

## Article

# Slope Matters: Anti-Sprawl and Construction of Urban Nature in Yongin, South Korea

Jewon Ryu <sup>1</sup> and Sang-Hyun Chi <sup>2,\*</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Korea Research Institute for Human Settlement, Sejong 30147, Korea; jewonryu@krihs.re.kr

<sup>2</sup> Department of Geography, Kyung Hee University, Seoul 02447, Korea

\* Correspondence: hyungeo@khu.ac.kr

**Abstract:** Nature in urban areas is defined, recognised, and used by various actors, such as residents, politicians, construction industries, public officials, civic activists, and tourists. These actors engage in alliances and confrontations to construct urban nature as they imagine and want it. Existing research has shown the role of actors and the relationship between them. However, the position and the role of actors can change over the course of urban development as well. The history of development in Yongin shows the process of the political construction of urban nature by illustrating the conflict between development and the environment. From the late 1980s, large-scale apartment complexes have been built. Development ordinances have supported this incessant expansion of the city by easing regulations on the conversion of forest into residential areas. The result of accelerated expansion of the city without comprehensive urban planning of the city is called ‘the epitome of urban sprawl’. From the late 2010s, the orientation of city development began to change. The relaxed slope ordinance was restored to curb further development. This study explores the background of this amendment from the perspectives of urban political ecology. In order to examine how Yongin’s ‘nature’ was imagined and reconceptualised, we explore how the perception of nature is differentially constructed among various urban actors, especially residents from different districts. Next, we focus on the political strategies of urban actors who developed environmental conservation and public asset discourses from individualised and fragmented complaints. Through this process, this study explored how ‘unchecked urban sprawl’ is imagined, recognised, defined, and, more importantly, prevented. Additionally, the public support for the anti-sprawl shows that actors in urban politics change in the process of urban sprawl.

**Keywords:** urban political ecology; development and environment; suburbs; urban actors; residents; slope; urban sprawl; Yongin



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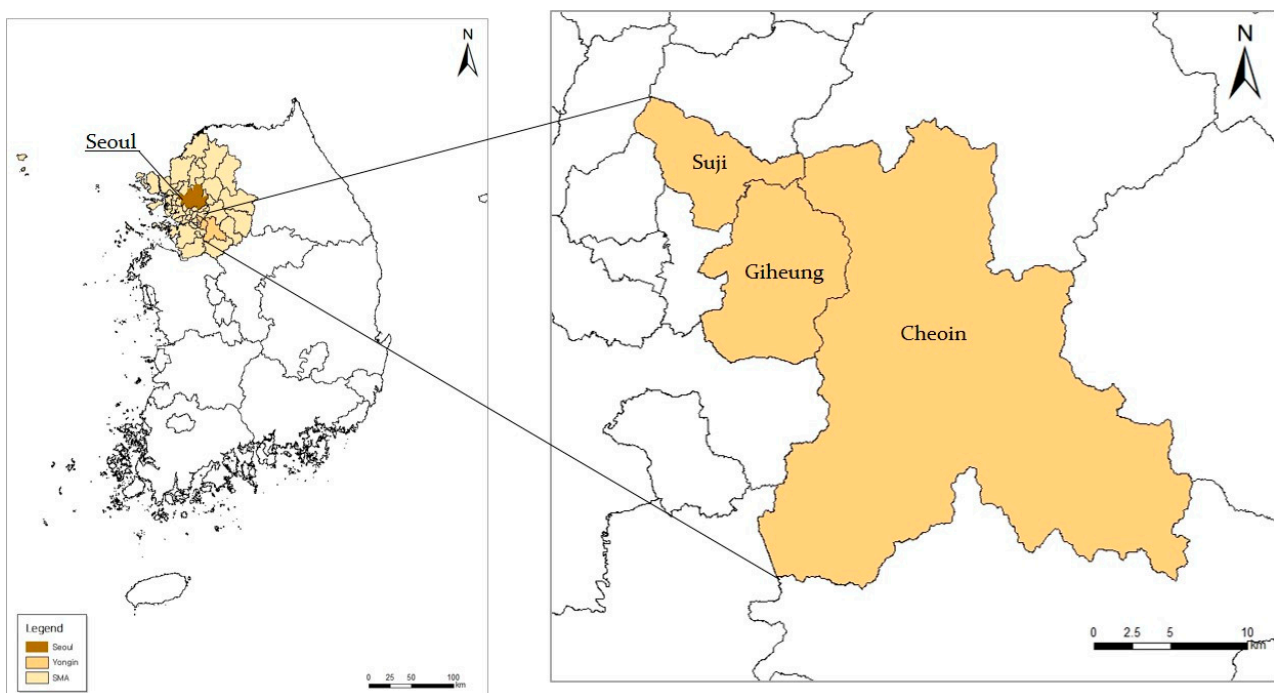
## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Yongin: The Epitome of Urban Sprawl in South Korea

Urban development in South Korea has been centred on the Seoul Metropolitan Area (hereafter SMA). More than half of South Korea’s population lives in the SMA, which accounts for 11.8% of the total area [1]. Despite the government’s policy efforts over several decades to decentralise the population, the concentration of the population has continued. Yongin, located in the south of Seoul and connected by several expressways, has grown since the late 1980s as a ‘new city’ or ‘bedroom town’ for commuters to Seoul. Despite Yongin not being the first new city in the suburbs of Seoul, it is notable that the development of the city was not carried out under a city-wide comprehensive plan prepared by the central government, which was common in the 1990s. Without a comprehensive plan, the land was divided into small residential districts by each contractor. The fragmentary housing developments have brought about urban problems, such as traffic issues and a lack of green spaces and infrastructure. Despite these problems, Yongin has seen rapid population growth because of affordable housing prices, accessibility to Seoul, and a somewhat bucolic

landscape. However, the incessant expansion of the city recently encountered anti-sprawl movements. Although the case of Yongin cannot be generalised as a phenomenon of urban sprawl or anti-urban sprawl, it is noteworthy how residents in sprawled areas changed themselves into proponents for anti-sprawl. In the process of urbanisation, residents of large-scale apartment complexes emerged as powerful players in local politics. In other words, the case of Yongin illustrates urban environments are drenched in uneven power relations [2].

