

Absurd City

Prologue; Motive

This essay focuses on the way I see the landscape of the city of Seoul, the landscape as the representation reflects the city, to analyze the mechanism of a modern metropolis with humans who are constructing the relations within it.

It started with my personal experience of alienation from my hometown when I had a vacation in Seoul. Seoul is the city I have lived for my whole life and this was the first time that I have been apart. In the holiday, I went around the places as an ordinary Seoulite. There were so many places that I wanted to go such as shopping malls, restaurants, cafes, galleries, but most of all were the new places which have opened while I left. It was just so exciting to physically 'be' in those places. But at the same time, I felt I am a stranger in the city yet Seoul is still familiar. I unconsciously sensed some veiled distance between the city and myself. It was like getting left behind, something I have to chase. I consciously tried to assimilate into the city meanwhile I doubted myself what is this for. Until the end of the holiday, there were still the places left that I want to go(I felt I should go), but couldn't accomplish.

After I came back to Rotterdam, I realized that the distance arising anxiety is not from the time gap but from the mutual relation between the city and humans; the relation on the city, as a self-developed entity marginalizes humans, and humans who want to be assimilated to the city. Now I'm recollecting the memories in the experiences what I did and felt in Seoul. The one-month homecoming holiday in Seoul drives me to think about the city as the place and humans who desire to belong in the city physically and systemically. The metropolis city that once developed and constitute by humans has become a self-evolving mutant. Based on the analysis of the case study of Seoul, the thesis will attempt to question how humans can react in this inevitable condition and set their position to keep their agency.

Seoul, Capital

The city of Seoul as known is the metropolis that has been through the fastest growth in the world. It has been the capital city for a long time(around 600 years) except in the Korean war(1950-1953), when the city was occupied by the Communist Chinese army. After the war, the city has been modernized during over 70 years. As the transportation infrastructure had not settled in the country, centralized investment and development were inevitable for efficient execution. As a result, Seoul has taken the role of the concentrated place including administration, industrialization, education and culture. However, most of the essential facilities were in the Gangbuk area (Northern Seoul), which is the geographical center of Seoul but also historical has taken a role of 'center', so the government decided to move some of them to Gangnam area (Southern Seoul) in the 1980s. With the development policies of Gangnam, the area has become the 'new downtown' as the 'new center'. It was an inevitable consequence of a high rise in real estate and the tenants in the commercial district were replaced continuously. This process led merchants to move to the other street naturally to set the new but alternative Gangnam area street. Plenty of streets became popular but rapidly lost their value simultaneously because of the price rise from the 2000s to now. In 2020, the Seoulites are still looking for replaceable 'center' meanwhile the streets are being gentrified spontaneously. To desire to set up an alternative 'center' makes the city decentral. Multiple centers delegitimize the centrality of the supposed center. Therefore, there is the center everywhere but nowhere.

Center

The population of the city has been heavily dense since Seoul has centrally developed. According to statistics, “the population that lives in the Seoul Capital Area (which includes Seoul, Gyeonggi Province and Incheon) has exceeded 50% of the country’s total population in 2020. The concentration of wealth, power, and people in the capital, a phenomenon that has been in place since the country’s industrialization, has now reached an extreme.” (Kim, 2020) There is no doubt that Seoul is the center of Korea not only geographically but also functionally. However, since more than half of the population lives in the Seoul Capital Area, there is even the sarcastic phrase ‘Republic of Seoul’ rather than ‘Republic of Korea’; which mimics the state of inordinate concentration of fundamental elements in the nation such as politics, economy, society, culture, etc. Seoul lost its meaning of the ‘center’ as it represents the ‘whole’.

On the other hand, there is one more speculative reason for the overpopulated situation that was intensified, which is due to a specific sense of ‘collectivism’ in Korean culture. Collectivism, is the sense of strong eagerness to belong in the majority and the anxiety of exclusion. This came from the fact that Korea is ‘a homogeneous country’. It was like ‘compatriot identity’ to Koreans before, but during modernization, it has become a sense of ‘belonging’ itself. Especially through the Japanese colonial era(1910-1945) and the Korean war(1950-1953), the concept of ‘one nation’ for the people was like a learned obsession, and the plausible motivation to establish and develop a Modern nation; Republic of Korea. For these reasons, as Seoul represents Korea, living in the center is indispensable. However, the paradoxical dialectic process shows that lust to be in the center makes the center not central anymore. Since the center is overpopulated, and the center performs the integral functions of the nation, the periphery disappears, and the center becomes not a part but the entirety. That is to say, Seoulites, who wanted to belong to the center, no more can be the representation of the ‘center’.

