

Urban Redevelopment, Displacement and Anti-Gentrification Movements

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Abstract : The displacement of business tenants is of growing concern in urban redevelopment. This research focuses on why business tenants have not collectively taken action against urban redevelopment and explores how their rights can be improved. It met the research aim through a case study on one urban redevelopment area in Yongsan. Although urban redevelopment plans create many problems for business tenants, there is no effective mechanism in place to enable them to get involved in the decision-making procedures of urban planning. They are collectively and individually powerless in urban politics, so they do not have enough opportunities to change the Korean urban redevelopment system. The findings from this research suggest that many tenants have been apathetic to anti-gentrification movements due to their powerlessness in the urban redevelopment domain. In order to overcome structural injustice, it is important to improve business tenants' awareness of 'the right to the city' and enforce strong legislation to safeguard tenants.

Key Words : urban redevelopment, business tenants, displacement, anti-gentrification movements, the right to the city

요약 : 재개발과정에서 상가세입자의 보상과 강제철거문제에 대한 관심이 증가하고 있다. 본 연구는 왜 상가세입자들이 재개발에 저항하며 단체운동을 하지 않는지 어떻게 그들의 권리를 향상시킬 수 있는가에 초점을 두고 있다. 용산의 한 재개발 지역을 대상으로 사례연구를 진행하였다. 도시재개발 계획이 세입자들에게 많은 문제점을 야기함에도 불구하고, 세입자들이 도시재개발 의사결정과정에서 참여할 기회가 전무하다. 상가세입자들은 개인적으로 집단적으로 지역정치에 미치는 영향력이 미약한 탓에 도시재개발제도를 변화시킬 충분한 기회를 갖지 못한다. 도시재개발영역에서 상가세입자의 무력함으로 인해 많은 세입자들이 젠트리피케이션 반대운동에 소극적이거나 냉담하였다. 구조적인 부정의 문제를 해결하기 위해서는 세입자 보호를 위한 강력한 법률 개정과 더불어 도시에 대한 권리에 대한 세입자들의 의식을 향상시키는 것이 중요하다.

주요어 : 재개발, 상가세입자, 이주, 젠트리피케이션 반대운동, 도시에 대한 권리

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1. Introduction

Gentrification, which is “a process involving a change in the population of land-users such that the new users are of a higher socio-economic status than the previous users, together with an associated change in the built environment through a reinvestment in fixed capital” (Clark, 2005:258), is the front line of social conflict over the contested city landscape (Smith, 1996, 2002). It results in the displacement of people from lower classes. Displacement, which involves direct residential dislocation against people’s will, imposes great social and financial pressures on individuals, from losing a sense of community to homelessness (Marcuse, 1985:931). If they are minority groups in terms of ethnicity and race, they tend to have stronger reasons for living in a particular area and are therefore likely to protest more strongly against gentrification and displacement. Considering their social capital and job opportunities, it is a natural response for residents to resist gentrification in order to preserve their communities, as Forman (1989) noted in his study of redevelopment in Spitalfields in London, the UK. Where there are strong community ties, the negative impact of displacement, in terms of its psychological and emotional ramifications, is significant. Fullilove (2005:20) argues that it is “the traumatic stress of the loss of their life world which is called root shock” in her extensive qualitative research on the African American community’s experiences of displacement in three different American cities under the Urban Renewal Act of 1949. Fullilove (2001:72) argues that the impact of displacement has continued in many ways from “psychological trauma to a collapse of political action”.

Even though disadvantaged groups have direct and indirect experiences of displacement, it is not easy for them to take action because of the unequal power relations between property interest groups and disad-

vantaged groups. Disadvantaged groups do not have many resources to solve their issues; for example, they are subject to insecurity of tenure and rent increases in the political and legal systems, which tend to be pro-landlords and developers (Lawson, 1986). However, displacement galvanises people into action. Tenants have continuously tried to resolve issues through collective action. Tenant movements have made progress in improving tenants’ housing rights and opposing landlords’ strong property rights (Lawson, 1986). Nevertheless, the battle between housing rights and property rights has been never-ending and urban social movements continue to grow.

