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11

Resistance to Regional Decline: The Art Village Project in Rural Korea

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Abstract

South Korea is confronting a deepening crisis of regional decline, with many small towns experiencing population loss, demographic aging, and economic stagnation. In response, cultural and artistic interventions have emerged as alternative strategies for local revitalization. This article examines the Art Village Project in Gyecheon, Pyeongchang County, which has developed over more than a decade through classical music education, the annual Gyecheon Classical Music Festival, and a series of spatial development initiatives. The project has redefined the village as a cultural destination, attracting thousands of visitors each year and fostering collaboration among residents, artists, and institutions. By staging performances in everyday settings and linking cultural programming with physical transformation, Gyecheon has been repositioned as a performative landscape that encourages participation, placemaking, and community resilience. The findings suggest that the Art Village Project has reshaped the village's public image, expanded its functional population, and mobilised investment from both public authorities and private enterprises. At the same time, the case highlights the challenges of sustaining culture-led development under conditions of rural depopulation. Ultimately, Gyecheon demonstrates how art, when embedded in community life and local space, can resist regional extinction and reimagine the future of small towns in Korea.

Keywords: Regional Decline; Art Village Project; Rural Revitalization; Place-making; Community Resilience

Regional Decline and the Rise of Cultural Interventions

South Korea has faced accelerating regional decline since the 1990s. According to the Ministry of the Interior and Safety, 89 out of 228 cities and counties are officially designated as “Population Decline Areas,” indicating persistent outmigration, shrinking birth rates, and rising old-age dependency (Ministry of Public Administration and Security, 2023). These trends jeopardise not only the economic base of small towns but also the viability of community life.

In response, cultural and artistic interventions have increasingly been viewed as alternative strategies for rural revitalisation. Rather than focusing solely on industrial restructuring or large-scale infrastructure, these approaches emphasise the symbolic, social, and experiential dimensions of place-making (Evans, 2005; Richards, 2011). This shift aligns with international discussions on creative placemaking, which argue that cultural activities can generate social cohesion and stimulate local identity while also attracting visitors and investment (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010).

The village of Gyecheon in Pyeongchang County illustrates this trend vividly. Facing the closure of its elementary school due to declining student population, the community adopted classical music education as an experimental response. In 2009, Gyecheon Elementary School launched the Starlight Orchestra, enabling children to learn and perform music (Fig.1). What began as a survival measure for the school soon became a catalyst for cultural regeneration.

Figure 1

The Gyecheon Starlight Orchestra, established in 2009 as part of the music education program at Gyecheon Elementary School



Building on this foundation, the Korea National University of Arts and the Hyundai Motor Chung Mong-Koo Foundation initiated the Art Village Project in 2015. This comprehensive programme combined arts education, cultural festivals, and spatial redevelopment into a single framework. The project sought not only to enhance cultural participation but also to reimagine Gyeongju as a hub of cultural experimentation and resilience in the face of demographic decline.

Art as a Foundation for Community Renewal

The Art Village Project positioned Gyeongju as more than a passive host for cultural activities. It cultivated what might be described as the value of the village: a space of hospitality where residents, artists, and visitors intersected (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). The physical and symbolic transformation of the elementary school into a cultural venue illustrates how educational institutions can also serve as community anchors when reinterpreted through cultural practices (Fig. 2).

Figure 2

The Art Village Project and the Gyeongju Classical Music Festival, based at Gyeongju Elementary School since 2015



At the core of this transformation was the creation of the Gyeongju Classical Music Festival. First launched in 2015, the festival was not imposed from outside but co-produced with residents, embedding itself in the rhythms of everyday life. Villagers prepared venues, hosted artists, and welcomed visitors, while local businesses benefited from new tourism flows (Fig. 3). The direct economic benefits of such festivals have been documented in other Korean cases, where cultural events stimulate local economies and create positive spillovers in lodging, dining, and retail sectors (Choi et al., 2021).

Figure 3

A festival made by the community, revitalizing the local economy during the Gyecheon Classical Music Festival



The festival also pioneered new forms of spatial practice. Rather than restricting performances to concert halls, organisers creatively used village resources — courtyards, schoolyards, and natural landscapes — as stages. These settings not only enriched the audience experience but also redefined the rural landscape as a performative space (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007). By doing so, the festival demonstrated how art can serve as a foundation for community renewal, enhancing cultural participation while reinforcing social cohesion.

Furthermore, resident participation played a crucial role in embedding the festival into the local identity. Active involvement in planning, hosting, and performing strengthened community ties and connected Gyecheon with external networks, illustrating how cultural projects can build social sustainability (Son & Krolkowski, 2024). Such participatory frameworks align with broader theories of collaborative planning, which emphasise inclusivity and co-production as being essential for resilience in fragmented societies (Healey, 1997).

Spatial Transformation through the Art Village Project

The integration of the Art Village Project with the annual festival produced visible and lasting spatial transformations in Gyecheon. Until 2019, the main stage was located at Gyecheon Elementary School, reflecting the project's educational origins and its connection to classical music education in the village. However, from 2020 onward, the festival shifted its primary venue into natural landscapes, symbolising a deeper integration between art and environment (Fig. 4). This relocation diversified the spatial settings of performances and reinforced Gyecheon's identity as a cultural village where everyday spaces and natural scenery become active stages. This broadens both the aesthetic and experiential dimensions of the festival.

Figure 4

The new main stage set in nature, introduced in 2020



A second stage, constructed by Pyeongchang County in 2024, further demonstrated institutional recognition of the festival's growing regional significance. This development highlights how cultural interventions can attract public support and policy backing — a dynamic also observed in other international cases where rural revitalisation was tied to cultural branding (Zhou & Zheng, 2022). Building on this growing institutional recognition, more comprehensive plans were initiated through public–private partnerships to secure long-term resources and spatial transformation for Gyeongchon.

