Episode Book

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Two Building Laws That Shaped Seoul's Streets

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SYNOPSIS

Seoul's most beloved neighborhoods feel like villages not by accident, but because of two building regulations. A 1970s daylight law forced four- and five-storey villas to taper like wedding cakes, while a 2002 parking rule hollowed out ground floors into dark alleys. Structured as a day-long walk, this tour traces those rules through Seongsu-dong's converted shoe factories, Euljiro's unmarked third-floor wine bars, Ikseon-dong's hanok lanes, and the hillside daldongnae.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

What does Seoul look like if you never look up at a monument?



Herman

That's a good opening question, because the answer is: a city of stepped rooflines, dark little alleys, and neon appearing all at once, like someone flipped a switch on the whole hillside.



Corn

That question comes from Hannah, actually, not Daniel, which is a nice change of pace. She's wanted to visit Seoul for years, she knows it mostly through K-dramas, and she's explicitly not after the tourist checklist. She wants the street-level city. The neighborhoods the characters live in, the ones that get referred to like little towns even though they're part of a city of nearly ten million people. Low houses climbing hills, rooftop apartments, tiny convenience stores, and then suddenly a canyon of neon with people spilling into alleys at two in the morning.



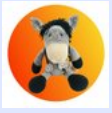
Herman

She framed it as a difference puzzle, too. Why does Seoul not feel organized the way a European or North American city feels organized? And she wants the answer delivered as a walk, not a lecture. A perfect day. Morning coffee, lunch somewhere completely different, an afternoon wander, an under-the-radar dinner, then whatever Seoul does best after dark.



Corn

So let's start walking. And I promise the regulations arrive when the buildings do.



Herman

Here's the frame I'd put around the whole day. Seoul is about nine point six million people, spread across twenty-five districts, and it's actually been shrinking since around twenty fourteen, when it slipped below ten million. And yet the places people love most in it feel like villages. That's not because Koreans are somehow more communal than everyone else. It's because of specific buildings and specific rules that produced specific streets.



Corn

The building is the villa.



Herman

The villa. Not the Italian kind, not the one with the pool. A Korean villa is a four or five storey walk-up, one or two flats per floor, with a shop or a parking slab on the ground floor. They've been going up since the nineteen seventies, and an architecture writer I like put it exactly right: when he thinks of the most authentic Korean streetscape, it's not the sleek landmarks, and it's not the hanoks, which are cherished but few. It's the villas. Anonymous architects, uncelebrated designs, everywhere, forming the backdrop of daily life.



Corn

The backdrop nobody photographs.



Herman

Nobody photographs it and forty percent of the country lives in it. That's the Statistics Korea figure for multiplex housing, including single-family, as of twenty nineteen. And here's the melancholy part. Most people who live in a villa town are trying to leave it for an apartment complex. The villa is the majority experience and it's treated as a waiting room.



Corn

Hold that thought, because two rules explain almost everything Hannah's going to see today, and I want them named early so we can point at things later. The first is the daylight rule.



Herman

The Architectural Slant Line Restriction, early nineteen seventies. In a residential zone, the north side of your building has to keep a set distance from the neighboring plot. One and a half metres if the building's under nine metres tall, and above nine metres, more than half the building's height. In practice, an architect put it this way: the third floor can be an ordinary box, but from the fourth floor up it has to taper.



Corn

That's the wedding cake.



Herman

Every stepped, terraced roofline climbing a Seoul hillside is that rule made visible. It's not a style. Nobody chose it because it looked charming. Every terrace you'll see today is a legal document rendered in concrete.



Corn

The second rule is the parking one, from two thousand two, and it's the reason the alleys are dark. We'll get there. Morning first?



Herman

We start in Seongsu-dong, east of the center, along the Han River.



Corn

Which I understand is now the Brooklyn of Seoul, a label doing an enormous amount of work.



