# Creative industries and urban structure: Seoul and Bangkok

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**ABSTRACT**

As states look to move towards the knowledge-based economy as a means of prolonging competitive advantages first obtained from labour-intensive, export-oriented manufacturing, the role of creative industries becomes increasingly important. These industries are variously defined and may be problematic in terms of their actual contribution to the overall economy but, nevertheless, facilitating their smooth functioning is held to be one of the state's principal economic roles in the years ahead. This requires the creation of a form or forms of infrastructure that will support the creative industries and the fostering of links between them and the education system and labour market, such that the latter produce what is required by the former. The city in East Asia which has most consciously and actively pursued the means of causing the growth of creative industries is Seoul. This has necessitated the creation and implementation of a wide range of policies, in addition to affecting the physical growth of the city. As the authorities of Thailand's city Bangkok look to the next round of growth beyond the East Asian Economic Model, the example of Seoul burns brightly. Yet there are various problems in following the Seoul example, ranging from the nature of the education system, the inability of metropolitan authorities to separate politics from planning decisions and the persistence of the value of low-labour cost manufacturing operations. This paper evaluates the nature of the Seoul model and the implications this has for the recreation of Bangkok in an environment in which the entire city may have to be abandoned to the elements.

## Introduction

Owing to accumulation of surplus resources, increasing productivity and the unequal spatial distribution of resources, cities are created and persist. Cities tend to dominate economic activities in a state and have been described in the modern world as the 'engines of development.' Urbanization throughout the world is increasing at a considerable rate and millions of people move to cities annually. The scale of economic activities in cities often promotes the creation of positive externalities which provide a competitive advantage for those activities in that place and, hence, cause them to remain there. The externalities explanation for the persistence of activities in cities (Marshall, 1890) suggests that competitive advantages are rather static in nature. However, with the emergence of the concept of the knowledge-based economy and Porter's work on clusters and national competitiveness (e.g. Porter, 1998), it has become evident that competitiveness may be created and fostered. Governments have in some cases established planning mechanisms to identify areas in which competitive advantage can be efficiently and what additional inputs and forms of support would be required. However, such activities are neither cost-free nor offer guaranteed success. Instead, the government can, through its various agencies, attempt to bring about the desired initial conditions and hope that the actors take advantage of those conditions. Even wholly-state moderated economic activities cannot ensure that synergies and creativity will flourish as required.

The creation of networks and clusters in this sense will have some impact on the nature and configuration of a city in which they are created. Changes might affect the physical and virtual infrastructure of the city, as well as the relationship between workers and workplaces, transportation systems and the sociology of the urban experience as a whole. This might be reflected in the nature of the urban structure of a particular city, including the ways it might change or be changed as a result of the industrial policy employed. Industrial policy relates to the coordinated, state-led attempt to bring about specific developmental economic goals by coordinating private and public sector interests according to a definitive, long-term plan.

Since the early 1990s, Thailand has joined those nations looking at the progress of South Korea (the Republic of Korea or simply Korea) as the exemplar of an Asian nation that has passed through the factory age as the means of attaining economic growth and then moved on to the next stage of development, with a view to moving from the middle income to the high income list of countries. In doing so, successive Thai governments have noted to a greater or lesser degree observed the importance of the capital city Seoul to the process of development and the ways in which the city has been modified to promote the country as a whole and promote, specifically, designated economic activities. The scope to modify Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand, has been more limited. For various political reasons, it has been unthinkable for there to have been significant construction or reconstruction in the area surrounding the Grand Palace and the neighbouring symbolically vital parts of the society. It would not be possible, for example, for either of the comparatively recent public transport systems (the Skytrain and subway service) to penetrate that core region because of the disruption it would cause in various ways. Other pressures exist that also lead to constraints on the ability of any

government to act with respect to urban change. Nevertheless, Thai administrations have sought, at least since 2001, sought ways of modernizing the economy, in view of the declining relevance of the factory paradigm of production (the East Asian Economic Model or EAEM) and the rise of China and Vietnam as powerful rivals in commodity and semi-commodity export markets. Michael Porter himself was invited to lead a team in the Kingdom to identify areas of potential new competitive advantage with respect to the cluster concept (Porter, 2003). Although the research and reporting was conducted, the implementation of the identified activities has been quite limited in scope, partly because of the inability to reshape Bangkok as required.

