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Young Korean Architects; rebalancing after compressed modernity

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Editorial

The global rise of "Korean Cool" is no longer a nascent trend; it is a solidified cultural phenomenon. From cinema and music to digital technology, the world has become accustomed to the vibrant, high-energy output of Korea. However, for those of us within the architectural community, the "Rise of the Korean Cool" has often remained vague and distant — a concept hard to grasp in physical form. This issue on **Young Korean Architects (YKAs)** acts as a departure point: a threshold from which a new generation of Korean architects are moving beyond mere aesthetic "coolness" toward a profound structural and philosophical maturity.

In this special issue of Architecture Asia, we turn our eyes toward seven teams of young Korean architects who are redefining the built environment during this period of global rebalancing. While their predecessors—active during Korea's "Compressed Modern" era—laid the groundwork for rapid urbanization, this new cohort operates with a different set of priorities. They are the architects of "**Rebalancing**": harmonizing the local with the global, the traditional with the avant-garde, and the rapid pace of development with the slow, meditative requirements of human-centric design.

The Philosophical Anchor: Harmony Without Uniformity

To understand the current trajectory of Korean architecture, one must look toward the intellectual framework supporting it. This issue is enriched by the insights of Professor Jin Baek, whose in-depth analysis of the seven featured teams provides a necessary academic bridge between theory and practice. His contribution helps illuminate the underlying thread connecting these diverse practices.

Furthermore, a concise yet vital essay by Joung Yun Bahk, editor of KIRA Monthly, explores the similarities and differences among these teams regarding their interpretation of social changes in a post-industrial, stagnant urbanization era. Bahk focuses on how these architects navigate an uncertain future, using their individual design approaches as tools for survival and as a means to discover a unique spatial language.

Architect Gibson Rhie translates the phenomenon of the "Korean Cool" from pop culture and applies it to architecture. By examining the underlying reasons for the sudden outburst of creativity in K-pop and cinema, he suggested that applying a similar logic to architecture—specifically through the relaxation of reviews and regulatory constraints—will foster a more positive and creative change in the Korean built environment.

There is an ancient aesthetic philosophy where Art finds a second life through the hands of the youth. In an era where "more and bigger" was the motto of the economic miracle age (1970s–1990s), the seven teams introduced here demonstrate the power of "enough." Their work suggests that contemporary Korean architecture is finding its voice not through loud, iconic gestures, but through the sophisticated management of space, material, and light. They are mastering the art of being contemporary without losing the "empty space" (bi-um) that defines the Korean spatial identity.

Navigating a Complex Landscape

The teams featured in this issue represent a cross-section of a changing profession, navigating a landscape that is technologically advanced yet environmentally conscious. Through their work, we see a recurring commitment to:

- **Urban Porosity**: Breaking down the rigid boundaries between private and public spheres in the dense metropolis.
- **Material Sincerity**: An exploration of how traditional materials can be reinterpreted through robotic fabrication or sustainable re-use.
- **Social Connectivity**: Architecture that functions as a catalyst for community in an increasingly digital and isolated society.

These architects are not merely building structures; they are crafting the social and cultural infrastructure for a Korea that is post-industrial and hyper-connected. They are the practitioners who will define what it means to be "Korean" in the architectural sense for the mid-21st century. As we present these works to the wider ARCASIA community and beyond, we invite a dialogue. The challenges faced by YKAs—high urban density, the tension between heritage and development, and the quest for sustainability—are shared by architects regionally and internationally. By examining the Korean context, we hope to spark insights that resonate in cities across the world. The "Korean Cool" may have opened the door, but it is the intellectual rigor, the attention to social change, and the philosophical depth of these young architects that will keep that door open. We are witnessing a generation that is not content to simply follow global trends; they are setting a new standard for what a responsive, responsible, and refined Asian architecture can look like. The work of these seven teams is a testament to a future for Korean architecture that is not just "cool," but both **local and global**.

Navigating the uncertain future. Design as a tool tackling social changes

Joung Yun Bahk, Editor of KIRA magazine

Joung Yun Bahk is a South Korean architect and critic who currently serves as the **Editor-in-Chief** of *The Architect*, the official monthly magazine published by the Korea Institute of Registered Architects (KIRA). He is the founder and principal of **Grid-A Architecture**, a firm based in Seoul and Yongin. Under his leadership, the firm has gained recognition for its thoughtful approach to both residential and public architecture. His commitment to public interest is further reflected in his role as a **Public Architect for Yongin City**. Beyond his design practice, he is a significant voice in the architectural community as the **Editor-in-Chief** of *The Architect*. In this capacity, he leads the editorial direction for South Korea's representative architectural publication, fostering discourse on contemporary design and the professional environment for architects.

