

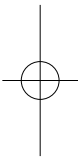
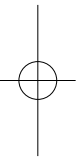


Commentary

# The Reproduction of Growth-Oriented Churches: Korean American Churches and the Politics of Infrastructure, by Seo Dae-Seung

## Placing Infrastructure

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A church is not a church is not a church. A Presbyterian congregation is organized differently from a Catholic parish, and one can expect to find a distinctly different vibe in prayer and praise at a Pentecostal church than they would at a Methodist church. A church can refer to a denomination, a community in congregation, or a physical building, and such ambiguity also comes with great variations of wealth and power. An affluent church in the shape of a corporate office tower is fundamentally a different kind of church than a small church that meets in a drafty room above the neighborhood grocery store. Some megachurches have international satellites and their own retreat centers in the countryside, while some churches eschew property ownership altogether and choose to gather in rented spaces. Not all churches have their own parking lots.

A church is not just a space of congregation either. Church members

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gather and disperse, assemble and scatter in a constellation of spatial mobilities. Some churches send short-term mission teams to aid faraway projects, while some churches direct their missional energy to nearby neighbors or social justice issues in the locality. LGBTQ Christians are welcomed with open arms in some churches, but denounced and banished from other churches that insist on heteropatriarchy as a bedrock of Christianity. Some are taken to church in a way that is not entirely voluntary, while others are pushed out and kept out of the church no matter how much they try to join. Some drive their own vehicles to church, while others take the church shuttle or use public transit. Some walk to church, even if it is for a relatively short distance from the nearest bus stop or subway station. Geography matters a great deal in how one attends church. In Los Angeles, where land and real estate prices are among the highest in the United States, woefully inadequate public transportation infrastructure and worsening crisis in affordable housing mean more and more people are moving farther out of the city only to have to drive back to the city for work, for school, and for church.

Keeping in mind these institutional and geographical diversities of churches, let us consider Church Y at the center of Seo Dae-Seung's discussion. It is an immigrant megachurch in Los Angeles Koreatown that exhibits several features of a recognizable and familiar immigrant-led Korean American church. It is a large, growth-oriented church in a fiercely competitive religious market in Southern California, where churchgoers are notoriously fickle and transient, known to shop around and move around a lot, contributing to dynamics of both church growth and decline. Church Y started small, grew big, and now is in the process of becoming smaller in size but saddled with an oversized shell of infrastructural investments made in the previous era. The church's senior pastor is a middle-aged man, and by all indicated signs, its elders all appear to be middle-aged men who govern and conduct church business. These are all prototypical attributes of an immigrant Korean American church. What is also common is for churches to fight and even break apart. Church Y has likewise seen numerous internal conflicts and leadership transition crises over the years, among which the parking lot controversy is just one.

When competing factions at Church Y face off in a heated dispute in 2016 over the purchase of the parking lot and the conflict becomes highly visible in the public eye, Seo interprets the moment as conveying several meanings. For one, he argues that the occasion renders visible the relation-

ship between the physical and the symbolic, between the tangible material infrastructure, such as the parking lot, and intangible religious infrastructure, such as prosperity theology. Seo's argument is that when "elements of a pastor's 'charisma,' such as preaching skills and leadership, fail to function properly, the social significance of tangible infrastructure acquires particular prominence." By this logic, material infrastructure would remain largely invisible when things are going well for the pastor, but become spectacular lightning rods or a "Pandora's box" when pastoral power and authority become disputed. I might put it another way: religious spatial fix is risky business.

I am not certain that there is a clear causal argument to be made, in part because the parking lot controversy at Church Y touches on so many complex dimensions. The church's founding pastor had retired but remained influential behind the scenes, much to the ire of those who wanted a real leadership transition. Church elders are notorious for challenging and haranguing especially newly hired pastors, and dispute over infrastructure projects obviously extend beyond parking lots to any number of construction or real estate ventures.

What is notably missing from this discussion is, in fact, the geographical specificity of Church Y and the parking lot in question. The wakeup call that was the LA Riots on April 29, 1992 was not just for Korean churches to "adopt a more active role in helping the Korean American community," as Seo describes. The call was for immigrant Korean Americans, including churches like Church Y, to reckon with their place in multiracial and multiethnic Los Angeles, a city with deep and enduring legacies of racial injustice and inequality. Koreatown-based churches like Church Y were urged to do more than just pay lip service to community engagement, to do more than host occasional cross-racial events. As Seo points out, "This situation calls for a move beyond the expansion of exclusive infrastructure within Korean American churches, allowing them to become infrastructure for the wider Korean American community."

It would have been important for Church Y to rise to the challenge of becoming a valued and active member of the local community rather than an exclusive private membership club. Instead, Church Y became a land-owner and real estate developer, a force behind displacing low-income seniors and opposing housing justice and anti-gentrification efforts. What is perhaps most interesting about the parking lot controversy at Church Y is that the church diminished itself to function as a mere parking lot—

useful only when occupied by personal vehicles, for a mere fraction of the 24-hour clock. For the rest of the time, like a parking lot, the church remains unused and useless, irrelevant to nearby residents who are disallowed access. What remains to be seen is how this infrastructure might be reimagined and transformed in the coming years.