There are two significant phases in the development history of Yongin. The first is the apartment-oriented development from the late 1980s to the 2000s. The growth of Yongin and its population increase was especially noticeable in two districts (Suji and Giheung) because they are relatively closer to Seoul and have a higher proportion of flat land (Figure 1). However, there was no sufficient urban infrastructure to support the residents, which resulted in the city's nickname—'the best example of sprawl' or 'the epitome of unplanned development'. Second, with the townhouse boom that started in the late 2010s, given the incessant population growth, Yongin's urban landscape came to face a significant change.



**Figure 1.** Seoul metropolitan area (left) and Yongin (right).

### 1.2. Urban Sprawl and the Recent 'Environmental Turn'

In the early stage of development starting in the 1980s, the city lacked a comprehensive development plan and urban infrastructure due to its apartment-oriented development to cope with the increasing demand for housing [3–5]. However, without a comprehensive plan, urban infrastructure was poorly provided, and the city had to depend on adjacent cities for daily services, which resulted in heavy traffic jams. The media described these aspects of the development with a word meaning unplanned development ('Nangaebal'), which emphasises the dark side of urban sprawl. Since then, Yongin has frequently been mentioned in articles dealing with unplanned development; it has, therefore, become widely known as a fast-growing development-friendly city.

The aftermath has subsided as the urban infrastructure has been gradually provided, but unplanned development appeared in different forms. Yongin still showed remarkable population growth after the 2000s. Since there were not enough flatlands to build large apartment complexes, the city's government expanded the range of slopes in the

forest to allow for development by making more lands developable. As the ordinance on development-related activities (hereafter the slope ordinance) has been eased three times since 2000, the conversion of forest land for residential purposes, especially lots for townhouses, has been accelerated. This was echoed in the townhouse boom that started in the 2010s in Korea, which especially gave city residents the chance to enjoy a bucolic life.

Residents and local NGOs complained that the natural environment and landscape were severely damaged due to the conversion of cheap forest land into residential areas [6]. To cope with negative public opinion on the course of sprawl that has destroyed the environment and landscape, Yongin has steered its policy orientation from horizontal expansion and quantitative growth to curbing further development. What made the change of policy orientation possible was the eruption of residents' intense dissatisfaction with the recent conversion of forest land to a residential area, especially for townhouse complexes.

We argue that the conflict over the revised ordinance cannot be reduced to the collision between support for and opposition to the development. Understanding the conflict as the tug of war between 'development aspiration to ease ordinances' and 'environmental conservation to strengthen ordinances' is too dichotomous and abstract. Therefore, this study attempts to clarify the social forces and relationships underlying the apparent conflict. First, we trace how the slope ordinance has changed over the past two decades of the conflict. Then, we focus on the residents' anti-sprawl movement which resulted in the recently tightened ordinance. More specifically, we glean how urban nature was recognised, imagined, and (re)defined by various actors of the urban politics surrounding the regulation.

### *1.3. Research Method*

This paper explores what drives the perceptions of nature and seeks to examine the complexity and dynamics of the urban politics surrounding urban nature. In particular, we focused on residents as the new actor in environmental politics. Residents dissatisfied with the city's incessant urban sprawl were the main actors in the recent revision of the slope ordinance. To understand the course of the debates and the advent of these new actors, document analysis was conducted including the minutes of city councils and newspaper articles, written and in-depth interviews, field trips, and GIS analysis.

Document analysis was performed on the White Paper of Yongin's Special Committee on the Investigation of Unplanned Development, minutes of Yongin's city council, and related newspaper articles. In particular, the change of slope ordinance, which defines the maximal slope for development in the urban planning ordinance system was given special attention. Field trips and in-depth interviews were conducted with former and current city councillors and citizen activists from NGOs. A field trip was conducted to the forest development site for townhouses and the construction site where the development conflict has been most acute recently. Interviewees were experts involved in the process of revising the slope ordinance, city council members representing each district, and activists who participated in the anti-development movement.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1. Urban Nature and the Context of Space*

Recent discussions on nature in urban areas have resulted in the development of urban political ecology (hereafter UPE). The theory of UPE offers several insightful implications for urban research. Since Swyngedouw coined the term and defined the concept, UPE has argued that nothing is completely natural or unnatural in an urban area [7]. Rather, UPE has focused on how nature or natural things have been produced in the entanglement of social process, which is crystallised in the expression of 'urban metabolism' [2].

UPE has contributed to the more comprehensive and dynamic understanding of cities by adding nature to the existing political-economic approaches [8]. First, it refutes the dichotomy of city/nature or city/countryside; rather, it insists they coexist as a mixture. Labelling the space with the tag of either urban or rural has created a problematic generali-

sation that each spatial compartment is viewed and analysed as a separate homogeneous unit. UPE insists that urban and nature are rather mixed, together comprising the urban area. Thus, nature in urban areas exists as ‘socio-nature,’ that is, nature or natural things in the city are defined and understood in a unique spatial context.

