

From a shabby downtown to an iconic cultural district: Cultural cluster strategy of *Totatoga* in Busan, Korea

SE HOON PARK

Research Fellow

Korea Research Institute for Human Settlement

254 Simindae-ro, Dongan-gu, Anyang-si, Gyeonggi-do, [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Draft, not for quotation

Abstract

With the rise of cultural economies in post-industrial cities, culture-led development has been widely accepted as an alternative tool for urban revitalization. In Korea, many local governments who are suffering from a shrinking population and an economic meltdown in their city centers are trying to revitalize the city by taking advantage of cultural activities. In contrast to high expectations, the top-down approach of these cultural strategies does not positively impact the local community, if one excludes the effect of infrastructure development. It is against this backdrop that this study attempts to examine one of the cultural strategies, Totatoga, in central Busan, South Korea. Initiated by local artist groups and supported by the Busan metropolitan government, the strategy employs a mixed nature of top-down and bottom-up strategies. Unlike conventional approaches, which focus on cultural infrastructure and events, Totatoga focuses on the artists themselves and their link to neighborhood. Totatoga begin with an artist residency program that offered vacant offices in the declining city center of Busan as free working space for artists. In return, the operating agency required that artists engage in local outreach activities, such as education, community building, and holding festivals. It has been two years since its inception and the strategy is now considered to have result in meaningful change to the district. Artists have painted the gray building block, and people have started to coming in. However, there was no direct impact on the real estate market that could trigger gentrification. Based on in-depth interviews with key decision makers and the artists that were involved, the study explores the transformation of the district by focusing on how the Totatoga strategy was designed and delivered, as well as how local artists have been clustered in the neighborhood, engaged in local activities, and contributed to urban revitalization.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the term “cultural economy” has become a buzzword among academics and policymakers in the field of urban and regional planning. As more cities in advanced economies entered into the stage of post-industrialization, the culture-led development has been widely considered as an alternative tool for urban revitalization. Korean cities are not the exception. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Korea had experienced dazzling economic development, but, currently, the nation is facing a procrastinated economic crisis and an aging population. It is against this backdrop that national and local governments are increasingly relying on cultural strategies to revitalize the urban economy.

The paper examines one of the urban cultural strategies, called the *Totatoga* project in central Busan, Korea. The Totatoga project is an artist residency program that provided selected artists with working spaces for a predetermined period of time. Unlike a conventional artist residency program and other urban cultural strategies, this project focused on artists’ networks and their link to the local community. Even though it was initiated by the city’s government, the program heavily relied on artists’ voluntary commitment to local engagement. As a result of this reliance, the project is a unique mixture of top-down and bottom-up approaches.

In Korea, the recent post-industrialization of the urban economy has prompted national and local governments to employ ‘cultural tools’ to encourage urban revitalization. Since the early 2000s, the national government has designated several ‘cultural cities’, including Gwangju and Jeonju, in a bid to revive the declining provincial cities by means of cultural activities. The local governments invented cultural events and festivals for the purpose of boosting their sluggish economy. These strategies, however, mostly focused on promoting the tourist attractions without sincerely considering the local culture and community. In this regard, these urban cultural strategies can be understood as just a different version of conventional developmental projects.

On the other hand, the ‘natural’ cultural districts with spontaneous artist agglomeration often face difficulties surviving. Some of them are threatened by excessive commercialization and some are on the brink of clearance by urban redevelopment. As a result of market force, the Insadong, Daehakro, and Hongdea areas in Seoul, once iconic cultural districts, were transformed into tourist spots. Munraedong in Seoul and Baedari in Incheon, the places having functioned as shelters for artists seeking affordable spaces, are now facing the government-initiated redevelopment plan.

Under the circumstance, the Totatoga project is aiming at a narrow target. The project tries to experiment with the so-called ‘community-based creative economy model’ (Stern and Seifert, 2007), which involves revitalizing a district through developing the relationship between artists and the local community. While carefully controlling the transformation process of the district, the project aims at genuine change from the neighborhood. By closely examining the local artist social network of Totatoga that developed in the shabby district of central Busan, this paper delves into the potential benefits and limitations of the Totatoga project.

