Identity and Alienation Along the Riverfront
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Urban rivers act as edges, separating and dividing the urban space into distinct and discrete units. As entities unto themselves, however, they also possess edges that demarcate the boundaries at which water transitions into land and the infrastructural project blends back into the urban fabric again. Edges, in addition to their organizational purpose, act also as the sites at which one scene transitions to another, where actions, ideas, and movements begin and end. In differentiating one area from another, they are both necessary to the formation of a spatial identity, while also serving as the substrate upon which interaction can occur across space. Mahbub Rashid cites the devaluation of edges as a cause for the loss of identity or 'a sense of placeness' within the modern city.[1] As cities do away with boundaries, their images become iterative (within themselves and of other cities globally), and the urban form degenerates into something ethereal and amorphous.

The urban edge, however, also possesses its own identity. The urban river is a unique entity whose functions differentiate it from other edges such as fences, streets, or the abstract boundaries of a zoning ordinance. For one, the urban river integrates nature and infrastructure within a single and unified entity. At every turn it is faced with the question of what nature's purpose within the urban environment is. Shall it be consumed, enjoyed, hidden, or controlled? Seoul's Cheonggye stream restoration project, in this sense, can be considered, as an effort to recondition the urban edge in accordance with the paradigms of a globalized urbanism.

In 2003, construction began to daylight Cheonggyecheon,[2] a 3 mile (5.8 km) long urban stream running through the heart of Seoul which had previously been filled with cement and covered by an elevated expressway. By 2005, the project had reached completion, and the space was opened to the public.[3] The stream begins in the west where artificially pumped water from the Han river,[4] which Cheonggyecheon is a tributary of, enters the stream through a miniature waterfall. As the stream flows eastward, it travels under twenty-seven bridges,[5] which, in addition to facilitating cross-traffic, provide entrances to the site. On both sides, the stream flows between a plaza that is submerged below street level and urban ecological corridors that introduce plant and wildlife into the cityscape. The lowering of the streambed and plaza not only differentiates this area from the rest of the city surrounding it; it also serves practically as a form of flood-control.[6]

The restoration has been praised for a number of its accomplishments. The construction process, which took place with extreme efficiency and speed, also managed to produce minimal

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[1] Mahbub Rashid, "Role of the Boundary," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 9, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 42.
[2] Hong Kal, "Flowing Back to the Future," in *Aesthetic Constructions of Korean Nationalism* (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 103.
[3] ibid.
[4] Jaon Busquets, ed. *Deconstruction/construction: The Cheonggyecheon Restoration Project in Seoul* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2011), 37.
[5] ibid., 49.
[6] ibid., 37.

amounts of noise, dust, and pollutants which would disturb the surrounding business district.[7] It has also been commended for creating an urban cooling effect, providing habitat and protection for a wide variety of wildlife, and serving as a central gathering space for both locals and tourists alike.[8] Furthermore, many of the worries circulating in the air prior to construction that Cheonggyecheon would hurt business and increase congestion have been dispelled. In fact, since the restoration, traffic has not worsened, and land values in the surrounding area have risen at a rate close to double that of the rest of Seoul.[9]

Figure 1: Construction of the Cheonggye-ro elevated expressway[10]

Historically, Cheonggye stream has acted as an urban boundary, first, between the Chosun dynasty's ruling class and common class, then later, during the Japanese colonization, between the colonized and colonizers.[11] The project beginning in the late 1950s of covering the stream in cement and the laying of the Cheonggye-ro elevated highway over its path significantly altered the nature of this urban boundary. What was once a socio-spatial boundary serving as a division as well as an interface between the different classes beame an inaccessible zone or no-man's land. It is in this context that the Cheonggyecheon restoration occurs.

