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From moon village to mural village

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FROM MOON VILLAGE
TO MURAL VILLAGE

The consequences of creative placemaking in Ihwa-dong, Seoul

Jason F. Kovacs and Hayun Park

Introduction

That creative placemaking is nearly always framed in a favourable light should not be surprising given that the various activities that may comprise it are meant to enhance the built environment and qualities of place and, with that, improve people’s quality of life. This chapter, however, addresses a notable case in which creative placemaking did the exact opposite for a large segment of the affected population. In 2006, the small residential community of Ihwa-dong, Seoul became the focus of arts-led revitalization. Situated adjacent to a portion of the city’s historic city walls, this community of late 1950s-era housing stock was transformed through the work of artists into a mural village under the auspices of a government-funded public art project. Ihwa Mural Village, as it is now commonly known, soon became a tourist magnet, bringing with it some investment and further beautification, but also crowds of visitors and, with that, all of the problems that are associated with ‘overtourism.’

A decade after the residential community’s transformation, two of the most iconic murals were destroyed, not by outsiders, but by local residents angered at the unequal benefits accruing from tourism as well as the negative impact that excessive visitor numbers was having on everyday life. The story of Ihwa Mural Village has been the focus of many studies in the Korean language, but remains largely unknown outside South Korea. This chapter will first briefly address interpretations of creative placemaking. The chapter will then examine the transformation of Ihwa-dong into a mural village and its subsequent rise as a popular destination for domestic and international tourists. The chapter will then address the problem of over-tourism as well as other issues that contributed to the 2016 vandalism incident. Finally, the chapter will conclude with some of the lessons learned.

Creative placemaking

Creative placemaking has received a growing amount of attention over the past decade by scholars, planners, and cultural policy experts in many countries around the world. Although interpretations vary, the notion of creative placemaking according to Gadwa Nicodemus (2013,
p. 213) ‘emphasize[s] art-centred initiatives with place-based physical, economic, and/or social outcomes.’ In contrast to traditional placemaking projects such as public space design and façade improvements, creative placemaking is distinguished by the role played by arts and culture as well as the centrality of community participation and public–private engagement. As Markusen and Gadwa (2010, p. 3) explain in their foundational White Paper on the subject, ‘In creative placemaking, partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities.’ They go on to note that this activity ‘animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired.’ Examples of such creative placemaking include activities such as outdoor concerts and community festivals, and projects including the creation of live–work spaces for artists, the display of public art, and the beautification of neighbourhoods with mural art.

Some experts however argue that, rather than being centred on arts and culture or on the revitalization of the built environment through planning, creative placemaking is more about an ongoing process, one that animates space, enhances the identity and unique qualities of place, connects people with place and other people, and promotes capacity building for local organizations and the civic sector, amongst other outcomes (Borrup, 2016). As Webb (2013, p. 35) asserts, ‘Current models of creative placemaking are tethered to the built environment and urban revitalization.’ Webb advocates for an expanded framework in which creative placemaking ‘is guided by civic engagement activities that foster cultural stewardship,’ ‘spurs systematic social change,’ and ‘articulates a shared aesthetic of belonging’ (p. 46). The interpretation of creative placemaking that the authors of this chapter use builds upon both of these general interpretations. That is, the arts are understood to have an important role in differentiating creative placemaking from traditional placemaking activities that also transform the built environment, but the process also ideally engages in a meaningful way those members of the public whose quality of life will be affected by the creative placemaking initiative.

While much of the literature on creative placemaking supports the process without acknowledging the potential drawbacks, there are some exceptions. For example, Frenette (2017, p. 341) states that creative placemaking differs from creative class-centred initiatives in its ‘stronger emphasis on equity’ amongst other things, but he nonetheless acknowledges in his study of creative placemaking in the United States that inequality is a ‘persistent problem for creative placemaking stakeholders’ (p. 338). In particular, gentrification and the failure of creative placemaking initiatives in expanding opportunities for marginalized groups have been identified as key concerns (Frenette, 2017; Markusen and Gadwa Nicodemus, 2014; Zitcer, 2018). This case study adds overtourism to the list of potential negative outcomes. Thus, while tourism development may certainly bring with it many economic benefits and be seen as a potentially positive outcome of creative placemaking, it is important that proponents of creative placemaking also recognize the potential negative consequences that excessive tourist numbers to a transformed place may pose to residents’ quality of life and plan accordingly.

