CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN URBAN PLANNING: 
THE RESTORATION OF THE CH’ŎNGGYECH’ŎN RIVER 
IN SEOUL

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ABSTRACT

After 40 years of accelerated economic growth, South Korea and its capital Seoul have performed a basic shift towards quality in urban planning. A 5.7 km-long, chronically congested, elevated freeway at the core of Seoul was removed to restore the Ch’ŏnggyech’ŏn, a stream that had been buried underground in the 1970s. This ambitious project was started in 2002 and completed in 2005. The Ch’ŏnggyech’ŏn restoration can be viewed as a rare achievement in urban revitalisation policy in South Korea, but the urban planning process, the criteria for evaluation, and the management of conflict during the restoration may not be viewed as equally successful as the project itself, leaving room for improvement and further consideration.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Ch’ŏnggyech’ŏn project represents the decisive project management skills and leadership of Lee Myung-bak, mayor of Seoul from 1 July 2002 to 30 June 2006, as well as the successful implementation of the project that paved his way to becoming the president of South Korea in February 2008. As the project contains all the aspects of urban mega-project management of a metropolitan urban area, it can be considered a contemporary example of urban planning conflict management in South Korea. Specifically, it highlights the interaction of various stakeholders, including numerous affected groups such as the media, politicians and individual protagonists, within a democratic process of urban planning and conflict management. Furthermore, it brings out the main points and preconditions under which city development is carried out. It is an interesting question for urban planning professionals how such a big project could be so quickly completed in
the downtown area of a megacity, when in significantly smaller cities in other democratic countries, legal hurdles prolong projects, cause them to become cost prohibitive, or hinder any city development at all.

After examining the historical importance of the Ch’onggyech’on river in the urban fabric as well as the restoration process, this paper analyses the political, economic, cognitive, and implementation aspects of the project. It illustrates how the restoration of the 5.7 km river in the city centre of a metropolitan population of more than 20 million was completed in just over three years despite large-scale public confrontation. The author discusses the structures and motivations that led the main protagonists and the instruments of power and resources that either supported or hindered the decision process.

The paper is based on consultation of Ch’onggyech’on-related literature and publications, as well as a comprehensive analysis of print media published in English and in three Korean newspapers (Chosun Ilbo, Donga Ilbo and Hankyoreh) from January 2002 to December 2005, during which period the project was introduced, planned and accomplished. Furthermore, between 2004 and 2009, the author interviewed 76 people who were involved in the project. All interviews have been transcribed and are used in anonymised form.1

The conflict management experience of the Ch’onggyech’on project gives insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the Korean urban planning system and its capabilities for political conflict management. Furthermore, it exemplifies the behaviour and patterns of action of the current political leadership on the local and national level. The successes of this project may contribute to creating more transparent processes for those involved in similar projects and enable a more effective conflict management for future projects both in Korea and elsewhere.

2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE CH’ONGGYECH’ON RIVER

The Ch’onggyech’on, which was known as the ‘Kaech’on’ (open riverlet) in the Choson dynasty (1392-1910), has been part of Seoul’s historical and cultural centre for the last 600 years. Although the his-

1 The transcripts can be inspected as components of the author’s doctorate at the Faculty of Geography, Westfaelische Wilhelms-University in Muenster, 2010.