



The process of redevelopment in present day South Korea involves a complex web of relationships, some open and some obscure; between giant business conglomerates and government, wealthy landowners and hired thugs, low-income tenants and the police.

From the 1950's to the 70's the Seoul Metropolitan Government utilized eviction-centered-redevelopment policies, where the government removed residents directly by force. The strong reaction against redevelopment and a growing anti-eviction movement pressed the government to resort to a joint-redevelopment policy in the 1980's, as a strategy to disengage the government, by persuading land owners to form a Redevelopment Cooperative. The Redevelopment Cooperative allows the land owners to choose construction companies, to carry out the compensation of households and to take the responsibility of vacating the land of all residents. As a type of privatized redevelopment, tenants are pitted against land owners, who use corrupt methods to make profit with the construction companies. "Contract Workers" hired by landowners and the construction company, are referred to by many as "Demolition Thugs" for their typical role of threatening and attacking evictees, sometimes using official police riot gear.

On January 19th, 2009, evictee-protestors from Jun Chul Yun or the South Korean Federation Against Housing Demolition, including tenants from neighboring areas, assembled a defensive shelter on the roof of a building in central Seoul. The evictees fought against the demolition of a housing and commercial district called Yongsan, which will be redeveloped into a "green belt" of luxury condominiums leading to a newly established central park. The clientele, according to Suksa Real Estate Services in the area, will primarily be wealthy expatriates, military and consulate personnel associated with the relocation of a U.S. military base in the park.

By January 20th, a raid was conducted on the housing activists and tenants. Demolition thugs gathered in the building and set fire to the third floor followed by a SWAT team to conduct an "anti-'urban terrorist' operation". The fire was extinguished and five protestors and a police officer were left dead. The incident ignited immediate and continuing demonstrations against police violence, massive redevelopment and the government administration. The cause of death of all six individuals is still under investigation. At the time of collecting the following stories, protestors of the incident were sentenced to prison terms but no police or thugs were tried in court. At the present time, five evictee-protestor families are temporarily living in one of a few remaining structures on the site, an abandoned restaurant in the same building as the office of the construction company. Widows of the deceased speak for the remainder of this work.



Widow of YUN Yong-heon:

The police broke my arm several months ago in a demonstration.

My husband and I met in the city of Cheonan near Seoul. We were married in 1984. In 1999, we moved to Seoul to start a business near Yongsan in the district of Jung-gu near Seoul City Hall. Since our neighborhood was located in central Seoul, our business was good. We had been living there for such a long time, we ran an eel restaurant for more than 10 years and every day the business was good. People stopped by our restaurant throughout the day so we worked hard.

The first floor of the building was the eel restaurant and the second floor was our home with two bedrooms and a living room. Our restaurant was designated as one of the best Korean restaurants by the city government. But after the eviction process started our designation was erased. So we felt like we lost everything all of sudden. When you run a business, as you may know, you invest everything, everything that you have. We put everything that we had into the business.

We had been living a happy life up until the time when the police and thugs came on Dec. 4, 2005. Suddenly they came really early in the morning, around 6:00 AM, and said “Get out of this place”. When they came, they came with many policemen and the police chief. There were about 14 police vehicles around. In the morning my son had to go to school with all his text books and supplies and I didn’t have enough time to get those things for him.

It’s been 5 years since the eviction process started in our neighborhood. The Redevelopment Cooperative bribes either locals or mobsters to be demolition thugs and force the evictions. The demolition thugs started small fires to scare us and get us out of the houses. A lot of neighbors or the protestors that we fought together with left our neighborhood because of the threat of the thugs. We couldn’t handle it and they were scared. Most of our neighbors just left.

Then later we found out about the Jun Chul Yun (Federation Against Housing Demolition). Jun Chul Yun is known







for militant fight and strong solidarity if you experience forceful eviction in your area. It is too painful and we know that in other areas of Seoul redevelopment projects are happening and poor people in those areas are experiencing the same trouble and hardship. For this reason we try to help each other and form alliances.

My husband was a very generous and kind person. He liked to give free meals whenever visitors from other areas or the countryside came to Seoul. Our family always valued relationships over profit. He never did harm to other people, he was liked by many people and that is why he participated in the Yongsan struggle.

On Jan 20th, 2009 I heard that five activists died in Yongsan and I couldn't believe my husband died. I heard the stories that my husband told other protestors in the fort, words to encourage other protestors. Survivors told me my husband was fighting until the end. He was one of the people who most strongly resisted the police crackdown. They died the early morning of the 20th so I visited a nearby hospital where the survivors were and one of the survivors told me "Your husband actually saved me, so since he is a strong person I don't think that he's dead. He's missing but I think he is hiding somewhere and will show up later." Then I heard the news that the dead bodies were at another hospital so other family members and I went to identify the bodies. When we arrived the police called us violent protestors. Anyway, we went to the room where the dead bodies lay. I saw them wrapped in plastic. At the end was my husband. His face was all burned black and beyond recognition but I recognized the shape of his head and his lips.