Metropolis, Capitalism

“At this point it is technology that marches alone, it is technology’s automatic writing that marches without a subject. This is what happens in the virtual: there is no longer a subject, it is calculation that works alone, a number, logical-mathematic synthesis, the self-production of a system rotating on itself in a tautological way.” (Calvino, 1988)

This essay regards the metropolis as a tremendous but dense platform for a range of phenomena that contains social, economic and cultural modality related to human behavior. The metropolis which was constructed within industrialization under capitalism is the means and consequence of economic growth. The rapid development and high growth naturally induced rampant consumption from the citizen. “Aggregate supply creates its own aggregate demand.” as stated by the economist Jean Baptiste Say (1803), explaining the initial mechanism of the metropolis that the dense population(demand) is a result of aggressive construction(supply). However, in the metropolis, as consumption from humans arose, the city grew again as a resulting figuration of ‘desire’. Economist Joseph Schumpeter suggests the idea of “Creative Destruction” which is “the process of industrial mutation that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one” in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. “Creative Destruction”, he declares, “is the essential fact about capitalism. It is what capitalism consists in and what every capitalist concern has got to live in”. (1942) In order to these two theories, construction of urban components (infrastructure, markets, culture, etc.) creates the values (population, real estate, wealth), but to construct the bigger value, the constructed components had to be demolished to recreate. As a result, the city developed by human desire in the aim of ‘growth’ (not only economic but also social and cultural) has become the place where can be developed by itself under the mechanism in Capitalism. As such, the decentralization of the center is the inevitable consequence that arises from this urban mechanism.

Landscape, Representation

“The detachment between the two terms ‘city’ and ‘landscape’ that tradition has considered inseparable as if reality were inseparable from the representation of reality. But the city is difficult to represent, while the landscape becomes an “additional figure” that takes on the role of revealing the city in situations where it is possible to “see it”. (Maciocco, 2008)

The idea of “landscape” in this essay is a tool to explore and analyze the city, specifically rely on how Giovanni Maciocco defined the term “landscape”. The precondition of his definition in terms of the city and landscape is the distinction between reality and its representation. Rather than the classic concept of landscape as “environmental image”, he addresses the landscape as “projectual figure”(Maciocco, 2008). This detachment drives the landscape to be understood as an independent object, even if it is inherently connected to the city; the landscape becomes subject to being perceived. As such, the landscape of the city is not the visual form, but the imagery of interpretation. “Understood in this sense, the landscape is the place of retrieval of ethos, of everything that was not in the centre, not in polis; the deep matrix of the primary elements of inhabiting, of the signs of nature and history that remain in the process of human settlement.” (Maciocco, 2008) That is to say, rather than humans in the city, humans in the landscape of the city are more explicit to interpret. As the landscape discloses the meaning from surfaces, analyzation of the human behavior in those meanings could disclose the fundamental interrelationship between the city and humans. Especially this essay regards landscape as the result of the reflection of urban mechanisms in the economy. To explain the city as the self-generated entity –which is revealed by the landscape of Seoul was constructed under the Capitalism– and how humans are manipulated within it, I will look at the sections of landscape, through different scales; from city scale to the town, the street, the store, and interior. In this specific procedure of downscaling, the essay will investigate the different aspects of the city’s mechanisms and how humans react to it.

