

THE DIPLOMAT

Read The Diplomat, Know the Asia-Pacific

Growing Pains

EAST ASIA | SOCIETY | SOUTH KOREA November 27, 2009 *By Ben Hancock*



The office building had been slated for demolition, but not like this. A column of flames ripped through its fourth and fifth floors, feeding on paint thinner spilled from Molotov cocktails. The makeshift watchtower built on the roof was consumed. And inside, a handful of protesters were locked in a final stand against police and the destruction of the surrounding neighbourhood.

Only 16 minutes passed between the time the second wave of commandos stormed the rooftop in those cold dawn hours of January 20 — lifted in a shipping container by a crane — and the time the building exploded. But what happened in those moments led to the deaths of six people and dramatically changed the narrative of Seoul's redevelopment struggles.

Ten months later, the tile and concrete skeleton of the building in Yongsan Ward is still standing. When I arrive, it is sunny and brisk, and a police bus is parked out front next to a huddle of about 20 policemen; all fresh faces, young conscripts serving their mandatory two years as riot guards instead of soldiers.

Around them, banners hang from condemned buildings and decry the actions of the government and the police that January day: 'Lee Myung-bak regime: apologize and resolve the Yongsan Tragedy!' and 'Even if you try to hide the truth, it will come out!' A fence that surrounds the burned building has been spray-painted in a rainbow of colours with stencils of the five dead protesters' faces. (The other victim was a police officer.)

The site may be the most recent and visible scar from South Korea's growing pains, but it is by no means the only one — nor will it likely be the last. According to an evictee group, there are more than 400 development battles taking place around the country. In the capital, development is swift and unsentimental. I once went to grab lunch at a corner diner I had been to just days before only to find the entire block had been levelled.

And the pace seems to be accelerating. At the end of October, Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon unveiled his plan to transform this gritty, tangled and blindingly neon metropolis into 'a city of design and culture.' His vision to revive the Han River area in a kind of urban 'renaissance' and grow a green corridor straight down the heart of the city would entail massive and likely painful changes to its landscape.

South Korea has been reinventing itself since reconstruction first began in the wake of the Korean War. Under the authoritarian rule of Park Chung-hee in the 1960s and 70s, modernization was placed high above preservation; things were simply destroyed and then built anew.

Because of this, much has been lost in terms of the nation's and the capital's character. Oh says he hopes to preserve the city's history while creating a modern and attractive hub. But critics say he is more focused on Seoul's image than its people.

As part of his 'renaissance' vision, Oh wants to pull down many of the apartments currently standing along the Han River — a number of which are over 30 years old — and make way for taller, sleeker residential buildings surrounded by parks. The jewel of this endeavour is the Yongsan International Business District, also called Dreamhub 21, which promises to define Seoul's nondescript skyline and draw tourism and investment when it is completed in 2016.

The project encompasses a central-city plot of 566,800 square metres — about the size of 30 Sydney Opera Houses — and is being designed by American star architect Daniel Libeskind, the hand behind the rebuilding of the New York World Trade Center site. But while the Memory Foundations will fill what is a painful void for Manhattanites, Dreamhub will dislocate thousands of lives — temporarily for some residents, but likely forever for a great many more.

West Ichon: The Next Battleground?

From the site of the 'Yongsan Tragedy,' one need only walk about two kilometres — past the withering red light district, shining Jaguar dealership and dubious 'LA Burgers' stand — to arrive at West Ichon. The neighbourhood is located in the same ward, sandwiched between the Korea Railroad train yard and the Han River, and now finds itself sitting in Dreamhub's footprint.

On my first walk around the area it is chilly and just after nightfall. The neighbourhood is mostly low concrete residential blocks, and their drab colours are obscured by orange streetlights and the shadows they cast. High above and closest to the river stand a row of 20-story giants — the Daelim and Sungwon apartments.

Painted in giant red and black letters down the side of one of these towers is: 'We will fight to the death against resident displacement by despotic developers!' It's an ominous choice of words considering January's events. Similar sentiments are conveyed by placards fixed to the open stairwell and faded, wind-torn banners that hang from a number of odd windows.