Beyond temporary event infrastructure, medium- and long-term plans for permanent facilities have emerged. In collaboration with Pyeongchang County and K'ARTS Creative Inc., the Gyeongchon Classic Art Village Project was launched as a public–private partnership supported by the central government (Fig. 5). Beginning in 2024, this four-year initiative is funded with a total budget of KRW 11 billion and aims to transform Gyeongchon into a cultural village by advancing both hardware and software components. On the one hand, physical development includes facilities such as the Gyeongchon Welcome Center, designed as a phased project integrating remodelling of existing buildings with new construction. On the other hand, cultural programming is reinforced through initiatives like the Classic Street Project, which envisions redesigning village streets and public spaces to accommodate performances, enhance visitor experiences, and strengthen the village's cultural identity. Together, these projects illustrate how cultural interventions can extend beyond festivals into urban design and landscape planning, shaping not only cultural life but also the physical environment of rural communities.

Figure 5
Comprehensive Project Plan Map for the Gyecheon Classic Art Village



Private investment with Korea National University of Arts has increasingly accompanied these developments. Companies have provided resources for infrastructure and programming, reflecting a growing recognition of Gyecheon as a cultural brand. Such public–private partnerships are critical for sustainability, aligning with findings that rural cultural revitalisation often depends on multi-scalar governance and collaborative financing (Qian et al., 2025; Liao et al., 2024). The integration of culture with tourism and ecological assets further demonstrates how diversified strategies can support rural revitalisation (Yang et al., 2025). In this way, Gyecheon has become not merely a host for cultural activities but a performative village. Its spaces have been reconfigured to accommodate art, tourism, and community participation, demonstrating the material as well as symbolic power of cultural interventions.

Conclusion: A New Possibility for Rural Revitalization

The case of Gyecheon highlights how art villages can function as performative spaces, blurring the boundaries between cultural production, everyday life, and spatial transformation. The festival not only reshaped how the village is perceived but also how it is inhabited, expanding its “functional population” — individuals who do not live locally but return regularly for cultural or social activities.

Conceptually, art villages may be viewed as urban retreats: spaces that restore nature, realise collective dreams, and rebuild community bonds. They provide respite from urban pressures while simultaneously offering sustainable models for rural futures. Crucially, the

participatory dimension ensured that revitalisation was not imposed from above but co-created. This participatory framework is key to long-term sustainability, mitigating risks of resident fatigue or external dependency (Healey, 1997; Son & Krolkowski, 2024).

At the same time, challenges remain. As Yúdice (2003) notes, culture's growing instrumentalisation raises questions about commercialisation and authenticity. Gyeongju must balance its identity as a cultural brand with the lived realities of residents. Moreover, stable financial support remains essential to sustain initiatives beyond periodic events. Importantly, Gyeongju has sought to extend the momentum of its festivals into broader cultural initiatives. Through public–private collaboration, the community has expanded the foundation of classical music education and developed diverse cultural cooperation projects, ensuring continuous local revitalisation and encouraging repeated visits by various functional populations. This cooperative framework demonstrates that sustainable cultural regeneration requires not only festivals but also educational and institutional platforms that anchor long-term engagement.

More broadly, the Gyeongju case has attracted attention as Korea faces a nationwide population decline crisis. Rather than suggesting a universally applicable model, this case illustrates one possible configuration through which cultural projects can be linked to demographic challenges, serving as both symbolic and practical responses to shrinking communities. In Korea, many state-led revitalisation programmes are implemented through short-term, procurement-based outsourcing cycles, which often limit the accumulation of local cultural expertise, resulting in event-oriented interventions rather than sustained cultural development.

Against this backdrop, the Gyeongju Festival represents a distinctive collaborative arrangement. The Korea National University of Arts has been involved in the continuous development of long-term cultural content, while sustained private funding — most notably from the Hyundai Motor Chung Mong-Koo Foundation — has provided symbolic stability and financial continuity. At the same time, Gyeongju County has supported local operations and infrastructure, enabling the project to be embedded in everyday village life. Although successful municipality-led festivals do exist in Korea, Gyeongju can be understood as a unique model where public institutions, private actors, and local communities work together to secure additional resources and capabilities. In this sense, the case demonstrates a context-specific form of cooperative governance that helps address gaps in cultural content, identity formation and community engagement within existing state-led frameworks, rather than a generic public–private partnership.

Nevertheless, the Gyeongju Art Village Project demonstrates that cultural programming, when integrated with spatial transformation and community participation can help to prevent regional decline, even if it does not immediately reverse demographic decline. While

comprehensive data showing a direct increase in the number of permanent residents is not yet available, the Gyechon Classic Festival and the associated classical music education programme at Gyechon Elementary School have led to a modest increase in student transfers from urban areas, indicating early signs of renewed local vitality.

Beyond the festival period, the village continues to function through ongoing educational activities and gradual improvements to everyday living infrastructure supported by Pyeongchang County. These efforts aim to stabilise and expand the village's population even during the off-season. In this sense, the festival operates as a spatial catalyst, with changes to the village closely linked to community revitalisation processes (Fig. 6). While the past decade has been focused on ensuring the continuity and maturity of the festival itself, the coming decade will emphasise consolidating everyday life by strengthening local services, enhancing living conditions and fostering longer-term residency and engagement. Gyechon therefore illustrates a transitional model in which cultural projects help to reconfigure local identity, sustain social resilience and open pathways towards more sustainable community life in shrinking rural contexts, rather than a completed demographic turnaround.

Figure 6

Festival as a tool for spatial transformation in villages: Sites of the Gyechon Classic Art Village.



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