

## **“Our Experiment Will Never Stop”:** *The Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable as an Experiment of Local Culture Governance*

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### **Abstract**

*As an example of cultural governance in Seongbuk-gu, Seoul, the Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable, an autonomous network of artists, was a new initiative and a starting point for participation, activity, and change through arts and culture in the local community. Launched in January 2014, the Roundtable is a best practice that tests the limits of public-private partnerships and collaboration in the field of arts and culture in Seongbuk-gu.*

*The Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable is neither an interest group of local artists nor a partner group affiliated with a public arts and cultural institution of the Seongbuk Cultural Foundation that facilitates its own projects. Rather, it is a minimum apparatus to ensure a sustainable ecosystem, which was created by local arts and cultural practitioners and an experiment to graft the local arts and cultural ecosystem to the larger local community ecosystem.*

*One of the strengths of the Roundtable is that it encompasses various genres of arts and culture while serving as a meeting place for different local actors, including cultural planners, village activists, and resident artists. Through this process, people can accumulate common experiences, address common issues and agendas in the local community, and discover and expand shared values.*

**Keywords:** Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable, Seongbuk-gu, Seongbuk Cultural Foundation, local culture governance, governance, network of artists.

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## 1. What Are We Going to Do?

Held in Strasbourg on May 25, 2018, the European Conference of the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) selected the Seoul's Seongbuk-gu district and France's Lyon as the co-winner of the Third International Award UCLG-Mexico City-Culture 21. Seongbuk-gu was praised by the jury as "a perfect example of cultural policy for a sustainable city" in which three entities—Seoul Seongbuk-gu, Seongbuk Cultural Foundation and the Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable—jointly organized public-private participatory governance to implement cultural democracy and cultural governance. The award was not only a great honor for Seongbuk-gu at the local level, but also a huge encouragement for many artists, cultural planners, and community activists who are at the forefront of creating a sustainable city. Moreover, as this award was given by the UCLG, it resonated to no small extent with the arts and cultural community in Korea, influencing many discourses including those on cultural cities and creative cities.

Above all, the UCLG is not a state-centered network, but a global organization of local and regional governments around the world that works towards sustainable development by sharing information and policies on agendas such as local autonomy and decentralization, local finance, gender equality, culture, social integration, and human rights. In this respect, winning the award is especially meaningful as an innovative experiment of a small district, Seongbuk-gu, gaining international recognition for tackling challenges currently faced by cities around the world, including Europe and South America. It also reaffirms the common nature of our concerns and experiments as issues shared by all our contemporaries who plan cities and organize urban life.

Then, what does it mean for a city to make an experiment of a new city through governance at the level of local culture? Who is doing what through which actions? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to examine a concrete and substantial case.

Most people aspire to do something to create change in the world. Whether big or small, such actions differ depending on situations like

influence, power, and politics. Therefore, we must think about what to do and how to do it to have a good impact on the world. In this process, it is difficult to create change by directly influencing reality. This is because the world around us is much larger than we think, and its internal system has a much more complicated structure. As a result, there is a huge gap between the idea of changing the world and the reality of doing so. One of the most practical and rational ways to change the world is to engage in democratic political activities such as voting. However, as we are witnessing all over the world, changes through political institutions have numerous limitations and flaws. We see politicians fail to play their proper role as representatives of their citizenry, and the state and local governments are at a loss for what to do. The gap between the ideal and reality is getting wider, while the people living in the gap are getting increasingly tired or left behind.

Changing the world requires real, concrete work. No matter how good the argument, there is nothing more important than the question of how to change the person sitting in front of me. In this sense, a local community has characteristics similar to a family. There are many people who are interested and active in big political issues at the national level but are surprisingly ignorant of or insensitive to the realities of their own neighborhoods. In this way, local communities are marginalized and it is often a small number of interest groups that lead local communities. If we are interested in changing or transforming the world, we should ask each other questions about our communities. It is in this context that the Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable launched an experiment of local culture governance as a new initiative and a starting point for participation, action, and change through arts and culture in the local community.