Urban redevelopment in the Korean urban context is directly connected to social upgrading through improvements to the physical environment. All areas after urban redevelopment are gentrified in the sense that they experience an upwards shift in the social class of their residents. Therefore, gentrification in Korea has been considered equivalent to urban redevelopment, housing renewal, urban renewal and urban regeneration in previous empirical research (Kim, 2006, Lee and Joo, 2008, Shin, 2009, Kim, 2010). Urban redevelopment is essentially another name for gentrification and it has worked perfectly as a form of “new-build gentrification” (Davidson and Lee, 2005, 2010) in Korea. Gentrification in Korea is associated with large-scale direct displacement and violent confrontation in some places, triggered by large-scale redevelopment. Forced eviction and displacement have become widespread and have taken place systematically in the name of urban redevelopment.

As a number of people and communities have been affected, more social protests and resistance have emerged. However, there are insufficient channels to halt urban redevelopment taking place against residents’ wills. Therefore, social conflict and protests over urban redevelopment have continued to be inevitable. The Yongsan incident¹⁾ was an anti-gentrification

movement residents staged against displacement. As was the case with the Yongsan incident, business tenants have recently become a key issue, since many proposed urban redevelopment areas are in city centre or inner-city locations which are not purely residential, unlike previous urban redevelopment areas. However, few business tenants across Seoul have formed collective strategies to prevent more gentrification in their neighborhoods. This lack of protest can be explained by the power mechanisms embedded in the Korean urban redevelopment system which lead to gentrification. This research attempts to explain why business tenants have not collectively taken action against urban redevelopment. It discusses the lack of business tenant-led anti-gentrification movements in Seoul through a case study, and delves into a discussion of how to make a difference in terms of ideas relating to the 'just city' and the 'right to the city'.

2. The Background of the Case and the Research Method

Yongsan has been gentrified street by street, since many urban redevelopment projects have been in progress during the last decade. Anti-gentrification movements from business tenants are likely to increase around large-scale planned urban redevelopment projects. They have been in a position to take more action than those in other redevelopment areas, since they observed the outcome of the Yongsan incident closely. However, urban redevelopment plans in Yongsan seem to have progressed smoothly and no significant collective action has been taken by business tenants in the area. The circled area (hereafter area H) in Figure 1 was selected as a case study area to examine the research question. This area was designated for urban redevelopment in 2011 in order to facilitate business

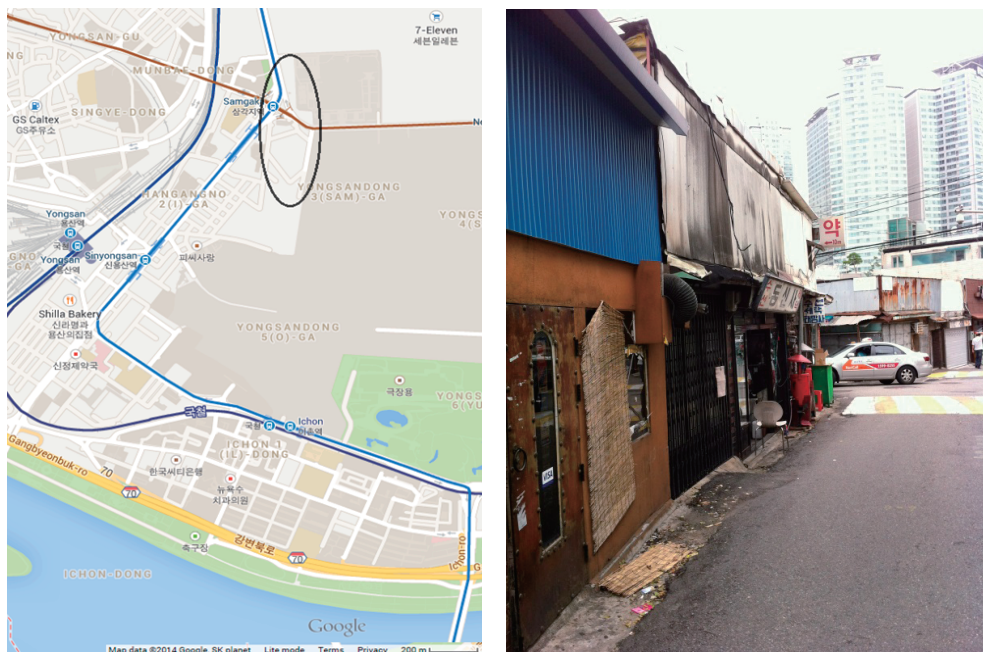


Figure 1. Location of the case study area and the present housing in area H

Source: Google Map (left), the author (right)

transactions. Property owners in area H established their association in 2012, and have driven urban redevelopment rapidly.²⁾ In area H, more than 40 percent of all buildings are non-residential. A substantial number of business renters are small supermarkets and eating and drinking places, so they are not well off. Therefore, more conflicts between tenants and the property owners' association for redevelopment (hereafter POAR) are expected in area H, because many tenants are business renters. It is more likely that collective action from business tenants would be taken at the early stages of urban redevelopment. However, no significant movements in this area have been observed so far. Researching area H offers insights into why there have been no resistance movements in the area.