Herman

Enormous, and here's the thing. The label got attached because of red brick and warehouse proportions, but the actual history is shoes. A decade ago these blocks were shoe factories, leather workshops, printing, warehouses. Then the cafés moved into the repurposed factories and old residential buildings, and now it's the pop-up capital of the country. Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Dior have all staged temporary retail there. Tim Hortons, of all companies, picked Seongsu for its first global flagship.

Corn

The Canadian doughnut embassy in a shoe factory.



Herman

So the walk: you start at Seoul Forest, which is a proper park, an old racetrack and tobacco factory site, just to get some breathing room and let the city arrive gradually. Then you walk toward Seongsu station along Yeonmujang-gil, which is the spine of the neighborhood. Red brick, exposed steel beams, concrete floors, big windows where loading doors used to be. Design shops, pop-ups, coffee roasters.



Corn

And the coffee is the point, yes. Hannah asked for excellent coffee, bookshops, vintage, people-watching.



Herman

Seongsu delivers all of it by ten in the morning, but there's a timing rule the guides all repeat: lines are inevitable on weekends, so go early. Weekday morning you have the place. By noon on a Saturday you're queuing behind four hundred people for a pastry.



Corn

I'd nap through the queue and call it sightseeing.



Herman

The other thing to tell Hannah honestly: Seongsu changes. A store she visits next year may be gone. A pop-up may appear where a print shop was. The guides straight up say it's one neighborhood where old travel guides become outdated quickly. Which is what happens when the entire appeal of a district is cheap industrial space and the cheapness doesn't survive the appeal.



Corn

The neighborhood eats itself on roughly an eighteen-month cycle.



Herman

Some of it, yes. The outer edge of Seongsu is still industrial, so the frontier keeps moving. And Time Out had it fourth coolest neighborhood in the world a couple of years ago, which of course accelerates everything.



Corn

Before we cross the river for lunch, let's actually explain the streets we just walked, because Seongsu's the odd one out today. Everything after this is villas and hillsides, and Hannah asked why it feels different from a European city. The two rules, Herman. Daylight first, then darkness.



Herman

Daylight. The slant line I mentioned: from nineteen seventy-one, seventy-two, that era. Korea legislated a right to light for your neighbors, meaning the north face of your building has to slope away from the boundary. Below nine metres you keep one and a half metres clear; above that, the gap has to be more than half your height. So a five-storey villa has full-width floors at the bottom and then progressively pinched floors above, each one set back, and the roofline of a hillside street ends up looking like rice paddies stacked sideways.



Corn

And the terraces get used. You see plants, drying laundry, a chair.



Herman

Almost always laundry. Now the dark one. In two thousand two, the law started requiring multi-family houses to provide parking scaled to each unit's floor area. The plots are tiny, there's no room for a garage, so the government recommended the piloti design: the ground floor becomes open parking on columns, and because that floor doesn't count toward your floor-area calculation, you effectively get an extra storey. Builders took the deal, obviously.



Corn

Free floor for a parking rule.



Herman

Free floor. The atmospheric cost is exact: in villa districts the alleys are especially dark, because the ground level is unlit parking. You walk past columns and a few parked cars and that's your streetscape. No shopfronts, because the law paid for parking instead.



Corn

So the street-level texture Hannah's noticed in K-dramas, the dim narrow lane with a convenience store as the only light source, is two laws stacked on top of each other. The taper above, the void below.



Herman

And one more wrinkle for the middle of the day: villas are mostly uninsurable romance. They're often built fast in a cookie-cutter pattern, as one architect put it, because the owners only care about rentable space, so they're uncomfortable to live in, and people leave as soon as they can. Policy only ever talks about apartment complexes, which means everything else is left to deteriorate. That's the air the whole afternoon walks through.



Corn

Lunch. I'm hungry and the walk demands it.



Herman

Lunch is a district, not a restaurant. We cross the river of the city's history, which is to say we cross the Cheonggyecheon, that stream that was paved over as a highway in the sixties and then daylighted again in the two thousands, one of the great urban reversals anywhere.



Corn

We did cover that stream in the urbanism episode, back when we were handing out the toolkit. Jane Jacobs, walkability, all of it. Today is that toolkit on holiday.



