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Iksun-dong and Gentrification

Essay by Da-hye Youn

As a participant in the Korean government internship program Korea WEST, I've had a chance to live in big cities such as New York and Washington, DC since last summer. It has been a great experience for me. When people ask me which city I prefer, I always say I really love both because each city has different charms and cultures. However, I think one thing they have in common is that they have preserved many of their old buildings and historic sites. I was very surprised when I heard that the famous Flatiron building in New York was built in 1902. And in DC, about 20% of properties have been designated as historic landmarks or districts.¹ In my opinion, these efforts help a city to keep its abundant history and maintain its unique atmosphere, even though there are always a lot of new people coming into the city and leaving.

In Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, there's also a district called *Jong-no Gu* where you can see many historic palaces and modern buildings at the same time. It has been the political, economic, and cultural center of the city for more than 600 years. The whole district is like a living history book. You can easily find many international visitors wearing *Hanbok* (Korean traditional dress) wandering around the palaces and *Insa-dong* area. There is a traditional village called *Buk-Chon*, where hundreds of traditional houses are located. When viewing *Cheong-Gye-Cheon*, the artificial river flowing across downtown Seoul, you can get a hint of the industrialization and modernization history of the city.



Joo-hyeong Han. (2018) Ik-Sun hanok village. Mae-il Economy News.
<https://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?oid=009&aid=0004078681>

¹Payton Chung. (January 2018) *DC has more historic buildings than Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia combined. Why?*
<https://ggwash.org/view/65911/why-dc-has-so-many-historic-buildings>

In Jong-no, there is a small neighborhood called *Ik-Sun Dong* near one of the palaces. It was an old neighborhood where traditional houses had been maintained for a long time. It was designated as a redevelopment area before, but the plan was canceled due to the opposition of the original residents. Over the next few years, young businessmen gathered at this neighborhood to open retro-style cafes, shops, and restaurants, and to renovate those traditional houses. Now it has become one of the most popular tourism spots among young locals and travelers. I've visited Ik-Sun Dong a few times with my friends last year. It seemed like a successful project which reinterpreted Korean traditions well.



Ji-min Seo. (2018) Ik-Sun Dong village overlooking from Jong-no 3-ga. Gong-gam news. <http://www.gokorea.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=60416>



Hong-beom Kim. (2019) Korean youngsters traveling in modern-Korea style clothing in Ik-Sun Dong. Financial News. <http://www.fnnews.com/news/201902281624415838>

However, there are growing concerns about gentrification in this area. As it became trendy and lots of people visited here, the rent was getting higher and it started threatening residents. According to a research center, the lease price of Ik-sun Dong has increased by about 15% in 2015-2016. This is 10

times the average increase in commercial rent areas in Seoul during the same period.² People who were living in the neighborhood were mostly those with few financial resources and who received a living subsidy from the government. More than 30% of original residents are reported to have left because their landlords have increased their rents significantly.³

Gentrification is not a problem that only Seoul has. Washington, DC and New York have been suffering from this issue as well. In DC, the \$2 billion redevelopment project in the Wharf area started in 2007 and resulted in a massive modern complex including hundreds of apartments, condominiums, and hotels with commercial space. It has been attracting lots of upper and middle-income families and millennial generation individuals, displacing low-income residents and small businesses at the same time. It is a historically African American neighborhood. Now the Wharf is being sued over gentrification by residents who worry that they will be forced out of the city as house prices go up.⁴

In New York, residents in some emerging neighborhoods such as Williamsburg and Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant are facing tourism gentrification issues as well. The Bedford-Stuyvesant area is known for beautiful Victorian architecture and African-American heritage with reasonable housing prices. Recently, investors have bought and renovated many of the townhouses and rented them out. The number of tourists and long-term residents has also increased rapidly. It caused the house prices to soar more than 40% from 2010 to 2018.⁵

Tourism can be a powerful tool to make a city flourish. However, when not managed properly, it can unexpectedly influence residents in negative ways especially when they belong to one of the more vulnerable groups in society. If people are driven out in the name of "development" by large amounts of capital and rich investors, there will be no point to tourism, because local people make the culture that tourists want to experience. In this way, gentrification could eventually make a city empty. I hope Ik-sun dong and many small neighborhoods in Korea don't take the same route.

² Sanghyuck Lee. (October 2018) *Commercial Area Analysis – Iksun-dong*.
http://www.sglab.co.kr/bbs/board.php?bo_table=center1&wr_id=106&sfl=wr_subject&stx=%EC%9D%B5%EC%84%A0&sop=and

³ Youjin Choi. (March 2017) *Iksun-dong residents decreased 30% over 3 years due to the poverty porn*.
http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_View/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0002304689

⁴ Jenna Wang. (June 2018) *Residents Sue Washington D.C. For Racist Gentrification Practices*.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jennawang/2018/06/28/residents-sue-washington-d-c-over-1-billion-for-racist-gentrification-practices/#e8f93983e8f0>

⁵ Amy Plitt (August 2018) *These NYC neighborhoods saw the fastest rent growth since 2010*.
<https://ny.curbed.com/2018/8/24/17779036/nyc-gentrification-rent-increases-streeteasy-housing-report>