It is the purpose of this paper to seek to identify the ways in which the impact on urban structure has been handled in Seoul and can be adapted to Bangkok and the implications of doing so. This will be explored through particular investigation of the computer games software writing industry, which has been of considerable importance in the development of the creative industries in Seoul in particular and which offers some potential in Bangkok.

## Methodology

The research reported on in this paper is based on a critical case study method with information provided by a wide range of personal, in-depth qualitative interviews. More than 80 completed interviews were conducted in both Korea and Thailand with a range of private and public sector executives, private individuals and others determined to have expert knowledge with relation to the various research questions (this project is derived from a doctoral program of research and only certain aspects of that research are reported upon here). Interviews were conducted in either Thai or English as required and extensive note-taking was followed by transcription and subsequent analysis. Interviews generally used a semi-structured interview agenda which was used to raise areas of research interest but to permit individual respondents to shape the research according to the particular interests and concerns which they held. This meant that each interview was unique in structure and in terms of content. A snowball method was used to help guide selection of respondents. It has been shown that appropriate and thoughtful adaptations to the snowball method can cater for most of the problems apparently created by its use (e.g. Sadler et al., 2010). A content analysis method was used to interrogate the data. Notwithstanding inherent problems in the content analysis process, it is argued that the attempt to overcome them is justified by the value of findings and analysis that can be obtained from the method (Kondracki et al., 2002).

## Findings

### Urban Structure

Urban structure refers to the way in which a city is organized in spatial terms. The first systematic attempt to describe urban structure was provided by Burgess (1923), who observed cities organized in a series of concentric circles. In such a city, the most important governmental, cultural and commercial institutions are grouped in the core central area and, around these, are bands of residential sectors distinguished by their attractiveness and, hence, cost. The sector model was identified by Hoyt (1939), who found that the concentric model was inadequate to explain certain cities which might have several core areas not necessarily organized as circular. In fact, Seoul is an example of the sectoral city in that it has as principal areas both the historical fortress but also industrial areas along

the Han River and towards the port region of Incheon, where the new international airport has been built. These regions are linked by transportation links and interstitial residential areas. A third model was proposed by Harris and Ullman (1945) as the multiple nuclei city. In this city, separate and distinctive core areas are sufficiently close together that development means they are all joined together in a single, large conurbation. London is a well-known example of this type, as the city has grown from a series of smaller villages grouped around the River Thames which were linked together as new industrial, commercial and residential areas grew.

In terms of Bangkok, it is evident that there is a core of the city in which principal institutions are located, in proximity to the Royal Palace, although pressure of space means that important commercial institutions are located away from this core area. Residential areas are not properly organized in terms of bands but are intermingled, while the presence of large numbers of often unregistered migrant workers and their families and dependents further complicates the urban structure of Bangkok. What can be said is that Bangkok fulfils with some exactitude McGee's (1965) concept of the Primate City, which is a capital that contains within itself the vast majority of all governmental, royal, economic, cultural and artistic institutions to the extent that no other city can challenge the primate in any category. Bangkok is connected to the sea via the Laem Chabang port and the Chao Phraya River and, since Thailand was never formally colonized, no colonial masters sought to redesign the city to make it a form of colonial city that glorified the dominant power and made more convenient the extraction of resources by strengthening the maritime links. Without a Haussmanesque widening of the avenues and roads, then, Bangkok retains its narrow alleys and canals, even if most of the latter have been built over in the numerous iterations of attempted development of the road system that have taken place since then.

Korea, of course, was colonized by the Japanese (1910-45) and, as a result, reorganization of the city took place alongside thoroughgoing national-level changes to the peninsula's economy to provide resources to the colonizers (Chang, 1971). The power of the Japanese to bring about changes to Seoul was paralleled to some extent by the military regimes that ruled the country between independence and democracy. That same power was retained and used for the slum clearances employed in the preparation for the 1988 Olympic Games, during which some 700,000 people are estimated to have been forcibly relocated from their homes (Davis, 2007). As Harvey explained: "Consider the case of Seoul in the 1990s: construction companies and developers hired goon squads of sumo-wrestler types to invade neighbourhoods on the city's hillsides. They sledgehammered down not only housing but also all the possessions of those who had built their own homes in the 1950s on what had become premium land. High rise towers, which show no trace of the brutality that permitted their construction, now cover most of those hillsides (Harvey, 2008)." The use of violence and force has been endemic in Korean modernization, particularly in the pre-democratic period. The result has been that Seoul has been extensively recreated more than once to make it more conducive to implementing the kind of developmental policy and goals dictated by the authorities of the day. This is quite different from Bangkok, where powerful taboos protect any part of the central core of the city close to the Royal Palace from redevelopment of any sort for the foreseeable

future: the two public mass transit systems, for example, remain at a distance from that area. This factor is likely to have a significant impact on the ability of Bangkok officials to produce the kinds of infrastructural development necessary for managing a flourishing set of creative industries.