The Town

I went to Gangnam station street after almost 3 weeks after I came to Seoul. Actually, it’s better to say ‘passed’ Gangnam station street. Because I was in a taxi. That area is the street that used to be avoided to drive normally due to serious traffic jams. But also, there is no reason to walk there as well. I was so busy to go around the city, but never went to Gangnam station street as there was no need to go. But that day was morning in the weekend, so the driver willingly drove and passed the street. But I rarely remember the landscape of street except for the huge billboard of Kyobo book store -presents the good passages from Korean poetry- which I always pay attention to. In the meantime, I tried to look for the changes of the retail store. Some of them have been replaced, some of not, but it didn’t matter. The only thing that matters is the fact that I’ve just been there somehow and it relieves me some anxiety in my mind that will arise if I don’t go there. It satisfied me to ‘be’ there even though I didn’t do anything there. At that moment, the street I passed is the Gangnam station street that I perceived and drew from the past, although in 2020. The street has changed definitely. But the street is always changing so the street that I saw has not changed for me. – 11.01.2020

Seoul had an aspiration for modernization and has achieved massive economic growth with the construction industry regarding the infrastructure and housing estate, ever since the government had set up a 5-year economic development plan in the 1960s. One of the main policies was the relocation of major facilities such as public transportation(Express Bus Terminal) and education(prestigious

schools) from Gangbuk(Northern Seoul) to Gangnam(Southern Seoul) to decrease the dense population in the central Seoul which is Gangbuk in the 1970s. The development was focused on concentrated development in the Gangnam area to decentralize the Gangbuk area. As a result of a huge movement of population to Gangnam, the merchant who owned the land of Gangnam area got super-rich and Gangnam became the land of opportunity to get wealth from real estate investment. Due to endless price hikes in real estate without depreciation, the price of housing in Gangnam has become highest in Seoul and also residences in Seoul had the highest price increase rate in recent 3 years in the world. (Jung, 2020) The apartments in Gangnam that have the view of Han river are one of the most expensive, as expensive as the ones in Midtown in Manhattan who have a view of the Hudson river. The price hikes of real estate in the Gangnam area were applied not only to the houses but to the commercial places as well. The commercial streets in Gangnam such as Gangnam station street, Garosu-gil, Coex had been through insane price rise.

On the one hand, in Gangnam station street which is the biggest street in Gangnam area, there is the tendency that the major retail brands who run their store for a long time, have started to close the branch. McDonald's that the representative place from 1999 decided to shut down the branch in Gangnam station street in 2018 due to extreme price hikes. (Seok, 2018) The place that has been recognized as the 'representative spot' as it located in the central street has vanished. The citizens of Seoul remember and draw the fundamental places in that street such as Gangnam station, McDonald's(or CGV which is the biggest cinema brand that shares the same building with McDonald's), Paris baguette(the biggest bakery in Korea), Kyobo bookstore(the biggest bookstore brand in Korea), etc. These represented the sense of the location as well as being symbolic places beyond their own functions. But two of them –the stores that needed to pay rent— are gone now. Gangnam station cannot be disappeared because it's literally the 'station' and Kyobo bookstore is located in their building owned by the affiliate which doesn't have a rent problem. Although, it was not shocking, nevertheless, it was a big issue. Numerous stores have left the street every year because of the drastic increase in rent though the rent was already high enough. The location is highly symbolic so they just wanted to keep their brand name but couldn't survive. This street is the place where new stores, always open and close after a few years. Although the major brands couldn't remain for long, the brand that has larger capital will replace and take over there.

Discontinuity in Replacement

Gangnam station street, once farmland became a place of the market economy based on capitalism, and left the farming history of land behind under the duty of modernization. In the intense price rise in the commercial street, replacement of tenant was unavoidable so even the brand who runs their branch in the street for the symbolic reason—exposure for marketing—couldn't afford to keep it; like the case of McDonald's who had to close their representative branch due to rental growth. The place has raised the price continuously replacing the component(tenant) in the demand of the market economy. It means, the façade of the buildings has changed by the replacement; thus, it couldn't persist their figure. To the city itself, this replacement made the 'landscape' of Gangnam station street discontinuous.

However, if the replacement is repeated, it means discontinuity is repeated as well, so that place would be seen as continuous, again. 'Constant discontinuity' itself has become the landscape. In this process, the place has fulfilled the desire of the consumption of people but also has excluded people through the evolution for price value to be the place for the capital. Relph(1976) indicates that "People are confronted and increasingly confused by landscapes that lack clear centers and boundaries and which are constantly changing identity." The replacement of place is not for fulfilling the needs of humans, but for the ones of the mechanism. Such shifts –from restaurant to restaurant, from café to café, from retail store to retail store– are new supplies for new demands. The constant replacement is for the economic mechanism of the city, and nonchalantly disregards humans. As such, humans might be the integral components of the city's mechanism, and not the autonomous actors.