This research project is based on semi-structured interviews with 13 key informants that took place between August and December 2012. The informants included three landlords, including a leader of the POAR, six business tenants, a social activist with the National Coalition for Victims of Forced Evictions (NCFE, JeonCheolhyeop in Korean) and a social activist with the South Korean Federation Against Housing Demolition (SFHD, Jeoncheollyeon in Korean), and two protesters (business tenants) working with the NCFE. The interviewees are not statistically representative of the entire business tenant population in the area on account of the method employed to recruit interviewees, which was knocking on doors. However, business tenants and landlords have various backgrounds in terms of age and length of residency. Consequently, they can tell different stories based on their experiences and provide a range of opinions. Interviews with the two protesters grew naturally out of an interview with the social activist with the NCFE.

3. Urban Conflicts and Social Challenges

Castells (1976:155) introduced the term 'urban social movements' (hereafter USMs) to describe collective citizen action designed to bring about structural social change. The only weapon ordinary people have against the powerful is collective action. USMs are one of the few means of public expression, especially for people who do not have enough opportunities to access socio-political resources. USMs have played an important role in resolving the problems faced by such groups, since grassroots mobilisation helps to improve their bargaining position through collective action. Squatter movements have been present in many Western countries since the late 1960s, and are one of the most representative urban social movements, showing the impact and importance of citizens' collective action (López, 2013:871). Squatting has taken place in resistance to urban redevelopment programmes which cause large scale displacement and gentrification (Mayer, 1993, Thön, 2012). This type of squatting movement was pervasive in Germany during the 1970s. Squatting in many German cities was sparked by the undemocratic planning process, which dismissed housing for local people in favour of building high-rise office blocks and luxury housing that would attract investors (Mayer, 1993:154-155). These mobilisations have affected the direction of urban restructuring and protected communities from demolition and gentrification processes (Thön, 2012).

However, it is now more difficult to make USMs successful and even to take collective action, since current urban policies subtly change the city to boost exchange values. Slater (2006:748-750) criticises how terms such as 'social mix' and 'social diversity' are used instead of 'gentrification' in discussions relating to neoliberal urban policies, since they hide the realities

of gentrification. Therefore, no protests or few protests happen in spite of the huge impact such policies have on people. Lees (2013:17-18) also explains that the lack of resistance against gentrification in the UK is due to the “guise of mixed communities policy” in state-led gentrification. Hackworth and Smith (2001:468) had previously claimed that anti-gentrification movements have declined in the third wave of gentrification. Uitermark et al. (2007) notice this tendency even in the Dutch context, where there was previously strong USM action against gentrification. Uitermark et al. (2007) argue that residents now accept gentrification as a means of improving their neighbourhood.

Many tenants (mainly residential tenants) in Korea took collective action against urban redevelopment and eviction between the 1980s and 1990s. Tenants demanded just compensation from the state and landlords, such as alternative housing (Cho, 1989). Direct action from some tenants forced the reluctant state to change its policies. In fact, tenants’ direct action made the state legislate several compensation packages and regulations to protect the interests of tenants. In spite of this progress, tenants are largely powerless and marginalised in the decision-making processes of urban redevelopment. They are more or less simply receivers of compensation from the state and their landlords. They cannot change the main mechanisms of urban redevelopment, which are absolutely skewed in favour of property owners and take tenants’ displacement for granted. Therefore, the potential for protest has been significant, but its occurrence and success have not been great since oppression has been systemised. During the period of compressed industrialisation, just procedure and process in Korea were ignored and the attention given to social justice and equality was insufficient. Collective value, the effectiveness of outcomes and one-sided decision-making tended to be more important than individual value, just procedure and hearing public opinions (Kim et al., 2011). This

lack of political sensitivity to social inequalities was rationalised as a means of achieving economic growth. These tendencies have remained in place until now and have affected politics, the economy and social attitudes in Korea, even after the authoritarian state disappeared and national developmentalism weakened. Oppression from a tyrannical military government is no longer a factor due to the demise of the military government in 1987. However, the concept developed by Young (1990) of structural injustice and oppression has remained prevalent in Korean society.