The significance of Cheonggyecheon's former identity as the site of an overpass is twofold. First, it marks the starting point from which the urban edge transitions into its current form. Second, this transition in form, if it is considered a step in Seoul's development into a globally competitive and attractive city, may reflect something common in the typologies of global cities. The terms which critics have used to praise the project—eco, sustainable,

[7] ibid., 19.
[8] ibid., 61-2.
[9] ibid., 62-3.
[10] Seoul Metropolitan Government, 서울도시계획 기본계획 수립 관련 사진, photo, April 4 1968, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Cheonggye_Overpass#/media/File:(1967-10-03)%EC%B2%AD%EA%B3%84%EC%B2%9C_%EB%B3%B5%EA%B0%9C%EA%B3%B5%EC%82%AC.JPG.
[11] Kal, "Flowing Back to the Future," 106.

people-friendly, historical, cultural, financially successful, etc.—reveal the ways in which Seoul desires to be perceived. Whereas the previous imagination of 'modernity,' expressed in the highway, seemed only interested in the city's potential for utility and outcomes, at the sake of its own image, the postmodern city, with some degree of self-reflection and awareness of its position in history, has now shifted its concern to identity. When Lee In-keun, the assistant mayor for infrastructure in Seoul claims, "we've basically gone from a car-oriented city to a human-oriented city,"[12] he reveals the notion that cities must be seen as human-oriented if they can succeed in the global arena. Of course, this leaves all the possible meanings of 'human-oriented' up to interpretation.

Cheonggyecheon restoration signals the return of interface to its role along the urban edge. The transition between the city street and infrastructure is an invitation for people to enter the space and socialize with friends or enjoy a picnic lunch—in other words, to step away from the city. In contrast to the highway that occupied the space formerly, the plaza, submerged twenty-four feet below street level,[13] parallels the sidewalks above it, almost as an extension of the public domain. The 'overhead edge' of the highway and the submerged plaza space are both variations on the 'multi-leveled city,',[14] yet their purpose and effect on the cityscape are nearly opposite. The highway raised above the heads of the pedestrian always remains beyond their reach and interrupts the logic of the city-level street. On the other hand, the submerged plaza draws the pedestrian in. Its differentiation from the street is meant to attract, not repel, the eye. Peering over the edge, one's gaze, like water flowing downstream, comes to rest on the river and its scenescape. Once within the plaza, one feels the city's presence receding.

Cheonggyecheon is not only an invitation to the pedestrian to enter and remain in its space. It has also been designed as an edge that is meant to be traveled across. The twenty-seven bridges that span the uncovered stream are complemented by a number of foot-crossings comprised of stepping stones in the stream that simulate an idyllic and pastoral scene within a bustling metropolis. Both the act of occupying a space and traversing it indicate a reconditioning of the edge to accommodate human activity. In both cases, it matters very much how the pedestrian perceives the site. Its appearance has a significant influence on the experience of the site's 'user.' The design of the image has taken on a newfound importance because Seoul is a city increasingly concerned with its identity.

In his essay 'The Generic City,' Rem Koolhaas identifies the Generic City as an outcome of globalization, characterized by a loss of the specificity and historicity associated with an urbanism rooted in vernacular traditions. Koolhaas sees this not as a drawback but a liberation. "The Generic City is the city liberated from the captivity of center, from the straitjacket of identity," he writes.[15] In a global context, urban forms are imported and exported, transmitted and mutated with astonishing speeds and on unprecedented scales. As a result, postmodern globalized cities mimic each other not only in appearance but also in function, with no apparent

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[12] Andrew C. Revkin, "Peeling Back Pavement to Expose Watery Havens," *New York Times*, Jul. 13 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/17/world/asia/17daylight.html.
[13] Busquets, ed. *Deconstruction/Construction*, 50.
[14] ibid.
[15] Rem Koolhaas, "The Generic City," in *Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large,* ed. Jennifer Sigler (New York City: Monacelli Press, 1998), 1249-50.

logic motivating this convergence outside of capitalism. He continues, “the Generic City has been ‘planned,’ not in the usual sense… but as if various echoes, spores, tropes, seeds fell on the ground randomly as in nature, took hold—exploiting the natural fertility of the terrain—and now form an ensemble.”[16] In the Generic City, the edge, as an organizational tool, has no use and thus loses its value. Instead, development takes on a natural or organic appearance. But Koolhaas makes it clear that this is only the appearance of organicism which is ‘planned’ and therefore artificial.