Academic & Professional Background

- **M.Arch., Seoul National University**: Earned a Master's degree in Architectural Design.
- **B.S. in Architectural Engineering, Jeonbuk National University.**
- **Practice experience:** professional expertise at major firms including **Haeahn Architecture** and **Gumsung Architects & Engineers**.

Over the past half-century, Korea—along with many other Asian countries—has grown at a pace unprecedented in modern history. Through industrialization, urbanization, and the development of new towns, cities expanded rapidly and passed through a phase of population growth. In this process, architecture functioned as an instrument of national competitiveness and economic expansion. Industrial complexes centered on manufacturing were constructed, and large-scale apartment housing—distinct from Western models—became a specialized urban typology across Asia to accommodate growing populations.

Like many countries, Korea also witnessed social structures gradually shifted, industrial systems evolved and population growth stopped and turned toward decline. New towns, many only a few decades old, have already entered phases of redevelopment. While city centers filled with commercial and office buildings driven by efficiency and speed, they still coexist with historic streets and villages that embody centuries of accumulated time.

After decades of dramatic transformation, compounded by global economic crises and geopolitical instability, the current condition of Korean architecture may look frozen or subdued. Many perceive this as a severe economic downturn. However, another interpretation suggests that architecture's share within the national industrial economy has decreased to levels comparable to those of advanced countries. Continued rapid expansion is no longer viable, many people view the current situation is in a plateau. The architectural design market may be entering a phase of stabilization. where new construction and renovation opportunities remains flat. .

Some say it may be reassuring that the field is not stagnating further, the intense competition and social perception facing Young Korean Architects remain far from favorable.

Compensation for Architects (design fee) have long been structurally undervalued, and market pressure forces firms to compete primarily on lower fee in order to secure commissions. Under such conditions, it becomes increasingly difficult to dedicate sufficient time and resources to producing high-quality architecture. In public projects especially, excessive competition—often with dozens of firms competing for a single competition—creates a situation in which the collective effort invested far exceeds the value of the built outcome.

Moreover, architecture's public and cultural value is not yet fully recognized across society. While consumers willingly invest in "luxury" fashion or electronics, they often lack the criteria to evaluate and appreciate what constitutes "good architecture," and therefore hesitate to invest in it accordingly.

Despite all these challenging circumstances, the achievements of Young Korean Architects gain greater significance. After completing their education and gaining professional experience, many establish their own practices and experiment with new architectural languages through small yet highly refined projects. In cities that no longer require monumental landmarks, they focus instead on carefully interpreting local context and the values of user experiences. From compact urban houses that demand rigorous structural and material considerations to neighborhood facilities, small cultural spaces, and renovation projects, they explore the essence of architecture precisely within constraint. Their persistent commitment to spatial quality, even within a fiercely competitive system, signals that Korean architecture may be transitioning from an era of quantitative expansion to one of qualitative advancement.

The Practice of Young Korean Architects
Softness with Potential for Growth, and the Firmness of Architectural Language

Korean Young Architects are constructing distinct architectural worlds grounded in diverse backgrounds and philosophies. Rather than pursuing formal spectacle, they prioritize reading urban and regional contexts, reinterpreting conventional materials through fresh experimentation, and shaping narrative experiences centered on users.

The work of 1458 Architects stands out for maximizing spatial density within strict urban constraints while carving out moments of release. Zoning envelopes defined by building coverage and floor-area ratios may seem to demand full exploitation, yet the life contained within them requires deeper architectural reflection. Their projects reveal the value that emerges not from filling everything in, but from strategically subtracting.

A.ROOT Architects incorporates practical experience with traditional Korean architecture into contemporary work. Their office, Mokwoljae, resembles a traditional Korean house, and its interior unfolds through level changes and framed views that construct a spatial narrative. In Veke, this narrative becomes more dramatic; with the addition of landscape design, architecture and nature intertwine to create a space that invites prolonged occupation. Based in Jeju, the practice respects regional history and environment while infusing it with contemporary sensibility.

A.co.lab Architects demonstrates a strong experimental attitude. Through material combinations and structural explorations, the practice proposes new spatial experiences even in small-scale projects, freely crossing the boundaries between architecture, pavilion, and sculptural installation. By juxtaposing metal and wood, exposed concrete and glass, they generate material tension while maintaining fluid boundaries between interior and exterior. Though modest in scale, their projects are densely charged with architectural inquiry.

Kim-O Architects is recognized for restrained forms and lucid compositions. Even within complex urban contexts, the firm proposes simple yet powerful volumes, while interior sequences produce rich spatial experiences. In residential projects, careful calibration of light orientation and window placement reflects a refined attentiveness to everyday life. The architecture appears calm and understated, yet reveals depth upon closer encounter.