To reveal the relationship between society and nature, Swyngedouw refers to the concept of ‘socio-nature,’ which implies that society and nature are dependent, and their existence as a unity is a produced entity [7]. Based on the fundamental notion that nature within a city has been recognised and transformed according to the way of life in the urban area, UPE is concerned with the political competition that occurs in the process of urbanisation. As nature in a city becomes urbanised, it focuses on being reproduced and transformed. Since Swyngedouw explained that nature in a city is physical geography and material landscape but also a symbolic and cultural landscape of power, theoretical and empirical studies have discussed the politics of urban nature in a landscape [7]. After reviewing Western urban development, such as land-use zoning and regional planning for suburban growth, from the late 19th century onwards, Gandy [9] summarised that the urban landscape is a part of urban nature, a combination of nature and human activities that create urban spaces. He characterised the politics of urban nature as political ecologies, which can be differentiated by perspectives that conceptualise nature. Likewise, as Heynen [2] has noted, scholars of UPE continue to overcome the binaries, boundaries, margins, and limits between urban and natural environments. As addressed above, UPE understands the interplay between nature and social process is practiced in the competition among various agents in cities. Hence, the production of urban nature is often located in uneven power relations. Kitchen [10] argued that neoliberal governance is an example of uneven power relations in cities. In addition, a profitable environment is regarded as a fundamental factor in the neoliberalisation of nature. For example, the green governance in South Wales was driven by the tourist-oriented policy imperatives, which was expected to boost the local economy [11]. The recent buzz of the green city or environmentally friendly city is in fact organised and implemented by a few elites who are located at the centre of the power structure [12].

Second, UPE recognises each city’s spatiality under the general framework of the composition of nature in the process of urbanisation. Attention must be paid to each city’s context to understand how to consider, reproduce, and use the nature that is the subject of development in the process of city growth and expansion. This does not mean returning to the encyclopaedia’s view of geography, which describes the city as an idiosyncratic place. The general use of nature in the neoliberal urban development project and urbanisation process exists based on each city’s uniqueness. A city’s context is diverse, including its historical trajectories, geographic location, and unique socioeconomic factors. Heynen et al. [13] addressed the elements that comprise urban spatiality; the transformation of nature is embedded in a series of social, political, cultural, and economic–social relations that are tied together in a nested articulation of significant but intrinsically unstable geographical configurations, such as spatial networks and geographical scales. This remark underlines how the power of the city constitutes urban space and how it operates.

The change in urban nature is spatially different and very unequal due to the economic, political, and cultural processes underlying the production of urban landscapes. UPE raises the question of ‘who sets up and produces what social and ecological environment for whom’ [13]. This concept has inherited the view that the social and physical urban environment is ‘the urbanization process of nature is a historical-geographic result’ [14]. The theoretical reasoning that understands urban nature as the social and spatial construction has been supported by empirical research [15–17]. Brownlow [15] emphasised the history of urbanisation and argued that the urban environment differed depending on the city’s own narratives, that is, the geographic, institutional, structural, and physical urban development systems from the past are the context for each city. For example, Philadelphia, an entrepreneurial city with an industrial background, has developed its own fragmented urban form according to its Black community. Focusing on the city’s spatiality, Robbins and

Sharp [16] analysed what social context existed in the composition and maintenance of the city's natural environment, which is often called the landscape. For example, researchers interpreted that good management of grass as a means of belonging and positively participating in local communities that maintain the same landscape as their neighbours. As a concept that emphasises the city's spatiality, Lawhon et al. [17] proposed a situated UPE, and they criticised that research has been centred on the West; therefore, structural or theoretical studies provide limitations that can only provide a partial understanding of cities. In other words, they underlined that the discussion in various case studies is pivotal to the expansion of UPE research.

## 2.2. *New Actors Creating Urban Nature*

Urban nature consists of interactions between various actors who are part of urban politics. They fight and compete to achieve their desired nature via a series of political competitions. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, each urban area has its own spatiality, which has come from its inherited context. In this regard, a considerable amount of empirical research has revealed the process of creating urban nature by focusing on the actors [12,18–25].

Attention must be given to the research on the politics of 'residents', who had not been seen as independent actors from previous perspectives. Residents are important actors who make up urban nature today, and it has been revealed that they have direct and indirect effects, and they voluntarily participate in environmental issues [18,19]. It can be explained as an effect of the 'depoliticisation' of environmental issues in the city. More recently, voluntary participation of 'new' actors has been emphasised in responses to environmental issues, not ideological ones. It reflects the fact that environmental issues are no longer confined to the sphere of formal depoliticisation [20]. Swyngedouw has argued that the production of depoliticisation ironically reflects the elevation of the environment to public concern [20].

Notably, residents, in addition to official groups such as the government, have emerged as important actors. Gabriel [18] insisted that the formal sphere of environmental issues is narrowed by the participation of the public and explored the process of how volunteerism has made the individual the main actor in the watershed of urban nature. Similarly, Ilcan [19] argued that the residents' voluntary participation in protecting the environment shows the privatisation of responsibility, which is part of the reconsideration of public-private relations, echoing the expanded neoliberal governance strategy.

Regarding the government's role in environmental issues, Cidell [21] revealed the local government's identity as an actor dealing with urban environmental issues, taking Melbourne as an example. The environmental discourse is no longer produced by the central government but by the local government, and the government devises policies in cooperation with other local governments. Narain [22] called for a government policy to support landowners and residents to engage as active actors to understand the conflict in the peri-urban area.

All actors have an influence by forming a relationship with each other. Tubridy [12] explored the politics of design in the context of climate-adaptive green approaches and addressed the question regarding 'for and by whom are new ecological infrastructures being designed.' Taking Copenhagen as an example, Tubridy showed that the making of green space claimed to be accomplished by civic participation was indeed controlled by a few elites. Goldfischer et al. [23] dealt with persistent and uneven alienation within and outside the city. They emphasised the movement of contextual solidarity in pursuit of social and environmental justice in each city. Loh and Agyeman [24] argued that this solidarity could change the urban landscape, tracing how economic solidarity between urban residents changed the agricultural landscape. In fact, this discussion was raised from the earlier work of the UPE. For example, Keil and Boudreau [25] analysed the rise of environmentalism in Toronto after the 1970s. They showed that urban environmentalism's construction follows the reality of metropolitanisation, such as the creation of a megacity or metropolis, and addressed how environment activists have gained political power, and how



the suburbs have emerged as a political centre, arguing that it was achieved by ordinary activists, not by a few elites, and that it was rolled out via a process of gaining consensus.

