

# Turning an Overpass into a Forest: Seoullo 7017



The pedestrianised Seoullo 7017 is most stunning at night.

Source: Centre for Liveable Cities

Seoul, winner of the prestigious 2018 Lee Kuan Yew World Cities Prize, has turned its highways and main roads into public spaces for people. What brought the city from car-centric to car-lite? The preservation and regeneration of Seoul Station Overpass, renamed Seoullo 7017 after its transformation from an ugly monster that ruined the urban landscape into a pedestrian street “Sky Park”, offers insights on the city’s vision for the future.

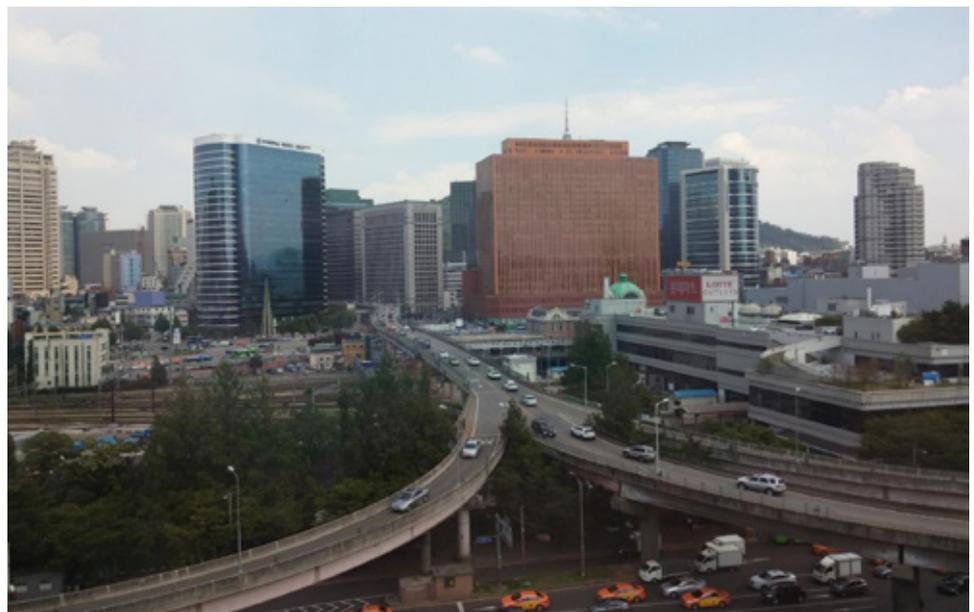
## The Traffic Monster of Seoul

Opened in 1970, the Seoul Station Overpass was a 938m two-lane, two-way road that connected Incheon, Yeoido, the western region and the eastern region. At its peak, the Overpass played a major role in traffic movement—as the east-west region of the city is disconnected by the railroads—and the average number of vehicles on it per day in 2015 was about 45,000.



Seoul Station Overpass in the 1970s.

Source: Seoul Metropolitan Government. <http://www.ss7017.org/>



Seoul Station Overpass before its closing in 2015

Source: Seoul Metropolitan Government. <http://www.ss7017.org/>

Once a symbol of modernisation and a solution to traffic problems in the city, the Overpass came to be regarded in the 1990s as an ugly monster that ruined the urban landscape as did other overpasses. From a political and cultural aspect, the Overpass was historic to Seoul, being a spot for assembly during the series of pro-democracy movements in the 1980s, including the Seoul Station Assembly in 1980 and the June Democracy Movement in 1987. It was also where reporters took photographs of important historic events.

By the mid-1980s, some 15 years after the opening of the Seoul Station Overpass, safety concerns were raised as the rapid increase in traffic caused the structure to deteriorate. This was worsened after the 1986 Asian Games and the 1988 Seoul Olympics, and partial repair and maintenance was performed in the 1990s. Since then, the Overpass has been inspected and repaired every year.

Despite these measures, safety issues persisted. In 1998, vehicles over 13 tonnes, including public buses, were prohibited from using the Overpass. In December 2006, it was classified “Level D” after a Precision Safety Diagnosis, which required a review on its possible removal. This led to the March 2007 decision to replace the Overpass. Following a detailed review, the Seoul Metropolitan Government announced in 2008 that the Overpass would be removed in 2010 and replaced by a new 471 m traverse bridge that would extend from Seoul Station Intersection to Malli-dong.

### **From Removing to Preserving the Seoul Station Overpass**

The plan to replace the Overpass made no progress until 2014 due to numerous factors, including resistance from the Ministry of Culture, Sports & Tourism, which was managing Seoul Station, and KORAIL, which was planning to redevelop the Seoul Station area. The economic recession also played a part in this delay.

After Mayor Park Won-soon was re-elected in June 2014, his election promise to create a “High-Line Park at Seoul Station” sparked discussions on reversing the removal of the Overpass and preserving it as a historical & cultural asset instead. This was inspired by The High Line Park in Manhattan, New York, where a former elevated railroad line had been transformed into a green, public space. Supported by Seoul’s transport policy changing from car-friendly to pedestrian-friendly in the mid-1990s, and through Mayor Park’s (Seoul’s fifth mayor to be elected by popular vote) insistence on developing a pedestrian-friendly city, the Seoul Station Overpass was now to be turned into a “Sky Park” and pedestrian street.

