

From International Style to Gangnam Style

Reinventing Korean Architecture

Text by Gwen Lee
Photography as credited



As the new Korean Wave continues to enthrall us with its K-Pop artists, television drama, fashion design, and media technology, *Gwen Lee* delves into the little-known world of South Korean architecture and urban planning. In this special feature, she looks into the postwar decades of the “hermit nation” and speaks with four notable architects about “Korean-ness” and the professional challenges of building in one of the world’s most vibrant economies.



From a hermetic, inward-looking Asian country to an international economic powerhouse, South Korea has undergone a massive transformation in its urban fabric in the last century. In 2010, its capital, Seoul, was named a “City of Design” by UNESCO, joining other historic Asian cities like Shanghai, Nagoya, and Kobe. This accolade is significant not only because it highlights the importance of design and architecture in a nation that has not so long ago, risen out of the ashes of war like a phoenix reborn, but also because it points to the strong presence of design-driven creative industries, such as architecture, interiors, fashion, and sustainable design. However, despite the country’s increasing global influence, Korea’s design industries attract little or no attention outside the country.

The same media black hole exists in the field of architecture. This is perplexing for those who have visited Seoul and witnessed its bustling and well-organised urban fabric. Stone, metal, and glass dominate the city’s skyline and an efficient, well-planned urban infrastructure makes the city more than liveable. Some may even say that Seoul is a less chaotic version of Tokyo. South Korean architects are well-educated and prolific, and their buildings demonstrate an informed modernity that does not pale in comparison to their western counterparts. Korean contractors are known for their quality, speed, and trustworthiness, with Samsung C&T Corporation having constructed three out of four of the world’s tallest skyscrapers. There is no question about the industry’s capability as a whole. Yet, Korean architects receive little coverage in the international press compared to their Chinese and Japanese counterparts. The situation is no better in the academic world. Translated publications are scarce and the flow of architectural discourse remains an outside-in, West-to-East affair.

To understand how Korea’s architectural landscape has evolved to be the way it is, one must take a step back into the country’s recent history. During the Korean War (1950–1953), large numbers of buildings were destroyed, along with key infrastructure. Street-to-street fighting and bombs levelled large expanses of the city, bridges were destroyed over the Han River, and historical architectural sites were burnt by invading armies. At the end of the war, the country was divided into north and south. Rebuilding began in earnest but to different effects. Architecture in the north is characterised by Stalinist and Brutalist architecture, imported by North Korean architects who had studied in Moscow. In Pyongyang, architecture was seen as a showpiece of North Korea’s power and as a consequence, grand imposing buildings, huge public squares, and wide processional boulevards were constructed.

In contrast, South Korean architecture in the sixties was highly influenced by the sleek, clean lines of American modernism, in particular the International Style. While domestic architecture still adopted vernacular influences and techniques, any building of importance in South Korea was quick to adopt the glass and steel box-like conventions of North America. One of the buildings that best encapsulated the International Style at that time was the Samilro building (1966) by Kim Jung-eop, who had returned to Korea in 1957 after working at Le Corbusier’s office. At 31 storeys and towering over the rest of Seoul, the Samilro building was modelled after Mies van der Rohe’s Seagram building in Chicago.

The chief concern of South Korean architects working in the sixties—as with postwar architects elsewhere in the world—was quantity and speed. As architect Hyunjoon Yoo explains, “In the past, our country did not have enough time and money to think about the identity of Korean architecture. We were too busy just building something to live in and were also not confident about our culture.” The South Korean skyline was rapidly populated with nondescript, if modern, high-rises.

With the accelerated growth of the economy in the seventies, and a resurgence of nationalism in the cultural sphere, public and private clients began to turn their focus to quality, meaning, and form. A lively debate over “Korean architecture” ensued, with proponents clamouring for a revival of tradition and opponents fearing that an overemphasis on “Korean-ness” could impede the development of modern architecture. Amidst Korea’s self-reflection, foreign architects like Cesar Pelli of Gruen Associates, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and Nikken Sekkei continued to collaborate with local firms to produce large-scale projects in Seoul, thus transforming the urban fabric further. Despite the building boom, the role of the architect remained limited. Jeong Hoon Lee, principal of JOHO Architecture,

lamented that architects of that period were treated as “technicians” hired to solve spatial problems. “Despite the efforts to establish a Korean modernism,” he says, “the role of an architect was only perceived as licensing for maximum property value.”