As addressed above, the pivotal role of local elites and the necessity of solidarity is well discussed in the recent emphasis on the environment in cities. In this paper, we aim to reveal the changing position or role of residents in the process of urban sprawl and the anti-sprawl movement. The beneficiaries of urban sprawl in the past turned into advocates of anti-sprawl to protect their economic interest by curbing urban sprawl in Yongin, which raises questions about the existing divide between public vs. private or power elites vs. residents. Residents as actors in urban sprawl and anti-sprawl politics should be understood in a specific local context, not as antagonists to a government and local elites. To understand this dramatic change, it is needed to examine the context of the rapid urban sprawl, series of urban development plans, and the process of how forest became the most important environmental issue in Yongin.

### 3. Case Study and Analysis

#### 3.1. The Slope Ordinance and Uneven Development in the City

Yongin's slope ordinance defines the forest area that can be deforested and developed. This regulation has been a significant issue in development over the past two decades. The topographic characteristics of the city, where 80% of the lands are hilly areas, made this regulation pivotal to the city's growth.

For the first time in South Korea, the ordinance was revised to provide different standards for districts in the city. According to the current regulation applied from 2019, construction activities are allowed on lands with a slope of less than 20 degrees for Cheoin and less than 17.5 degrees in both Suji and Giheung districts. The difference in the levels of development between districts was an important factor in creating the conflicts, which resulted in fragmentary regulations in the city. Due to the accessibility to Seoul and topographical features, urbanisation began, starting in the northwest, which is reflected in current urban infrastructure and the distribution of population.

When public opinion opposed the additional development in the urban fringe through the development of forests, residents in Cheoin were disappointed, and the conflict intensified, as they opposed strengthening the regulation. Cheoin has awaited urbanisation, which would expand beyond Suji and Giheung and lead to the rise of real estate prices, more job opportunities, and the provision of urban infrastructure. Figure 2 shows the land cover from the late 1980s to the late 2010s. The built-up (residential, commercial, and manufacturing) areas marked in red have increased remarkably, and the increase seems to come from a decrease in forest and agricultural areas. The built-up areas expanded from the late 2000s to 2010 in Suji and Giheung. In the case of Cheoin, the change was less significant, compared with two other districts. It shows the urbanisation process and population growth of Cheoin was slower than in other districts, which formed the background to pursuing a relaxation of development ordinances.

#### 3.2. The Four Amendments to the Slope Ordinance

In 2019, the relaxed slope ordinance, which has supported urban development over the past two decades, was finally strengthened. As shown in Table 1, the slope ordinance was revised four times between 2000 and 2019. All revisions up to 2015 were aimed at facilitating development by easing regulations. However, the 2019 revision reversed the trend and reinforced this regulation.