Just across the road, on a lower building, a very different message hangs: 'Congratulations to the developers! Please push forward with your work quickly and deliver our just compensation.' Below, it is signed, 'The assenting residents.'

The two are indicative of a clash not only between residents and developers or city planners, but between neighbours themselves, and hint at the complicated underside of the Dreamhub project.

Because Yongsan Development Co., the firm carrying out the project, is a quasi-public entity, it is able to exercise what is known as 'compulsory acquisition.' This means it can seize private property with appropriate compensation but without consent.

Even so, because the development is so large, it would be hard for the developer to move ahead if the residents were opposed. As such, since the project was announced in August 2007, the people of West Ichon have divided into dongeuija — assenters — and bandaeja — dissenters. (Yongsan Development is offering incentives to those who sign agreement papers.)

It is all but finalised that most of the neighbourhood will be demolished and redeveloped. But the project has become snagged on three residential complexes: the Daelim and Sungwon apartments, and the Dongwon apartments. These are relatively new buildings (Dongwon was built in 2005) and on a clear day many of their units have stunning views of the Han River and Mount Gwanak to the far south.

Depending on who you talk to, the number of assenting residents from these apartments has either already surpassed 50 percent or falls short. This is an important distinction, because in August, Mayor Oh said that if the majority are opposed the three complexes will be left standing as Dreamhub goes up around them.

When I duck into the office of the North Han River Apartments Emergency Action Committee, for a moment there are blank looks — I am a bearded white man speaking Korean, and I have no appointment. But when it's clear I'm from the press the mood suddenly warms. A cup of instant coffee finds its way into my hand; I settle into a chair, start my recorder and the three men sitting there begin to answer my questions enthusiastically, sometimes interrupting each other.

'The protection of private property, the freedom to move and live where one wants — these are fundamental citizen rights,' says Park Han-geun, a 69-year-old retiree who lives in the Sungwon apartments and represents its dissenting residents.

"You can't move there. You can't live in Seoul." You can't just order these kinds of things in a democratic society,' Park says. 'But what's happening in West Ichon is a case where development was already a foregone conclusion.'

He may well have good reason to believe so. When I talk later with a representative from Yongsan Development, he says: 'Our position is that we have to go forward with comprehensive development [as opposed to partial].' He adds that the city also seems to have recently shifted away from the idea of leaving the three complexes out of the plan.

Kim Dong-hwan, the emergency committee's director, says that residents are opposed to the project for a number of reasons. Some simply like where they live; most doubt that compensation will be adequate despite assurances from the developer and the city. They likely won't know what they're being offered for certain until next year.

Sungwon's emergency committee recently put an ad in South Korea's most-read newspaper, the Chosun Ilbo, urging Oh to keep his promise of leaving the apartments untouched.

When I ask what might happen if that promise is not kept, Sung Ji-hoon — also a pensioner in his 70s and a Sungwon resident — leans forward out of his chair and says darkly: 'I would predict another tragedy like what happened in Yongsan.'

Top-down

Mistrust of government has deep historical roots in South Korea, according to Nah Yoonkyung, a professor of culture and gender studies at Seoul's Yonsei University. 'The government decision-making process has never been democratic. They just decide,' she says. 'It's kind of common [knowledge] that the government has broken all its promises.'

Nah traces this way of thinking back to the Park Chung-hee era. She adds that many South Koreans (herself included) believe the law does not work for the poor — an idea, Nah says, that was highlighted by the aftermath of the Yongsan Tragedy.

On Oct. 28, a Seoul court handed down prison sentences, ranging from two to six years, to seven of the nine surviving protesters from the January clash. The other two were put on probation. The judge convicted them all on a slew of charges including manslaughter, and of starting the deadly blaze.

Their lawyer has maintained their innocence and says the fire could have been ignited by a generator or another appliance. No one denies that the protesters made Molotov cocktails and stockpiled flammable material. But supporters say they were desperate, not suicidal. They blame the police for sending in commandos, which they see as an excessive use of force that worsened an already dangerous situation.

