

Renewing Urban Life in Seoul

A metropolis with a population of more than 10 million people, South Korea's capital definitely has character, offering contrasting landscapes that combine traditional and contemporary styles, including its more than 600-year-old historic districts and 25 self-governing boroughs. From the 1950 to the early 2000s, Seoul enjoyed industrialization and rapid growth, which led to a rapid population increase and large-scale expansion of the city. Now it seems Seoul is experiencing its next phase of development, with major urban regeneration projects to be found all over the city... and which association planners will be eager to discover.

Words Rémi Dève



OIL TANK CULTURE PARK

A thriving cultural centre, Seoul has been attracting international visitors for some time now, with its well-preserved national monuments and many fascinating palaces. Now a global megacity, South Korea's capital is a place where the country's heritages blend seamlessly with the rapid developments of 21st-century life. But this has come with challenges. *"In the past, Seoul focused on quantitative development and expansion in preparing for housing and population growth. Now, we need to switch to new regional development plans through physical regeneration (of decayed areas) and renewal,"* Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon recently told The Korea Herald in a recent interview.

As authorities and urban planners look towards making the city more inclusive and livable, "regeneration" has indeed begun to feature as a main focus of Seoul's urban policy. Today, urban regeneration projects of varying scales are being carried out at dozens of locations across the city, and local communities are able to preserve the cherished memories they have accumulated over time, while visitors can discover a not-so-distant but totally rejuvenated past.

SUCCESSFUL PROJECTS

The Dongdaemun Design Plaza might well be the epitome of this, standing out as a major landmark of Seoul. Aside from its aesthetic value with a distinctively neo-futuristic design, it is also seen as the most successful urban development project ever attempted in the city. It not just revived the downtown area into a vibrant fashion hub and a popular tourist destination in the Republic of Korea, but it also successfully transformed the whole district into a place of relaxation and recreation in downtown Seoul.

Featured during the Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism 2017, the Donuimun Museum Village is all about the transformation of Korean architecture over the years, showcasing traditional alleys of the Joseon Dynasty era, wooden houses built during the Japanese occupation, and improved hanoks – the well-known Korean houses – in the 1950s. Maybe one of Seoul's most fascinating urban regeneration projects, the Village is like a glance at the city's glorious past, where visitors can see performances, take cooking classes, and participate in creative workshops offered by artists from various fields, architects, and designers.

Jin-Hyeok Park, director of the Seoul Convention Bureau, the MICE division of the Seoul Tourism Organization, explains that the city's urban regeneration efforts have made a host of unique venues available for meetings. This is not only testament to Seoul's urban dynamism but it also *"represents the diversity of the city's MICE offerings"* while *"strengthening the competitiveness of Seoul's MICE industry."* He adds: *"And with the Seoul MICE Alliance (SMA), a public-private coalition for the industry which has close to 300 members including unique urban renewal venues, hotels, and entertainment venues, among others, Seoul has become quite cutting-edge on the international scene."*

Other regeneration projects include Seoul's Oil Tank Culture Park, a former emergency oil reserve built in the late 1970s transformed into an environmentally friendly cultural event complex featuring festivals, performances, exhibitions and village markets since September 2017. The property is composed of 22 soccer field-sized spaces that can host various events in its six tanks: it's really one-of-a-kind, and should you need an exclusive venue for your event, look no further. Situated downtown, Baesan, a former warehouse, has been repurposed into an industrial-style, flexible space for small conferences.

MORE TRADITIONAL

More traditional venues include Samcheonggak, a mountain retreat standing proud at the top of a hill and a unique event space representative of Korean culture. Its stylish buildings were initially created to host the North-South Red Cross Conference in 1972 and all built as hanoks, sitting still between tradition and modernity. Established in 1967 as a venue for receiving VIPs and visiting heads of state, Yeong Bin Gwan, on the other side of the town, now serves as a public venue for high-profile conferences.

And of course there is Coex, your straight-forward, purpose-built convention and exhibition centre. Established in 1979 and located in the heart of Gangnam, Seoul's business district, Coex boasts more than 30 years of experience. The facility is huge and comprises of 4 main exhibition halls and 55 dividable meeting rooms. Here the 'everything under one roof' concept makes the most sense: there are three 5-star hotels on site, one of Asia's largest underground shopping malls, four international office towers, aquarium... and even a city airport terminal.

Right across Coex sits Bongeunsa Temple, where 3,479 Buddhist scriptures of 13 types, including the works of Kim Jeong-hee, are stored. Dating back to 794, the highlight of the temple is a 28-metre statue of Maitreya, the Future Buddha, one of the tallest stone statues in the country. Today, the temple can provide a pleasant, interesting, and peaceful retreat after a hard day at a conference. If it was, before the 1960s, surrounded only by farms and orchards, the area has become the centre of one of the wealthiest and busiest places in Seoul making Bongeunsa Temple a rather interesting mix of traditional and modern Seoul.

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Case Study

7th UNWTO Global Summit on Urban Tourism

The trip I took last September provided a peak to some sessions of the 7th UNWTO Global Summit on Urban Tourism, themed 'A 2030 Vision for Urban Tourism'. The event was hosted by the Seoul Metropolitan Government and supported by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of the Republic of Korea, the Korea Tourism Organization and the Seoul Tourism Organization.

It provided a unique platform to discuss the key issues shaping the future of urban tourism in the context of the 2030 Urban Agenda, and brought together high-level representatives from National Tourism Administrations, city authorities and related stakeholders, serving as a platform to exchange experiences and expertise and set a shared vision on urban tourism.

Discussions of the Summit unfolded on a high-profile panel and four themed debate sessions to touch on key topics concerning this rapidly-growing tourism segment and set a vision to fulfill United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Among the subjects touched upon were the impact of digital technologies in shaping the future of urban destinations, the role of urban tourism in transforming cities landscape through the rejuvenation of public space, along with how to ensure residents are an integral part of urban tourism development – a theme that was particularly relevant to the participants of our press trip. A UNWTO report named 'Overtourism? Understanding and managing urban tourism growth beyond perceptions' was also presented at the event.