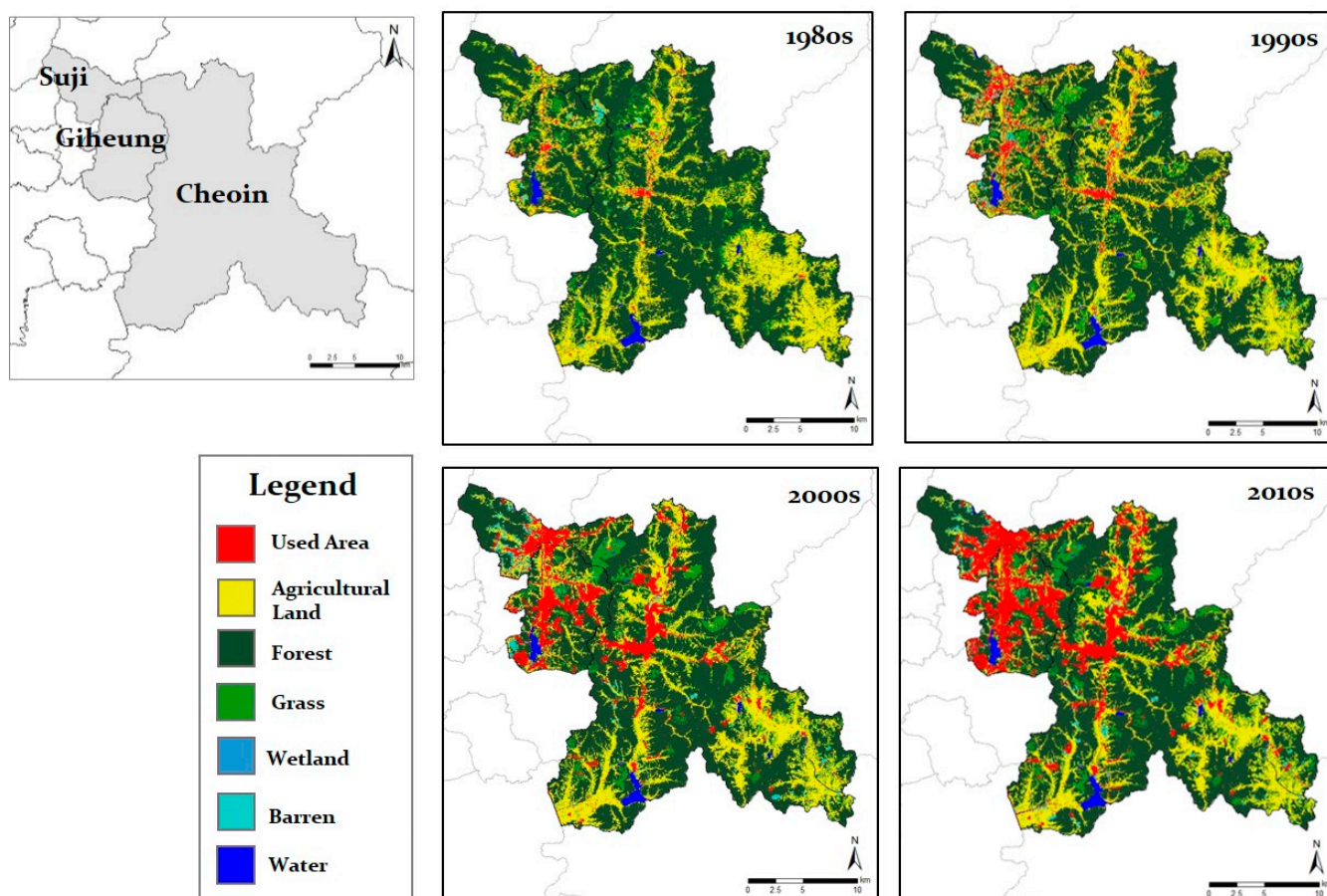


Figure 2. The changes of land cover in Yongin (1980s–2010s).

Table 1. The history of the amendments.

Year	Yongin		
	Suji	Giheung	Cheoin
2000	14	14	14
2003	17.5	17.5	17.5
2013	17.5	17.5	20
2015	17.5	21	25
2019	17.5	17.5	20

Repeating the relaxed ordinance resulted in the percentage of land that could be allowed for development reaching up to 98% of the city. Figure 3 shows the areas where development is available according to the regulation revisions from 2000 to 2019. The white areas are flatland, areas with less than a slope of 5 degrees. The grey areas are where development is possible, and the green area is the forest where development is not allowed. Between 2000 and 2015, the green area significantly decreased, as regulations were repeatedly eased. Table 2 shows the areas and proportions of the land where development is allowed according to the 2015 regulation, which was the most relaxed regulation. The total area available for development is 98% for the entire city and 99.3% for Cheoin.

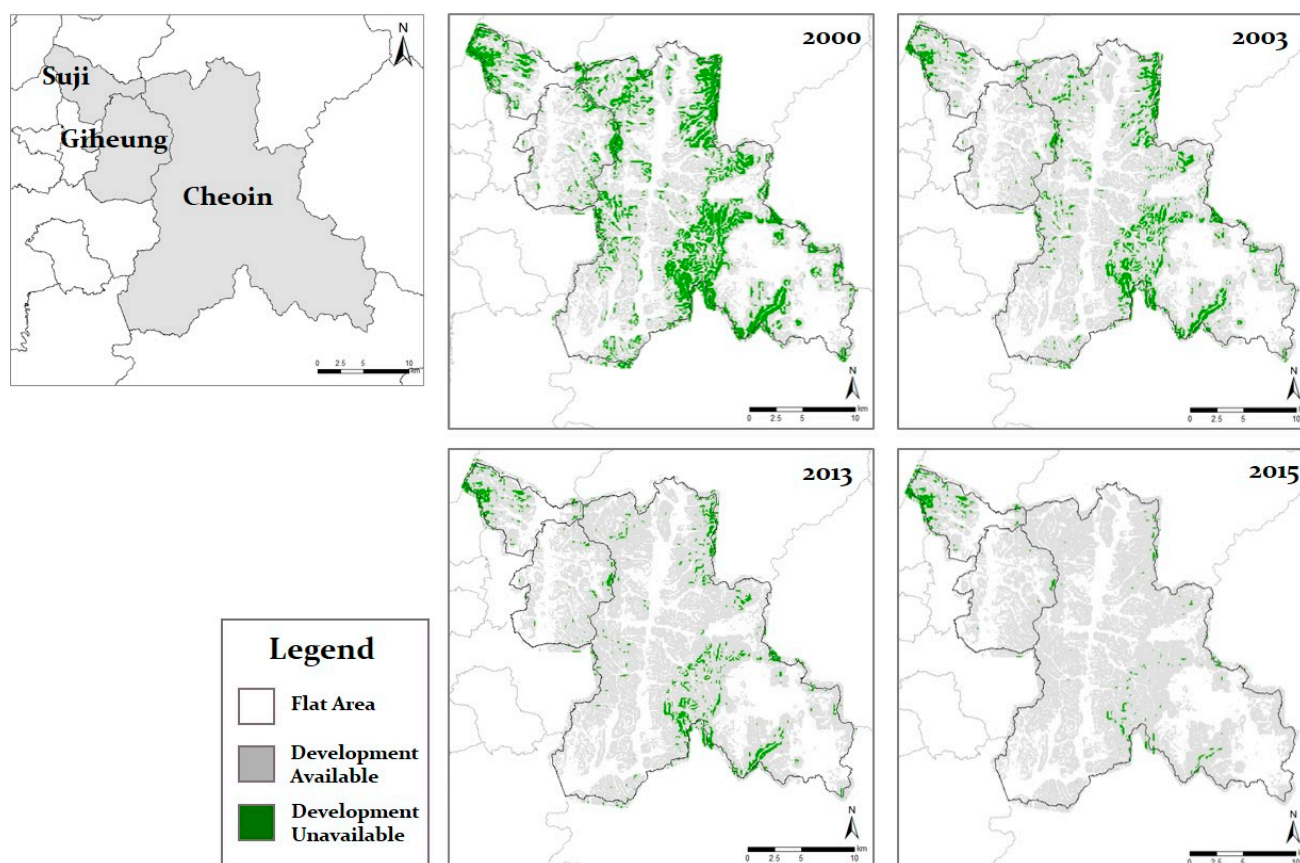


Figure 3. Land available (grey) and not available (green) for development.

