

HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOOD REIMAGINED THROUGH COLLECTIVE ACTION

Happy Hwangchon: A Village Where Everyday Life Feels Like Travel – Gyeongju, Republic of Korea

1. DESCRIPTION

Happy Hwangchon is a resident-led urban regeneration program implemented in the historic neighborhood of Hwangchon, Gyeongju, between 2021 and 2024. Rather than relying on large-scale redevelopment, the project adopted a collaborative, bottom-up approach that empowered residents to co-design, implement, and manage the regeneration process. Through housing improvements, public space enhancements, community programs, and the creation of the innovative “Alley Hotel” model, the initiative transformed the neighborhood into a vibrant place where heritage, tourism, local economic development, and everyday life reinforce one another. The project continues beyond the initial public investment phase through the resident-managed Happy Hwangchon Cooperative.

2. CONTEXT THAT MOTIVATED THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRACTICE

Located contiguous to the Gyeongju Historic Areas, Hwangchon is a traditional residential neighborhood that had been experiencing population decline, housing deterioration, economic stagnation, and weakening community ties. Poor pedestrian conditions and a lack of quality public spaces further limited social interaction and neighborhood vitality. Despite its rich heritage character, residents faced increasing difficulties maintaining a vibrant and attractive living environment.

3. APPROACH/METHOD

The project was developed through a participatory and multi-stakeholder governance model involving Gyeongju City, the Urban Regeneration Support Center, local residents, the Residents’ Council, the Happy Hwangchon Cooperative, universities, and public institutions. A clear division of responsibilities was established: Gyeongju City focused on infrastructure and institutional support, while residents progressively assumed responsibility for operations, services, and local economic development.

Main phases:

1. Community engagement and vision building
 - Eight resident facilitation workshops (24 hours total).
 - Two study visits to exemplary regeneration projects.
 - Surveys, interviews, alleyway roundtables, living labs, public meetings, and expert consultations for the identification of local needs and co-creation of the project vision.

2. Physical and environmental improvements: Renovation of deteriorated housing, creation of community facilities and public spaces and improvement of pedestrian infrastructure and alleyways.
3. Development of resident-led economic activities
 - Conversion of vacant and underused buildings into accommodations, cafés, and community facilities.
 - Creation of the “Alley Hotel” model, developed directly from residents’ desire to preserve the scale and atmosphere of the neighborhood instead of building a large centralized hotel.
4. Governance and long-term management
 - Establishment of the Residents’ Council as a participatory decision-making body.
 - Creation of the Happy Hwangchon Cooperative, which manages facilities and local economic activities.
 - Capacity-building, business development, branding, and management support provided by the Urban Regeneration Support Center.

4. EXPECTED/IMMEDIATE/MEASURABLE EFFECTS

Measurable results

- 45 deteriorated houses renovated
- 9 community facilities created
- 29 jobs created through public investment and 43 additional jobs through private initiatives.
- Annual participation in community programs increased from a target of 300 to approximately 2,400 participants.
- Cooperative membership grew from 21 to 63 members.
- Café revenues increased by approximately 11%.
- New customer inflow increased by 89.4%.

Immediate effects observed

- Greater use of public spaces and pedestrian areas.
- Stronger sense of belonging and neighborhood identity.
- Revitalization of alley-based commercial activity.
- Emergence of resident-led entrepreneurship and community initiatives.
- Improved collaboration between municipal authorities and residents.
- Establishment of a sustainable governance structure capable of continuing beyond the project's public funding phase.

Expected effects

- Strengthened residential attractiveness and quality of life.
- Sustainable local economic development linked to heritage and tourism.
- Long-term resident-led management of community assets.
- Continued reinvestment of economic benefits into community welfare and neighborhood improvement.
- Increased social cohesion and local resilience.

5. KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Gyeongju's initiative demonstrates how resident-led governance can become the driving force behind the regeneration of historic neighborhoods.
- Improving habitability requires balancing heritage preservation, economic vitality, and residents' quality of life rather than prioritizing tourism alone.
- The practice highlights how historic centers can remain living, inhabited places by empowering residents to shape and manage their own future.



Renovated alleyways in Hwangchon. (©) OWHC Asia-Pacific Regional Secretariat

FOR MORE INFORMATION :

https://www.gyeongju.go.kr/open_content/ko/index.do

<https://blog.naver.com/happyhwangchon>