## **2. The Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable Model**

The Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable is an exemplary case that tests the limits of public-private cooperation and collaboration in the field of arts and culture in Seongbuk-gu’s community. It is neither an interest group of local artists, nor a partner group affiliated with a public arts and

cultural institution of the Seongbuk Cultural Foundation to facilitate its own projects. Rather, it is a minimum apparatus to ensure a sustainable ecosystem, which was created by local arts and cultural practitioners and an experiment to graft the local arts and cultural ecosystem to the larger local community ecosystem.

The Roundtable was jointly proposed by many people who were concerned about the local arts and cultural ecosystem with the establishment of the Seongbuk Cultural Foundation in September, 2012. In short, it was a result of the combination of the Seongbuk-gu local government, the Seongbuk Cultural Foundation as the intermediary support organization, and the civil organization of arts and cultural practitioners. Since its first meeting in January, 2014, the Roundtable has held a general meeting every month and solidified its identity as a local community by organizing sports days and joint workshops every year.



The most significant feature of the Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable is its autonomy. It is an open community which invites anyone to participate in its operation, regardless of their qualifications. Even though there are some difficulties in decision-making and discussion due to

its extremely open nature, the Roundtable has consistently maintained this stance for the past 10 years. The operating principles are outlined in the rules it established in 2015: “autonomous activities” (autonomy), “cultural democracy” (democracy), “friendship and cooperation” (solidarity), and “respect for differences through cultural diversity” (diversity). The election of members and co-chairs of the Steering Committee is based on voluntary participation and autonomy. The committee consists of 20 to 30 members who participate voluntarily each year. Committee members do not receive any special benefits or monetary compensation, but rather pay a monthly membership fee of 10,000 won and spare time for their roles in the committee. There are two co-chairs, one of whom is elected among committee members, while the other is selected by a random selection method known as “ladder climbing” (*sadari tagi*) among those nominated by others or by themselves. This method displays a high level of “trust” in the sense that it is a mechanism to strengthen and maintain democracy in community activities through checks and balances on the authority and power of the two chairs. Chairs serve a one-year term and are not eligible to serve again in following terms. As a result, the open and democratic ways of the Roundtable play an important role in building trust within and outside, as well as in the emergence of new actors.

This operating method of the Roundtable is tantamount to a model of direct democracy. The monthly general meeting is a time for participants to introduce themselves and new members. In this way, those who share and enjoy this time together each month eventually form a core group in the Roundtable. During the general meeting, members share their own activities with others, exchange ideas, and engage in discussions and debates. They also organize joint actions or performances depending on current social issues while also constructively criticizing and encouraging each other’s activities. One of the strengths of this network is that it encompasses various genres of arts and culture while serving as a meeting place for different local actors, including cultural planners, village activists, and resident artists. Through this process, people can accumulate common experiences, address common issues and agendas in the local community, and discover and expand shared values.



### 3. The Power of Governance

If the Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable is the private sector, the Seongbuk Cultural Foundation can be categorized as the public sector. The Foundation is a local government-invested and funded institution established by Seongbuk-gu in September 2012. Its objective is to promote arts and culture in the Seongbuk-gu area and to ensure that arts and culture effectively permeate the lives of its residents. At present, about 100 local cultural foundations across the country play a minimal role in operating existing public facilities such as art centers or cultural performance halls on behalf of their local governments. Since it is difficult to operate existing facilities such as performance theaters, libraries, art museums, living culture spaces or sports facilities, it is almost impossible for them to envision further changes in the arts and culture of the local community. Arts and culture are arguably just one of the many areas of the local community ecosystem. However, arts and culture are not only about a specific field but are also closely connected to changing the condition of life. Although performances, exhibitions, and festivals do not help us in our daily lives, there is a big difference between having and not having this experience.