Table 2. The proportion of land available/not available for development according to the 2015 ordinance.

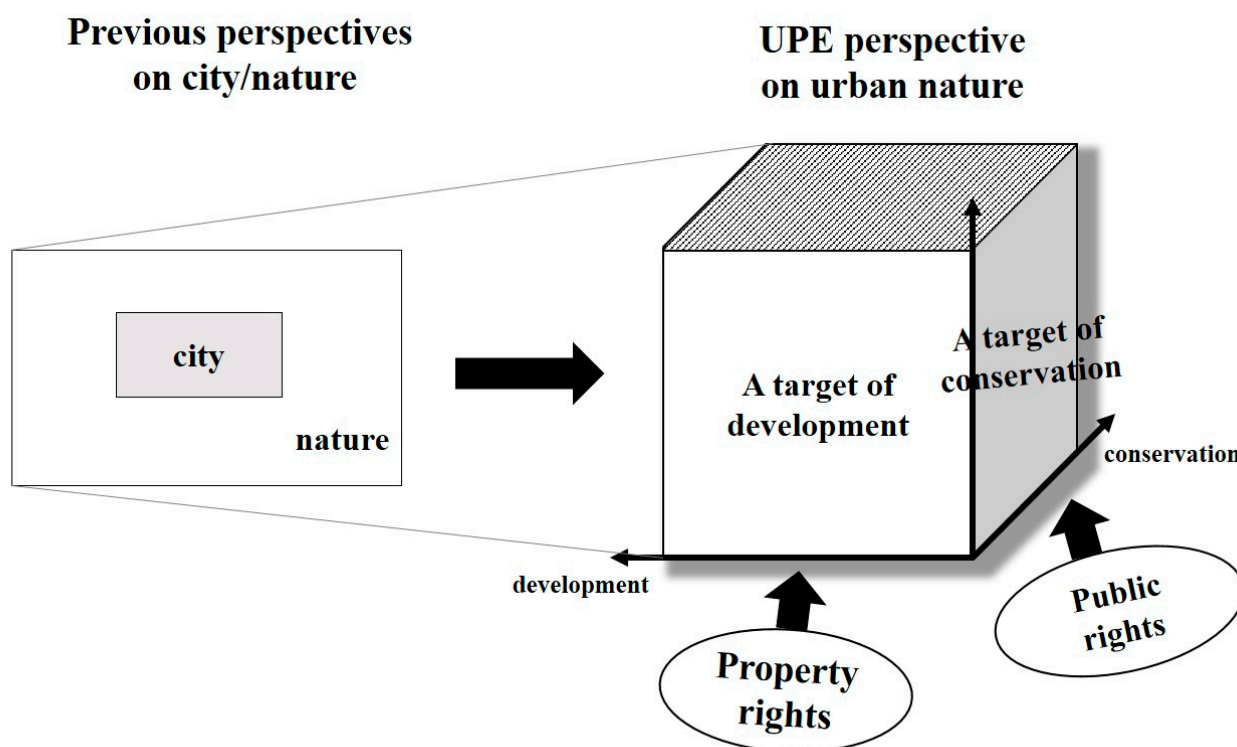
	Mountain Areas (km <sup>2</sup> )	Available for Development		Not Available for Development	
		Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Proportion (%)	Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Proportion (%)
Yongin	328.7	322.1	98.0	6.6	2.0
Suji	271.3	269.4	99.3	2.0	0.7
Giheung	33.5	33.1	98.8	0.4	1.2
Cheoin	23.9	19.7	82.3	4.2	17.7

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Link between Development and Conservation

There are differences between urban actors regarding their perspectives on nature. As Yongin is known as having been a development-friendly city in the past, the prevalent view was to see nature as something ‘to be developed’ (Figure 4). However, beyond this, nature was regarded as either an object of development or an object of conservation according to each actor’s interest in urban nature, supported by property rights or public rights, respectively. Additionally, the scope of places to develop and preserve is determined by how urban nature is imagined and defined by actors. The way nature is used and reproduced in the horizontal growth of a city depends on the people who appropriate the urban space. In other words, what and how nature is used in a city becomes a question of ‘who sets up and produces what socio-ecological environment for whom’ [13].





**Figure 4.** The relationship between urban space and nature.

#### 4.1.1.1. Development as a Way to Narrow the Gap

In the early stages of development in Yongin, the prevalent view of nature was an 'object of development.' Local actors who had an interest in real estate were present from the beginning of urban growth and had a pivotal influence on urban politics. From this perspective, Yongin is an area with numerous lands that can be developed. Therefore, the dominant political actions may be characterised as those of a 'growth machine' [26].

At the moment, the most noticeable actors in Yongin are the native people of Cheoin. Unlike other districts full of newcomers and commuters, these native people have lived in the area for quite a long time and have waited for their property to be developed similar to other districts, such as Suji and Giheung. When the environment conservation discourse emerged, they strongly opposed it and soon emerged as a chief party in the conflict between development and the environment. Supporters of this development emphasised 'fairness' or 'equal opportunity' of development, and their opinions were steadily expressed using banners and protests, which put pressure on local politicians.