The transformation plan involved several stages, from prohibiting vehicles into the area and opening it as a pedestrian street, a contest for ideas on the best ways to utilise the overpass, and expert discussions. The project name “Seoul Station 7017”, was announced in January 2015 and the numbers referred to various outcomes: “a historic overpass that was first constructed in 1970 and reconstructed in 2017”; “rebirth from a road for vehicles in 1970 to 17 pedestrian streets”; and “an overpass with a height of 17m that was first constructed in 1970”. The Overpass was subsequently coined “Seouillo 7017”, Seouillo literally meaning Road of Seoul in Korean.

This project was to spearhead the urban regeneration of the area around Seoul Station and raise its value. In addition to the vision of reusing the Overpass to create a landmark green space in the city, it would be linked to historic and cultural spaces nearby to boost the local economy which had shrunk due to the railroad facilities. This was to be achieved by the creation of a “Seoul Arboretum” by Dutch architect, Winy Maas. His proposal, the winner of an international design contest ending in May 2015, was to connect the central part of Seoul, fragmented with disconnected roads, into one. The Overpass was to be remade into a forest, with lamps that looked like branches on trees and Korean trees planted from Toegye-ro to Jungnim-dong in the order of the Korean alphabet. The Overpass would also activate the local economy by organically connecting Namdaemun Market, Nam Mountain and Seoul Station Square.



Aerial view of the winning design for the Seoul Station 7017 Project (Winy Maas, "The Seoul Arboretum")  
Source: Seoul Metropolitan Government. <http://www.ss7017.org/>

### **Concerns Over Seoul Station 7017**

When the Seoul Station 7017 Project was announced, there was strong opposition from traffic/environment/urban planning professionals, merchants at Namdaemun Market and other related parties, self-governing bodies in Jung-gu and Mapo-gu, civic groups, the general public, media and politicians. Their opposition can be classified into five concerns.

First, there was worries that traffic congestion would arise without a substitute for the main road that connects the East and West over the Overpass. The nearest detours—Cheongpa-ro~Yeomcheongyo~Tongil-ro/Chilpae-ro—were already at their peak capacity and additional traffic would only worsen an already bad situation.

Second, the impact on the area's commercial vibrancy and living environment was a concern of the merchants at Namdaemun Market, workers in the sewing industry in the Malli-dong/Gongdeok-dong area, and residents. They demanded an alternative route be constructed for trucks and motorbikes delivering goods. However, this was not possible due to the railroad facilities. Third, civic groups, the media and politicians criticised the lack of a sufficient communication with the public and other interested parties during the project's planning stages and accused the Seoul Metropolitan Government of unilaterally pushing forward with the plan.

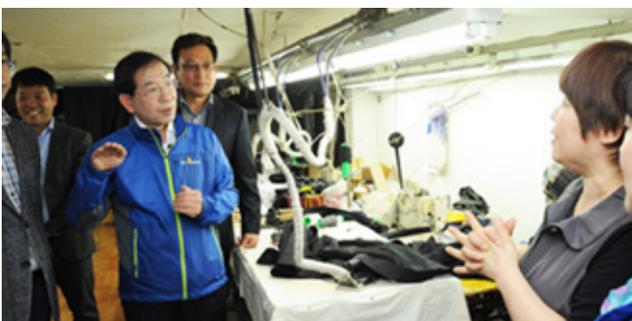
Fourth, many experts worried that preserving the Overpass may spoil the urban landscape and that a high-line walkway may not comply with the principles of a pedestrian city. They also saw the plan to create a high-line forest as anti-environmental, and nothing more than just another development project.

Finally, the proposal's economic feasibility was called into question. The cost of developing a high-line forest was similar to that of removing the overpass and constructing an alternative. Its maintenance was estimated to cost even more. In addition, there was social costs from the expected traffic congestion nearby.

### **Winning Support for Seoul Station 7017**

In response to the concerns and opposition, the Seoul Metropolitan Government planned an alternative traffic route to relief traffic congestion and improved the flow of detours with traffic countermeasures near Namdaemun Market and expanded the public bus service. There was also more engagement with residents through a Mayor's Office on-site.

The office invited residents to organise and manage an Overpass walking group and it held discussions with experts to learn about the plan's economic effects. In March 2015, a Citizens' Committee was created with subcommittees for Operative Planning, Culture & Tourism, Technical Advice and Urban Regeneration. Over a hundred engagements were clocked in a month, including public presentations, visits to Namdaemun Market, face-to-face discussions with residents and experts, a specialist forum, and discussions with Gu (autonomous districts) and related agencies. Their voices—including support from the sewing industry in Malli-dong/Cheongpa-dong/Seogyedong—contributed to a "General Development Plan for the Seoul Station Area" that was announced in May 2015.



