



PROJECT MUSE®

*Deconstruction/Construction: The Cheonggyecheon Restoration
Project in Seoul* edited by Joan Busquets (review)

Tom Looser

Journal of Korean Studies, Volume 18, Number 2, Fall 2013, pp. 407-410 (Review)

Published by Duke University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jks.2013.0021>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/528263>

Book Reviews

Deconstruction/Construction: The Cheonggyecheon Restoration Project in Seoul edited by Joan Busquets. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2011. 86 pp. 40 color photographs. 12 black-and-white photographs. 3 black-and-white illustrations. 19 maps. \$19.95 (paper)

As Korea continues to rebuild beyond the postwar period and perhaps supersede the condition of postcoloniality, the city form—the concrete infrastructure of everyday life—is one of the media in which this historical process is playing out. The Ch’onggye Stream (Ch’onggyech’ŏn)¹ project would seem to be a prime example. In an intense recovery operation from 2002 through 2005, the Seoul city government ripped out an elevated freeway running through the center of the city and rebuilt the riverbed. The newly running river, including the public space it reconstituted, is designed to pull Seoul back into a new kind of unity.

But Ch’onggye Stream is not your average river, urban or otherwise, nor is it anything like the typical center of a major metropolitan city. More than simply a successful reclamation of a waterway, the stream helped to propel Seoul Mayor Lee Myung-bak (Yi Myŏngbak) on to his ultimately successful bid for the presidency of the Republic of Korea in 2012. Moreover, the project has come to constitute something of a new paradigm for urbanism in general. It makes sense that Harvard’s Veronica Rudge Green Prize in Urban Design has been awarded to the project; the publication of *Deconstruction/Construction* was part of the commemoration of this prize. The book is short, consisting of a set of brief, varied essays accompanied by photo compendia, but the essays suggest some of the complexity and importance of this project—both in its relation to Seoul and to urban studies.

A naturally occurring stream had always run through the city, but by the 1950s it had become overburdened by shanty-style housing with inadequate waste systems. A long-term process of covering the stream in concrete addressed these problems, culminating in the construction of a highway overpass in the late 1960s. The result was, in some ways, a classic modern transportation system that allowed and encouraged the smooth flow of automobile traffic across the city, but it also helped to install a cultural and economic divide within the city; city planners thus designed the destruction of the highway and revival of the stream not only to provide a new and happier public space, but also to stitch the city back together.

This was not, however, just a matter of yanking up concrete to unveil a natural river way. Even *Deconstruction/Construction* tends, at times, to romantically speak in simple terms of a return to nature within the heart of the city. A visit to the stream itself reveals something quite different. Certainly there is a flowing stream, including river plants, fish, and occasional birds. But at the start, near City Hall, one finds a concrete-enwrapped deeply sunken channel that structurally looks little different from any urban river designed to carry runoff, as, for example, the Los Angeles River. The “headwaters” are marked by a massive spiral, a shell-shaped, brightly painted sculpture by Claes Oldenburg called *The Spring*, and the actual waters for the stream are piped in from the Han River over six kilometers away and mechanically pumped up from beneath the sculpture to cascade then down a concrete bank. There is, in other words, no pretense that this is a naturally derived waterway; it is more as if the artwork is the fanciful origin of the water. The river then flows through layers of bright neon lights and large scalloped concrete sidewalls that guide the water on into the channel.

From that origin, varied elements structure the pedestrian experience. The walkway proceeds under frequent bridges, each of which seems to be of a different era and architectural style. One walkway passes displays of digital art, said to invoke global connections; local photography; art installations in the water itself; folk performances and wall tiles depicting a procession of the influential King Chǒngjo of the eighteenth century; and a gradual increase in native vegetation and animal life.

Ch’ōnggye Stream is thus a complicated reorganization of conditions that we might still call “natural”—as well as high-tech, urban, cultural, and historical. The argument for judging this as a restoration of an “ecological habitat” (p. viii), as the book at times does, seems to miss the point; walking the river is not a homogenous experience of nature. The book is, however, far subtler and more revealing of the complexity of what has been built. One can at least begin to read into the essays a sense of the heterogeneous conditions and qualities that help to define the Ch’ōnggye Stream, both with regard to the kind of site it is and in the way it is meant to relate to its wider urban context.

Accordingly, Marion Weiss’s essay calls Ch’ōnggye Stream an “urban theater . . . an infrastructural chameleon,” that creates “a new reciprocity between engineered nature and a vibrant public life” (Marion Weiss, “Rewinding a Public Infrastructure,” p. 50). Eve Blau describes it as “multiply coded,” a “rush of high-tech cyberspace and nature in one central-Seoul spot” (Eve Blau, “Recalibrating the Urban,” p. 25). Chris Reed says it “supplants layers of single-minded transportation . . . infrastructure with a new kind of hybridized public work” (Chris Reed, “The Ecological [and Urbanistic] Agency of Infrastructure, p. 35) that “spawns new forms of ecological and social life in the city” (p. 35). And at the level of even more strictly defined material infrastructure, Joan Busquets writes that the integrated implantation of specialized systems, such as sewerage, water table, services, and circulation flows in general, are constructed to coexist in an “active” (Joan Busquets, “The Deconstruction and Construction of a Major

Metropolitan Space in Seoul,” p. 4) rather than a single, stable relation to each other and to the wider fabric of the city. Ch’onggye Stream accordingly is, in sum, a combined “rehabilitation of the existing fabric” with “superpositions of major interventions in content and program” (*ibid.*, p. 6).