Oppression in this sense is structural, rather than the result of a few people’s choices or policies. Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules ... We cannot eliminate this structural oppression by getting rid of the rulers or making some new laws, because oppressions are systematically reproduced in major economic, political, and cultural institutions (Young, 1990:40).

Oppression still prevails through daily practices and produces injustice and unfairness. This sometimes results in violations of human rights, but it is difficult to eliminate the cycle of oppression due to its self-perpetuating nature. Accordingly, democracy, autonomy and equality, even in the democratic Korea, have come under attack due to state and market pressures.

Lefebvre (1996)’s concept of the ‘right to the city’ can help us to find a new path for participation-driven democracy which will help to enlarge citizens’ decision-making capacity in the currently unbalanced power relations framework. Harvey (2008:23) argues that the right to the city is one of our human rights, enabling us to change both our cities and ourselves. The right to the city is a collective and shared right that can improve individuals’ human rights (Mathivet,

2010:24). Purcell (2002) argues that this concept has profound potential to give urban inhabitants rights to participation and appropriation. The right to the city can empower the oppressed to take charge of their lives and surroundings by asserting their power as citizens, since it aims to rebalance the power dynamics between the least powerful groups and the most powerful groups. Inhabitants of urban areas can participate in decision-making processes related to the production of space more directly and centrally when they claim their right to the city. As the right to the city enhances users' rights, it can define the future city in terms of "cities for citizens" (Douglass and Friedmann, 1998) or "cities for people, not for profit" (Brenner et al., 2011). This embraces Fainstein's idea of the 'just city' (Fainstein, 2009, 2010). Fainstein's just city can be summarised as a city which provides subordinated citizens opportunities to self-govern the democratic production of urban spaces and resist profit-driven urbanisation processes. Fainstein (2010) suggests that three elements, equity, democracy and diversity, are necessary to realise urban justice. She reiterates egalitarian policy directives for the least well off in housing and urban redevelopment and underlines the importance of citizen activism when it comes to the development of just policies (Fainstein, 2010:181). When the right to the city and the just city are applied to anti-gentrification movements in Korea, they can help to raise new ideas relating to socio-spatial political and economic transformation and citizens' participation in the process of reshaping the city.

4. The Lack of Anti-Gentrification Movements in Yongsan

Even though urban redevelopment plans in the current planning system regulate housing type, the height

of the building and other factors in detail, there are no social plans or policies that allow us to see who is affected by redevelopment plans and how their negative effects could be mitigated. According to the official urban planning documents of area H, published by the Yongsan Gu government, almost all legislation deals with the physical appearance or environmental effects of urban redevelopment; people are disregarded. Current policies do not deal with the many social issues caused by urban redevelopment, such as the needs and anxieties of tenants who do not want urban redevelopment. Urban redevelopment processes have been primarily governed by the exchange value interests of property owners, which are aligned with those of capital and the state. While most of the people adversely affected by urban redevelopment are tenants, they do not have enough direct opportunities to influence urban planning for the benefit of residents living in urban redevelopment areas. Tenants are excluded from all processes apart from claiming compensation. Housing tenants have access to several compensation packages: the right to move into social housing, temporary accommodation, home loss payments and disturbance payments (Jeong and Kim, 2011). In contrast, business tenants are not offered the same compensation as housing tenants. They are given compensation called 'business suspension' for the loss of income caused by redevelopment and relocation (Yang et al., 2010).³⁾ Business tenants are likely to be more vulnerable than housing tenants under the current compensation system, because some of them lose their workplace and their home at the same time. Small business tenants resent urban redevelopment bitterly, since they often go out of business as a result.

This could happen to business tenants in area H. However, no significant movements in this area have been observed so far. This can be explained with four reasons. Firstly, tenants have not been given correct information about urban redevelopment as the POAR

does not have a compulsory duty to provide such information. They hardly grasp what is happening in their neighbourhood. They have no idea how much compensation they will be given. Their landlords and local council also do not provide enough information about urban redevelopment in their neighbourhoods. Tenants are excluded from all information. Secondly, because of the lack of information they have, business tenants have vague hopes that their area could be different from other cases and that they will not have any problems. Thirdly, many business tenants think it takes a long time to start urban redevelopment, so they believe they do not need to take action immediately. Fourthly, even though they disagree with urban redevelopment, they do not think they have the right to oppose it because they are tenants. Tenants do not feel that they are entitled to take part in the redevelopment project and they have not organised themselves into tenants' associations so they can express their opinions.