The police said they had already done the autopsy. I checked his body and his ribs were all broken, all his flesh was messed up. So I said "Why did you do this to my husband?" All the details of the condition of his body showed that my husband didn't die of the fire but that he was severely beaten before his death— and I strongly believe my husband was beat to death before he was burned. The police couldn't open his jaw, it was closed shut. Experts say that when you die in strong pain or resisting until the end, you can see this kind of thing happen. The police said that the official investigation result from the CSI was that my husband died because of the fire but if he died of burning then the police also would not have had the gloves and lighter from his pockets that they returned to me. These details make me believe that he was killed before the fire.



What I demand is that the truth is revealed and that the people responsible for the deaths are punished. Soon after the fort was built the police sent the most elite anti-terrorist SWAT team saying the situation was very severe and that the citizens who were involved in the struggle were urban terrorists. Since the Yongsan Massacre my husband and the four other victims were dubbed as Urban Terrorists, and we cannot live with this. We used to live happy lives with our kids and my husband is not a terrorist. Because of the forceful eviction we had no other choice but to choose the struggle because if you set up a fort then it is hard for the police and thugs to approach you; we wanted to stop what was happening and had no choice but to fight.

I strongly demand that we get our good name back. The prosecutors should release the 3,000 hidden documents from the official government investigation because the report says the activists died because of the fire but we don't think that is the truth. We want to have a fair trial.

Now we live in a building with no heating system. It gets really cold these days and we just have an electric blanket. Whenever we wake up in the morning, it is really cold and not good for your body. But the kids don't complain about the living environment. A lot of people are supporting the Yongsan struggle and lots of people are suffering so I hope the government apologizes and admits its fault so the Yongsan problem can be solved as soon as possible. That's the only thing I want right now. My children and I discussed where we would go to live if the Yongsan struggle ends. Right now we are five families living in an abandoned restaurant. Even if we go back to Jung-gu, where our house is demolished, and live in a tent it will be better because we will have our own space. This is our situation.







Widow of LEE Sang-lim:

When we first moved here it was around 1984 and we opened a Korean pork rib restaurant. At first we didn't know anyone in the neighborhood so it was not easy but then I realized that everywhere you go the situation is the same. The people in Yongsan were good, we were all small business owners with families and after business hours we would get together, we were close.

After the subway line was constructed this area became more commercial. Back then there were not as many cars, there was less traffic than now. There was a huge produce and fish market which is now an electronics mall. The market moved to the southern part of Seoul. There was also a large bus terminal in this area, but it was also moved to the southern part of Seoul. These two factors affected our business the most. We didn't move somewhere else, we stayed in the same place for 23 years to run the restaurant and as we got older our youngest son and daughter-in-law ran the business and changed it into a café.

Some other businesses were restaurants for kimbap, bibimbab, dumplings; there was a liquor store, cosmetic store, different shops. Some families lived here, others just had their business. We lost both our house and our business. Some parts of this area were just residential. Many land owners and tenants already left because the land owners received money and will get luxury apartments when the redevelopment is done. The tenants got really scared from the thugs, who would come to you and say "Are you still here? Why don't you leave?"—They did things like put rotten fish outside your restaurant. Many tenants became disillusioned with the area and voluntarily left. If you had a small business the story is different because you invested a lot of money to decorate and run the business, so you put in more money than the residents who just lived here. The money you invested beyond the contract is not recognized and the compensation money is not enough. We only were offered a compensation of half of what we put into our business; with that money we cannot make the same business.

People who are fighting have been living here for 20 -30 years. We were business owners that all of sudden became evicted people because of the redevelopment plans. When we realized it we built the fort in the building to have real talks with the Redevelopment Cooperative, because we didn't get the chance to talk about what we want. We set up the fort to tell the world that this is what we want, we want to live together, and we want to work where people help each other and treat each other well. I want the whole world to know that the reason we are



still fighting here, refusing to leave—it's not for personal profit, it is for making a better world where all people [rich and poor] can live together.

I will stay here fighting the eviction until the end. The typical way of leaving is either to live temporarily in a tent, or to go to the countryside where the rent is affordable. My deposit money is all I have to move but it won't be near where I am now because the price of land will go up by double or triple the price.

But hypothetically, it's not going to happen to me. If it happens to me then eviction will happen to every citizen of this country, so I will never let that happen to me. I've been living here for 30 years, I won't get forcefully evicted. That's what we are fighting for. The New Town project is happening in every little corner of this country so if we get evicted all Korean people will be evicted, so I will not let that happen. I must win, we must win.

Eldest son of LEE Sang-lim:

When my family moved to Yongsan I was in high school. I didn't have a lot of friends because I went to a high school in another district. It was a good place though, people helped each other. If you ran out of rice someone would give you some, if you didn't have cash someone would give you a cigarette.

After high school I was recruited into the military, and then I got married. My father was a leader of this community, when he got old my younger brother took over. Right now my brother is in jail for protesting and was just sentenced to 8 years in prison. He was in the hospital with his legs broken and a punctured lung. He still needed treatment when the police came to take him to jail. We wouldn't be against redevelopment if there were no victims.

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