2. Cultural clusters approach: theories and research framework

Theories on urban cultural strategies

Today, urban cultural strategies are one of the most sought-after policies around the world. The trend has been loosely corroborated by two theories: city marketing theory and creative class theory.

City marketing theory is focused on the fact that cities are increasingly relying on marketing methods. This theory was particularly prevalent in the last three decades, when competition for inward investment and tourism revenues at various spatial scales were intensified (Kotler et al., 1999). Place promotion has been undertaken by cities or regions in various places and times since the beginning of the 19th century (Ward, 1998), what is new; however, ‘the conscious application of marketing approaches by public planning agencies not just as an additional instrument for the solution of intractable planning problems but, increasingly, as a philosophy of place management’ (Ashworth and Voogd, 1994). On the other hand, there is another theory that stresses the role of creative minds in the urban economy. As illustrated in Richard Florida’s work (Florida, 2002; Florida and Tinagli, 2004), the creative class theory asserts that the talents of the creative class—knowledge workers, intellectuals, and various types of artists—are the key driving force for economic development in post-industrial cities in the United States and other advanced countries. The theory implicitly suggests that, in order to compete in the global economy, urban policy makers should come up with policies to attract the creative class.

These two different approaches, however, share common ground in that they rely on the external forces, such as tourists and talents, rather than on citizens in the neighborhood when looking for a solution to urban economic malaise. The developmental strategy that city marketing theory pursues is basically to refurbish a city’s image for the purpose of attracting more tourists and investment. Similarly, the creative class theory’s spatial strategy prioritizes creative minds over local citizens. It is fair to say that the strategic focus of urban policies is placed on what visitors and global talents want, rather than what citizens want.

In recent years, scholars have paid attention to the negative aspects of conventional urban cultural strategies. Gentrification remains the most commonly raised problem. Flagship developments inspired by city marketing or creative class theories often result in neighborhood disruption, replacing less affluent local people with more affluent newcomers (Zukin, 1995; Markersen, 2006). Additionally, a less commonly discussed drawback of urban cultural strategies is the social polarization that cultural strategies could cause (Paddison, 1993; McGuigan, 1996). As Saskia Sassen notes, the global economy tends to valorize particular jobs while it devalorizes others that are equally important to the overall functioning of the economy (Sassen, 2001). If we agree with Sassen’s view, then it is fair to say that Florida patronize ‘winners’ in the global economy in disregard of common people. Artists are especially vulnerable to this process. The handful of opera singers, concert pianists, dancers, and authors, who are seen as the best in the world, garner disproportionate incomes compared with those of gifted practitioners who are seen as less extraordinary.

Can the creative economy expand economic opportunity and social inclusion without generating inequality and displacement? Following Stern and Seifert, I think that the answer

lies in *cultural cluster strategy*, the approach linking the creative economy to community-building in an alternative model for low-wealth urban neighborhoods (Stern and Seifert, 2007). Through their research on the artists social network in Philadelphia U.S., Stern and Seifert have developed the concept of cultural clusters as an alternative tool for urban revitalization.

The cultural cluster strategy is based on the concept of economic cluster that has been developed in the literature of economic geography. Clusters, according to economist Michael Porter, are “geographic concentrations of inter-connected companies, specialized suppliers, service providers, and associated institutions in a particular field” (Porter, 1998). This economic cluster theory appears to offer the potential for the creative sector to regenerate distressed cities. Cultural clusters, which occur at both the neighborhood and regional levels, arise out of the social networks developed to meet common needs among producers in a given sector. In a study of the craft, fashion, and cultural products industries of Los Angeles, Allen Scott observed that clustering is a critical feature for cultural producers to improve the quality of work produced and economically benefit from the work (Scott, 1996; 2004). Thus, clusters highlight the social organization of the creative economy, and it is this socio-economic dimension that is culture’s link to neighborhood revitalization (Stern and Seifert, 2007).

In this study, cultural cluster is defined as “a cluster of nonprofit, commercial, and informal cultural assets linked by artist as producers and participants as consumers or practitioners”(Stern and Seifert, 2007). When I see cultural cluster as artists’ spatial agglomeration, I focus primarily on artist’s interpersonal networks and their links to local societies. Artists are considered to be the anchor of neighborhood-based creative economies and proponents to culture-based neighborhood revitalization that integrates urban residents with the regional economy and civil society.