Park Jong-min has more faith in the law and city government, but it wasn't always so. At the beginning, Park — a Daelim resident who has lived in West Ichon since 1998 and ran an interior design business there — was one of the development's fiercest opponents. He and a friend, Kim Mun-seon, burst into a February press conference being given by the mayor, shouting and asking where residents were supposed to go. They had to be dragged out.

But as they campaigned, Park and Kim began to do intense research about the project and related laws and arrived at a different perspective. 'When we talk now about how opposed we were then, it makes us laugh,' Park says.

According to Park, Yongsan Development has promised residents 35 million won (about \$30,000) to cover moving fees, 300 million won for rent or 'key money' deposit and — for homeowners — compensation worth 1.25 times the value of their property. In contrast to the emergency committee, he says the laws protecting residents are strong.

Park Woo Suh, a professor of urban and regional development at Yonsei, says that's mostly true. 'There's a big disparity between the haves and the have-nots. [Homeowners] will get richer,' he says, but renters generally get the short end of the stick.

This is especially true in the case of West Ichon, says Jang Yeong-Hee, a senior research fellow at the Seoul Development Institute. The area has many multi-family homes, she explains, where rent is far cheaper than can be found elsewhere in the city centre.

And whereas in most redevelopment cases 70 percent of families stay in the area and are able to keep their kids in the same school, Jang says, Yongsan Ward is undergoing such massive development that most will have to go to Seoul's outskirts or run-down neighbourhoods. The city is slated to destroy 30,000-40,000 housing units next year, she adds.

I meet Park Jong-Min and his friend Kim in front of Saenamteo Cathedral. Built in 1987, the soaring structure is perhaps the only West Ichon building that will be preserved, and looks more like a Buddhist temple with its pagoda-style roof — save the large cross at its peak and images of Catholic martyrs.

Where the two men are in agreement with the emergency committee is that the lack of discussion between residents, the city and the developers is a problem. When the project was announced, Park says, it came as a total surprise.

Yongsan Development has posted handfuls of fliers and mailings trying to convince residents the project is to their benefit — Park hands me an envelope full of them during our walk through the neighbourhood. But to this day, neither the firm nor the city has held an open discussion with West Ichon's residents to explain those benefits and address their concerns, he says.

Kim, who himself is the president of a small development company, says that in the beginning the silence may in part have been deliberate in order not to tip off property speculators. But Park is more cynical. 'Government workers are lazy,' he says.

Pride and loss

Jin Hee-Seon, director of urban management at the Seoul Metropolitan Government, stresses that the full development of West Ichon is the best option for residents and the city overall. 'If the apartments facing the river are kept, the work will be incomplete, and in the long term residents will suffer because the buildings won't be able to be reconstructed,' she says.

Current West Ichon residents who own their homes will be given the option of moving into in the new development along with cash compensation, according to Jin. As for tenants and shop owners who rent space, she says, how long they have been in the neighbourhood and whether they own other property will determine what kind of options they receive.

'The success or failure of this project depends upon resident cooperation,' she says. 'It would be difficult to proceed if the majority of residents were opposed, so we're going to make further efforts to unite resident opinion so that the development can go ahead.'

For some residents, the idea that their neighbourhood will become a landmark development of international renown

is a source of pride. Lee Jeong-hee, 74, has lived in West Ichon for 35 years. She talks about seeing the mayor's vision for the future of the city in the nearby Seoul Museum of History.

'It looked so good,' she says, 'Like Japan or England. Isn't it time for our country to have great buildings? It's the 13th largest economy in the world ... we worked hard, so our descendants should be able to live in a better place.'

Yet even among assenters there is a feeling that history is being erased.

Cho Myoung-hwan, 40, grew up in West Ichon and lives in a building that's about as old as he is. 'I'm losing all my memories,' says Cho, 'that's the hardest thing about it.'

In spite of his nostalgia, he thinks it will be good to move someplace new. 'I've had things fixed, but the building itself has problems,' he says. 'You don't know when these things are going to fall down.'

<http://thediplomat.com/2009/11/27/growing-pains/>

For inquiries, please contact The Diplomat at info@the-diplomat.com