The care with which Cheonggyecheon’s image has been planned and controlled points to the identity which Seoul attempts to manufacture of and for itself. Earlier, it was mentioned that the plaza serves as an extension of the sidewalk above, but it resembles more closely a quasi-public place in which certain actions or behaviors are prohibited. Eating, drinking, singing, and smoking, activities that would all be allowable on the street, are prohibited in the plaza.[17] Just as important an influence on one’s perception and experience of a place as behavior are the images and artifacts that populate that space. The inclusion and exclusion of certain images as well as their positioning within the plaza’s scene are results of deliberate choices and can reveal much about the aspirations of Cheonggyecheon towards a certain identity. In this sense, Cheonggyecheon resembles an open air museum in which certain images are carefully curated and displayed so as to evoke a response from the audience.

Returning to the topic of bridges offers us an opportunity to examine the preservation of two historic bridges, Kwangtong bridge constructed during the 15th century Chosun dynasty and the remnants of the demolished Cheonggye-ro elevated expressway. The rediscovery of the Kwangtong Bridge, which occurred during the excavation that preceded the daylighting of the stream, provided a unique opportunity for the site’s developers to include an authentic piece of history within their project. In fact, the bridge became a contentious point between the government officials, developers, and citizen groups who all had different opinions regarding the accuracy of the bridge’s restoration and its future location.[18] The bridge now serves as a pedestrian crossing as well as a historic artifact and popular attraction.

In many ways, the fate of the expressway runs counter to that of Kwangtong bridge. Previously a symbol of modernity and unrelenting progress, it has now been relegated to a historic artifact, its presence mimicking an ancient ruin emerging from the riverbed. Only two of the pillars supporting the old expressway remain intact near the eastern terminus of the restoration, while a third pillar juts out from the water like a fang, before it is broken off halfway, seemingly beheaded. Removed of the structure they are meant to uphold, the pillars loom over the landscape like ghosts without purpose. The pillar, formerly an object of utility, takes on an aesthetic role in its new life, as it becomes an object for the eye.

Though both of these bridges can be categorized, in the broadest sense, as historic preservationism, their stories reflect two different manners of dealing with the past. Preservation also repurposes its object, in one case turning a ruin into infrastructure and, in the other, turning infrastructure to ruin. The narrative promoted by Cheonggyecheon distances itself from its most recent past in favor of a more distant one. Ironically, in this new reordering of history,

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[16] Koolhaas, “The Generic City,” 1254.
[17] Kal, “Flowing Back to the Future,” 116.
[18] ibid., 110.

modernism becomes a moment that has run its course and remains irrevocably in the past. Meanwhile fragments from the Chosun era are resuscitated and reimagined for the audience's enjoyment. The active use of Kwangtong bridge signifies that the Chosun dynasty has been brought back to life in the present day. The Chosun dynasty functions as the core around which Seoul builds its new identity around. In its attempt to form a historic identity, Seoul has imagined itself as a direct predecessor to the Chosun. On the other hand, the memorialization of the Choenggye-ro is a rite for a deceased entity, never to return. The most recent memories become historic, while the more 'historic' or nostalgic past, like the stream itself, is uncovered and brought into the light.

Kal, in the essay "Flowing Back to the Future," has posited that the tendency of iconography in Cheonggyecheon to depict idyllic scenes from the past stems from a desire to construct a national identity based on collective nostalgia.[19] From another perspective, the project of identity building in Cheonggyecheon represents an opposition to the generic pattern of development. By returning to history, the site aims to distinguish itself from the Generic City, that is "the city without history."[20] The conscious effort on the part of the developers to inject history into the reconstruction is part of a greater desire to generate an urbanism of specificity, if only restricted to one location: the edge. If indeed Cheonggyecheon defies genericism, the urban edge which it occupies and shapes, then, stands out as a discontinuity from the rest of Seoul's modern, faceless urban core. From this perspective, the global city possesses two competing and contradictory desires. The desire for an identity, a face, a brand name is continually [upset] by generic patterns of development, which come, after all, as a consequence of the global city's status as Global City. From the tension generated between these two desires emerges the consciousness of the postmodern city.

