

Songdo, ghetto for the affluent

Very impersonal, the first smart city in South Korea is not a great success; it has mainly attracted well-to-do families who appreciate the high quality of the services.

LE MONDE | 29.05.2017 à 18h23 • Ms à jour le 30.05.2017 à 10h47 | Par Philippe Mesmer (journaliste/philpe-mesmer) (Special Reporter)



First South Korean smart city, Songdo was built on a polder of 600 hectares reclaimed from Yellow Sea Christian Science Monitor/Getty Images

"We came here because it is new and clean" said Park Seon-mi, a mother whom I met at the terrace of a small restaurant in one of the five shopping malls in Songdo, the first 'smart city' in South Korea, sixty kilometres west of Seoul in the commune of Incheon. She does not sound disappointed by her choice. "The prices of real estate here are 40% cheaper than in Gangnam (a trendy area in the centre of Seoul)" adds Kim Song-joo, another mother who moved here in 2015 to the 48th floor of one of the towers "because the view is beautiful and the town is less crowded than Seoul". She was also attracted by the leisure activities by the sea.

However, the satisfaction displayed has difficulty in concealing the limits of a project launched in 2003 in a joint public-private partnership with Posco, the steel industry giant and the American Gale International in the first Free Economic Zone to be created in South Korea – today there are about forty of these. The idea was to create a genuine 'business centre in North-East Asia', attracting investment from all over the world and offering an unrivalled quality of living which would serve as a model to be exported. President Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) integrated it as a concept for a sustainable city in his project for green growth. Songdo is moreover the home to the Global Institute for Green Growth, a UN Organisation.

VICTIM OF ITS
DISTANCE FROM
SEOUL (1H45) -
EVEN THOUGH A
HIGH SPEED
PROJECT IS IN
THE PIPELINE -,
SONGDO HAS
ONLY ATTRACTED
58 FOREIGN
FIRMS

Built on a polder of 600 hectares reclaimed from the Yellow Sea and which will have cost 40 billion dollars (36 billion Euros) in 2022, the city is a mixed picture with its glass and steel buildings dominated by the Northeast Asia Trade Tower, 305 metres high, standing in the middle of a vast disused area awaiting new constructions. During the building work two other zones have been integrated, Yeongjong around the international airport of Incheon and Cheongna. With 250,000 inhabitants (of which 120,000 in Songdo), this 'golden triangle' has less than half the number of residents anticipated when the project was launched. The large avenues which run through it are broadly-speaking empty as are also the 25 km of cycling track. There are neither cinemas nor museums.

Songdo is a victim of its distance from Seoul. Transport takes 1 hour 45 minutes. Even though a high speed project is in the pipeline, it has only attracted 58 foreign firms. Some Korean firms are also established there like

Samsung Biologics; they avail themselves of some of the fiscal advantages initially reserved to foreign groups.

Cursus at 35,000 dollars per annum

It would appear that Songdo mainly attracts young well-to-do couples with children. It is less expensive than the centre of Seoul but remains inaccessible to the average Korean. But the employees of the Incheon Free Economic Zone (IFEZ – an agency managing investments and services) working in Songdo admit that they cannot live there.

Sterile and soul-less, the city looks different from Korean cities. There are no poor people, no street vendors, no old people. Stars, like the actress Kim Nam-joo have left Seoul to live there.

The attraction of Songdo is education. There is internet everywhere and the area is home to several international schools, mainly Chadwick International, an American institution which offers a cursus at approximately 35,000 dollars per annum. Universities like Yonsei (private) in Seoul or that of Gand (Belgium) have opened a campus there. The University of Normandy is apparently showing interest. A project led by SparkLabs, which finances innovations linked to the development of the Internet of Things (IoT) is ongoing.

A town under constant surveillance

Songdo is also a town under constant surveillance: 500 cameras ensure total grid coverage to regulate the traffic or detect 'suspicious' behaviour. Even the opening of a sewer cover is immediately notified to the IFEZ management centre in one of the towers in Songdo. "We work in close collaboration with the police, but the data are not kept for more than thirty days", according to Kim Jong-won at IFEZ.

As to the environmental aspect, the town, whose name means 'Pine Island', is built on a coastal strip which used to be known for the wealth of its ornithology, and includes 32% of green space as compared with 21% in Seoul. A system of household waste collection has enabled the suppression of rubbish bins and garbage trucks with 76% of waste being reprocessed. The networks enable optimal management of consumption of electricity.

But the electricity comes from an outside source, as it does for all the cities in Korea, mainly from coal-fired power plants. Park Seon-mi says "There are sometimes strange smells which come from the factories in neighbouring cities and we are not safe from the pollution from China". "The buildings are totally transparent and it is impossible to open the windows", says her friend Hong Ji-hyeon. "In summer and winter the air conditioning is on all the time. I wonder if I don't use more than before".

She herself had not seen the link between smart city and environment. "To me, it's just digital and in this respect it's not very different from Seoul".

Smart Cities : « Le Monde » analyzes urban transformations

« Le Monde » Smart-Cities 2017 International Innovation Awards (/les-prix-de-l-innovation/article/2017/03/31/international-awards-le-monde-smart-cities-extension-of-the-time-limit-for-applying-to-april-9th_5103555_4811683.html) will be handed on June 2nd in Singapor. On the same day, « Le Monde » organizes one day conference dedicated to urban transformations and governance issues for the 21st century (/smart-cities/article/2017/05/23/smart-cities-which-visions-and-models-for-the-21-century_5132413_4811534.html) , with engineers, sociologists, public managers, professors.

On April 7th in Lyon (France), « Le Monde » and its partners already awarded laureates of the second edition Le Monde Smart-Cities Innovation Award (/les-prix-de-l-innovation/article/2017/04/07/le-monde-a-decerne-sept-prix-europeens-pour-l-innovation-urbaine_5107354_4811683.html) for their innovative projects improving urban life. A conference on « Governing the city differently : can the cities reenchant democracy ? » (/les-prix-de-l-innovation/article/2017/03/21/gouverner-la-ville-autrement-une-journee-de-debats-organisee-par-le-monde_5098343_4811683.html) was held on the same date.

Find out about cities current affairs analyzed by « Le Monde » journalists on our « Smart-Cities » (</smart-cities/>) section, on Lemonde.fr