A community transformed: Ihwa-dong, Seoul

Ihwa-dong (hereafter Ihwa Village, or simply Ihwa) was an inconspicuous residential community noted more for its ageing infrastructure and housing than anything else prior to its transformation into a mural district. Characterized by a higher elevation and steep terrain, the community was simply one of many so-called ‘moon villages’ or daldongnae in the city. A moon village is a low-income, hillside residential area, which owing to its higher elevation was tra-
ditionally thought to offer a better view of the night sky. The term is also sometimes applied strictly to urban hillside shantytowns, which Ihwa Village was prior to its redevelopment in the late 1950s. Beginning in 1958, the slum-like environment of Ihwa, which had become home to many refugees and migrants from the countryside during and in the years following the Korean War (1950–53), was transformed by the National Housing Corporation (now Korea Land and Housing Corporation). To deal with the poor housing environment, the makeshift homes in the area were removed and replaced by 57 two-storey residential structures. While these houses served their purpose well for decades in providing impoverished families with a proper roof over their heads, a half-century later, residents were calling for more modern housing to replace their deteriorating homes. Although a proposal for the redevelopment of Ihwa Village was in discussion for some time, it never materialized due to the lack of profitability of new housing structures with building height restrictions imposed because of the area’s location next to Seoul’s historic city walls. In its place came the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism’s (MCST) 2006 Art in City public art initiative, which was intended to ameliorate the urban environment of this and other residential neighbourhoods in decline, albeit through the more modest means of ‘rehabilitation-type regeneration’ rather than demolition-centred redevelopment (Kim and Park 2016).

It is worth noting that the MCST’s Art in City initiative predates the creative placemaking term that arose in the United States by several years. Nonetheless, the objectives of this South Korean initiative, which also went by the lengthy official title ‘Public Art Enterprise for Neighborhood Improvement of Neglected Regions’ fit well with explanations that have since been given on creative placemaking. First, the public art project was intended to tackle social polarization and the unequal presence of art and culture within cities, which was often confined to higher-income neighbourhoods. Second, the initiative was meant to address the right that all citizens have to live in pleasant urban environments; art would contribute to enhancing the quality of place in the targeted residential communities. Finally, Art in City was intended to foster a new model of public art policy, one that actively involved resident participation. Altogether 11 urban residential areas in South Korea were selected for the 2006 initiative, which was funded through a lottery commission fund. In Seoul, the initiative involved the participation of district-level government, including Jongno-gu in the case of Ihwa Village.

Unlike the 10 other residential areas, which were selected through an open competition, Ihwa Village was specially chosen by the program’s Public Art Program Committee. The committee’s choice tied into the area’s character as a post-Korean War residential area in need of rehabilitation, which fit perfectly with the type of place the public art initiative was meant to effect change in. Moreover, according to the lead artist who oversaw the community’s transformation, Ihwa’s location and ‘countryside atmosphere’ near to a trendy university street was also a consideration; the arts-led revitalization project would create a place ideal for post-secondary students nearby to visit, linking a modern area of the city with a more traditional residential environment.

The old residential area of narrow streets and steep stairwells was transformed from unremarkable moon village to popular mural village over the course of a few months in late 2006 through the work of 68 artists from outside the community. Altogether 70 murals and other artworks were completed. Significantly, although an attempt had been made to involve local residents as called for in the objectives of the Art in City initiative, their involvement in cooperative painting remained limited to a handful of murals. The limited involvement of residents in the transformation of Ihwa-dong likely owed to the hurried nature of the project, which was tied to several delays culminating with the resignation of the original project director in the summer. The lead artist subsequently took over the position to oversee the project, which needed to be
completed by year’s end. Not surprisingly, a survey conducted soon after the project’s completion indicated that a large number of residents felt dissatisfied with their level of involvement in the community’s transformation (Korea Art Management Service, 2007). Nonetheless, most viewed the transformation of Ihwa into a mural village favourably, particularly given that most believed it to be a temporary measure to improve the district until the post-war-era housing could be replaced with modern apartments and infrastructure.

