

Yeouido Sibum Apartments: South Korea's first high-rise collective housing complex, 1970-71

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Introduction

In 1971, on a previously barren construction site on the eastern part of Yeouido, one of the few inhabitable islands in the Han river, the towering profile of the Yeouido Sibum Apartments, the first high-rise apartment complex in Seoul, gradually appeared against the backdrop of Mount Namsan. Planned as the biggest and most technologically advanced apartment complex ever built in Seoul, the Yeouido Sibum Apartments was intended as an ideal family housing complex, with 1,584 apartments of four different types for the upper middle-class residents of the city, served by South Korea's first apartment elevators moving between 12 floors.



Figure 1. Yeouido Sibum Apartments in 1973

(Source: Seoul Museum of History)

The Yeouido Sibum Apartments was one of the first architectural projects realised in the newly developed Yeouido areas. From the early 1960s, a great number of government-led industrial and cultural modernisation projects had been initiated, and Yeouido had gradually attracted the attention of government officials as the ideal place to imagine the future of the physically and demographically expanding Seoul by overcoming the geographical limitations caused by the Han river. In this context, the Seoul Metropolitan Government came up with a series of ambitious plans to convert the island into an ideal city where important governmental institutions, including the City Hall, the National Assembly and the Supreme Court would be relocated to.¹ Unfortunately, very few buildings survived subsequent years of major modification. However, Yeouido has developed as one of the major civic centres of Seoul, and the Yeouido Sibum Apartments holds historical value as the first architecture realised in relation to the initial ambitious visions for the island.

Until now, the South Korean apartments built under the developmental state of the 1960s and 1970s have been understood not as ‘architecture,’ but as a by-product of South Korea’s modern construction industry, only highlighting its fast and developing building techniques. In particular, the Yeouido Sibum Apartments has not been properly acknowledged except as the first high-rise apartment complex equipped with advanced facilities for the upper middle-class.

This essay focuses on revealing the architectural importance of the Yeouido Sibum Apartments in terms of portraying the social, cultural, and political ideals and realities of its time. Planned when the South Korean authoritarian government of the 1960s-70s pursued unprecedented, rapid modernisation projects in every part of the nation, the Yeouido Sibum Apartments project shows how architecture could play a propagandistic role, not only to promote modern ways of living but also to visualise the ideals of President Chung Hee Park

(1917-1979).

Conflicting ideals and realities of the South Korean developmental state

The idea of developing Yeouido as a civic centre originally started with the post-war national development projects of President Park. With the establishment of his dictatorial government in 1961, a series of top-down, large-scale economic development plans were set in motion. As a result, South Korea dramatically shifted from an agricultural country to a newly industrialising nation based on manufacturing and construction industries, which influenced the social and cultural dimensions of society, leading to the emergence of middle-class citizens.

Under Park's military regime, the country experienced a massive construction boom, and, a great number of civil engineering projects were carried out, such as the construction of highways in order to facilitate the transport of produced items between major South Korean cities. In 1968, the first highway was completed between Seoul and Incheon, the nearest port to Seoul, and it clearly represented the vision of the newly emerging developmental state, promoting manufacturing and exporting businesses. In this context, Yeouido had become a strategic location to create an industrial corridor connecting the two cities, named Kyung-In Megalopolis.

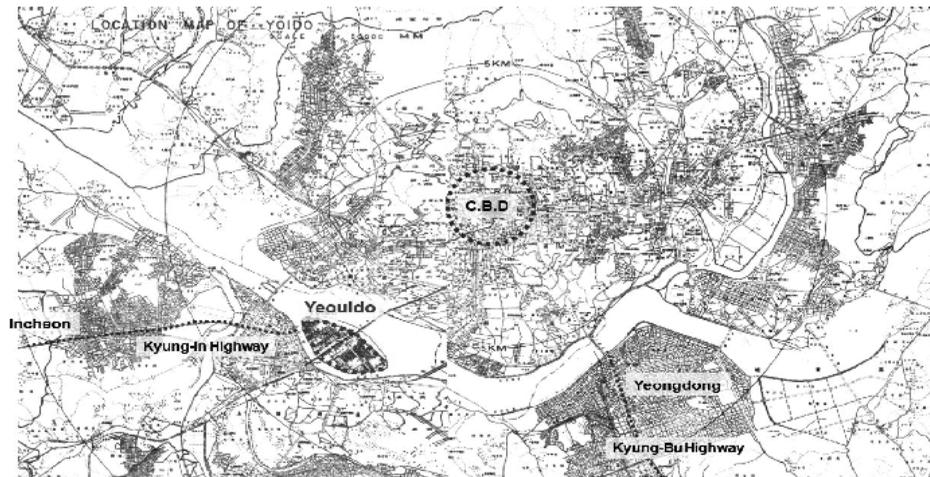


Figure 2. Location of Yeouido

(Source: Yeouido Apartments Danjigyehoekdoseo, 1973-78)