Absurd landscape

“Our distorted surroundings by distorting us have robbed us of the power to make our experiences coherent.” (Kepes, 1956)

“Absurd landscape”, Relph(1976) addresses, is that the place is regarded to apart from humans and irrelevant to humans. “It involves the sense that nothing is really clear or comprehensible, that events are beyond control and men are trapped in a web of anonymously directed and largely meaningless forces.” (Relph, 1976) Like the impotent feeling, as we encounter the place out of control, such as gigantic mountain or endless skyscraper. Denseness and strangeness of the urban landscape make humans feel the street absurd. Gangnam station street which excludes humans and replaces their components continuously makes humans experience the place irrelevant and detach from them far away.

However, what makes humans sense the street absurd is not the replacement itself but continuous replacement. Temporal discontinuity is just the moment of transition but the repetition of discontinuity makes the distance from the humans who experience the place. If that distance is retained, it becomes strangeness, absurdity. As a result, the interiority in the absurd landscape that humans see in the street reflects the continuous repetition of discontinuity in the urban mechanism of Capitalism rather than the discontinuity itself. And absurdity is the sense of powerlessness as spectator, once was autonomous agent, lost their authority of control in the system.

The Street

Visiting the Seongsu-dong area where is the trendiest street nowadays was almost a ‘must-do’ mission for me on the holiday. Because that street has a lot of the latest popular places such as café or multi-cultural spaces, and all the young people go there. Most of the locations from the uploads that I’ve seen on social media from my friends were in Seongsu-dong. I went there on some weekend of January avoiding the period of the year-end. A friend accompanied me already have been the famous places in there but went there only for me. We parked the car at some parking lot in the company building, then went to the Blue Bottle passed by the silent alley where the small manufactures closed at the weekend. When we were reaching our destination, the street was gradually crowded. There were so many people stand in a line to go inside, yet the Blue Bottle has opened last year. It was too long to wait so I just scanned inside through the window. Afterward, we went and looked over the other places, such as Café Onion, Café Bot, Amore Seongsu and Seongsu Yeonbang that the most popular and newest places in that area. It took two hours to visit 5 places. My friend made the joke to me how satisfied I am with the tour in Seongsu-dong. I said I feel relief and satisfaction even though I didn’t have any single drink in any of the places. I ‘went’ and ‘saw’ there. Besides, now I have some photos of there that possibly will be uploaded on my Instagram in the future. – 04.01.2020

Gentrification in Seoul has occurred in the commercial area, not a residential area; especially not in the downtown scale but small streets. Koreans who had been through the period of new town redevelopment until the 2000s didn’t regard it as gentrification. “The specific period is after the 2000s when the artist and the people in the culture industry who settled in the streets where were not popular and cheap in Seoul for their living or working has started to suffer from not only the price of rent but in the various problems regarding the real estate.” (Institute for East Asian Studies at Sungkonghoe University, 2016)

The most noticeable aspect of the gentrification of Seoul was in commercial districts with cultural attention as described. Hongdae street (Hongik University Street) is the street that was experienced this process first. In the 1950s, Hongik university established the art department after moving to the current location, which was acknowledged as the renowned art institute right after. Then huge housing was constructed from the government in the 60s and 70s, while the number of art studios, galleries and art academies in the street were increased. Since then the area has been the place where people in art and culture industries –such as design, music, film, publishing, fashion– moved to this area in the 1990s. After that, the number of visitors to Hongdae street increased rapidly as the internet advanced to the public in the early 2000s. Young people hung out in the street where contains things to ‘see’ and ‘enjoy’. But as the streets became the most popular place in Seoul, rent of stores obviously rose drastically and the places have their own identity had to move out while the heavy influx of capital occupied each of it. In the end, the attractive atmosphere of complex culture has spread to the environs of Hongdae street and other areas in the late 2000s.

This kind of process happened from Hongdae to Apgujung, Garosu-gil, Itawon, Gyeongridan-gil, Haebangchon, Seochon, Ikseon-dong, Eulji-ro, Seongsu-dong and others from the 2000s till nowadays in a different way, but similar in some ways. There was a slight difference of transformation in these streets based on the locational and historical background but the process and the consequences are the same.

