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LEARNING FROM UTOPIA? THE CASE OF SEJONG CITY

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Abstract: The brand new city of Sejong in South Korea has so far received little academic attention internationally. This is surprising, given the scale of the undertaking; when complete, it will accommodate up to half a million residents, with the national government footing the bill. This short essay provides reflections on a fieldwork trip to Sejong. It discusses the nature of the lessons that might be learnt from new-build eco-cities of this type, given that their emergence depends on very context-specific favourable conditions, and suggests that it may be unhelpful when plans to build whole new cities are dismissed as problematically utopian.

Keywords: sustainable city, eco-city development, Sejong.

Large-scale new-build developments only account for a minority of the 'eco-city' initiatives being implemented around the world (Joss, Cowley & Tomozeiu, 2013). We might then wonder why these are the ones which tend to attract international media attention. One reason must be that the promise of the 'brand new city' has always exerted a hold on our collective imagination. In utopian thinking throughout history, normative and exploratory ideas have often been spatialised into imaginary urban form, and the eco-city might be interpreted as the latest reincarnation of this tradition. But the sport of dreaming about ideal cities is one thing; attempts to bring such dreams to life are quite another. Such endeavours are now associated with the modernist excesses of the twentieth century (Pinder, 2002): at best leading to dysfunctional cities such as Brasilia; at worst indicative of totalitarianism. And if a similar tendency can be detected among the underpinnings of the eco-city, should this be a cause for concern?

The very ambition to plan and build a whole city from scratch, first, only makes sense if it rests on a partial conceptualisation of the city; the ambition may in fact relate only to the physical

environment. Insofar as planning always represents an act of ideological closure (Allmendinger, 2002), the idea that we can plan for something so multiple and dynamic as a real city even seems self-contradictory. But the appeal of the 'clean slate' approach is also at odds with the messy processes of urban development in the real world. We might wonder where the 'empty' spaces are which will house these new cities. And if such schemes rely primarily on active government intervention, then this presumes both political will and institutional capacity. Rather than turning their back on the flawed past, new cities necessarily arise through, and are constrained by, existing institutional procedures and policy requirements – as well as the verdicts of the court of public opinion. The growing literature on the outcomes of new-build eco-cities often critiques their sustainability claims and performance (see e.g. Cugurullo, 2013; Joss & Molella, 2013; Caprotti, 2014). But it would seem just as important to understand the contingent socio-political conditions of their emergence. Without taking contextual factors into account, we may risk overestimating the feasibility of emulating such projects elsewhere.

One example, which I recently visited, and which has received relatively little academic attention, is the new city of Sejong in South Korea. Sejong is no tokenistic small-scale experiment: it is a major new urban settlement, meticulously planned and funded by national government. It covers 73 km2 of previously agricultural land in the centre of the country, and should house as many as half a million people when finished (in 2030). So far, only one neighbourhood is fully built and occupied, with around 30,000 residents, but its rapid construction means that 150,000 are expected as soon as 2015 (Shin et al., 2011). The colossal state outlay involved – projected to be around ₩22.5 trillion, or £15 billion – makes it probably unrepeatable in Korea, and currently unthinkable in most other countries.

Why build this new city? There is a longer history in South Korea of plans to relocate the national capital, partly reflecting security concerns over Seoul's proximity to the border with North Korea (Kim, 2011). Sejong was originally conceived of with this in mind – but moving the capital was ruled unconstitutional in 2004. The main stated purpose of the final plans is to contribute to the strategic policy aim of creating a more 'balanced national development'. The wider Seoul area is home to half the country's population, and marked by a concentration of large corporations and state institutions; congestion and over-centralisation are seen as detrimental to the nation's future development. In terms of industries and employment, it is hoped that Sejong will work with other nearby R&D centres including, most notably, the city of Daejeon, to form a hi-tech cluster: a pole of attraction outside the capital area. Meanwhile, most of the country's civil service has already been moved here (and many of the 10,000 staff already relocated were less than enthusiastic about the idea).

The possibility of Sejong's development has no doubt been facilitated by a history of state-led 'mega-projects' (Kim, 2011), including programmes of new town building since the 1960s (Seo, 2013). And yet this project has not been mandated by an authoritarian government. Rather, it has taken place in a developed country with a proud – if relatively recent – tradition of empassioned

civic engagement (see e.g. Armstrong, 2002; Cho, 2002; Hwang, 2010). The final plans leading to the city's official opening in 2012 were preceded by years of related political wrangling and social division (for an overview, see Jackson, 2010). One key reason why President Roh Moo-Hyun chose this location in the early 2000s was the chance to curry favour with the two swing-voting provinces which it borders (Ramstad, 2012). Sejong's progress, in short, has been intractably embroiled in the national democratic process over the last decade, shaped by and shaping the trajectory of its political institutions.