Tourism, complaints, and community responses

Overtourism, which the World Tourism Organization defines as ‘the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitors’ experiences in a negative way’ (UNWTO, 2018), has been a growing issue in Ihwa Village ever since its transformation in 2006. One of the first clear signs of this problem dates back to 2010 when one artist insisted that their ‘angel wings’ mural be removed after hearing about growing complaints by local residents of the excessive number of visitors engaged in taking photos of themselves in front of the artwork to post online. Like many other tourism hotspots in Seoul, social media has served as an important catalyst in boosting visitor numbers at Ihwa Mural Village (Jang and Park 2020; Oh, 2020). In particular, this first notable incident of a growing public backlash against the murals was tied to the use of the village as a set for episodes of a popular Korean TV show, which involved the visit of a celebrity entertainer whose photo in front of the angel wings mural led to an influx of young visitors aiming to take their own photos there. For the next few years, Ihwa Village underwent an intense phase of ‘tourism gentrification’ (Cocola-Gant, 2018) as the residential area was transformed into a tourist destination. In particular, several outsiders, including artists, began to move into Ihwa Village. A number of homes were converted into studios as well as bistros, cafes, galleries, and private museums. In addition, some of the original murals that were already in a state of decay or had been previously erased were replaced in 2013 through the work of professional artists. Their work was supported through maintenance funds from the MCST. Notably, Ihwa Mural Village’s popular painted ‘flower staircase’ was redone in more durable tile and a new staircase mural depicting koi fish was completed that same year, also by the original lead artist, who has since moved his studio into the community.

Through these interventions, Ihwa Mural Village soon became the focus not only of domestic tourists, but also of international visitors, particularly from China and to a lesser extent Japan. Media reports captured the growing complaints about noise pollution, litter, and even public urination. However, despite the promotion of a ‘Silent Tourism Campaign’ meant to remind visitors that they were in a residential environment, the issue of overtourism continued to remain a problem, eventually boiling over with the 2016 mural vandalism incident which saw the destruction of the lead artist’s staircase murals. The vandalized artworks were accompanied by graffiti adjacent to them that were directed towards government officials and tourists alike. Some messages, such as ‘we are against urban rehabilitation and the murals,’ were aimed at the government’s seeming reluctance to deal with the ageing housing and infrastructure while others, such as ‘this is a residential area, not a tourist site,’ were clearly aimed at local visitors and domestic tourists.

Several researchers have acknowledged the problem that overtourism has posed for the wellbeing of Ihwa’s residents. For example, Woo et al. (2017) conducted surveys with residents in both Ihwa Village and in Seoul’s even more popular tourist destination of Bukchon Historic District. They maintain that the ‘touristification’ of both residential areas has ‘negatively affect[ed] residents’ community life, economic life, and health [and] safety’ (p. 417). In particular,
they as well as others have identified several key problems in these two saturated tourist sites, including: noise, rubbish, and graffiti; the lack of parking facilities and public facilities such as restrooms; increased anxiety amongst residents with privacy and safety-related concerns being an issue; a deterioration of normal community life with the influx of visitors; and concerns about inequality in tourism-generated revenue. Our own research on Ihwa Village, particularly on government and community-led efforts to deal with the problem since the incident, has revealed that apart from the issues outlined above, a key matter that has been overlooked ties into problems in governance and management. Specifically, some of the key problems of this creative placemaking project, which have exacerbated the problem of overtourism, include poor communication with stakeholders on the part of government, as well as confusion on the part of citizens with regard to who their concerns should be directed to, particularly given that receipt of many of their formal complaints over the years was purportedly never acknowledged. Our interviews also revealed the role of a proposed and since abandoned land-use plan that would have excluded a large segment of the estimated 134 households in the area (Oh and Hwang, 2018) from potentially benefiting economically from tourism in sparking the 2016 incident. Specifically, the unveiled land-use plan a few months prior to the incident infuriated many residents since it designated certain areas of Ihwa Village as residential only and others as mixed commercial-residential spaces, including those areas ‘newcomers’ had invested in during the intense phase of tourism gentrification in the early 2010s.

What is perhaps more notable than the 2016 vandalism incident and the reasons behind it are the responses that have since emerged by government and especially by the community itself. The vandalism that led to the destruction of Ihwa Village’s iconic ‘flower’ and ‘koi fish’ staircases as well as graffiti adjacent to them drew much media attention to the longstanding concerns of the area’s residents. Government responses since have included the appointment of a community planner tasked with encouraging conflict resolution, and the establishment of a new local decision-making committee (‘united community group’) meant to act as a bridge between residents and government. It remains to be seen what if anything will materialize from these developments, particularly since some residents already claim that the local committee is merely symbolic; that its suggestions to government will never be given serious consideration. On the other hand, the government has recently invested more into improving the built environment with additions being made, such as handrails along stretches of some of the area’s steep streets.