Recently, one of the most popular streets in Seoul is Seongsu-dong. The specific feature of the street is that small but long-standing manufacturer still keeps their position and works there, which is extremely rare in Seoul. Seongsu-dong is renowned for its factories for leather, fabric and shoes. The area is used as the places for labor for the masters who in the ages of sixties and seventies by now. Seongsu-dong, which is located in the middle of Gangbuk and Gangnam, has become a kind of central area because of the urbanization of Gangnam. This caused the movement of residents who work in the Gangnam area and also the movement of major factories to suburban areas due to price. Empty places used for the factory were occupied by people such as artists who preferred a large place at affordable prices. The outstanding feature of this kind of space is different from that of Hongdae because the interior has a trace of history. The physical condition stayed the same while the function has changed. As such, the places get distinctions as ‘image’. The architectural elements that remained for manufacture became the interior decoration. The factory which was a rice mill for 40 years has become a gallery and cafe (Co:lumn) in 2012, and the printing factory has become a lighting gallery and café (Zagmachi) in 2014. (Shin, 2018) Similar kinds of small stores and cultural spaces were opened rapidly afterward, then the first branch of Blue Bottle Coffee –the American café brand– opened in 2019. People stood in line for a few hours to enter the place. The street has become the most popular place in Seoul along with Blue Bottle. Not surprisingly, in 2019, the highest rate of increase in real estate was recorded in Seongsu-dong.

Authenticity as image

When the city has reached a steady status in infrastructural development as well as the economic level, people started to pay attention to the places for the entertainment or culture to spend their spare time. However, due to the price growth of real estate, it was unavoidable that humans and companies seek for the replaceable place to settle. These alternatives were the outcome of the desire for the replacement of ‘Gangnam station street’ (commercial area) at a lower price. But as the alternative street became popular, it raises the price again so the mass capital will dominate the street as well.

“...especially in global cities like New York, cultural districts, ethnic tourist zones, and artist’ lofts presented a clean image of diversity for mass consumption. By the 1990s the commercial success and global media prominence of some of New York’s neighborhoods, notably SoHo and Times Square, seemed to justify the rhetorical promise of their new beginnings.” (Zukin, 2010)

The process of gentrification of Manhattan that Zukin(2010) describes is shown similar to that of Seoul in the different eras, from the 2000s to 2020s. What she indicates is “relentless bulldozer of homogenization” (Zukin, 2010) of the street, to explain the implosion of the historical streets. That is to say, the replacement, that finding the ‘alternative’ street, displaces the original history of the streets. The face of the street has disappeared which contains the people who rooted in these neighborhoods.

However, as the process of replacement is the fundamental state in Metropolis, this essay focuses on the consumption of the ‘image’ of the city rather than the authenticity of the street itself. “Recently, authenticity has taken on a different meaning that has little to do with origin and a lot to do with “style”. The concept has migrated from a quality of people to a quality of things, and most recently to a quality of experiences.” (Zukin, 2010) The experience, especially the behavior of ‘go’ and ‘see’ is intensely related to ‘appearance’. What humans go and see is not the authenticity of places, but the outcome of the artful system covered with the ‘commercialized authenticity’. Or the indifferent behavior of humans itself might be manipulated by the system which already part of it. Powerless humans who lost the agency in this mechanism are only wandering in the vicious economic cycle.

Inauthentic attitudes

“Preformed in the figure of the flaneur is that of the detective. The flaneur required a social legitimation of his habitus. It suited him very well to see his indolence presented as a plausible front, behind which, in reality, hides the riveted attention of an observer who will not let the unsuspecting malefactor out of his sight. [M13a,2]” (Benjamin, 1982)

There is definite influence affected by specific desire which wants to follow the mass, ‘trend’. Especially for Korean, it’s more intense because of the concept of ‘collectivism’ as argued before. To be specific, the inherent sense of belonging, which is essential in collectivism, is related to the satisfaction by belonging to the majority. This is like the sense that being certified as a Seoulite only if go to the place where is popular to Seoulite. As such, the sense of belonging is not practical but superficial imagery. This also can be explained as the state of self-observer who monitors his own existence to be legitimated, like the figure of the flaneur that Benjamin introduces. In this sense, the location of presence is the means of certification. Hence, there is only the behavior of ‘being located’, but not ‘experienced’. It relates to the absurdity of the place which is constantly replaced. Authenticity as the image rewards the absurdity. As humans locating and assimilating themselves into this landscape of image, the failure of experience is concealed. It also can be described from the attitudes of the tourist which is the act and the means of tourism is more important than the places visited. “These inauthentic attitudes to place maybe unselfconscious, stemming from an uncritical acceptance of mass values.” (Relph, 1976) The inauthentic attitude from humans to the places of authentic imagery proves that humans are not only powerless but also catalyst who intensify this mechanism.