Herman

And on the far side is Euljiro. Locals under forty call it Hipjiro, half joke, half real estate listing. By day it's a working industrial district: printing presses, tool suppliers, machine shops, arcades of tiny booths, old shop signs that haven't been replaced since the eighties. The Sewoon Cheonggye Arcade runs through it, this long, strange electronics-and-everything building.



Corn

Which is the Seoul texture par excellence. A whole city block that looks like a spare-parts drawer.



Herman

Time Out named Euljiro the second coolest neighborhood in the world in twenty eighteen, and the write-up described streets made up mostly of printing presses, warehouses and old-school fried chicken joints. The mechanism matters more than the list, though. Old buildings, cheap rent, high ceilings. Young people started converting the second and third floors into bars and wine bars. There's often no sign. You find a place because someone told you where it was.



Corn

That's my favorite sentence in this entire research trail. An entire nightlife economy that runs on directions rather than signage.



Herman

The steel doors are unmarked. You walk down an alley that smells of machine oil and fried chicken, and behind a plain grey door on the third floor is a natural wine bar with forty seats.



Corn

I trust a bar I have to be told about more than one with a mascot.



Herman

Lunch itself, I'd do simple in Euljiro. Old-school fried chicken, or a soup place where the menu is one page and laminated. Then we climb. North from Euljiro, up to Jongno three-ga, and specifically into Ikseon-dong, which is a nineteen twenties hanok quarter, a web of narrow lanes lined now with small cafés and boutiques. Low tile roofs, compressed little streets, sudden courtyards.



Corn

And that's Time Out's number one coolest neighborhood in the world right now, I believe. Number one, this year.



Herman

Number one in the world for twenty twenty-six. And a couple of streets over, Seosulla-gil runs along the stone wall of Jongmyo Shrine, and it's turned from a quiet lane into a strip of craft workshops, jewelry studios and bars. That wall walk is one of the great free experiences in Seoul, honestly. The shrine wall on one side, these small, careful businesses on the other.



Corn

Evening in Ikseon, the pocha tents go up.



Herman

The orange tents. Pojangmacha. Street stalls that were once cheap fast food for laborers and are now packed with young locals, along Donhwamun-ro eleven-gil. So you can spend the whole afternoon in this one square kilometre: Euljiro's machine shops by day, Ikseon's lanes in the afternoon, and the beginnings of the tents by early evening.



Corn

Before dinner, though, Hannah asked for the hillside villages, the K-drama neighborhoods climbing the hills with rooftop apartments. And those have a name.



Herman

Daldongnae. Moon village. Literally. They're on the hillsides because after the Korean War, refugees and rural migrants had nowhere else to go, and urbanization kept pushing people to the edges through the sixties and seventies. The name supposedly comes from being so high up you're closer to the moon. Haebangchon is one of the most famous: Liberation Village, on the north slope of Namsan, named for the Koreans who came back from Manchuria and occupied territories after forty five and had nothing. A second wave of northern refugees after fifty three. Families built makeshift homes from wood, corrugated iron, salvaged stone, and the neighborhood grew following the curves of the hill rather than any grid.



Corn

And here's the correction I want on the record, because it matters. Calling them slums or favelas helps explain what they are but it's inaccurate. The Korean word for shanty town is panjachon, wood board village, and it's close but not the same thing.



Herman

Right. Daldongnae is about altitude and history as much as poverty, and the Korea Times makes exactly that point. Some of them aren't even poor anymore. They're just high and narrow.



Corn

So the afternoon climb. Take us up Sinheung-ro.



Herman

From Noksapyeong station, exit two, you walk up Sinheung-ro, and the first stretch is ordinary: convenience stores, small Korean restaurants, a hardware shop. Then the character shifts. A handwritten sign for a language-exchange café. An art print in a studio window. You keep climbing and you reach Sinheung Market, which has been a market for over seventy years, and now the produce stalls share their lanes with specialty cafés and craft studios. That's Haebangchon in one sentence: a market that got cafés without losing the produce.



Corn

And the showpiece at the top.