However, the distinction between Cheonggyecheon and the generic cityscape may not be irreconcilable. In fact, there are many points of comparison between the Generic City and Cheonggyecheon, suggesting that the restoration project is not an exception to globalizing trends of genericism but rather a different expression of it. The Generic City, Koolhaas writes, "in a perpetual quest for 'character,' grinds successful identities down to meaningless dust."[21] The effort to manufacture an identity proves to be counterproductive because identity arises in an organic manner. But as Koolhaas has stated earlier, even the appearance of organicism in the Generic City comes as a result of planning. Top-down processes, which naturally converge to centralize the means of affecting the urban landscape, limit the possibility for identity to arise naturally through bottom-up processes. The memorialization of Chun Tae-il, a figurehead of the labor movement who protested workers' lack of legal protection in an act of self-immolation, displays how this phenomenon works in reality. Today, his statue stands as an empty symbol in a gentrified landscape of upscale shopping centers and luxurious condos, a landscape which has increasingly distanced itself from the memory of the labor movement.[22] Chun Tae-il, like the Cheonggye-ro, has become petrified in the past. The monuments dedicated to them, removed

[19] ibid.
[20] Koolhaas, "The Generic City," 1250.
[21] ibid., 1248.
[22] Kal, "Flowing Back to the Future," 118.

from the histories which they are meant to represent, float awkwardly, out of place in a foreign landscape.

In the context of a globalized economy, the forces that shape the urban identity may not necessarily even be municipal or national. Evocation of the past acts only as a façade that masks the city's lack of an identity. But even memory becomes genericized. "Instead of specific memories, the associations the Generic City mobilizes are general memories, memories of memories: if not all memories at the same time, then at least an abstract, token memory, a déjà vu that never ends, generic memory."[23] Indeed, what sense of relation, if any, does the modern day Korean citizen feel towards the Chosun dynasty? Who is to say the Cheonggye-ro is not a more apt and authentic representation of Seoul's heritage than the relics on display at the Cheonggyecheon museum? It becomes increasingly clear that the purpose of images and history in the postmodern city is to fuel a culture of consumption. Cheonggyecheon advertises Seoul. But it reveals little of Seoul's identity.

What is the possibility, then, for the postmodern city of forming an authentic identity? Heretofore the globalization of generic forms has been posited as a kind of death to the urban identity. It would be more accurate to say, however, that the Generic City has no fixed identity. If we consider identity to be formed through an urban dialectics of human reflection and interpretation then the Generic City replaces its identity with such rapidity so as to elude comprehension, which has no way of catching up to it. It is impossible to fully grasp a city in the present. Before we can pin it down, it has already exceeded us. Only history offers a fixed point to examine a city in its totality. But the Cheonggyecheon project has discarded the city's most recent and relevant history in favor of a more generic one. Culture, history, identity: these form through an accumulation of memories in time. Despite its architectural and infrastructural successes, the Cheonggyecheon restoration project has largely neglected the temporal. It wants a stable identity in the immediate, but this is a contradictory desire. A stable identity only exists in the past, while a city's identity in the present remains in flux, up to interpretation and reinterpretation. The restoration project, in an act of impatience, has opted instead to import an identity from the past of questionable authenticity into the heart of modern-day Seoul.

If nothing else, then what distinguishes Cheonggyecheon's edge from the surrounding downtown is the pace at which life moves. The spatial edge gives way to a temporal edge where the hustle-bustle of the CBD transitions into an area for contemplation, relaxation, and leisure. Here a couple may linger for hours over lunch and tea, or old friends may meet again to go on a leisurely stroll. There is a greater permanence or delay to the presence of the people visiting Cheonggyecheon, in contrast to the transience of bodies, bicycles, and automobiles that move through the street-level in a state of transit. Pedestrians on the sidewalk shift in and out of each other's presence, another grouping of cars waits before the traffic light. Entering the stream is a break from the rhythm of urban life, and it is important to note that this break is made possible by architecture. The temporal edge depends upon the integrity of the spatial edge between the stream and the street.

Just as a temporal edge depends on a spatial edge, so too does a city's identity depend on the character of its form. But the urban form, alone, does not generate an identity; it only

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[23] Koolhaas, "The Generic City," 1257.

provides the substrate upon which identity develops. It is the historians, scholars, and citizens who weave together strands of a narrative that ultimately forms the face of a city. If anything, Cheonggyecheon demonstrates the necessity of thoughtful architecture in the postmodern global city. However, it is not within the domain of the architect, planner, developer, or city official to craft an identity. They have created the infrastructure. Now, leave it up to the people to build their own identity.

Cheonggyecheon, at its essence, suggests a different way of moving through the city.
Might this be where its identity begins?

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