Research framework and method

This study is focused on the artist social network of the cultural cluster. According to literature that examines economic clusters, mature clusters are considered to have three elements: tacit knowledge, supply chain, and labor pool (Hill and Brennan, 2000). Translating these elements into the version of cultural cluster, I regard a full-fledged cultural cluster as a combination of *artist community*, *work linkage*, and *local connection*. I assume that the embedded artist social network can produce a favorable *neighborhood effect* on local society, while minimizing negative impacts, such as displacement or social disparity. Hence, in this case study, I will specifically examine these three elements, as well as the ensuing neighborhood effect.

- **Artist community:** the frequency of interpersonal interaction among artists; the ratio of knowing each other among artists; pride and a sense of belonging to the Totatoga community.
- **Work linkage:** where you get the idea for art work; where you get assistance and cooperation when you produce art work; where and how you exhibit your art work.

- **Local connection:** artists' motivation to join Totatoga; the relation between artists' work and the neighborhood; what kinds of activities artists are involved in as the level of the local community
- **Neighborhood effect:** increased number of visitors; degree of the area's media exposure; increased solidarity among citizens; improved physical environment, etc.

The case study used in this research is the Totatoga project installed in central Busan, which is Korea's second largest city. The project is an outcome of a deliberate policy effort, but, at the same time, is also the result of artists' active and committed engagement with local communities. In line with the framework outlined above, I tried to examine the artist's community, as well as their internal and external networks. In order to accomplish this, the study mobilized various research methods. I conducted in-depth interviews during 2011-2012 with related policy makers and involved artists; I also designed a survey on artists and used social network analysis to complete my research objectives.

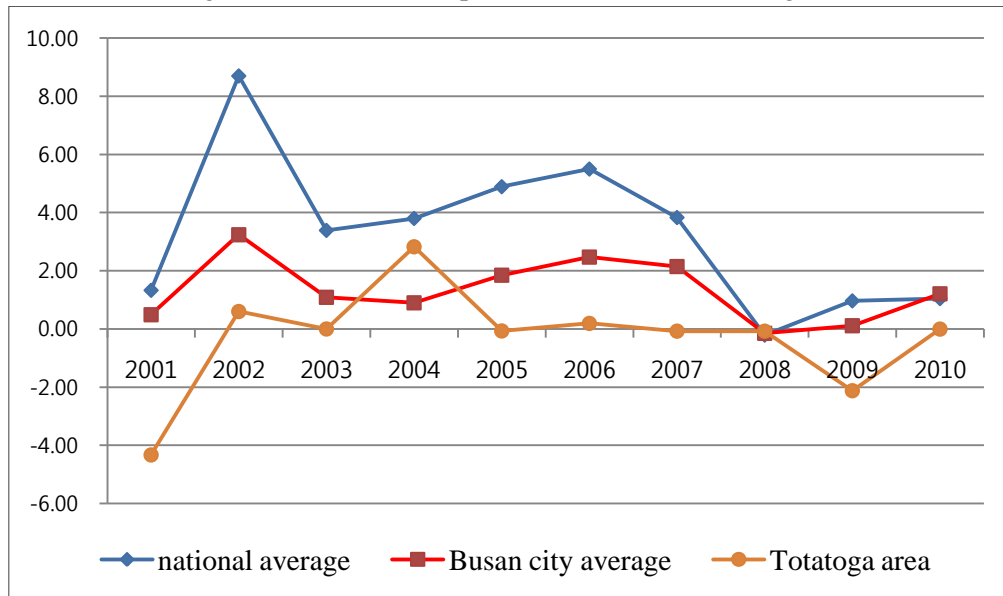
3. Totatoga story: An overview

Totatoga is the name of the project. It is also an acronym that is derived from a few Korean and English words, and refers to 'a street with solidarity and tolerance'. The project was launched in 2009 by the joint effort of Busan Metropolitan City and Busan Cultural Foundation. The area that the project was installed in was the Jung-gu District (literally 'central ward'), the old downtown of Busan Metropolitan City. Up until the late 80s, this place was a bustling commercial district and also performed the city's key administrative and commercial function. However, it started to lose its vitality after the relocation of city hall and the city's expansion into Haeundae and Seomyeon in the early 90s (See < Figure 1 > for declining land price in Totatoga area since 2000). As administrative and financial institutions moved out of the area, small-sized printing shops and restaurants began to support the local economy. The area is also culturally rich with lots of historical assets and memories. In addition to other places, Yongdusan Park, 40 steps, and Jagalchi traditional market are all important to Busan's modern history. During the Korean War, the prominent artists in Korea were gathered around the area, making the place the cultural heart of Busan. In a nutshell, the Totatoga district is a declining but is a historically significant part of downtown Busan.

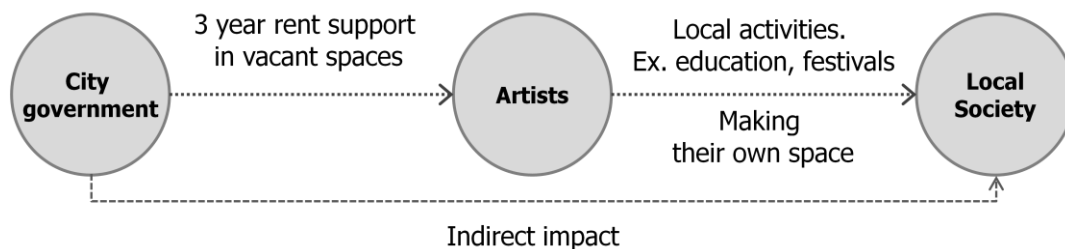
The Totatoga project was started in 2009 when the Busan metropolitan government accepted the proposal of the Busan Cultural Foundation, who offered a strategy to utilize artists to revitalize central Busan. At that time, Busan metropolitan government was looking for an appropriate cultural project that would use the remaining budget (approximately 300,000 USD) allocated for cultural purposes. Mr. Cha Jae Keun at the Busan Cultural Foundation suggested a simple and clear idea. He wanted to bring vitality into the neighborhood by encouraging selected artists to engage in local activities (See <Figure 2>). The Busan Cultural Foundation, the management body of the project, accommodated artists by offer to rent vacant offices for 3 years in the declining city center. In exchange for this accommodation, artists agreed to engage in education programs and festivals that were

geared towards local people. After 3 years of government support, the artists needed to be financially independent in their space and the foundation was to select new artists for the project. If the project is successful, one can see more and more artists being attracted to central Busan.

< Figure 1>Trend of land price increase rate at Totatoga area



<Figure2> The structure of the Totatoga project



Even though it looks simple, this is unprecedented in Korea. The conventional artist residency programs, which were already installed in several Korean cities, provided artists with fancy brand-new art studios or, at the very least, a remodeled one. These programs often allow artists to stay relatively short period of time, mostly less than 1 year. In these circumstances, artists focus on the production of their art work and do not pay much attention to the urban context of their art work. However, Totatoga was different in its approach. Mr. Cha Jae Keun, the architect and operator of the project, said:

Coming up with the idea of Totatoga, my belief was firm from the very beginning, because we know very well the problems of the previous practices. First, the project is designed to invite artists from diverse genres, not only visual art. We want networks and synergies among artists with different background. Second, the spaces for artists should be opened for citizens and contribute to

belonging to the group. It was said that, after joining Totatoga, the artists were satisfied with the opportunity to associate with other artists, the unique atmosphere of the location at central Busan, and the chance to meet local citizens. For most young and active artists in Totatoga, to be a member of Totatoga is an honor and a great opportunity to widen their work network through interacting with peer artists and the local community. A photographer at Totatoga said:

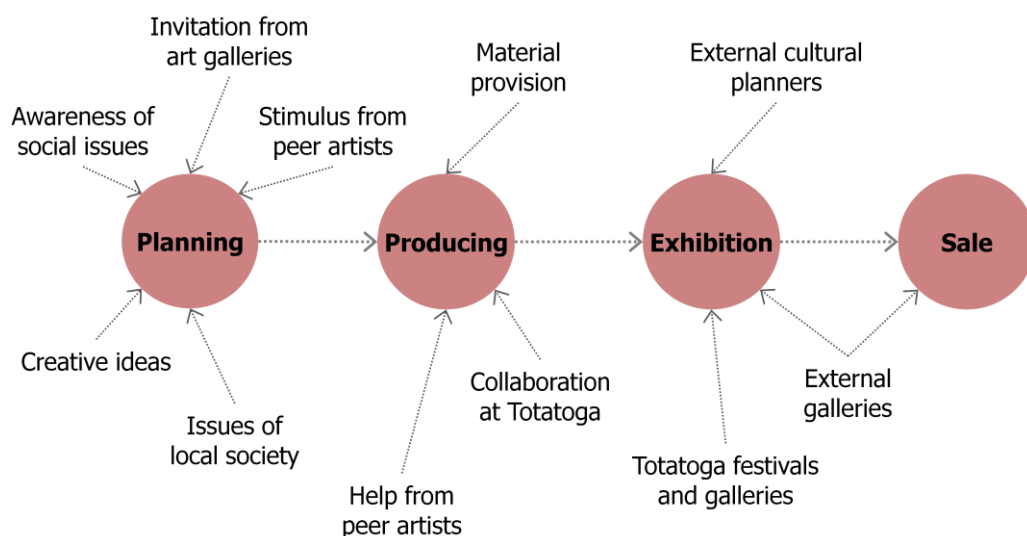
I really love the place. I think that this place is the present given from citizen so I named this space as GIFT. I want to give this present back to everyone who visit this place. That is why I opened photography classes for senior citizen and migrant house wives.

On the other hand, social network analysis, as illustrated in <Figure 4>, shows that here are 5~6 key players that play a central role in the network. However, no one is isolated from the network. While visual artists tend to be better linked and writers are less linked, this tendency is not strong enough for some artists to form a subgroup or, conversely, to be isolated from the network. It is fair to say that the network is largely homogeneous.

Work linkage

Work linkage refers to artists' connection with other artists or cultural agencies regarding their working process. This can be either from inception of the art work through to exhibition or sale. Individual artists are linked to different partners at different working stage. <Figure 5> shows us an installation artist's work linkage from planning to sale. Particularly, the stages of exhibition and sale seem to be difficult for young artists at Totatoga. Visual artists required an exhibition hall, writers need publishers, and performance artists need a stage. Filmmakers and installation artists need a certain level of investment, even in the early stage of their work process. All these are financial burdens for young artists.

<Figure5>Working cycle of a Totatoga artist



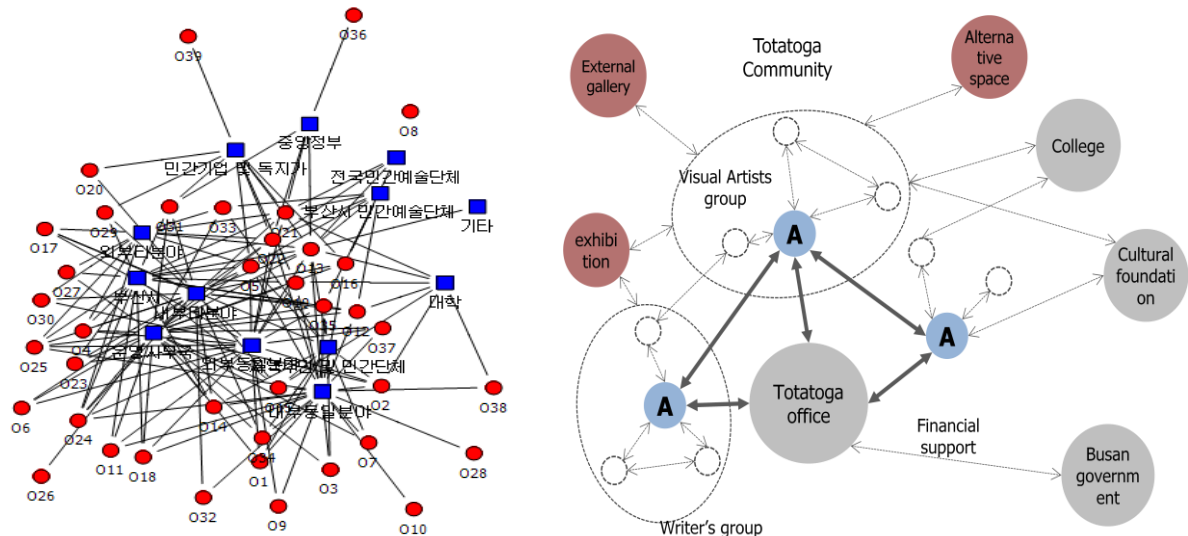
In Totatoga, there is a gallery, an exhibition center, and a small art theater. So one can say that Totatoga is fully equipped with what artists need for each stage of their work cycle. However, in reality, Totatoga does not provide significant help in expanding and diversifying artists' work network. Cultural foundation, art agencies, and universities in Busan are the artists' major partners in post-production activities. In this regard, the limitation of Totatoga is clear. In fact, Totatoga artists expressed hardship regarding their work linkage in interviews.

I don't have enough chances to exhibit my works. Holding a photo exhibition cost a lot. I have to pay for myself in printing and framing photos for exhibition. With just one solo exhibition, you would go bankrupt" (K, photographer)

Filmmaking requires a lot of facilities and equipment. I usually employ the equipments provided by Busan committee for film industry. My friends even went back to college just in order to use the equipments in the college (K, film director)

Installation work needs huge money. But there is no organization to support for the cost of materials. I am doing everything I can do to finance my work through delivering lectures and part-time work. (K, installation artist)

<Figure 6> Work linkage of the Totatoga artists



※ The right is the conceptualized map of the left

Local connection

Local connection refers to how much artists are engaged in local matter, how they communicate with neighborhood and to what degree they are embedded in the local society. As mentioned earlier, the Totatoga project requires the artists participate in local activities in a various forms. Key local activities among others are operating 'community spaces', running educational programs, and holding annual festivals.

First, 'community spaces' is a key feature of the Totatoga project. Some artists are running 'art-café' types of spaces where citizen are free to visit. For instance, at the center of

the district, there is a café called ‘100 year fish school’. This is just an ordinary cafe that sells coffee and tea; however, at the same time, the place regularly provides lectures for citizens about different topics related to humanities. Kim Soo Woo, a poet and a café operator, expressed her commitment to operating the space in the interview by saying that “this shabby downtown is a perfect place for studying humanities. We should ask, from here, who we are and where we are heading”. A film café named *Bogideomun*, which literally means ‘hard to see’, is a similar place but a different topic. The cafe, run by an independent film maker, has archives of books and films, and regularly arranges seminars, lectures, and films viewing mostly about ‘hard to see’ indie films. There are also a few other ‘open’ spaces, such as the Totatoga gallery, which displays and sells art work, and a craft shop called ‘silver fox,’ where citizens can come and learn arts and crafts. These kinds of shops, run by artists and sponsored by the Totatoga office, play a crucial role in increasing the interface between artists and citizens.

Second, the Totatoga artists actively participate in educational program, both individually and collectively. Individually, many artists launch their own teaching classes for local people. Photographers run photo classes for senior citizens, singers provide singing classes, and performing musicians teach citizens how to play guitar. In addition, Totatoga’s operating team arranges local cultural programs. Currently, the following courses are offered by the operating team: ‘Launch time art performance’, ‘Vitamin C’ (cultural lecture on every Tuesday), ‘Weekend free market’, and ‘Totatoga art exhibitions’, etc. These programs provide local citizens with an opportunity to learn and enjoy culture within the neighborhood.

Thirdly, the annual art festival, which is organized by the Totatoga artists and sponsored by the operating team, has been a key event of the Totatoga project. The various cultural events, from musical performances and exhibitions to art flea market, are held at several spots in the district during the festival season. This season usually lasts from two weeks to two months in autumn. During this time, artists collaborate each other to provide quality art work and performances, and nearby citizens enjoy and participate in the process. The festival, which was held three times up until 2012, marks the place as a cultural district to the citizens of Busan.

<Figure 7> The scenes of the Totatoga annual festivals



Source : Totatoga homepage(www.tttg.kr)

• Printing Street project: a symbolic event of artists' local connection

The printing street project is a symbolic event of how artists can contribute to and communicate with the local community. The project started with an encounter between a painter, who was a Totatoga artist, and a boy at the printing shop in so called the printing street in 2010. The boy, named Kyeongmin, full of curiosity, became friends with the painter, and introduced her to his mother in the printing shop. The painter suggested that she could help Kyeongmin to decorate the wall of the shop. After painting the wall together, the shop owner, happy with the result, launched the street beatification project called *Kyeongmin's apple tree*. And many Totatoga artists and printing shops participated in the project. In order to raise the funds needed for the project, the Totatoga musicians held a free concert and the Totatoga operating agency also donated money. As a result, the gray walls of printing shops were painted with colorful flowers and trees, the street was decorated with flowers, and, more importantly, the project provided a chance to bring artists and local people together.



Source : Totatoga website (www.tttg.kr)

Again, it should be noted that the important feature for Totatoga is having artists who are enthusiastic to participate in local activities. According to the survey, half of artists are engaged in local activities more than 1 hour per week one. Visual artists, musicians, and installation artists are relatively more active than artists in other genres. As for the types of activities, education programs and festivals show higher participation rate among artists. It is noted that this active local connection is carefully designed by the Totatoga project policy from its inception.

Neighborhood effect

How much did the artists' activities contribute to the revitalization of the area? It depends on how you define the term 'revitalization'. Since the inception of the project, Totatoga was focused on the long term social effect rather than direct economic benefits, such as the increase in the number of tourists and infrastructure improvement. According to Mr. Cha, the operator of the project, the whole project was carefully planned with reflective understanding on the pitfalls of the previous practices. The operator did not intend to institute a drastic change in the district or in the real estate market.

In Totatoga, it is fortunate to say that the change was incremental and gradual. According to the survey of the artists, major change was felt first in the inner circle of artists (90% responded). Thanks to the project, the old district became more attractive than before to

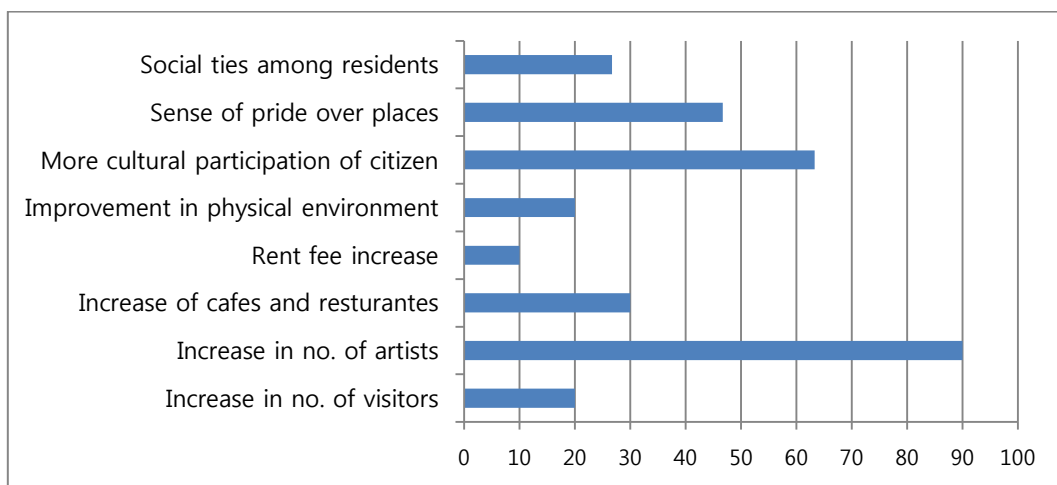
artists seeking benefits from artists' network. The result was that the district began to attract more artists. Secondly, the artists think that the project provided a better chance for cultural participation and increased local people's sense of pride. In contrast, only a few mentioned that the project attracted more visitors and increased land price.

Even though there was no dramatic transformation of the district, at least in terms of physical environment and tourism, it can be said that the district witnessed a renewed sense of vitality thanks to the project. By increasing awareness of the local culture and history, the public in Busan has begun reevaluating the historical and cultural value of the district. The image in people's mind gradually shifted from a shabby downtown to a historic/cultural zone. Artists describe the change in the district as follows:

Yes. I feel changes here. Perhaps we can call it Totatoga phenomenon. Recently a craft shop came in, some coffee shop and restaurants with unique color came in (K, film maker)

Many artists want to come here. We forgot the value of this place, Busan's cultural heart, for a long time. Thanks to Totatoga, we come to revalue this place (K, writer)

<Figure 8> Totatoga's neighborhood effect, measured based on survey on artists



※ The number means the ratio of artists who said 'yes'

5. Conclusion and discussion

- **Totatoga is the result of a deliberate policy design:** The policy designer had a specific sense regarding the relationship between artists and the local community, and acted superbly as an intermediary between government, artists, and local citizen. The key to success in urban cultural strategy is being able to function in this role.
- **Pursuing invisible success:** There was no new physical development. The project

reused old buildings and asked artists to be independent in their space after 3 years. The project focused on social benefit, rather than on direct economic benefit.

- **Fragile nature of the Totatoga artist community:** The Totatoga community is still maintained by government financial support, so one cannot say that this is truly embedded in locals and sustainable. More time is needed to determine how successful Totatoga was.
- **Busan and Totatoga at odds:** Cultural industry is increasingly important for Busan, a city long suffering from industrial hollowing out. Still, the Busan metropolitan government does not recognize the potential of Totatoga, even though the project has been highly touted by both local and national media. Totatoga should find a proper place within the bigger picture of Busan's vision for itself.

Reference

- Kotler, P., Asplund, C., Rein, I. and Heider, D. (1999) *Marketing Places Europe: Attracting Investments, Industries, Residents and Visitors to European Cities, Communities, Regions and Nations*. London, U.K: Pearson Education.
- Ashworth, G. J. and Voogd, H. (1994) "Marketing and place promotion", in Gold, J. R. and Ward, S. V. (eds) *Place Promotion: The Use of Publicity and Marketing to Sell Towns and Regions*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons.
- Florida, R. (2002) *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Basic Books.
- Florida, R. and Tinagli, L. (2004) *Europe in the Creative Age*. Carnegie Mellon Software Industry Center.
- Hill, E. & J. Brennan. (2000) "A Methodology for Identifying the Drivers and Clusters: The Foundation of Regional Competitive Advantage". *Economic Development Quarterly*. vol. 14, pp. 65-69.
- Kearns, G. & Philo, C. (1993) *Selling Places: The City as Cultural Capital, Past and Present*. Pergamon Press.
- Markusen, Ann. (2006) "Urban Development and the Politics of a Creative Class: Evidence from a Study of Artists". *Environment and Planning A*. vol. 38. pp. 1921-1940.
- McGuigan, Jim. (1996) *Culture and the Public Sphere*. London: Routledge.
- Paddison, R. (1993) "City Marketing, Image Reconstruction and Urban Regeneration". *Urban Studies*, vol. 30(2). pp. 339-350.
- Porter, Michael E. (1998) "Cluster and the New Economics of Competition". *Harvard Business Review*, November-December. pp. 77-90.
- Scott, A.J. (1996) "The Craft, Fashion, and Cultural Products Industries of Los Angeles: Competitive Dynamics and Policy Dilemmas in a Multisectorial Image-producing Complex". *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 86. pp. 306-323.
- Scott, A.J. (2004) "Cultural-Products Industries and Urban Economic Development: Contestation in Global Context". *Urban Affairs Review*, vol.39(4). pp.461-490.
- Stern, Mark J. and Seifert, Susan C. (2007) *Culture and Neighborhood Revitalization: A Harvest Document*. Philadelphia: The Reinvestment Fund.
- Ward, S. V. (1998) *Selling Places: The Marketing and Promotion of Towns and Cities, 1850-2000*. London: E&FN Spon.
- Zukin, S. (1995) *The Cultures of Cities*. Cambridge MA: Blackwell.