Herman

Le Montblanc. A dessert café in a former knitting factory. The signature mousse cakes are shaped like balls of yarn and hand-knit sweaters. Three floors of thread installations, and a rooftop terrace looking over the market roofs. The knitting machines are gone but the industrial bones of the space remain. It didn't sanitize its history, which is the rare thing.



Corn

A knitting factory that sells dessert shaped like its own inventory. That's very good discipline.



Herman

There's also Nuldam Space nearby, where you write a postcard to your future self and the café mails it exactly one year later, from a rooftop with Namsan Tower above you and the Han River glinting beyond. Hannah's the one in that house who'd actually use that. Daniel would forget he wrote it.



Corn

Hannah would schedule a reminder for it.



Hilbert

Hilbert's Mid-Show Haiku. The Villa at Dusk. Brick stairwells going quiet. Snow that never came. Hm.



Herman

Snow that never came. It does feel like a November in Seoul, actually.



Corn

It does. Though if we're doing weather, I'd take Seoul's cold over ours any day.



Herman

The alternative climb, and I'd argue the better one for a first visit, is Changsin-dong, east of the center below Naksan. Steeper, stranger, more layered. The official line on it is beautiful: a quarry village in the sixties, a wooden village in the seventies, a sewing factory in the nineties, a sewing village in the two thousands. One hillside, four identities.



Corn

And it doesn't announce itself. No ticket booths, no signposted trails. Just narrow lanes, layered rather than arranged.



Herman

That's the walking guide's phrase and it's exact. So the route: from Dongmyo station, fifteen, twenty minutes north and up, to the Dolsan Village viewpoint above the old Naksan quarry. What you get there is the sheared granite cliff where they cut the city's building stone, the multiplex houses packed above and below the rock face, and Dongdaemun's towers glinting beyond. Best near sunset, which is where our clock wants us anyway.



Corn

Then downhill through the sewing street.



Herman

Dongdaemun's back kitchen. Hundreds of one-room workshops where the clothes sold in the market below are cut, sewn and trimmed, a few pieces at a time. You listen for the machines behind half-open shutters, and you mind the motorbikes, because riders hauling bolts of fabric always have the right of way. Weekday mornings are the liveliest. The whole street moves at the tempo of a deadline.



Corn

The most vivid hazard description I've ever heard of a garment district. Fabric bolts as rolling stock.



Herman

Near the bottom, around Dongmyo station exits two, three and four, there's a Nepalese food street. Everest Restaurant, Lumbini. Regulars come for dal bhat and momos, and this is the thing Hannah should know about Seoul: it's not just Korean food down there. There's a whole Himalayan enclave at the foot of a Korean garment hill.



Corn

And the playground.



Herman

Sanmaroo Playground, opened twenty nineteen. The centerpiece is a nine-metre jungle gym shaped like a golmu, a sewing thimble. No slides, no swings. A roofless interior you spiral up along a hundred-metre path to a lookout. A climbing monument to the neighborhood's actual industry, which is such a Seoul move. The city builds a shrine to a thimble.



Corn

Thirty feet of thimble. I'd climb it just to say the sentence.



Herman

There's a stationery and toy market around there too, about a hundred and twenty shops there since the mid seventies, most goods thirty to forty percent off retail. But honestly, by then the sun's down, and it's dinner time, and Hannah asked for somewhere cool, elegant, under the radar. Not famous.



Corn

My pick would be on Seosulla-gil, back along the Jongmyo wall. W Slash.



Herman

That's the one I'd choose too. Small room, the front opens onto the street in terrace season, and the dish people talk about is the rose ragu pasta with shrimp, around twenty three thousand won, and its sweet-salty balance has been called ridiculous, as a compliment. Closed Mondays. It's a neighborhood restaurant, that's the whole point. Short menu, small room, the kind of place that survives on regulars.



Corn

Twenty three thousand won is about, what, twelve pounds, sixteen dollars. For the dish of the day. Jerusalem would charge that for the view alone.