It was not until the late 1960s that the Yeouido area attracted the attention of the Seoul Metropolitan Government. In order to solve urban problems caused by the rapid population growth of the city, they wanted to create a secondary civic centre in Yeouido.² In 1967, the city government came up with the Three-Year Han River Development Plan, where all the Yeouido areas were categorised as business, residential, or special districts,³ and it was further developed as a futuristic masterplan, titled Yeouido Master Plan, by the pro-government architect Swoo Geun Kim (1931-1986), who was the vice president of the government-sponsored architectural company, Korean Engineering Consultants.⁴ Basically, he suggested converting Yeouido into a cultural and political centre of the city, like New York's Manhattan.

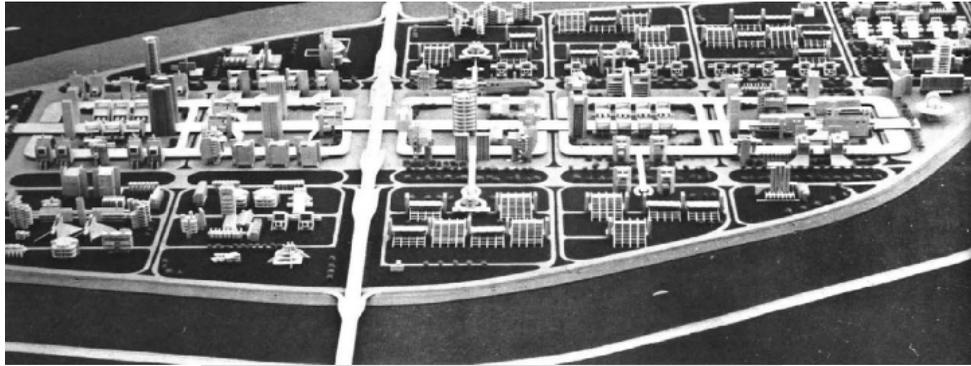


Figure 3. Swoo Geun Kim's masterplan for Yeouido

(Source: Space Magazine No. 29, April 1969)

Commonly compared to the 1960s' plan for expanding Tokyo, by the Japanese modern architect Kenzo Tange (1913-2005), Kim's architectural ideas were fundamentally based on the idea of a linear city, connecting Seoul and Incheon through Yeouido, the solution that contemporary Korean architects and urbanists had suggested for the continuously expanding Seoul.⁵ In particular, Kim proposed elevated decks, not only to separate pedestrians from cars, but to create a car-oriented civic centre on the ground level. However, considering the low motorisation rate in the late 1960s in South Korea, Kim's plan was not a practical approach. Rather, it was more an idealistic one directed towards a futuristic vision of a newly emerging industrialised nation.⁶

Eventually, Kim's ambitious architectural ideas for Yeouido were abandoned because of a lack of financial resources.⁷ Furthermore, President Park wanted to create a huge asphalt square in the middle of the island, not only for hosting political events, but for military purposes like an emergency landing strip in times of war. The square was named after the date of his military coup, 16 May, and the construction was completed on 29 September 1971. The size of the square was 280~315 m x 1,350 m, and it could accommodate 550,000 people. Recently, a secret underground bunker, seemingly built around the mid-1970s, was found near the area.⁸

Originally, the Seoul Metropolitan Government wanted to sell the newly developed lands in Yeouido in order to have a budget for realising Kim's futuristic plan. The mayor, Hyeon-og Kim (1926-1997), also pushed another plan to develop other areas in Seoul, such as Ichon and Gangnam, with the money made from selling parts of Yeouido.⁹ Eventually, the Yeouido Master Plan went through major modifications;¹⁰ by investing a limited amount of money into the Yeouido areas, the new city hall and 19 superblocks with increased high-density residential areas were intended to be built. Although the plans for the elevated pedestrian decks were abandoned, the new plan also had a central water supply and heating system as well as a new road network system designed for a future increase in the number of cars in the area.¹¹ The final plan for Yeouido, announced to the public on 10 August 1970 by urbanist Byung-Joo Park (1925-2015), visualised a modified ideal city while considering the weak economic situation of the city government.¹²