Sejong is not, then, and does not pretend to be, a wholesale replicable model of urban development; its existence depends on particular economic, political and geopolitical conditions. But perhaps the important lessons we might take from it relate not to its formal qualities or technological achievements per se, so much from reflecting on Sejong as a site of real-world pragmatic experimentation. In thinking about its much-flaunted 'eco' credentials, for example, we can go further than attempting to quantify their effectiveness in terms of, say, overall resource consumption. Environmental sustainability was not central to Sejong's original stated purpose; its greater prominence in the final plans reflects the government's 2009 National Strategy for Green Growth (see MACCA, 2010; Kamal-Chaoui et al., 2011; Suk, 2014). Local residents, however, seem to appreciate its greenness in terms of quality of life: parks, rivers, vegetation, and fresh air. One lesson, then, may be that selling the eco-city to the public may require an emphasis on 'liveability' rather than on saving the planet.

But how do the residents feel about living there? Despite early press reports which appear to have drawn on a 'ghost town' narrative (see e.g. Korea Times, 2011; Mundy, 2013), or flagged up problems faced by civil servants' separated families (e.g. Korea Herald, 2012), the overall mood among residents I spoke to was one of optimism. Some described themselves as pioneers, reporting a degree of social levelling untypical of Korea as a whole. This reminded me of what I've read about the new town of Milton Keynes in the UK, at least in its early days (Clapson, 2004). Sejong certainly lacks various services for the time being, but this only seems to have encouraged the formation of mutual support groups which organise community activities, and engagement with neighbourhood forums which collectively voice minor concerns to the authorities. A healthy public life, in other words, is beginning to taking shape beyond the limits of what has been formally planned in the city. We might learn much from observing this dimension of the city in other locations, and seek to understand how it has been enabled or suppressed by what has been planned from above.

One particularly innovative feature is its 'ring-shaped' layout. At its centre is a huge park with large hills, forested areas, and a lake. More than one person I spoke to drew an analogy with Central Park in Manhattan; it is equally tempting to infer the influence of Howard's Garden City plans. But this is something quite different: the idea is not that there should be a public park in the city centre; rather, there will be no city centre. Frequent rapid buses will loop round the city in 40 minutes – thus allowing residents to get anywhere in the city in 20 minutes without using a

car. The built part, meanwhile, is very dense (many buildings are 25 storeys tall). In theory, then, the overall design will provide all the advantages of the 'compact city' – in terms of access to facilities – without reproducing the Seoul-like congestion against which the new city defines itself.

'Ring-shaped' structure with large park at the centre.

The future success of this urban design experiment seems far from certain. One possibility is that the decentralisation of the city will simply negate the gains made by densification; paradoxically, it may end up both compact and dispersed. Alternatively, a de facto centre may emerge as the city takes on its own life, with the remainder of the city left relatively isolated. If, on the other hand, in succeeds in its aims, I rather wonder how 'city-like' the outcome will be; despite the inefficiencies and frustrations which it implies, I would see congestion as a central ingredient of the defining urban 'buzz'. But perhaps this is unfair: 'cityness' in this sense should probably be understood as more of a descriptive than an aspirational quality. Sejong may not end up appealing to everybody, and its demographic profile to date is in fact skewed towards married couples in their 30s and 40s with small children. Perhaps there is a useful lesson here too – or at least a suggestion – that we are too quick to assert that cities should be all things to all people; in practice, even if not by intention, different types of inclusion and exclusion appear to be inevitable in any given city.

Sejong's grand promotional claim to be "the utopian city for everyone" (MACCA, 2012) might then be reasonably criticised for its rhetorical vacuity, but not necessarily for its hopeless or dangerous idealism; it should not be interpreted as a measure against which the city might be usefully judged. As responses to problems in the real world, initiatives such as Sejong may well be

envisaged and gain wider support in a spirit of utopian dreaming; perhaps what Ernst Bloch (1986) called the 'utopian impulse' always lies at the source of our desire to ameliorate our surroundings. Crucially, however, the content of this dreaming should not be conflated with the substance of the more limited and uncertain achievements that can be planned or delivered in the real world. To expect Sejong to become a groundbreaking new paradigm for urban life on a sustainable planet would, therefore, be to miss the point. What we should expect instead is a contextually embedded human settlement with its own particular problems and advantages. This is not to rule out the possibility that it will also offer some useful specific lessons for our collective future, either in its concrete socio-technical innovations, or which arise out of ongoing critical reflection. And on these terms, at least, I think there's every chance of it succeeding.

Robert Cowley's PhD project, entitled 'Eco-cities: technological showcases or public spaces?' has a special focus on the way that 'publicness' is conceptualised and performed in eco-city initiatives around the world. It is being supervised by Professor Simon Joss and Dr Daniel Greenwood in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Westminster.

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