Herman

The alternative if the day's route ended elsewhere: Jongno Heungbuga near Supyo-ro, a bossam house, sliced boiled pork paired with oysters, small octopus or pollack roe. Bossam is the great underappreciated Korean dish, honestly. If Hannah's been cooking Korean food at home, that's the one to attempt, though the pork belly slicing takes nerve.



Corn

She's been attempting Korean cooking for a while now, we know this from the fridge.



Herman

The fridge and the smell of gochujang at odd hours. And if you wanted dinner in Seongsu instead, there's a little Taiwanese place on Yeonmujang-gil, bao and dongpo pork rice bowls, or Seongsu Darak, which has ten and a half thousand Naver reviews, which is its own kind of warning.



Corn

Ten thousand reviews is a queue with a website.



Herman

It is. So we eat at W Slash, we walk out at ten, and the night is just starting, because Seoul has no legal closing time. The night runs from a seven pm barbecue to clubs that empty at sunrise.



Corn

Which is the single most important fact in the whole evening, and the one that reshapes the walk. The city doesn't wind down. It changes cast.



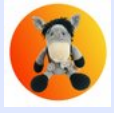
Herman

Back to Euljiro for the first stop. Nogari Alley, near Euljiro three-ga exit four. After dark the plastic tables come out, grilled dried pollack, cheap draught beer, until about eleven, when it quiets. Upstairs, the unmarked steel doors start opening. The wine rooms, the tiny bars you were told about by someone.



Corn

Pollack and cheap beer under fluorescent strip lights, then a hidden third floor. That's a full evening's architecture.



Herman

Then Hongdae, if the legs hold. The student district by Hongik University. Buskers start around six in the evening, and it's the one place in the city where the street performance is the attraction. Small clubs charge ten to thirty thousand won entry, often including a drink, and many venues don't fill until after midnight. Itaewon has the international bars and the LGBTQ+ scene, Gangnam has the big EDM clubs with dress codes. Hongdae has the bands.



Corn

And the contrast with the morning is the point. Seongsu's converted shoe factories and Euljiro's printing presses are the same city, twelve hours apart. The machine shop that sold you a hinge at noon is a speakeasy's downstairs neighbor at midnight.



Herman

That's the day. But here's the thing about every neighborhood we just walked, and it's the structural truth under all of it: almost every one of them is a leftover. Haebangchon survived because it was too steep and too far from the subway. Too hillside, too cramped, too far from the lines that pulled investment elsewhere. That quiet invisibility turned out to be its greatest gift. Euljiro's bars exist because old print shops had cheap rent and high ceilings. Mullae's design studios, sixth coolest neighborhood in the world last year, sit inside a dying steel district. Changsin-dong is Dongdaemun's back kitchen. None of these were planned to be loved. They were places the city forgot, and forgetting preserved them.



Corn

The bulldozer is the real rival of charm.



Herman

And the zoning explains the sudden neon. This is the part that answers Hannah's actual question, why the dense commercial strips appear so abruptly. Korean zoning has never entirely prohibited mixed use. The semi-residential zone has always allowed a blend of residential and commercial, and neighborhood commercial zones allow homes above ground-floor retail. So a bar can legally sit over a shop, in a way that would take a variance fight in most North American cities.



Corn

But that alone doesn't explain the walls of neon. Density does.



Herman

Commercial zones cover only about four percent of Seoul's land, twenty six square kilometres or so out of six hundred. Tiny. So all the commerce compresses into these ribbons, and when you cross the invisible line from residential into commercial, the city goes from two storeys to twenty in a block. That's the neon canyon appearing all at once. It's not an atmosphere, it's a ratio.



Corn

Four percent of the land carrying nearly all of the neon.



Herman

And nearly all of it regulated identically. Roughly ninety percent of Seoul's commercial districts are designated general commercial districts with nearly identical rules regardless of whether it's a neighborhood bar street or the CBD. A planner would say the zoning map is drawing in one color. The cap in those zones is eight hundred percent floor-area ratio with sixty percent building coverage, so within the four percent, you build tall. There's been some movement recently, revisions to over two hundred district unit plans last year, a proposal to cut the non-residential ratio in commercial districts from twenty percent to ten. The city keeps tinkering at the edges.