The Store

Hannam-dong for me is the comfortable place because the company that I worked for few years was located in that area. Just few days after I arrived in Seoul, I went there to meet ex-colleague who still work in the company. It was bit earlier than appointed time, so I decided to walk the street to look around and reminisce myself. I went out from metro station and walked then there was new Starbucks in the building that constructed for a long time. I heard the large scale of Starbucks has been opened in this area. I passed the Starbucks and then went ahead to small alley which I walked a lot. But I couldn't find the small stores like café, restaurant and retails existed before. Most of the places regarded as landmarks of the street such as a café introduced in every magazine and Instagram in that time, a bakery that was operated by the one who was business partner with me, a pub always had a long line due to young and hype atmosphere were closed and replaced to the others with nice interior somehow. Before, I could count the stores that I haven't been, but now I can count the stores that is left. Then it was time for appointment. I asked to my colleague where is the most popular place to go nowadays, and he replied me it's all similar so let's go to Starbucks. And I agreed without question. I wanted to feel like home, but there wasn't place for that. Starbucks was rather comfortable to me. - 17.12.2020

As street has gentrified, the tenants who made the place vivid in the street have to leave due to the rent increase, then another tenant with more capital who can afford it would replace them. In the case of Korea, the places have filled with the shops which are operated by the franchise. This kind of business was implemented for the first time in the late 1970s and was thrived in the 1990s as the restaurant and dining culture in Korea had developed with the improvement of the level of income. Especially the period after the IMF (International Monetary Fund) crisis in 1998 was the moment when the franchise business has become an attractive investment. As the instability of employment – the increase of early retirees due to job-cut for restructuring– was getting serious with the unstable economy, the attention shifted to the chain stores like the franchise, for whom it is relatively easy to establish their own business with the little capital. (Park, 1999) The people who realized the precarious status of being a salaryman in the company dreamed about their stable future guaranteed by the self-employed stores.

The families of Kitaek and Geunse in the movie Parasite(2019) is the example representing the people who became poor because of serial failure in the franchise business. The specific brand made these characters went broke is “Taiwanese Castella”. For Korean audiences, it directly could be understood why this movie chose that brand, is because this is the representative case of the fastest failure in the shortest period of franchise business in Korea. In 2017, the brand became popular immediately but then suddenly disappeared after a few months. This was because of the intensive competition in the similar(copy) brands, and the boycott of the product as misreported on the TV show; the exaggerated information about its harmful effect on health. As such, 150 of franchise operators who invested their money had to shut down the store with the debt. Even though this brand had the specific cause accelerating the failure, the whole procedure of appearance and disappearance of the franchise in Korea –to be popular, to be consumed and to extinct– does not that much take a long time at all. The period that pioneer franchise brand maintains their prime time is 6 months average. (Oh, 2017) Then a year later, a lot of similar (in fact almost the same) stores are opened aggressively. But these kinds of stores are actually launching their business at the end of the trend, unfortunately.

The place where these stores are located is the district —that will be gentrified, young people looked for it, the price is not that high yet— will be standardized because of the franchise stores. The sociologist John Hannigan explained this phenomenon as the term “riskless risk”. (1998) The street pretends to give to the people the ‘opportunity’ with the various attractive stores which will be disappeared in the close future. However, this ‘opportunity’ in fact is not ‘opportunity’ but a ‘trap’ as this street will be filled with predictable places which are franchise stores. (Hannigan, 1998) The

predictable place that is standardized, uniformed makes the street fail as the street would lose its characteristic atmosphere. Then the failure of the street makes the place failed again. Moreover, it is also the failure of the humans, the consequence of 'being entrapped', behind all these failures.

