

# Consuming ambitions devour a city's culture



Phillip O'Neill

I WAS in Seoul, in South Korea, last week. The place is huge, over 10 million people, which makes it the world's eighth biggest city. It's hard to be unkind to Seoul because its people are friendly and generous. American-English is widely spoken, as you discover if you stand for more than a moment looking lost; a polite local always stops and asks if you need help, and smiles.

The food is great, the beer is cold, the service always superb. The subway is equal to the world's best, getting around the city underground is cheap and quick. Everywhere is clean and safe.

As well, the city is probably the best connected in the world. Its airport, Seoul Incheon, consistently wins world's best awards. The high-speed intercity railway system, KTX, is amazing, with more lines on the way. The city itself is a connectivity paradise.

Seoul boasts the world's fastest internet speeds, the best mobile phone access, and all these are cheap. The schools and universities, too, are state of the art and the teaching standards are top notch.

The problem, of course, is the city's freeways. I stared not knowing whether to laugh or cry as I watched from a pedestrian overpass eight choked lanes of Hyundais – and I'm sure some other brands – not going anywhere in one direction, and eight choked lanes not going anywhere in the other. I remembered it was just the same when I first visited 15 years ago.

But the rise of Seoul and South Korea are remarkable. War on the Korean peninsula in 1950 brought 2.4 million deaths. It ended in 1953 with North and South Korea remaining divided, and each side has been ready for war with the other, each day, ever since.

In 1960, South Korea was a poor nation. It had a similar GDP per capita to Cameroon, Cambodia and Nicaragua. By 1988, when it hosted the summer Olympics, it was seen as an Asian tiger alongside Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan. By the time it hosted the FIFA World Cup in 2002, it had become an advanced,



RARE GLIMPSE OF PAST: Gyeongbokgung Palace, known as the "Palace of Shining Happiness".

prosperous nation. Today, the tall office towers of Seoul host giant corporations like Hyundai, Samsung and Posco Steel and, like Australian minerals companies, these firms are thriving on the back of close relations with next-door neighbour, China, the bitter enemy of 60 years ago.

But for all its success, Seoul has problems. It gets tagged as Seoul-less, that in its drive for development it became obsessed with importing Western ideas and lifestyles and gutted its own. Many young Koreans find it difficult to recognise genuine Korean culture. Vast shopping malls dominate social life. Temples and museums are managed as tourist venues. Radical political views, stomped on severely after the 1950s war, remain rare.

In quiet moments of conversation when I was there, local planners wondered about Seoul's future. High-rise apartments, many luxurious, eat at open space and old neighbourhoods, and new

developments soar to create edge cities on Seoul's outskirts. Air quality is poor. Urban density is rising.

Early one morning I crossed the city by subway to explore one surviving old neighbourhood, the Samcheong-dong district. My walk was pleasant. The backdrop to the area is the Gyeongbok palace and the Bugaksan mountain beyond. The leafy main road runs through a small valley floor and housing tumbles down its steeper side slopes.

The houses are small and renovations are adventurous, and playful, and there are perched gardens and potted flowers everywhere. There are also many art galleries, most just small rooms. Stairwells and tiny alleyways and gang planks lead you to higher ground through craft shops and past quirky clothing stores to where cafes and tea shops rise from roof tops, and to where a decent lunch and a good glass of wine can be had.

From there, the city of Seoul as a

curtain of glass and concrete rising through lunch time smog looks anything but inviting. The Koreans have built a city that generates enormous wealth. It provides a standard of living which in the 1950s could never have been imagined. And there is more on offer as the Great Chinese Boom unfolds nearby.

Yet, as I stared at one giant apartment building after another, I whispered to myself, I couldn't live in them. But then I gazed across the old rooftops below and realised that neighbourhoods like these in Seoul are museums, over-run with tourists like me seeking out the "real" Seoul, and I realised that for Seoulites the high rise apartment was the only housing choice there is. The alternatives are gone.

Professor Phillip O'Neill is director of the Urban Research Centre, University of Western Sydney.

## Cyber friends are poor substitute for reality

The switched-on age of 'i' lacks 'h' for heart, writes Phil Camden.

I GLIMPSED a quiz show where the contestant was asked the average size of a household in Australia. The answer surprised me: 2.5 people.