Corn

So the walkers' Seoul, the low-rise part, the four-storey wedding cakes on hillsides. What's the city's own plan for that?



Herman

Limbo, mostly. The low-rise residential zones are about forty two percent of the city's land, and something like eighty seven percent of those areas fail redevelopment criteria. Too small, too fragmented, ownership too scattered. So they sit, neither renewed nor replaced, and the city's own description of them is blunt: narrow alleyways with dense multi-unit housing, severe parking shortages, illegal parking, poor fire safety response, not enough green space.



Corn

All of which is true and all of which is the charm, which is the trap.



Herman

That's the trap exactly. Seoul's answer is called Moa. Two programmes: Moa Housing, joint redevelopment where neighbors combine plots past a threshold of about fifteen hundred square metres, and Moa Town, which manages anything up to a hundred thousand square metres under one plan. Moa means gather. The idea is to make the scattered plots worth assembling.



Corn

Gather the wedding cakes into one tower.



Herman

And on the other side, there is a genuine preservation current. Since twenty fourteen the city architect's office has pushed regeneration that keeps the existing streets, alleyways, terraces, even plot boundaries, rather than clearing them. Baeksa Village, one of the last moon villages, was partly demolished in the nineties for apartments and has a redevelopment plan hanging over it. Changsin-dong has the Mordeunji Art House, a six-storey building with a basement theatre, a bookshop café, shared offices, and social housing for young artists and activists. Which quietly answers the question the rest of the walk keeps raising: what happens to the people when a neighborhood gets discovered?



Corn

And that's the question I'd leave the walk with, but first I want to hear the one about the roofline, because our own resident measurer has views.



Hilbert

You've been calling them wedding cakes all afternoon. It's a setback calculation. I know it from the inside, Herman. I stayed in a villa in Seochon once, and the fourth floor was narrower than the third, and it bothered me for a whole morning.



Herman

Of course it did.



Hilbert

So I measured it. Had a laser measure in the bag. One and a half metres clearance below nine metres of height, then the setback past half the building height above that. I wrote the numbers on a piece of graph paper and I still have it. Folded, in the wallet. Pencil. Little diagram of the tapered roof.



Corn

The landlady's reaction?



Hilbert

She thought I was from the tax office. I explained it was the right to light rule and she didn't believe me. A nephew of hers had told her the taper was for the view.



Herman

The view. People will accept an aesthetic explanation before a legal one every time.



Hilbert

He'd heard it from a real estate agent, so it was load-bearing. I gave her the graph paper copy. She kept it under the phone.



Corn

You keep the original and give away the copy.



Hilbert

The original has the diagram. A man doesn't give away his diagram.



Herman

The pencil diagram is doing more for villa literacy than most architecture magazines, to be fair.



Hilbert

The walls were thin and the stairs smelled of sesame oil. That part isn't in the notes.



Corn

Nothing ever is. So the walk ends where it started, at the villa, and I think the thing I'd actually take from today is that graph paper logic. The city reads as charm from the outside and as constraint from the inside, and both readings are standing in the same dark alley. The moon villages are the leftovers, the leftovers are under pressure, and the pressure is named Moa.



Herman

And the open question is what happens when Moa Housing and Time Out's list arrive in the same neighborhood in the same decade. Because they're both headed for the same hillsides. The low-rise belt is forty two percent of the city and most of it fails redevelopment criteria, so for now the limbo is the policy, and the limbo is what everyone fell in love with. Haebangchon was saved by being too steep and too far from a subway, which is not a preservation strategy, it's a lucky accident that ran for seventy years.



Corn

And luck ends. Thanks as always to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing the show, laser measures notwithstanding.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. If today's walk worked for you, the whole back catalogue is at my weird prompts dot com, including the episode on how to start thinking like an urbanist, which is basically the toolkit behind everything we said today.



Corn

Leave us a review if you can, it helps. We'll be back soon.



Herman

See you tomorrow.

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