Realizing such limitations of local cultural foundations, the Seongbuk Cultural Foundation has been striving, from the early stage of its establishment, to build an active network with local arts and cultural practitioners. This is a part of its substantive and concrete work to create participation and change in the local cultural ecosystem beyond the simple expansion of a horizontal network. Building many culture-related facilities or pouring a huge budget into local festivals can hardly lead to vitalizing the local culture. Local culture can become sustainable and vital only when those who constitute the ecosystem participate in its creation. This means that local artists and residents should be the actual actors of local culture and that the local cultural ecosystem should be directly linked to the local ecosystem. As cultural foundations are public institutions, most of their budgets are funded by local governments, which means they are operated with tax money and their staff receive salaries. Therefore, depending on how these public platforms are utilized, the local cultural ecosystem can produce very different results. While cultural foundations have a degree of autonomy through their board of directors as nonprofit organizations, they are also subject to audit by local governments and local councils. Thus, it is crucial for cultural foundations to clearly define their identity and role.

In this context, the collaboration between the Seongbuk Cultural Foundation and the Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable has had a different effect on the local community and local culture. In recent years, there have been several cases in which the public and private sectors work together on a project basis and then disband after the project is completed. In addition, there are few opportunities for activists and artists to have close relationships with each other. Nevertheless, the arts and cultural practitioners in Seongbuk-gu have continued their monthly meetings and relationships without exception, building a relationship of mutual trust that is hard to find these days. The Foundation provided spaces for Roundtable meetings and prepared basic materials for the meetings. This support was the minimum, but probably most important works that are needed to make up for the limitations of private actors who are irregular and fluid. In this process, the Foundation’s employees also participate in the Roundtable voluntarily or as part of their work. During meetings, participants



share their activities with others, exchange various ideas on the local community and culture, have discussions from different points of view, and constructively criticize and encourage each other's activities. These experiences are refreshing and create new relationships and networks that previously did not exist in the local community.

#### **4. Seongbuk's Experiment: Its Change and Outcome**

One of the strengths of the Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable is that it encompasses various genres of arts and culture while serving as a meeting place for different local actors, including cultural planners, village activists, and resident artists. In this process, people can accumulate common experiences, address common issues and agendas in the local community, and discover and expand shared values. These activities can lead to more systematic activities for the sustainable change and development of the local community through sharing and cooperation that goes beyond individual ideas and activities. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the Roundtable has been able to continue its activities on a stable and sustainable basis especially after partnering with public institutions such as the Seongbuk Cultural Foundation. Such a relationship and structure allows for various experiments such as a new form of local festival, the "Art Village Making" project involving artists, youth, merchants and citizens, arts and culture education encompassing diverse generations and social strata, and a project to expand healthy communities in the area by organizing cooperatives in various fields.

In Korea, most local festivals are organized by commercial agencies through competitive bidding, leading to a proliferation of similar local festivals. However, when urban planners and artists work together to design and implement them, as in the case of the Roundtable, they can reduce the budget and imbibe the vitality of the local community in their content and atmosphere. Local artists, designers, and activists can collaborate to establish a festival secretariat to design and implement related projects, enabling broad participation of the local community in the process.



In addition, it is necessary to discover and connect various resources related to the festivals through the “Festival Academy” and the “Festival Cooperation Network” for a virtuous cycle of the festival ecosystem. In the case of Seongbuk-gu’s flagship festival, the Seongbuk Global Food Culture Festival Nurimasil, a cooperative was organized through the Roundtable, and in partnership with this cooperative, the festival served as a catalyst for shifting to a collaborative governance model.



The Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable also offers a new model of joint management of public spaces. Public theaters and complex cultural spaces are usually either operated by public institutions or entrusted to the private sector. However, entrusting them to a cultural foundation poses its own problems since it is legally impossible to reassign them. In this situation, the Roundtable is conducting a new experiment through a “joint operation agreement” to facilitate active collaboration with the private sector. The Miarigogae Art Theatre has attracted attention in the performance world for actively involving artists in its planning and operation through joint operation with the Maeul-dameun Theatre Cooperative. In addition, a complex cultural space called Miindo (the

combination of the first letters of three Korean words: Miarigogae + people + road) was created in the abandoned space under the Miarigogae Overpass. This space has become a cradle for various cultural activities such as exhibitions and performances, woodworking workshops, playgrounds, and markets through joint operation with the Ridge-N-Village Cooperative. Also, as a novel experiment, an old multipurpose hall in the basement of the Seongbuk Information Library, the largest in Seongbuk-gu, was transformed into a black-box public theatre called the Cheonjangsan Mountain Fable Theatre, and a reading room on the fifth floor of the same library was changed into the Kkumjaram Children's Art Gallery. This change was carried out in collaboration with artists through a participatory budgeting. In short, a single library is transformed into a complex facility including a library, an art gallery, and a performance hall. This was made possible by the ideas and collaboration of local artists instead of a unilateral top-down process. It is a project that would not be possible without a deep understanding of and affection for the local area.