## Creative Industries

The creative industries concept is an evolving one that is based on the use of creative assets that are able to generate economic growth and development (UNCTAD, 2008). Currently, the hope pinned on the creative industries as an engine for promoting economic development and growth exceeds their actual achievements. So, while it is hoped that the industries will foster cross-industrial synergies, make use of advanced skills and personal competencies and cross borders and genres in adding local wisdom to value-adding activities, this has yet to be seen in reality. However, the creative industry as a concept has the distinct advantage that it represents a prime opportunity for governmental agencies and important transnational NGOs to make plans and agreements and set objective and staging posts along the way towards achieving those objectives. Inevitably, the ability to set quantitative measures, which can be monitored and managed, appeals to many agencies operating in an environment of uncertainty. It is a combination of this uncertainty and the nature of much of the supposed output of the creative industry that has led journalists Atkinson and Elliott, writing about the British economy, to label the concept the 'bullshit economy' (Atkinson and Elliott, 2007). While the justice of this judgment may be debated, it certainly appears to be true that the actual value created by the sector lags behind much of the rest of the economy.

The list of industrial sectors customarily (although not universally) included as members of the creative industry are advertising, architecture, art and antiques, design, designer fashion, film, video and photography, music and visual and performing arts, publishing, software and electronic publishing, digital and entertainment media, TV and radio. Figures from the UK indicate that these industries accounted for £59,100 million of gross value added from a total of £1,053,900 million or approximately 5.6% of the total produced by the economy (DCMS, 2010).

The extent to which the knowledge economy is taken seriously as a matter of governmental concern is indicated by the fact that a dedicated ministry has been established to address it. That Ministry had adopted an inclusive attitude towards its role and has been formed by the integration of several other Ministries, including Commerce, Industry and Energy, Information and Communication and Science and Technology. This makes for a large and powerful government body with wide-ranging responsibilities, which have been described in the following terms:

"A knowledge economy embeds traditional goods and services with a premium derived from greater levels of research and innovation intelligence. Korea is turning its focus to accentuate the production of these globally-competitive, value-added goods and services. Different from other economic models which rely primarily on natural resources or manpower, knowledge will be the primary engine of productivity and growth for the Korean economy. At its core, the Ministry strives to assemble traditional industrial know-how, cutting edge R&D, and strong pro-business policies (MKE, 2008)."

In order to fulfill the charge laid upon it, the MKE has become involved in policy-making and implementation in areas as apparently diverse as energy security and providing incentives to international inward investment. Given the nature of Thai politics and the role of the bureaucracy, it is difficult to imagine and administration being willing and able to provide so much power to ministers in a comparable situation, not to mention the opportunities for preferment and skullduggery.

The interaction between the Korean government and the computer games software industry provides a good example of how the state has set the level of importance of developmental goals. Within the Korean economy, computers have been one of the fastest growing sectors in Korea businesses. The software industry has taken up a greater share of Korea's GDP each year. Gaming has been one of the fastest growing businesses in Korea. The Korea Game Development & Promotion Institute (KGDI)'s vision is to become one of the top-three global gaming nations by 2007 (Kanellos, 2004). In 2000, sales in the domestic gaming industry were valued at US$1 billion. According to KDGI, the South Korean domestic market size in 2007 was expected to reach US$8.5 billion (25% increase per year) and to have created up to 100,000 jobs (25% increase annually) from 34,000 jobs in 2002 (KGDI, 2006). The KGDI itself was founded in 1995 as a concept to build a gaming industry. The office was officially opened in 1999 (ibid.) and it follows on from Korean success in other forms of cultural production, including animation, film and television production and popular music.

From 1999-2003, KGDI put forth various policies related to games. Excellent infrastructure has been introduced such as a certification system to evaluate the qualifications of state-certified technicians in three fields: namely games planning, game graphics and game programming. In addition, a Game Academy has been created and there is a scenario support system organized through the "Best Gaming of the Month, Korea" Game Awards and more.

In addition to economic and business change, it has also been necessary for Koreans to accept some social change. For a society which greatly values diligence and educational achievement, the emphasis on playing games seems counter-intuitive. Game playing is the opposite of working and would seem to have little or no value in a society in which neo-Confucian values promote self-sacrifice and diligence well above personal gratification. Further, the playing of online games has at least for some players an addictive quality which can lead to negative health outcomes resulting from over-lengthy playing sessions, together with the concomitant negative effects upon career and educational performance. To tackle this, the Korean government has made considerable efforts to promote games playing as a legitimate activity for young people and games design as a real option as a career (Jin and Chee, 2008). An extensive network of PC Bangs (Rooms) exists across the country and they are generally very popular with young people playing games online, as well as other activities (Huhh, 2008). As of December 2004, there were 219 'pro gamers' in Korea. New gamers have been turned out since 1998, and after the registration of pro gamers in August 2000, 'professional gamer' was recognized as a new occupation. By 2005, there were nearly one thousand registered professional players. The structure in which competition takes place is provided by the Korea Internet Game League (KIGL), which was founded with teams of professional players representing companies like Samsung and SK Telecom. Sponsors provide gamers with housing and automobiles. Administration of the sport is provided by the Korea e-Sport Association (KeSPA), which was

founded in 2005. KeSPA is responsible not just for providing competitions and rulings but also has a role in promotion of the sport and in training young players. In other words, KeSPA works with a similar remit to organizations charged with administering sports such as athletics, football or rugby.

The games played in competitions may vary and competitors are expected to have a degree of flexibility and competence across platforms. However, the principal game used is Starcraft, which is a Real Time Strategy game, in which gamers must collect and manage resources, build units and attack and defend against other players and their units and installations. Starcraft is produced by Blizzard Entertainment has sold more than 6 million copies in South Korea and played by more than 10 million people in the country with 49 million of population (Wallace, 2007). Played to a high level, this game requires a combination of good strategic thinking and planning as well as very quick reflexes and nimble fingers. For these reasons if no other, younger people are much more likely to be successful in competing in these games than older people. However, the games have not been taking place in organized play for sufficient time for it to have become established what age levels are particularly suitable. Indeed, it is possible that a variety of long-term health and social issues may emerge in the course of time. Players are able to earn up to US$20,000 for winning a day-long competition and so it is possible for professionals to support themselves through prize money, if they are successful enough. However, players may also receive support from their team and endorsement deals with sponsors. Some players have become famous in their own right and enjoy, if they wish, a level of celebrity. Clearly, not every player can be successful and wealthy and some of the less-skilled can only afford to participate on a part-time basis. Nevertheless, events are screened on television and a dedicated channel exists for showing games on a live basis. Clearly, this level of commitment requires a significant expenditure of resources to bring success to the industrial sector: the Korean state has worked hard to provide the necessary troika of good policy, education and social solidarity required to bring innovative activities of this sort into reality. The impact on urban structure has been similarly decisive. As has become well-established, Korea has become one of the most wired countries in the world and its citizens among the most attuned to the online world. Of course, the entirety of the project to bring Korea into an advanced level of online technology has not been entirely driven by the online games industry but that has been a part of it. The urban structure of Seoul, as for most of the rest of the country, has been strongly influenced both by the developmental nature of the state in general and by the need for high levels of internet connectivity in particular. This has been conducted through the public-private partnership that has come to distinguish the post-survival East Asian developmental state: leaders in the private sector have developed corporations to the extent that they can no longer be ordered by the public sector without recourse but, nevertheless, are still reliant upon the state for a number of important issues.

**Creative Industry in Thailand**

The definition of the creative industry in Thailand reflects, as might be expected, the existence of already active and important sectors within the economy. There is an element of defensiveness mixed with self-regard in the Thai government (and many other governments too, of course) that leads to definitions such as this one that portray the country in its best

light. Hence, this definition is employed: Wooden furniture and fixtures; Printing and publishing; Drug and Medicine; Jewelry and related articles; Research; Motion picture production; Movie theatre; Radio, TV, and related services; Information Technology. Of this list, the jewelry sector contributes more than 50% of total value already. The Kenan Institute evaluated the Thai creative industry as follows: "… in 2008, Thailand's creative industries contributed THB 1,067,987 million (about USD 32 billion) in sales and more than THB 325,274 million (about USD 9.7 billion) in value added (not including the value added from the IT industry as this value-added data is not available). These industries accounted for 9.53% of total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) with the value added amounting to 2.86% of GDP in 2008. Revenue from the jewelry industry accounted for 4.73% of GDP). In 2008, 875,500 workers (or 2.42% of Thailand's workforce) were employed in the selected creative industries" (Kenan Institute Asia, 2009). In other words, it is the jewelry industry that currently dominates what is called the 'creative industry' in Thailand and this sector is largely old-fashioned in its various aspects of custom and practice. As a traditional form of economic activity, jewelry is clustered into historically important areas that can draw upon resources of comparative and competitive advantage – much of mainland Southeast Asia has access to valuable mineral resources which have been mined for centuries, often with the assistance of Chinese expertise and capital, while certain villages have specialized in jewelry manufacturing for many years. Since the trade requires comparatively little in the way of modern infrastructure, at least in its present configuration, then its impact upon urban structure will remain limited.

Much of the change in the structure of Bangkok as it is currently being manifested is being driven by the private sector development of new accommodation opportunities, while the public sector has focused on safety and disaster management. In recent years, Thailand as a whole has suffered from water management issues, especially seasonal floods, which have devastated much of the upriver provinces and threatened (but not quite managed) to overwhelm the capital. The metropolitan authorities have responded by digging very large tunnels that will remove excess water flow at a very rapid rate. At the same time, development of the public transit system has, slowly, worked its way through the preliminary negotiations and debate and extensions to the existing system are being brought into being. It is this extension that has proved most useful for the very busy real estate development industry in Bangkok as numerous new projects are being opened, many of which are in the attractive but very expensive centrally located Silom and Sukhumvit area but, more interestingly, in areas surrounding the public transport stations. Many of these are aimed at midlevel clients who provide the workers for city centre jobs in higher level residential accommodation than previously available. These systems and the ongoing improvements to the road network have made a contribution to reducing the problems of Bangkok's notorious traffic issues. There has also been a dispersal of the retail system, with a wider range of stores available in more locations throughout the city. In general, this has led to the creation of more important nodes within Bangkok which combine residential, commercial and retail facilities together and are changing the location of production areas and flows of people and resources. This also includes to a slightly lesser extent the peripheral 'villages' which are mostly gated residential communities on the outskirts of Bangkok and linked

with the central urban region by good quality road links. However, this process seems to have little interaction with any coherent attempt to restructure the city in the light of the creative industry and its physical units. Although these changes do seem to reflect to some extent improvements in standards of living that have resulted from the EAEM, they do not indicate a qualitative break from that model.

In other words, people are exiting the model upwards as their improved income has allowed them or their relatives to attain urban living and employment.

However, that does not mean that upgraded jobs are available to those people but merely the same kinds of service or office work available all along.

There is, therefore, a strong need for future development plans to incorporate the vision for the creative industries or other future drivers of economic growth into the planning for the city and its hinterland.

By contrast with Seoul, Bangkok authorities have not yet either articulated this vision nor sought to bring about the combination of education, policy adjustment and social solidarity that would be necessary to make changes successful and sustainable.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Developmental states have less power to effect their goals once the road to democratization has begun, assuming that progress along this road includes the incorporation of transparency, freedom of association, a strong and independent media and so forth. There is a limited but definite amount of leverage available for causing change in the behaviour of the private sector. Of course, the private sector is generally quite happy to act according to public sector bidding if they have a strong enough incentive to do so.

This is generally the case when it comes to bringing about changes to urban structure since private sector firms are able to take advantage of publicly-funded infrastructure provision and may even win contracts to build part of them.

However, causing clustering in firms whether as part of the creative industry or not remains problematic in terms of sustainable competitive advantages and evidence shows that it is not always possible to predict when success will be obtained (cf. e.g. Pereira, 2002; Farole, 2001; Cho, 1996). The problem is more difficult because of the dynamic change in contemporary urban settings such as Seoul and Bangkok, the constantly creative destruction characteristic of capitalism and the changes that are being brought about as a result of the changes induced by global climate change. Many of these changes are unpredictable and seem impossible to predict or to dictate.

In both Korea and Thailand, the creative industries have been seen as a means of entering the knowledge economy, which is also one version of the post-EAEM age.

Korea has gone much further along this path than has Thailand and appears to have made a much more committed effort to ensure that it had the conditions for progress in place prior to launching policies and committing further resources.

To some extent, this is the result of a closer relationship between firms and government and this may be seen in the urban structure of Seoul. In Seoul, much of the landscape is dominated by the regular apartment blocks reserved for the corporate workforce of large Korean conglomerates. By contrast, Bangkok's landscape is dominated by individual development projects created by independent investors for their personal profit and for sale or rent on an open market.

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