Only a year ago, this average was 4.5. It seems that the sizes of our households are shrinking. Adding to this, due to longer life expectancies, increasing divorce rates, and putting off marriage until later in life, the singles population has exploded.

Not only are more of us living alone or single, but as a population we have never been more connected. Social media means we don't have to leave the loneliness and comfort of our own home to connect with hundreds, if not thousands, of contacts.

Moreover, often the products we use to access these forms of social media have been marketed to us as an extension of ourselves, think the iPhone or the iPad.

But what of the relationships that result from these forms of social encounters? Is true relationship helped or hindered by the "i" focus and the increasing isolation?

I wonder whether becoming more connected causes an improvement in relationship, or has it had the opposite effect?

Christians believe that a relational God created humanity for relationship. From day dot, God said it was better for man not to be alone. Since that time, relationships have had the potential to enrich our lives.

The Bible teaches us several ways in which we can add value to relationships so that they add to, rather than detract from our lives. For example, it teaches that there

are key relationships that we need: a relationship with God, with other people to whom we provide support, and with those who support us.

These relationships are enriched by living Godly lives.

Admittedly, it is this complexity or depth of relationship that often frightens us from participating in relationships wholeheartedly. We hesitate to take risks, trust others, and become vulnerable for fear of getting hurt or betrayed.

Real life relationships are far less defined than those in the social networking world, where labels such as "in a relationship", or "it's complicated" seek to explain the multi-faceted nature of a genuine relationship.

However, real life relationships should not be something that we fear due to their complexity. It is possible to embrace relationships and navigate our way through even

the most complex of relationships empowered with information and skills to do so.

Relationships do impact on everything we do and healthy relationships have the potential to foster true community, accountability and friendship.

I believe that the brave among us will make time for true relationship. We will enjoy the increased connectivity social media gives to us without forsaking the depth of those relationships we hold dear.

Finally, we will seek to continually improve our relationship skills in order to build relationships the "old-fashioned way" face-to-face, heart-to-heart.

Phil Camden is the senior minister at Church180. Submitted by Churches Media Association.



### A town of decay

Online readers had their say on the poor state of buildings owned by GPT in the Hunter Street Mall.

This is news? I live 200 metres from the mall and don't give a stuff. Look at the great new developments at Marketown, with excellent retail centres at Charlestown and Kotara. The mall was never a major retail centre, and Hunter Street died decades ago.

newstus

Bring in the bulldozers. That will clean up the very old CBD. Although, I had my first trip into the city last week for a very long time, and from Fort Scratchley the city does look impressive. It's just the drive down Hunter Street that is daunting.

intouch

Blame the council and the Save our Rail (so-called and self-proclaimed) experts who have all the answers to a decaying city. Perhaps a few of the [Save Our Rail] SORs could get a working bee together and try to repair some of the damage they have done. Ditto councillors and the Labor parliamentary representatives. Sad city. But at least we have a happy new logo!!!

Priscilla

Doesn't the cynical part of you think this was always part of the plan – buy up the CBD, do nothing with it, let it rot away while you create a mega and disgusting shopping centre a few kilometres away? A small item on the balance sheet for GPT.

Novocastrian girl

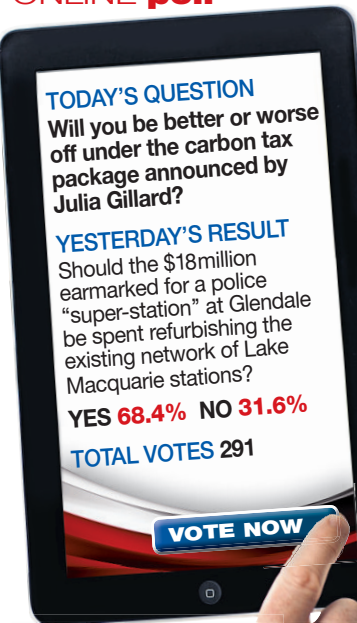
GPT and all these other so-called investors don't care about local businesses or the future of the city, just the bottom line and revenue for their own companies and investors. Unfortunately it will be another 10 years before anything is ever started/finished in this city if it does happen at all. We need a new younger council and members that don't have their own interests at heart.

Lee

GPT has certainly not done us any favours. It has given us false hope and really stuffed us around. They own the property in the mall so as an owner you must keep your properties in good condition and safe for the tenants.

Dibby

### ONLINE poll



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