Given what creative placemaking is ideally about, a more impressive development since the 2016 incident involves the former lead artist’s effort to engage with community members, particularly with those residents who have always felt excluded from the public art project. Specifically, the artist has acknowledged the problems of the original project, admitting that much of the original art lacked meaning since it was introduced by artists parachuted in during the rushed transformation phase in 2006 and to a lesser extent again in 2013 with the creation of additional murals. In response, he has promoted meetings with residents, including with some who originally supported the vandalism of his popular staircase murals. Although the artist has a complicated relationship with the community, having been the project director during Ihwa’s transformation, at the time of writing he was acting as an intermediary, encouraging community dialogue, listening to residents’ ideas and concerns, and making an effort to relay this information to other stakeholders, all through a non-official, voluntary capacity. In addition, he was also volunteering his time responding to requests by residents for advice on a range of local matters. Thus, the current effort by the artist to engage the community fits well with explanations of socially engaged art and the role that artists may play as intermediaries between different stakeholders, including residents, fellow artists, or government employees. Artists, as Frennette (2017, p. 340) states, are often ‘well-practiced at communicating with many publics and adjusting to
the expectations of various parties. Similarly, Redaelli (2018) asserts that creative placemaking brings artists into the centre of a community where they can act as researcher in helping to celebrate the local history and culture of place, collaborator in adding layers of meaning, and facilitator in helping to create a common vision by facilitating conversation amongst people.

While the future of Ihwa Village’s murals remains uncertain, at the time of writing most of the graffiti has been removed, some murals have been repainted, and there is talk of repairing the staircase murals and others, albeit with input from the community. With regard to tourism, the destruction of some of the murals did have a negative impact on visitor numbers. However, there were still some 325,000 visitors on average per month according to an estimate for 2016/17, and many international tourists were still to be seen during our visits to Ihwa Village in the autumn of 2019. In fact, Ihwa Village was still being frequented by some visitors in late March 2020 in spite of the coronavirus pandemic situation.

**Conclusion**

This case study has revealed the potential failure of creative placemaking in enhancing livability and quality of life, particularly when there is inadequate community engagement or consideration of the potential negative effects of such initiatives should the affected site become too popular with visitors. Thus, this chapter contributes not only to the literature on creative placemaking (Courage and McKeown, 2019) but also to the specialized works on murals tourism (Skinner and Jolliffe, 2017) and the growing body of studies on overtourism (Capocchi et al., 2019; Dodds and Butler, 2019; Milano et al., 2019; Pechlaner et al., 2020), which has to date been largely confined to addressing the issue in popular tourist destinations in Europe. In terms of creative placemaking, several lessons can be highlighted. First, community members must be actively involved in the process of creative placemaking and should be clearly informed what the project is about, including what the longer-term timeline is for the project. Despite community engagement being an objective of the *Art in City* initiative, participation was lacking in the Ihwa case from the get-go, and residents were unaware of the long-term nature of the project, hence their initial indifference both to the project and to the early budding interest towards the area by outsiders. Second, since creative placemaking is ideally about highlighting the stories of place and revealing the unique qualities of place, this should be reflected in the nature of the project. In the case of Ihwa Mural Village, the mural art was almost exclusively made by outsiders and had little meaning or connection to the history of the place, this should be reflected in the nature of the project. In the case of Ihwa Mural Village, the mural art was almost exclusively made by outsiders and had little meaning or connection to the history of the place, an issue that is now likely to be corrected. Third, responsibility for the long-term management of such projects should be clearly defined from the onset of the process and understood by community stakeholders. Much of the difficulties that boiled over with the 2016 mural vandalism incident can be attributed to poor communication between government and residents. Fourth, the potential consequences of creative placemaking, including social and economic impacts, should be considered and planned for accordingly. In the case of Ihwa Village, tourism was not factored in as a potential consequence of the area’s transformation nor was the question of who benefits adequately considered, especially during the development of a land-use plan to deal with the area’s popularity as a tourist destination.

On a final note, the process of creative placemaking should ideally emerge organically within a community, rather than being assigned to a place by outsiders. In the case of Ihwa Mural Village, the idea to transform the marginalized residential area through mural art originated outside the community. Moreover, most of the beneficiaries of the area’s transformation were not the original residents but rather outsiders who moved into the community during its ‘tourism gentrification’ phase. Ultimately, all of these issues, as well as the problem of overtourism, contributed to the shocking incident in which several individuals, with the apparent approval of
many fellow residents, attempted to destroy the tourism base of their own community. However, it would seem that conciliation efforts since the 2016 incident, including current attempts by the former lead artist and now day-time resident of Ihwa Village to engage community members in envisioning the future of the mural village, are serving to correct some of the problems in how the *Art in City* project was originally implemented in Ihwa-dong. Consequently, current efforts, it would seem, are bringing the ongoing rehabilitation process in Ihwa closer to the ideals set forth by leading experts and proponents of creative placemaking.

References


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