The collaborative governance of the Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable and the Common Seongbuk Cultural Foundation has transformed the arts and cultural ecosystem of the Seongbuk-gu area to an unbelievable extent. As a result, the Roundtable was selected as a member of the "Seongbuk Hall of Fame" in 2017 in the field of arts and culture, which is very unusual at the local political level in Korea.

One of the most important features of the Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable is the fact that local artists began to live in public rental housing within the local community. In 2017, 19 rental housing units were provided exclusively for local artists, allowing them to settle down at affordable housing costs. Now, with the additional provision of 138 units in 2019, more than 70 households of arts and cultural practitioners live in rental housing. This change in conditions has had a significant impact on these artists' activities. Since their workplaces and living spaces coincide, their interests in the area are bound to grow as well. As a result, the participation of artists in the resident autonomous council has given them the opportunity to meet with community members to discuss policies.

Artists are citizens (residents). The reason why this obvious fact is



repeated here is that local communities still do not recognize artists as such. Although a few of artists are now involved in the resident autonomous council, it has not been easy to get this far. This was possible because, over time and through accumulated experience, locals have begun to perceive artists as residents and to build trust with them. Until now in Korean society, local communities have been influenced by a select few rather than a diverse group of people. Even in Seoul, for example, the local community ecosystem is mostly composed of various occupational organizations or self-organized groups, often centered around community centers at the smallest level of *dong*. The administration of local governments is carried out in such a context, and thus there are few opportunities to find or discover the various actors within the community.

The activities of the Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable do not move or stop at the individual level, but include the neighborhood, the smallest unit of community. By encountering the daily lives of local residents at traditional markets or small alleys that cannot be grouped even with the smallest administrative unit of *dong*, the Roundtable plays a role in making very substantial changes in their lives, far from a merely temporary effect of arts and culture. It is not a matter of efficiency measured in numbers or outcomes, but a feeling of “happiness” or “solidarity” that cannot be seen but can be felt. It is nothing less than the restoration of community.

A community is not a business or a project, but a repeated, tangible experience of daily life and a natural expression of people's lives.



## 5. Living as Neighborhood Friends

The Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable is not a rigid organization, but rather a flexible platform. The composition and operation of the Roundtable are strictly oriented toward connectivity, sharing, solidarity, and expansion. Ultimately, the expansion of the Roundtable is made possible by its people. When artists' various life practices, such as their artistic activities, cultural engagement, and political expression, are connected to the local community, the experiment of the Roundtable can continue.

Locality is a space embodied in concreteness and diversity, where abstract values are revealed by actual people in a concrete place. This is an important fact, often referred to as a “policy case.” The problem is that most policy cases remain on paper or as data, eventually disappearing. Why is it impossible for concrete local cases to last longer? The reason is

that we approach local culture by simply defining it as an area. As a result, the cases may be temporary successes or specific cases, but they cannot survive as sustainable cases. Locality is the final point where political, cultural, economic, educational, and social issues simultaneously manifest themselves. In this respect, an integrative and holistic approach to local culture is needed. This is possible only when we presuppose the whole process of life, not a separation of activity (work) and life. It does not matter what theories or positions are advocated, such as capitalism, neoliberalism, or communitarianism. The Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable will continue its experiment for each person to live his or her own life from the perspective of cultural governance and village autonomy. It will envision a local community thriving cultural diversity that goes beyond differences in political views, ethnicity, gender, disability, generation, and so on. It is a matter of securing a space that is without competition and is safer than any other place, which can be achieved neither by individuals, nor by the state or company, but by the efforts of those who are connected to each other in the name of neighborhood friends. It is ultimately to better change the conditions of our life and further to create a new daily life.