In 1988, Seoul was selected as the venue for the Olympic Games. This further boosted the sense of patriotism and a period of rapid construction. Local architects designed a series of iconic Olympic showpieces that exhibited a renewed confidence in the Korean culture. Key figures of this period include Kim Chung-up, architect of the Peace Gate at the Olympic Park, and Kim Swoo Geun who built the Olympic Stadium, a gargantuan structure with lines recalling the elegant curves of a Joseon Dynasty porcelain vase. Kim Swoo Geun, a seminal figure in the architecture field, went on to design over 200 projects inside and outside of South Korea during his lifetime. Also known as an educator and publisher of the art journal *SPACE*, his representative works often integrate elements from traditional Korean architecture and include *SPACE* Group building (1978), Masan Yangdeok Catholic Church (1979), and the Jinju National Museum (1986).

Today, South Korean architecture continues to be heavily influenced by modernism as defined by the West. Ambitious young Koreans view a higher education in the West as a box to be checked, and indeed, the most promising stars of the country’s architecture profession hail mainly from “branded” universities in the United States and Europe. In a sense, the flow of ideas remains very much as it was half a century ago—in the direction of West to East. The new generation of Korean architects, being more media-savvy and conversant in English, are reaching out to the rest of the world using the internet as their primary platform. This, in turn, is generating greater attention from online sources and webzines, such as *designboom* and *ArchDaily*, although the reportage remains scant and fragmented, with most features typically being image- rather than text-heavy.

Still, this signals a change in how the peninsula’s brightest talents are engaging their global audience. What is remarkably different is the unwillingness to be caught up in the “modernity versus tradition” navel-gazing debate of the seventies. This new generation of architects is more interested in responding to issues of sustainability and local conditions and concerns than being bogged down by the manifestation of Korean-ness in their designs. Unlike their predecessors, they are less *influenced by* and more *becoming part of* the global architectural discourse. With maturation and a newly found cultural confidence, Korean architects are shedding the baggage that some non-Western architects still carry—that is, the need to constantly reference or acknowledge vernacular and indigenous traditions, almost as an apology for designing anything new.

Already we see a more relaxed attitude in the likes of the controversial Moon Hoon, whose cited influences include Indian philosophy and popular culture. Moon’s buildings are proudly surrealist and playful; criticisms of kitschiness do little to dissuade him from rebelling against the entrenched ideas of modernism. Then there is Haewon Shin of Lokaldesign, one of the few prominent females in the profession, whose primary interest lies not in “short-lived stylistic preconceptions” but in bettering Seoul’s urban infrastructure one tunnel at a time. Make no mistake, South Korean architects continue to draw inspiration from their culture and they are proud to showcase their patriotism when the right moment arises. A recent example is Minsuk Cho’s Korean Pavilion at the Shanghai Expo. Derived from the form of the *hangeul* (Korean alphabet) and punctuated by openings inspired by the Korean picture frame window, the porous pavilion is an unabashed celebration of all things Korean.

So while the question “What is Korean architecture?” remains, the answer is perhaps no longer relevant in our globalised world. What we do know is that as the frenetic pace of nation-building slows down, Korean architects are now, for the first time in history, taking their time to experiment, redefine, and broadcast their visions. It is a matter of time before the rest of the world catches on. ■

References

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ZooZoo Theatre,
Hyunjoon Yoo Architects.
(Photo: Seunghoon Yum)

2, 4
Shinbanpo Underpass,
Lokaldesign. (Photo:
Kim JaeKyung)

3
The Curving House,
JOHO Architecture.
(Photo: Sun Namgoong)

5
Green Weaving Club House,
Hyunjoon Yoo Architects.
(Photo: Seunghoon Yum)

6
SangSang Museum,
Moonbalsso.
(Photo: Kim Yong Kwan)

7
Lollipop House, Moonbalsso.
(Photo: Nam Goong Sun)

8
Herma Parking Building,
JOHO Architecture.
(Photo: Sun Namgoong)