In contrast to these passive tenants, their landlords have pushed forward redevelopment plans to maximise their profits. A leader of the POAR in area H told me in an interview that

We can earn more profit from this redevelopment business than in any other redevelopment area, so there are few property owners who disagree with this redevelopment. As I told you, time is money, so I will do my best to finish this redevelopment business as soon as possible. I will give compensation to residential tenants, according to the law. If business tenants strongly resist and do not leave their property, I am willing to give as much money as they want (2012.08.20).

Considering many other cases, it is not easy to give business tenants as much compensation as they want, since the leader of the POAR in area H should get ap-

proval on the amount of tenant compensation to be awarded from the other property owners. Landlords I interviewed expressed different opinions from the leader of the POAR. Therefore, it is inevitable that conflicts between tenants and property owners happen when business tenants are provided with their compensation at a late stage. Tenants usually start to take action when they know how much compensation they will be receiving, which is generally much less than what they expected or invested in their business. However, it is too late to stop urban redevelopment at this stage. When tenants realise that their compensation is too limited for them to keep their shops open, they seek to initiate individual and collective demonstrations in their neighbourhood and ask for help from social organisations such as the NCFE and the SFHD. However, a social activist with the SFHD commented that

The earlier people take action, the better the result they can get. However, people just believe that the law helps them to keep their rights, so they first try to bring a suit when they learn they will only be receiving a small amount of compensation. However, their legal action changes little. They appeal to the court, but it does not help them. In the end, they realise later that they were wrong, and they are in danger of losing their business. They ask us to help them at the last minute, so there are not many things we can do for them when they visit us (2012.08.02).

As this activist has pointed out, the current law is not helpful for business tenants who want to stay put and run their business. They cannot resist displacement or urban redevelopment itself, since they have no rights to their property as tenants. They have to vacate their property with compensation. However, their legal compensation is not sufficient for them to open

a new shop elsewhere. Their first and foremost goal when they protest is negotiating a better deal with the POAR, since it is directly connected to their job security. Even if they demonstrate and squat in their shops to challenge the urban redevelopment plan, many of them are not able to continue occupying their premises because of harassment from the POAR. One protester with the NCFE told me what kind of problems she and her neighbours experienced during their protest:

At first, 50 people protested, and claimed the unfairness of urban redevelopment. As time went by, people gave up because they were not able to work and even their family did not fully understand them. On the one hand, the POAR conciliated our spouses with money. On the other hand, the POAR threatened our families in order to stop our demonstration. The POAR said that we would not be given any compensation, even legal compensation, unless we stopped our protest (2012.08.02).

Because of these difficulties, some tenants do not consider presenting strong resistance. The response of one tenant in Yongsan is typical:

I know our compensation would not be enough. However, I am not sure protest would be helpful. While protesting, I experience financial losses because I am not able to work. It takes a long time to win and obtain more compensation. It could be better to restart my shop in another area as soon as possible rather than protest (2012.09.21).

Likewise, some tenants are passive when it comes to protest and political action since they have seen other protests fail. Only a few people who keep up their protest obtain a marginally higher level of compensation, compared to the legal level of compensation. It is not possible to make a law for business tenants or to

change the urban redevelopment system in their favour, since they have difficulties protesting and maintaining solidarity with other business tenants. In addition, tenants have limited power in the local electoral arena compared to property owners. Business tenants may not live in the area where their shop is located, so they have limited power in local politics. Under these circumstances, fighting against urban redevelopment for better compensation, rather than changing urban renewal policies themselves, is both practical and necessary. This is a reason why business tenants' protests have failed to transform their legal rights and protect them from urban redevelopment.