I [city councillor] met the landowners today. It may be better not to destroy forest for development. But where are their [anti-sprawl advocates'] apartments located? They were built on the destroyed forest too. But, now they just want to keep the forest untouched for a better view from their living room? Let's be fair. Everyone can make a complaint, but let's do it in accordance with reality. (76th City Council Meeting, May 2003)

For those residents living in undeveloped areas, mostly in Cheoin, development is regarded as the most efficient and visible way to reduce the gaps within the city. In particular, the discourse that 'since Cheoin has been alienated and marginalised in the series of development of Yongin, it's time to boost the region by easing the regulation' was the driving force behind the former three amendments [27]. The growth machine of Yongin, which played a major role in producing and maintaining this discourse, comprised local entrepreneurs and politicians [5], but also landowners in Cheoin. By securing the land ready to be developed, the growth machine would want to shepherd the city's growth on the surface. The following remark is a complaint from Cheoin:

Suji and Giheung are talking about environmental conservation these days. The question is, is it fair for them to prevent us from deforesting for development after they have already ruined it to build apartment complexes? (City councillor of Cheoin, August 2020)

In the case of Yongin, there are various actors, such as politicians, civic groups, residents, and construction contractors, and special attention should be given to the activities of residents who were both the beneficiaries and victims of urban sprawl at the same time. In a sense, the fact that residents were able to have affordable houses in the suburbs and took advantage of new urban infrastructures, such as the construction of subways and highways, made them winners of the urban sprawl, including with respect to the increase in the value of their assets due to rising housing prices.

#### 4.1.2. Time to Protect the Environment?

As mentioned before, the incessant urban sprawl had a negative impact on their quality of life in the suburbs, which caused residents to want to restore the slope regulations. This view stands out primarily among apartment residents, especially in Suji and Cheoin. Residents of apartments are ‘people who moved to the city twenty years ago when apartment development was in full swing’ (City councillor of Giheung, August 2020). Their opinions can be summarised as supporting public rights over private ones, such as nature in the city should be enjoyed by everyone as a public space.

Whether a forest in the city is viewed as an area waiting for development or nature to be preserved differs depending on the interests of actors associated with the development. Consequently, the way nature is viewed and used is ultimately determined by the outcome of the political competition between actors. As a result, the pros and cons of the amendments of the ordinance became ethical and political problems simultaneously. A politician confessed that he had to deal with a contentious issue regarding conflicting perspectives.

Since Yongin has already been significantly developed, I want it [the strengthened slope ordinance] to prevent further destroying of the forest and development at least symbolically. Also, there are still a few vulnerable places that can be developed. We [city councillor of Suji and Giheung] are afraid there might be huge complaints from nearby large apartment complexes when those places would be developed. (City councillor of Giheung, August 2020)

The existing and widening gap in the development between districts affects the process of choosing positions. The landowners of Cheoin and the apartment residents in Suji and Giheung are two key competing actors in urban politics. They have tried to apply pressure on local politicians, such as city councillors and local officials. Among them, apartment residents exercise their political influence by putting pressure on politicians to strengthen the ordinance. As mentioned above, one politician revealed that a civil complaint from a large apartment complex had a considerable influence.

Conflicts over the city’s forests originated from the different perspectives among people who recognise, represent, and reproduce urban nature based on their interests and ambitions. By and large, the conflict can be understood as a confrontation between those who would benefit from development and those who want to enjoy the natural landscape. However, the conflict over conservation and development cannot be reduced to the dichotomous understanding of a confrontation between the landowner and the residents. Rather, actors justify their argument by presenting a different understanding of ‘urban nature.’ At one end of the spectrum, landowners, developers, real estate brokers, and local politicians try to lower the bar regarding the slope regulation by arguing for balanced development of the city. In contrast, residents of apartment complexes use traditional environmental conservation discourse about nature as well as argue for the public right to enjoy natural landscapes. They justify their desire to enjoy the landscape of nature by arguing that the forest should be preserved for the public good and future generations. In the next section, by focusing on the self-interest of residents, which comprises the environ-

mental conservation movement, we explore how this conflict ended in the strengthened slope ordinance.

#### *4.2. New Agents in Urban Politics*

##### *4.2.1. Residents' Desire to Enjoy Green Landscapes*

The fundamental question is the following: what is the problem with 'unplanned development?' It is a very difficult task to explain or discuss the nature of Yongin without addressing the existence and role of the residents. In other words, the problems of unplanned development or urban sprawl are defined by the interests of urban political actors. Some have actively participated in the production of urban nature in their own way, which situates them as one of the major actors shaping the city's natural landscape. Their actions have been particularly prominent in defining and setting indicators for unplanned development. Concerns over this issue began in the early 2000s, when the construction of large-scale apartment complexes was completed and the development of residential complexes (townhouses) in forest fields began.

There has been a growing awareness about damage to nature among residents, who were mainly people living in large-scale apartment complexes that were built in the early 2000s. As the city has grown, it has filled in the blanks that used to be the forest close to the apartment complexes. Residents opposed this development, arguing that development activities in their backyard or the back mountains close to their apartments infringed on rights such as 'the right to a view (the right to have a green landscape)' and the 'right to have sunlight.' It is not hard to find news articles reporting on these being the problems of unplanned development in local media over the past two decades. The voices of residents have identified the damage to urban nature, to be more precise, to forests, as the main problem of unplanned development. Although there are many problems other than the removal of forest to build townhouses, the argument equating unplanned development with the conversion of forest into townhouse complexes has been reported repeatedly.

The recent concept of unplanned development in Yongin refers to converting forest into townhouse complexes, an act that violates the landscape and rights of apartment residents. In this context, the 'urban nature' is regarded as a natural right of residents, and the integrity of 'urban nature' is threatened by the construction of townhouses. To prevent further development, apartment residents actively participated in disseminating the discourse about environmental conservation.

How did the dissatisfaction of those residents develop into environmental concerns and even political activism? The civic movement to protect property rights became a more sophisticated cause justification of environmental conservation with the cooperation of NGOs. The development activities close to the existing apartment complexes were defined as the 'unplanned development', which was a more general and justifiable slogan than complaints about the development in their backyard. Residents took action to prevent further development via a campaign to collect residents' signatures, disturbing construction by sabotaging the site, and conducting one-person protests in front of the city hall. Through these activities, the city's problem of unplanned development became more visible, and public opinion against further development was strengthened.