Standardized interior

“Such uniformities contradict our expectations about the distinctiveness of separate places, and as tourists or migrants we may often find ourselves looking for the familiar rather than the unusual.” (Relph, 1976)

Gentrification is not just the one-time event that appears and disappears, but is the constant geographic procedure of the spread and mutation. Humans who had to move themselves due to gentrification are settled in different places such as vicinity or whole new districts. However, it might be just a matter of time before these new places are gentrified again. Even though the repetition transforms the landscape of the places from here to there, the consequences of figuration are the same. The diverse stores, that were authentically contextualized to a region fill the street, were replaced and standardized as the street was becoming popular. This standardization is completed especially by the stores from a global company, including not just visual form such as a unified sign, logo and interior but also the content of the business for instance merchandises or even operating guidelines. The standardization eliminates the authenticity of place and appeals to familiarity. “Sameness provides continuity in our experiences of different settings—a continuity that is extremely important because it compensates for the experiential and identity changes we undergo in new environments.”(Relph, 1976) Gradual standardization of protean landscape might be the visual compensation to humans for the adaptation to the rapid change of the place. It is the visual factor that brings the absurd landscape in the repetitive replacement of place seems continuous instead of discontinuous. Such replacements, from the café to café, from the restaurant to restaurant in the standardized interior, seem interior changed, but the same. The familiarity of these stores is easily accepted to humans. Humans who feel insecure in the absurd exterior, feel secure in the interior. Therefore, the standardized interiority of the store in the absurd landscape is the clever deception of the urban mechanism to reassure humans who sense powerlessness arose from that absurdity.

Displacement in Replacement

We live in “The bureaucratic society of consumer manipulation” as Henri Lefebvre(1998) explained, the society of consumption to consume. In this society, humans are not just consumables as a performer of consumption. As the investor for supply to consume, consuming humans in a way feeds the urban mechanism. In this process, there is not only the displacement of gentrifiers who lost their place and was expelled from the street through gentrification but also that of the people who failed in the system of the franchise. To be specific, the franchiser provides the ‘systemized standard’ to the franchisee such as sale, management, marketing, interior and the others. And people, who are amateurish and inexperienced to the individual business, decide to invest their life savings for that to reduce the risk of failure. However, there is a constant investment for constant replacement. The urban mechanism—which should be replaced constantly despite the standardization—easily forget this investment(capital) and look for another investment(capital). What was ‘Creatively destructed’ for displacement is not only the inhabitant who failed and left from their street. There is the displacement of small capital (which for someone, is their entire wealth) in the process of replacement. The city deprived the agency of humans, switched the humans to the component as consumables then consumed for the mechanism. The constant displacement in replacement takes human sacrifice.

Epilogue; Conclusion

All these things –the motive of this research, the alienation impression from the hometown of Seoul– were done because I was apart from the City of Seoul. Through sections of the landscape as the objectified image, I could find and analyze the represented figuration of the city in the landscape and that of humans including myself. Besides, this demonstrates what the city of Seoul is urgently facing, such as centralization and decentralization, replacement and displacement from gentrification.

Meanwhile, I realized why I intuitively chose the city of Rotterdam to stay. I might feel the familiarity –modernized landscape with the aggressive development behind the history of places and standardized places which can be seen in the protean metropolis– in Rotterdam rather than the other European cities. I’m in the generation, who were born and grown in the period of rapid development for the replacement, that barely experienced the authenticity of the place. The European cities where keeps their trace of a century at least are the beautiful but intimidating place for the people like me who haven’t had a chance to be rooted in the place.

At the end of the journey of research, I’m back in Seoul again. I’m afraid but curious about how Seoul has changed in the few months of my short absence. “Changes in form and fashion, our own mobility, and shifts in experience man that we frequently confront landscapes we have not learned to recognize or cannot understand. Obscurity, uniformity, and proteanism in landscapes are expressions of new processes and values in society.” (Relph, 1976) The mutational figuration of the city itself is the placeness of the city. The city is transforming from moment to moment, even now. And these changes manipulate, marginalize and sacrifice the humans secretly to the city evolved. Humans are not the agent of the city anymore. The city mechanism is the agent of human behavior. However, there is still a responsibility to humans to aware of the realization of what this absurd landscape of the city represents, even if the intrinsic mechanism is hardly perceivable. And what we have to struggle with this alienation from the place is the mission in order to define and prove the human role within it.

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