Most surprisingly, many of the tenants I interviewed agreed that there was a need for urban redevelopment in their neighbourhood, although it meant their displacement. For those tenants, urban redevelopment is needed to create a better environment although they will not benefit. In that case, who is urban redevelopment for? It is certainly not for tenants. Many tenants do not think they have rights in relation to urban redevelopment because they do not own property. Property owners also note that tenants have no rights to urban redevelopment apart from compensation. Likewise, the legacy of oppression in Korea is embedded in everyday life, especially in the form of powerlessness. It came through in the interviews when people spoke of their powerlessness in relation to urban redevelopment processes. The 'have nots' right to oppose urban redevelopment and participate in decision-making processes has never been taken for granted; this is because the right to the city has not been shared for the common good. The right to the city emphasises the need for changes to existing unequal power relations between the state–capital and citizens, and suggests it is necessary to enfranchise citizens, so they can participate in the process of reshaping the city for themselves (Purcell, 2002:101). The right to the city places emphasis on more direct participation from tenants in

the Korean urban redevelopment process. The essence of the right to the city in the Korean urban context is recognising the rights of the 'have nots' and making their voices heard. It is essential that tenants are aware of the full range of social and economic rights they are entitled to, so they can make their claims successful. It is not about giving more compensation or sharing the profits of urban redevelopment. It is more about how to protect people's self-determination and equality and create a just city. There is still a long way to go before the just city is realised in Korea, since urban justice protected by equity, democracy and diversity has yet to be fully realised in the country. To make a just city, urban redevelopment should become equitable development which will "be redistributive, not simply economically but also, as appropriate, politically, socially, and spatially" (Fainstein, 2010:36). A more democratic system is the first and foremost step necessary to allow for the creation of the just city in Korea. In order to transform the Korean quasi-democracy, everyday democracy and active citizenship are suggested as ways to improve individuals' participatory rights in local politics. In order to overcome structural injustice and achieve the ultimate goals of a better city and society, it is important to empower citizens.

5. Conclusion

This research explored the lack of anti-gentrification movements in Yongsan. Urban redevelopment policies in Korea have been driven by urban strategies crafted to attract capital and affluent people. There have been no significant movements in the Yongsan urban redevelopment areas after the Yongsan incident, although tenants observed what happened to those involved with the Yongsan incident closely. Although tenants experience significant upheaval, they do not think they

are either able or eligible to oppose urban redevelopment. Even if some tenants take collective action, they have little option but to give up their protest due to the many difficulties they are faced with, and only a few people succeed in obtaining better compensation. Many tenants have been apathetic due to their powerlessness in the urban redevelopment domain; for them, it seems like there is no point in taking action over their displacement since it is fundamentally non-negotiable. As the state has failed to act as an arbiter between conflicting interest groups, tenants have been displaced and suffered extreme stress due to urban redevelopment. Displacement of tenants cannot be tackled effectively without policies focused on tenants, since the current urban redevelopment planning and implementation system is controlled by property owners. Legal protection for tenants is necessary in order to protect their rights. For the sake of vulnerable people who are likely to be more concerned about displacement, the state has to get involved in this process. The state needs to take a more democratic, egalitarian and redistributive approach to urban redevelopment.

Along with this, consistent grassroots movements can recreate the urban redevelopment system in favour of the majority of the population and protect the least well off. Improving people's awareness of the 'just city' and the 'right to the city' concepts could lead to citizens controlling the redevelopment process beyond statutory participation. Grassroots movements may not generate massive change, but they have great potential to gather momentum. The right to the city cannot provide a perfect solution and achieve a perfect balance between rights, urban space and socio-spatial justice. However, it can give us a reference point that we can use to approach current problems from a different perspective and take further political action to reshape urban spaces that have been influenced by unbalanced power relations. The right to the city can give an insight into the meaning of participation and

appropriation of the city at the neighbourhood scale, enabling citizens and communities to improve their self-control and self-determination by exercising their collective rights. Sustained collective action and solidarity can help to achieve the right to the city.

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Notes

- 1) In January 2009 in Yongsan, tenants and members of the SFHD went up to the rooftop of a building listed for demolition in order to resist forced eviction. However, they were suppressed by the police just one day after they started their protest. Five citizens and one policeman lost their lives as a result of an accidental fire which started during the riot police suppression.
- 2) Property owners in area H established their preparation committee for the POAR in June 2012, and 80 per cent of all property owners agreed to establish a property owners' association for redevelopment in September.
- 3) Along with this, business tenants have a priority to buy commercial units which are not sold. However, the rent for a new shop is expensive after urban redevelopment, so few business tenants can afford it. Rim and Lee (2011) argue that public rental business units are needed in order to improve the return rate of existing business tenants.

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