Mayor Park talking with citizens in the field  
Source: Seoul Metropolitan Government.  
<http://www.ss7017.org/>



Plans of the Seoul Station 7107 Project were presented to residents  
Source: Seoul Metropolitan Government.  
<http://www.ss7017.org/>

With regards to project's economic feasibility, research by academia and specialised research institutions discovered sufficient amounts of social benefits, including improving convenience for pedestrians and activating the local economy. These findings and the General Development Plan for the Seoul Station Area helped the Seoul Metropolitan Government persuade nearby merchants, residents and citizens of the benefits of Seoul Station 7017. On 13 December, 2015, the Overpass was closed. After a "Last Walk on the Overpass at Christmas", the Overpass was no longer a road for vehicles. The Overpass reopened to the public as a forest in April 2017.



An event for citizens before the closing of the Seoul Station Overpass  
Source: Seoul Metropolitan Government. <http://www.ss7017.org/>



Closing of Seoul Station Overpass

Source: Seoul Metropolitan Government. <http://www.ss7017.org/>

To oversee the redevelopment and promotion of the Overpass, a General Planning Group for Development of the Seoul Station Area was set up under the deputy mayor. The group is supported by an additional three teams (planning/regeneration/support) from the Public Regeneration division under the Urban Regeneration Headquarters. In 2016, an external pedestrian/urban planning expert was appointed as the Master Planner to ensure the comprehensive planning of this urban regeneration project. An Urban Regeneration Support Center, headed by an expert on community planning, was also established to promote the project to the residents. Other efforts to ensure the success of the project include expert advisory meetings, presentations to and interviews with residents, an international workshop with domestic and foreign experts and intensive meetings in each region.

### **Promoting Urban Regeneration Around the Overpass**

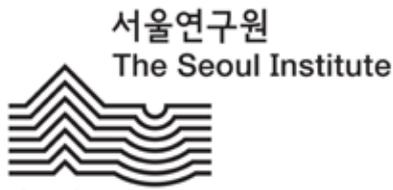
Besides redeveloping the Overpass, the Seoul Station 7017 also has a strategy to make Seoul Station the gateway to a global city, one which is pedestrian-friendly and rich with history and culture. This was achieved by carrying out a systematic and accurate diagnosis on the current pedestrian system, the commercial opportunities of the local market and to identify suitable beneficiaries of regeneration. The project also sought synergistic participation of and cooperation between relevant planning organisations. Finally, to create a mutually-beneficial project, the project sought to unify bottom-up communication with residents and area merchants through the Urban Regeneration Support Center. It also used the Citizens' Committee and experts to provide top-down direction on regeneration led by the public sector.

With these strategies, the Seoul Metropolitan Government is pushing forward plans to 'activate the streets linked to the connection points' by repairing Toegye-ro, Millije-ro, Junglim-ro, the road of the National Drama Company of Korea and developing the road connecting to Nam Mountain/Fortress Wall. This provides a starting point to promote further regeneration plans in the Seoul Station area.

### **Success via A Holistic Approach**

The Seoul Metropolitan Government anticipates that this project will attract an average floating population of 390,000 daily to around Seoul Station and the city. It will create a new tourist and cultural space that is expected to greatly help the local economy (i.e. Namdaemun Market and nearby stores) too. Residents in the area will also benefit from the High-Line Park on the Overpass, as it offers a relief from environmental issues such as vehicle noise and pollution. Finally, the project is expected to promote regeneration of the Seoul Station area, making it a top-rate example of urban revival in pedestrian-friendly Seoul, and a gateway to this global city.

The Seoul Station 7017 represents Seoul's efforts in creating a more pedestrian-friendly city. Not only is a road for vehicles being converted into a pedestrian street and a high-line park, this project is the foundation for the regeneration of the Seoul Station area. By working hard to engage various stakeholders, listening to their views and coming up with appropriate solutions, the Seoul Metropolitan Government managed to overcome initial opposition and initiate the project. This was also aided by a proactive public relations campaign, a mutually-beneficial governance system and an expert organisation put in place.



### About the Seoul Institute

The Seoul Institute analyses major challenges that face the city. As a think-tank for the Seoul Metropolitan Government, it plans for the city's future through studies of various current policies along with establishing mid- and long-term visions for Seoul. Funded by the Seoul Metropolitan Government, the Seoul Institute was established as a comprehensive policy institute in 1992. It has systematically studied problems in various disciplines such as urban planning and design, housing, transportation, environment, safety and control, industrial economy, administration and finance, social policy, welfare, health, cultural tourism, gender and family, and education.

Since these areas influence the lives of the city's residents, viable policy alternatives are critical. While Seoul, as the capital of Korea, has been an icon of compressed growth in modern times, it now needs to become a city of social responsibility with a clean environment and a unique culture. We propose policy alternatives to improve life in qualitative terms, instead of simply quantitative indicators of urban growth. The Seoul Institute also conducts research on urban infrastructure for citizens of Seoul.



### About CLC

The Centre for Liveable Cities was set up in 2008 by the Ministry of National Development and the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, based on a strategic blueprint developed by Singapore's Inter-Ministerial Committee on Sustainable Development. Guided by its mission to distil, create and share knowledge on liveable and sustainable cities, the Centre's work spans four main areas - Research, Capability Development, Knowledge Platforms and Advisory. For more information, please visit us at <http://www.clc.gov.sg>