This makes basic terms like a city center, and even the whole fabric of the city, a little more complicated. This is a massive project and in many ways a modernist one. The restoration, furthermore, has included elements of modernist history along with the resuscitation of nature. One of the buildings to be restored, for example, was a four-block-long Metabolist residential building from 1956. Still, this is not the overarching, homogenizing thrust of modernist engineering typified by Haussmann. Nor, on the other hand, is it necessarily just a postmodernist pastiche of references (though Busquets does write of a “collage of morphologies and infrastructures” [p. 8]). It is no longer based on a model of “monofunctionalist urbanism” (Weiss, p. 52), but it is an organized and integrated order of things nonetheless. It is a synthesis, in which “old and new fabric . . . spatial and temporal layers coexist” and are dialogic (Blau, p. 21). Modernity, as figured in this project, is no longer simply about either linear progress or a homogenizing futurity. History is thus part of what is playing out in Ch’onggye Stream. And if this is now what is being called a rehabilitation of nature, then so too is the idea and place, of nature.

The comparison and contrast to something like a Haussmannian modernity works in other ways as well. In part, this is visible in the essays’ repeated reference to an opposition between the ongoing tendency of urban planning to think in terms of scale—the kind of thinking implied in Haussmann’s modernity—and architects’ orientation toward much more local, site-specific concerns. Here, the authors generally accept the idea that Ch’onggye Stream is a new combination of these two tendencies. Perhaps more interesting, though, is the related opposition between the propensity of modernist planning to strategically attempt to organize the future—orienting the present in such a way that the future is all planned—and something less certain. In these essays, one can see at least hints that Ch’onggye Stream is something closer to an idea left open to develop organically, rather than an organization of life as a fixed set of possibilities. This is perhaps a little utopian, and it would be interesting to see how the architects might in fact have been thinking along those lines, but it has force as an actual prospect, whether intended or not.

The essays that make up this book overlap, but they are also quite different in tone and focus. The opening essay by Busquets at times speaks in almost archetypal terms, as in how “civilization evolves” (p. 2) and how the geography of Seoul responded to the “universal concept” of the “prototypical ‘valley section’” (p. 2). The concluding essay, on the other hand, focuses on straight statistics as a means of evaluating the outcome of the project. For the most part, the essays provide a complementary balance of perspectives.

There are, however, some recurring contradictions that run through the book, both within and across the essays. Some view the stream as a revived modernist project and readable in those terms, while others at least imply that it should

be understood as something entirely new. At some points the arguments focus on Ch'ŏnggye Stream as a truly site-specific construct—a singularity—and at other points (even within the same essay) the argument will shift back to the need to view Ch'ŏnggye Stream as clearly part of a full urban fabric. Some of the same essays contradict themselves, saying that the sunken nature of the river way means that the river way is independent of, or even alienated from, the city, while simultaneously claiming that the river way weaves the city back together; similarly, at times it seems this is close to the emptying of a center, and at other times it seems to be a critically forceful center.

The essays are also suggestive of important questions that do not really get the attention they should. There is oddly little discussion of the actual experience of walking the river way. It is designed to proceed in five sections—for example, the first section is vaguely described by the designers as a realm of “history,” the second “harmony,” etc., and more simply, it starts out concrete-splattered and ends up as something closer to an undefined wild. If one of the underlying principles was a consideration of movement, what is this movement like? Even practically—does it matter that the park is composed of water, not trees like similar parks elsewhere? Or, if this is a prize in part for the design of public space, how do the authors conceive of this as a *public* space? And perhaps most important, what are some of the social costs, or at least, some of the social motivations for building this? For example, the first essay writes of the “infrastructures of mobility” (Busquets, p. 4), the need for broader and straighter streets, and the emergence of hierarchies—as if this were merely a matter of material urban form, independent of economic, social, or political concerns. It is only briefly noted, toward the very end, that the price of land in some of the areas around Ch'ŏnggye Stream rose by 50 percent when the project was built. Surely these considerations are part of the picture?

But this text is meant to be a short document about the Ch'ŏnggye Stream project in celebration of the prize awarded. The sections are true essays; they are brief statements testing out ideas put into play in Ch'ŏnggye Stream. At all levels, these ideas are provocative, important, and productive.

NOTE

1. The text under review employs the Revised Romanization system employed in South Korea since 2000 rather than the McCune-Reischauer system utilized by *The Journal of Korean Studies*. Thus “Cheonggyecheon” is rendered “Chŏnggyech'ŏn” in the review. —Eds.

TOM LOOSER
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY