



Oh Se-hoon was elected in April 2021 to serve as the 38th mayor of Seoul. A lawyer by profession, he had previously served two terms as mayor from 2006 to 2011, and was a member of the National Assembly of South Korea from 2000 to 2004. Oh studied at Korea University, graduated from Korea University's School of Law, and was a fellow at the Graduate School of Social Science and Public Policy at King's College London, where he focused on job creation and economic growth in major cities around the world. During his first stint as mayor, Oh introduced initiatives related to housing and governance that earned recognition from the UN. Oh's election victory in 2021 was attributed in part to dissatisfaction over housing costs, which he promised to address. In late 2022, a stampede in Seoul's Itaewon district killed 159 people and attracted global media attention; the mayor offered a tearful public apology, pledging to improve public safety. He recently connected with Senior Fellow Anthony Flint by email, with the help of a translator.

Top: Seoul, South Korea. Credit: fotoVoyager via E+/Getty Images.
Inset: Oh Se-hoon. Credit: Seoul Metropolitan Government.

A Second Time Around in Seoul

ANTHONY FLINT: *What is your vision for the redevelopment of the city and the creation of more meaningful public space and parks, including plans for the transformation of the former U.S. military base at Yongsan?*

OH SE-HOON: Seoul has emerged as a globally competitive metropolis thanks to urban development. In the decade leading up to 2021, the city prioritized conservation, not convenient and comfortable public spaces. Seoul will pursue a recreation strategy and implement initiatives to break down barriers between conservation and development, redefining urban planning. The vision of Seoul's urban planning is to transform the city into an attractive, [economically active] city with expanded green space in the downtown area, including the Han River, and to develop a wide range of recreational and cultural facilities. The objective is to create an "emotional city" where culture and art are integrated into people's daily lives, and nature serves as a backdrop for reflection.

Yongsan is the last piece of land in Seoul that is available for future development. It will serve as the political, economic, and ecological epicenter of [the

future Seoul and Korea. After the presidential office was relocated to this area [in 2022], it became the focal point of Korean politics. The former train depot will be transformed into an international business district. The relocation of the U.S. military base is 31 percent complete. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact date when the transfer will be completed, but the area will be transformed into hundreds of acres of green space, a place of rest and tranquility for citizens.

In April 2022, Seoul announced the Green Urban Space Recreation Strategy. It decreases the building-to-land ratio and raises the floor area ratio, easing building restrictions in the urban core. This is expected to quadruple the current ratio of urban green space from 3.7 percent to over 15 percent. Priority is given to revitalizing the outdated Jongmyo and Toegye-ro area (the Sewoon Shopping Center district). In August 2022, Seoul unveiled the Great Sunset Han River Project, which will usher in an era of 30 million international visitors. The project aims to make the Han River a popular urban space by enhancing its allure and convenience. [The plans include] a mega Ferris wheel, Nodeul Art Island, and a floating performance stage. In February, Seoul announced the Urban and Architectural Design Innovation initiative, which aims to increase the city's competitiveness through innovatively designed buildings. Business plans will prioritize design elements to encourage creative public building design.

AF: *You have said there needs to be a better range of housing options, particularly for young individual renters. How are you addressing the problem of housing affordability?*

OS: Housing problems prevent individuals from climbing the social ladder. Housing is the most expensive component of essentials such as food, clothing, and shelter, [and] is becoming a source of pain and anxiety for citizens, particularly young people. According to a Seoul Metropolitan Government survey, *jeonse* [a long-term lease requiring a large deposit up front] loans for young

people have increased sixfold in the last four years, and 59.4 percent of young single-person households live in rental housing.

Seoul is pursuing various housing and housing support policies to help young people participate in social and economic activities without worrying about housing, including providing public housing; improving the quality of rental housing; and providing private youth housing at below-market rates to help them accumulate assets and start their own families.

Generation-integrated housing, which can house parents, children, and grandchildren, can help address daily challenges and social issues such as rapid aging and child care. We also intend to provide senior-friendly public housing with residential, medical, and convenience amenities. The government's ultimate objective is to stabilize home prices.

AF: *What are the key elements of Seoul's current climate action plan, and how do you envision that being a model for other cities?*

OS: In response to the climate crisis, the Seoul Metropolitan Government established the 2050 Seoul Climate Action Plan to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. The plan was submitted to the

A young Seoul renter outside her apartment building. The city is working to make housing more affordable. Credit: Kim Hong-Ji/REUTERS via Alamy Stock Photo.



C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group and received C40's final approval in June 2021. The plan, which aims to create a sustainable city where people, nature, and the future coexist, has outlined policies in five major areas: [build and retrofit] one million low-carbon buildings by 2026; expand electric vehicle supply to 400,000 units and install EV chargers by 2026; provide various renewable energy sources (such as fuel cells, geothermal, hydrothermal, and solar); reduce waste, promote recycling, and prohibit direct landfilling; and expand urban parks and forests to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and enhance urban resiliency.

The plan aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 30 percent compared to 2005 levels by 2026. It will take a concerted effort on a global scale to solve the climate crisis. Seoul will share its best practices with mayors of cities worldwide and engage in dialogue with them to combat the climate crisis.

AF: Tell us about how Seoul has become a smart city, including the use of robotics and apps, and your exploration into virtual reality.

OS: Seoul is a global smart city that has been an outstanding leader in fields such as e-government, where it has been named the best e-government for seven years in a row. We aspire to be an inclusive and sustainable smart city. . . . Currently, 16 self-driving vehicles are on the road at all times in four areas: Sangam, Gangnam, Cheonggyecheon, and the Blue House (Gyeongbokgung Palace, the former presidential residence). Seoul aims to offer autonomous vehicle service across the city by 2026 and become a global standard model city for autonomous driving.

The Seoul Metropolitan Government [also] implemented robots and AI technologies across its public administration. The robotic public servant "Robo Manager" handles simple administrative tasks, such as the delivery of documents. "Assistant Manager Seouri," a virtual public official and internal chatbot, has been

introduced to help employees with complex business procedures. Metaverse Seoul was named one of the best inventions of 2022 by *Time* magazine. It was the only [public-sector invention on the list]. Metaverse Seoul is a place where anyone can equally enjoy Seoul, since it is not limited in time or space and does not have discriminating elements such as gender, disability, or occupation. Seoul intends to implement the metaverse ecosystem across all of its administrative services, including the economy, culture, tourism, and citizen complaints.

In collaboration with the World Smart Cities Organization, Seoul recently established the Seoul Smart City Prize. The winner will be announced in September. The prize is intended to promote Seoul's core values as well as to discover inclusive and innovative projects to share with the world.

The municipal tool Metaverse Seoul was named one of the best inventions of 2022 by *Time* magazine, which called it "the first platform of its kind developed by a city." Credit: Seoul Metropolitan Government.



AF: *You have traveled to South America and Africa to talk about city administration. What did you tell them about managing the modern city?*

OS: I traveled to Lima, Peru, and Kigali, Rwanda, several years ago as part of a Korea International Cooperation Agency advisory group. Lima was highly interested in Seoul. I discussed my experiences with the Han River Renaissance Project and housing. I also discussed the Women-Friendly City project, which [aimed to implement] women-friendly facilities . . . including pedestrian roads, parks, restrooms, housing, and public transportation. I went to the sites where Lima’s major projects, such as the Rimac River Project and the Costa Verde Project, were being carried out. And I organized a seminar to examine housing policies including site development and rental policy.

At the time of my visit in 2014, Kigali was still working hard to heal the wounds left by the atrocious genocide that had killed one million people 20 years prior. I was impressed by how they were overcoming the tragic history, declaring *Kwibuka*, “let us remember,” rather than seeking vengeance. I admired how they transformed their hatred into reconciliation. Urban reconstruction is a major concern in Rwanda, so I passed on my experience in urban planning, housing, and tourism—especially the importance and growth potential of tourism. From Peru to Rwanda, during overseas advisory activities and volunteering, I learned firsthand how “you learn as you teach, and you receive as you give.” It reminded me of how important it is for a leader to be inclusive and reconciliatory.

AF: *What is your view of land value capture in private real estate development, and how it can be used to finance infrastructure, housing, and other needs?*

OS: In exchange for infrastructure during private real estate development, the Seoul Metropolitan Government provides floor-area-ratio incentives. Through this exchange, the government may

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acquire infrastructure such as roads and parks and essential community amenities such as libraries, childcare facilities, cultural facilities, and youth facilities, as well as public rental housing and public rental industrial facilities. Between August 2015 and January 2023, [these policy incentives yielded] 357 public contribution facilities equivalent to approximately \$5 billion. Furthermore, the revised National Land Planning Act, which went into effect in July 2021, allows for both in-kind items such as facilities and cash payments that can be used throughout Seoul. The Seoul Metropolitan Government will use these funds to cover operating expenses for essential facilities, the expansion of roads and railways, and new transportation projects.

The current zoning system will be revamped to maximize land efficiency in underutilized spaces. It will pursue two pillars of urban competitiveness: integrating residential and commercial uses and expanding urban green space. Seoul is abolishing the rigid 35-floor regulation [on residential buildings] that acted as a headwind against change, easing building regulations such as height and floor area ratio that impeded urban center development, and expanding parks and green areas.

Seoul is reinventing itself in ways other than just modifying its urban planning practices. With the city’s attractiveness in mind, the Seoul Metropolitan Government comprehensively considers factors that significantly impact a person’s happiness, such as leisure, health, safety, and environment, as it builds the city. □

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