

Infill Development in Pyongyang and its Social Implication

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The Arduous March, the turbulent economic crisis in North Korea of the second half of the 1990s, led to the emergence of not only the market in general but also drove the impulse to the development of the real estate market specifically (Joung, 2015). In conditions of an unstable financial system, tonju (masters of money) who managed to accumulate savings, started to aggressively invest in development projects in order to protect their assets (Baek et al., 2021). Although different aspects of the new glamorous residential districts including Mirae and Ryomyong Streets are well documented (Em & Ward, 2021; Yim, 2019), scholars almost totally ignore the fact that numerous infill residential buildings have been constructed in Pyongyang over the past two decades. This significantly limits the scope of our understanding of Pyongyang's development trajectory and the important socio-economic processes happening in the country.

This paper aims to investigate whether the construction of infill buildings activates urban regeneration in the surrounding areas and what kind of social implications it has. To do so, such methods as satellite imagery analysis, literature review along with interviews with defectors residing in North Korea, have been employed.

The results prove that the infill buildings sprung up “like mushrooms after a rainfall” in most of the districts of Pyongyang from 2000 to 2022. These locations are determined by factors such as proximity to urban infrastructure and good view among others, which are usually considered significant in cities with market economies (Luo et al., 2021; Bottero et al., 2022). Since the construction of infill buildings has initiated a revitalization of city services in their surrounding areas, it seems that a significant part of the residences inside these infill buildings have been purchased by people earning an affluent, liquid income. Such findings allow me to argue that the residents of Pyongyang de-facto live in a market economy with the attendant behavior, even though the country de-jure remains one within a fleeting number of centrally planned economies. This important fact should be considered when dealing with North Korea.