In this context, the Yeouido Sibum Apartments was one of the first architectural projects to be realised in the Yeouido areas. As mentioned above, the Seoul Metropolitan Government tried to sell the newly created lands in Yeouido to private business in order to create funds for developing other areas in Seoul. However, given the future uncertainties of Yeouido, nobody was willing to invest in the undeveloped island. Instead, the city government took the initiative and announced the launch of the Yeouido Sibum Apartments project. It was awarded to a government-sponsored company called the Seoul Unified Engineering Development Corporation (Seoul Habdong Gisul Gaebalgongdan).¹³

The Yeouido Sibum Apartments project was important for the Seoul Metropolitan Government on another level. The population of Seoul increased in step with the fast post-war urban development projects concentrated in the capital city; it was only about 1.56 million in 1955, but reached 2.45 million in 1960 and exceeded 5.5 million in 1970.¹⁴ The housing supply rate in Seoul was around 50 percent in 1966, which means that half of the

population lived in illegal forms of housing.¹⁵ Not only to solve the persisting severe housing shortage but to use the limited amount of land in Seoul in a more efficient way, the city government had to promote the benefits of apartment living to its residents.

However, most of the apartments constructed in the 1960s had been intended to supply the maximum number of homes with the minimum building cost, which led to the collapse of the Wau Simin Apartments on 8 April 1970. Upon witnessing the unprecedented disaster, the Seoul Metropolitan Government changed its previous housing policies, which had mainly been focusing on the fast development of *Simin* [citizen] apartments. As the word *Sibum* indicates (the Korean word '*Sibum*' means 'model'), the Yeouido Sibum Apartments project was carried out with the intention of building a model apartment complex, expecting it to become a dream housing community. The newspaper advertisement described it as follows: 'new town charged with emotion and high dignity' and 'pride and pleasure of living in this place'.¹⁶

As the new ideal model home, the Yeouido Sibum Apartments especially targeted the newly emerging upper middle-class.¹⁷ The surface areas of the four individual unit types, ranging from 60 m² to 156 m²,¹⁸ are much larger than 35 m², the average surface area of the apartment units for low-income classes built between 1969 and 1971. Moreover, the units of the Yeouido Sibum Apartments were designed in a way to promote modern lifestyles as opposed to Korean traditional ones; living spaces were equipped with sofas and dining tables, and technologically advanced home appliances were introduced, especially for the kitchen and the bathroom.

For President Chung Hee Park, the construction of the Yeouido Sibum Apartments had the potential to propagate his political ideals of building a modern nation, as well as advertising modern lifestyles.¹⁹ Planned around the time when the political power of President Park had reached its highest point,²⁰ the project was carried out in a way that

directly reflected his military-based governance, the so-called ‘developmental mobilisation’. Park intended to achieve modernisation through mass construction, and he believed that constructing apartments was an important task for the country. Moreover, by imagining communal living in high-rise apartment buildings, Park intended not only to strengthen the central control of the government over its citizens but also to modernise South Korean people’s traditional lifestyles, transforming them into a living culture like that found in advanced countries.²¹

The construction of the Yeouido Sibum Apartments was part of a collective attempt to realise an ideal modern city for the residents of Seoul. After Swoo Geun Kim’s utopian masterplan for Yeouido had been abandoned due to the economic and political situation of the time, the Yeouido Sibum Apartments project was the first architectural project to be realised on the underdeveloped island, not only to solve the financial and housing problems of the Seoul Metropolitan Government, but to propagate the political ideals of President Park, such as building a modern nation and advertising modern lifestyles. In this sense, the construction of the Yeouido Sibum Apartments portrays a wide spectrum of contested ideals and realities that the post-war South Korean developmental state of the 1960s-70s faced.



Figure 4. The entrance plaza of the Yeouido Sibum Apartments

(Source: National Archive of Korea)

¹ The total area of Yeouido is 8.4 square kilometers.

