

### 3. Uncovering its secrets Seoul

*Lost rivers revealed, flyovers turned into parks, old buildings saved – and a soul rediscovered.*

Seoul lost a few key parts of its identity during the 20th century and now the city is looking back in order to find what went missing. The South Korean capital is plagued by a bad pun: “Seoul has no soul”. This wordplay was contrived as the city was rebuilt at breakneck speed in the decades following the Korean War (1950 to 1953). During these boom years, known as the “Miracle on the Han”, Seoul transformed itself from a war-torn backwater into one of Northeast Asia’s most vibrant and wealthy metropolises. The city’s population rose to 10 million, it became home to world-class enterprises and is now an epicentre of pop-culture power.

But it somehow felt empty. Following the war, Seoul “lost its identity” says Seung H-Sang, who heads the firm IROJE and served as the local government’s first city architect from 2014 to 2016. He explains that this “tragedy” occurred when Seoul attempted to emulate western, or rather US, ideals of urban development that focused on growth and expansion (and cars).

Well before Seoul became the capital of cosmetic surgery, it underwent a makeover of its own. Concrete apartment blocks and steel office towers obscured views of Seoul’s surrounding mountains. Many of its streams and creeks, once the lifeblood of the city, were relegated to drainage canals or covered with asphalt. And thanks to the prowess of conglomerates such as Hyundai, cars and elevated highways became signifiers of South Korea’s emergence as a modern nation. According to Seung, it was this inharmonious development that changed the city’s natural

characteristics. To find what was lost during the years of rapid urbanisation and fill that void, Seoul is re-examining its recent history.

In the first two decades of the 21st century, Seoul has not only removed but also remodelled and repurposed artefacts of its industrial era to give residents of this densely populated city some much needed space in which to walk, relax and ride. One of the first relics of Seoul’s gritty past to come down was an overpass that covered the Cheonggyecheon, a stream that once flowed through the ancient city. While no longer fed by natural springs, the 11km waterway now stretches from central Gwanghwamun to the Han River and is flanked by stone walkways.

The rebirth of the stream and its success as a reclaimed semi-natural space inspired the rehabilitation of several other forsaken waterways, including the Seongbuk Cheon and the Dorimcheon. It also led to a rethinking of how traffic flows throughout the city. No matter how aesthetically unpleasant they are, elevated highways were regarded as a means to reduce gridlock. But coupled with an increasing number of dedicated bus lanes and the city’s continuously expanding surface and underground transportation systems, Seoul found that it could do away with some of these eyesores without creating havoc.

The Seoulo 7017, an overpass erected in 1970 to channel cars from one side of Seoul Station’s adjacent railway yard to the other, was spared. Dutch design firm MVRDV led the renovation project that turned this dilapidated structure into a sky garden that features thousands of

plants, fauna and trees. The 1km-long Seoulo 7017 reaches 17 metres at its highest point and, via several off-ramps, connects to the train station, local businesses and Mount Namsan before sloping down into Namdaemun Market.

For Kim Young-joon, who served as Seoul’s second city architect, the restoration of Seoulo 7017 in 2017 signalled a turning point for the capital’s urban planning. “It’s a new symbol that we are living in a different time,” he says. A time that’s greener and less dependent on cars.

Seoul now maintains 115 sq km of public parks and continues to purchase private property or acquire former industrial zones, which are converted into recreational spaces. A notable example is the Gyeongui Line Forest Park, a 6.3km stretch of formerly abandoned train tracks that by 2016 had become a tree-lined path that winds its way through residential neighbourhoods. Another is the Oil Tank Culture Park in Mapo, a hillside exhibition centre that consists of six vast tanks that once brimmed with crude oil when it was an oil depot decades ago.

But the largest addition of public land will come when Seoul officially acquires the Yongsan Garrison, a military base that for more than a century was home to both Japanese and then US forces. Spanning from the southern slope of Namsan to the Han River, swathes of this former base will be transformed into an urban park. Central Seoul is in need of more green space and integrating this land into the surrounding communities could help the city reclaim much of its lost nature – and assist with creating a new identity altogether.

**Ups and downs:** The city looked up to repurpose a 1km-long highway overpass into a sky garden called Seoulo 7017, overseen by Dutch practice MVRDV; it also dug deep to uncover the Cheonggyecheon waterway, paved over in the 1950s, that now provides an 11km-long pedestrian route (*bottom*)