The strategy used to encourage more people to be involved was to change the issue from an abstract environment one to 'the issue of our rights'. The concept of nature to be protected developed from a general nature to a specific one with value to residents, such as hiking trails and landscape views from the living room/backyard. The meaning of nature was redefined in these actions to prevent further damage to the forest close to the apartment complex.

In 2011, the small hiking trail disappeared. It was an ecological playfield for the education of children as well as for daily exercise, but it just disappeared. I knocked on every door in the apartment complex and received consent from 90% of the residents to stop the development and delivered their opinions and

signatures to the city's administration. I guess that's how it started. (Citizen activist, September 2020)

Individual responses to the infringement have transformed into more collective action, as solidarity began with the help of local NGOs. Residents shared knowledge about how to respond to related issues and how to find information on development plans. In the process, they visited city hall and council, went to the National Assembly, and orchestrated activities such as demonstrations. The solidarity of the residents became official. These activities were gradually recognised as environmental activism against urban sprawl and unplanned development.

#### 4.2.2. The Environmental Turn

The empowered voices of residents also have the political power necessary to change the course and direction of urban planning for the city. The growing power of the movement against the development-friendly policy influenced the election. In the 2018 local elections, some candidates recognised the changing atmosphere around urban planning and suggested pledges which met the needs of the residents. During the election, a candidate who was later elected had campaigned with the slogans of 'an eco-friendly, eco-city without unplanned development' and had promised to establish the SCIUD.

The establishment, organisation, and activity of the SCIUD were political. First, as just mentioned, the residents' solidarity and political power led to the establishment of the SCIUD through the official local political process—election. Second, the members of the committee mainly consisted of residents of apartment complexes and people from NGOs. The appointed chairperson was recommended by residents from the areas experiencing unplanned development, especially Giheung. Organising committee members and resident representatives ensured that as many experts as possible were appointed and included residents in areas beleaguered by unplanned development, civic groups, and experts, also recommended by the residents of underdeveloped areas. The rest were commissioned as relevant public officials and experts recommended by the city government, but stakeholders such as development companies were excluded (policy agreement between Yongin mayoral candidate and residents affected by unplanned development, 2018).

Lastly, the activity of the SCIUD was political, too. Unplanned development, a problem in Yongin today, is not defined and measured based on objective standards but refers to a specific act of development that violates the residents' right to enjoy nature. The SCIUD report published in 2019 shows this partial view well. For example, the main targets of investigation were cases that violated the rights of residents in large apartment complexes. In fact, there were other perspectives or definitions that unplanned development should include non-preferred facilities, such as factories and sewage treatment plants or facilities without proper regulation. However, in the end, what the SCIUD report focused on was the damage to apartments complexes. In other words, the target of unplanned development was (re)defined by the residents.

The SCIUD, established to prevent unplanned development, produced a significant result—the amendments to the ordinance. As specified in the original contract, the committee was disbanded in August 2019 after a year's activity. In October 2019, the current regulation that reinforced the slope to be developed took effect, which was a return to the level before 2015. Moreover, the mayor stated his intention to reject the unplanned development based on the research of the report. The reinforcement or reorientation of the regulation showed that residents' solidarity could change the actual urban space [22].

## 5. Conclusions

Yongin's municipal administration continues to seek a balance between aspirations for development and environmental conservation. Despite the regulation being strengthened, some councillors and NGOs perceived flaws in this amendment; it had only returned to the level before the revision in 2015 and failed to adopt the elevation regulation to the urban planning ordinance. However, the revision of regulations in 2019 was a symbolic milestone



that has curbed the accelerating damage to forests in the suburbs and the expansion of the city, which is seen as taking one step further towards preserving the natural environment.

In this paper, we determined the driving force behind the environmental conservation movement of the city by focusing on the ordinary residents who had enjoyed the fruits of the urban sprawl and were opposed to further development. They tried to protect their own ‘urban nature’ from unwanted development. To curb the development further, they redefined nature and built up their political powers. Residents established solidarity with other areas with similar interests and local NGOs to professionally respond to the city’s unplanned development. Their solidarity influenced the local elections in the city, and a joint committee was formed as a new form of governance, eventually leading to an institutional change—namely, the revision of the urban planning ordinance. Although it has been intensively discussed that there exist various actors and the relationship among players in urban development, the case of Yongin shows the role and position of agents change in the process of urban development. Once beneficiaries of sprawl now became the victim of excessive expansion of the city and emerged as the main proponents for anti-sprawl.

This paper attempted to clarify the constructive aspects of the complex and dynamic urban politics through an investigation of the amendment process of slope regulations in Yongin. The environmental discourse against urban development has been developed according to the nexus of interests of various actors. In this process, several points can be highlighted to understand the urban politics around urban sprawl, anti-sprawl, or increasing environmental sustainability. First, socio-nature is a useful framework to examine the discussion on the development and environment in the urban fringe. As addressed, residents successfully redefined urban nature to be preserved as a forest close to apartment complexes, which leads to the restoration of slope regulation. Second, the role and position of actors in urban politics should be examined in a very local context. The trajectory of urban development in Yongin has a significant influence on the attitude to development and environment. The people in Suji and Giheung, beneficiaries of urban sprawl in the past, turned into advocates of anti-sprawl to protect their economic interest and organised a series of political actions to thwart further development and sprawl.

The development conflict which unfolded in Yongin is not unique, as other cities’ suburbs continue to expand with diverse housing types, such as townhouses. Development activities in urban forests are becoming increasingly common in suburbs in Korea, and the conflict between urban development and the environment will likely continue. In the current urban society, where development and environmental issues are no longer the official government’s domain, this study raises the issue of the need to give more consideration to conflicts within cities and the role of residents as actors in complex urban politics. These attempts are expected to contribute to understanding urban politics in fast-growing suburbs in metropolitan areas.

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