Creative Industries Quarter (CIQ) are illustrative. Manchester's Northern Quarter emerged organically based on factors such as cheap rent and a history of active music development in the city, rather than policy measures of the city government. The area is widely seen as a success and continues to enhance Manchester's image as a music city. In contrast, Sheffield's CIQ was the result of

deliberate efforts from the Sheffield City Council to boost the urban economy. The council provided key infrastructure and facilities and marketed the CIQ to creative companies that wanted to set up businesses. Twenty years after its launching, however, the CIQ has failed to produce a significant music or film niche in Sheffield. Key projects funded by the public have faltered, and many companies are still relying on government subsidies (Brown, O'Connor, & Cohen, 2000; Moss, 2002).

Although natural cultural districts generally produce more positive outcomes than government-planned ones, several studies have also stressed the role of government for nurturing or protecting cultural activities in districts. One prominent justification of government intervention is that cultural actors and activities are vulnerable to rent hikes and property development (Newman & Smith, 2000; Zukin & Braslow, 2011). It is widely accepted approach for city governments to intervene in the market and protect cultural actors, including artists, through zoning regulations, subsidy programs, and facility provision. It would also be difficult to imagine natural cultural districts totally free of government intervention under the current economic and social environment. In a situation where artists and art-related activities typically rely heavily on government financial and administrative support in direct and indirect ways, the concept of purely natural cultural districts is hardly feasible. In fact, many cultural districts known for their spontaneous features, such as Temple Bar in Dublin, are often the product of long-term, indirect intervention from various public authorities (McCarthy, 1998). In reality, Noonan (2013) demonstrated that cities with cultural districts, regardless of whether they were natural or not, grew faster than cities without cultural districts in the United States.

Based on the previous research, this study tries to further develop a discourse on effective governance in planning cultural districts, and cultural strategies in general, in the context of policy delivery practices in Korea. Research focuses are placed on the following three points: (1) social-political relations among actors, (2) the meaning of culture represented by the projects, and (3) changes in the mode of government interventions toward local issues, particularly under the “developmentalist” tradition in Korea and broadly in East Asia.

First, this study tries to locate the discourse on planning cultural districts in the frame of social-political relations among players in cultural districts, such as the national government, local urban bureaucrats, artists, merchants, and citizens. The political aspects of culture-led urban regenerations have become a frequent focus of academic discussions in recent years (Grodach & Silver, 2012; Lin & Hsing, 2009; Shin & Stevens, 2013). However, not enough attention has been paid to how different actors with different interests actually collaborate and/or come into conflict with each other in the development of cultural districts, and how these relations produce different results. Here, I focus on the contesting agendas, interests, and intentions of each player involved in making cultural districts.

Second, I will focus on how culture was interpreted and represented by each project, often as a compromise involving the different strategies of actors in developing cultural districts. Culture-led urban regeneration inherently raises the issue of “whose culture?” (Miles, 2005; Shin & Stevens, 2013). Urban bureaucrats, artists, and local merchants usually have different understandings of culture, which make it hard for them to come together for common goals. Thus, it is critical to understand how different concepts are contested and compromised and whose culture, or what culture, is represented in making cultural districts.

Third, this study tries to widen our knowledge on the changing modes of government intervention—and its limitations—in terms of local issues in South Korea, where the developmental state tradition still looms large in the policy delivery system at the central and local government levels. So far, while a number of studies have been based on the experiences in Western cities, only a handful of researchers have touched upon cultural district planning in East Asian cities (for example, see Lin & Hsing, 2009; Ren & Sun, 2011; Wang, 2009; Zhong, 2011). With a strong state and a weak civil society throughout the

¹ Researchers in previous studies have used different terms for cultural district, such as cultural cluster/quarter and art district/cluster. In this paper, I use cultural district, but the terms can be used interchangeably.

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