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- ² Inha Jung, 'A study on the Urban Development of Yoido', Journal of the architectural institute of Korea 12, (1996), pp. 124.
- ³ By developing the Yeouido areas, the Seoul Metropolitan Government intended to create funds to invest into other underdeveloped areas in Seoul. See Jung-mok Son, *Seouldosigyehoeg-iyagi 2* [The story of the urban planning of Seoul 2] (Seoul, Hanul, 2009), pp. 19-20.
- ⁴ Kim had a very close relationship with important government officials, and he took advantage of his connections for his professional career. See Inha Jung, 'A study on the Urban Development of Yoido', p. 124.
- ⁵ See Jung-mok Son, 'Yeouido geonseolgwa sigajiga hyeongseongdoeneun gwajeong (jung) [Yeouido development and the process of urbanisation (2)]', *Gugtoyeongu*, vol. 193 (1997), pp. 125-132.; Jung, 'A study on the Urban Development of Yoido', pp. 124-126. It is generally understood that Kim's Yeouido Master Plan was influenced by Kenzo Tange's plan for Tokyo. However, as Hyunjung Cho argues, Kim was exposed to the international architectural knowledge of the 1950s and 1960s, such as mobility and flexibility in architecture propagated by TEAM X. See Hyun Jung Cho, 'Cities in the age of automobiles and futuristic narratives' in *Akitopiaui silheom* [Experiment of Architopia] (Seoul, MATI, 2015), pp. 128-131.
- ⁶ Regarding the motorisation rate see Cho, 'Cities in the age of automobiles and futuristic narratives', p. 137.
- ⁷ Kim's ambitious plan for Yeouido required more than 100 billion US dollars of financial investment from the private sector; thus, it was a fundamentally unrealistic project, given the fact that the revenue of the Seoul Metropolitan Government was only around 13.8 billion dollars and the GNP was 169 dollars in 1968. See Jung-mok Son, *Seoul dosigyehoeg iyagi 1* [The story of the urban planning of Seoul 1] (Seoul, Hanul, 2003), p. 53.
- ⁸ The bunker was found in 2004, and it is now open to the public as a gallery. See *Hankyoreh*, 1 October 2015. (http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/area/area_general/710968.html)
- ⁹ Changmo Ahn, 'Seoul-ui dosihwa gwajeong-eseo yeoudoui soeowa gaebal', p. 64.; See Inha Jung, 'A study on the Urban Development of Yoido', p. 126.
- ¹⁰ Jinhee Kim, 'Jamsil District Comprehensive Master Plan (1974) in the context of Urban Planning of Seoul during 1960-1970s', p. 144.
- ¹¹ See Gak-soon Na, 'Yangtaegsig sijang jeonbangi (1970-1972) jungjeomsa-eobgwa seong-gwa' [The major projects and achievements in the first half-year of Mayor Taek Shik Yang (1970-

1972)]' in *Tudoji sijang Yang Taek-sik I (1970-1972)* [Mayor named mole, Taek Shik Yang I (1970-1972)] (Seoul, Seoul Yoksa Pangmulgwan, 2014-2015), p. 267.

- ¹² See Jung-mok Son, *Seoul dosigyehoeg iyagi 1* [The story of the urban planning of Seoul 1] (Seoul, Hanul, 2003), p. 76.
- ¹³ See Jinhee Kim, 'Jamsil District Comprehensive Master Plan (1974) in the context of Urban Planning of Seoul during 1960-1970s', p. 144; Jung-mok Son, 'Yeouido geonseolgwa sigajiga hyeongseongdoeneun gwajeong (ha) [Yeouido development and the process of urbanisation (3)]', *Gugtoyeongu*, vol. 194 (1997), p. 109.
- ¹⁴ The Seoul Research Data Service (<http://data.si.re.kr/node/332>)
- ¹⁵ The Seoul Research Data Service (<http://data.si.re.kr/node/87>)
- ¹⁶ See *Maeilgyeongje* (Maeil Business News Korea), 20 August 1970.
- ¹⁷ In 1970, one year before the completion of the Yeouido Sibum Apartments, the Hangang Mansion Apartments project was completed by the Korean Housing Company in Seoul, and it was intended to be the first middle-class low-rise apartment complex based on the neighbourhood unit theory.
- ¹⁸ These surface areas are quite similar to those of the six units of the Hangang Mansion Apartments, ranging from 88 m² to 180 m².
- ¹⁹ Park understood the idea of modern as something good as opposed to that of traditional, which was bad.
- ²⁰ By amending the South Korean constitution, President Chung Hee Park legalised his long-term dictatorship in 1969.
- ²¹ See Chulsoo Park, *Apartment* (Seoul, Mati, 2013), pp. 81 and 141.