

The Politics of Abundance: Housing Policy and Social Stratification in Seoul, 1961-1979

This paper takes up the question of housing policy in Seoul in the 1960s and 1970s, a time of rapid growth and urbanization that saw the rise of a critical nationwide housing shortage. Urban housing – or the lack of it – was a major determiner of social mobility at this time, and this study inquires into the limitations and primary beneficiaries of formal housing policy, looking at protest, civil society debates, and ethnographic records to understand how the struggle for housing was navigated and experienced.

Government interventions through institutions such as the Korea Housing Corporation historically vacillated between two principle impulses: modernizing the country's housing stock, and housing those unable to purchase a legal dwelling on their own. In the 1960s public housing resources were nearly exclusively devoted to the former goal as the KHC undertook apartment prototype design and construction.

The success of these KHC designs raised an important question in the 1970s, namely who would be the primary beneficiaries of new and modern apartment construction. High-profile disasters such as the Wau Apartment collapse, the ongoing displacement of poor urban communities for new development, and the increasing rarefication of apartment stock in the 1970s lent an urgent edge to these discussions. Even as the public housing budget swelled after the Third Five-Year Plan (1972-1976) officials, without addressing deeper structural issues, were unable to head off the new contentious politics emerging from below.

Russell Burge
Postdoctoral Associate, Yale University