ODETO.A Architects embeds musical rhythm and narrative within space. In exhibition venues and small cultural facilities, circulation unfolds like a storyline. Variations in ceiling height and gradations of light guide users intuitively through spatial progression. Their architecture engages not only function but also emotional resonance.

Shin Design Lab Architects moves between public and private sectors, demonstrating that young practices are capable of

proposing large-scale visions. Notably, their transformation of their own office into a multi-cultural space accessible to the public has drawn local attention, expanding the role of the architectural studio within the community.
ZITTA Architects, true to its name, focuses on the essence of "making." Deep involvement in the construction process and commitment to material integrity and detail define its practice. In small-scale lodging projects, the framed experience of the surrounding landscape becomes an essential component of architectural completion.
Across differences in scale, these offices share a clarity of philosophical stance. Even within competitive design environments, they accumulate architectural language through sustained and rigorous inquiry. While navigating commission pressures and the need to negotiate design intent, their reflective processes themselves contribute to strengthening the foundation of Korean architecture.

Anticipating a Better Future
Climbing the Stairs, One Step at a Time

Contemporary Korean architecture stands at a point where multiple forces coexist. While shaped by real estate logic and accelerated development pressures, it is also witnessing the emergence of new architectural sensibilities among Korean Young Architects, alongside a slowly growing cultural recognition of their value. Within this tension, their work becomes not merely built output, but a response—and a question—posed to the times.
The works produced by young Korean architects may not yet appear as a singular dominant movement. While ambition is often compared to climbing a mountain or ascending a tower, their trajectory resembles the steady act of climbing stairs—one deliberate step at a time. Each new step depends on the one already secured below: completed projects, accumulated social recognition, and the trust of clients willing to invest in new possibilities.

A single small building, a neighborhood cultural space, or a carefully crafted house can alter the character of a city and reshape everyday life. As such transformations accumulate, public perception of architecture begins to shift. Higher steps require a solid base and structural continuity. Thus, while individual effort and singular works matter, expanding and consolidating the broader foundation is even more essential.
The projects introduced here may be read as signals of Korean architecture's future. The experiences and works being accumulated today will serve as stepping stones for architects practicing in Korea. As the discipline moves beyond quantitative growth toward qualitative maturity, the practice of young architects stands as one of the most persuasive grounds for hope. One may look forward to the next step—and to the future of Korean architecture.

New Trajectories in the Landscape after Compressed Modernity: Young Korean Architects

Jin Baek , Architecture critic and a professor of Seoul National University

B.S., M.S. Seoul National University, Korea / M.Arch. Yale University, U.S./ Ph.D. University of Pennsylvania, U.S.

Jin Baek earned his Bachelor of Science and Master of Science from Seoul National University, Master of Architecture from Yale University, and completed his Ph.D. in the history and theory of architecture at the University of Pennsylvania. Before joining the Department of Architecture and Architectural Engineering, Seoul National University, he taught theory, design studios and history at the University of South Florida, Pennsylvania State University and University of Tokyo. His research focuses on architectural and urban theory through a phenomenological lens. From a global perspective, he explores themes of universal relevance and, on this basis, interprets the historical trajectory and significance of modern and contemporary Korean architecture and urban development. His work further examines the foundational and ethical roles of architecture and urban planning, while investigating the interrelations between history, technology, and future urban discourse.
He is the author of *Nothingness: Tadao Ando's Christian Sacred Space* (Routledge, 2009), *Architecture as the Ethics of Climate* (Routledge, 2016) and Justice and the City (published in Korea, Hyohyung, 2025). His articles have been published in leading architectural and philosophical journals such as the *Architectural Research Quarterly*, *Journal of Architectural Education*, *Architectural Theory Review*, *Center*, *Philosophy East and West*, and so forth. He has organized many international symposia and conferences, including the <International Architecture and Phenomenology Conference> and <Asia Cities Culture>. He has given talks as a keynote speaker and an invited speaker at many international events. He organized a symposium titled <The Mundanity and Transcendence of Historical Buildings The Everyday and the Transcendence of Historic Architecture: The Future of the Former National Buyeo Museum>, exploring the new future and possibilities of the Former National Buyeo Museum, one of the representative works of modern and contemporary Korean architecture. He is currently organizing an international symposium entitled <Topographies of Collective Housing and its Praxis, Imagining Futures beyond the Apartment>. The symposium explores communal housing models and examines how they can be institutionalized through policy frameworks, financial mechanisms, operational structures, and the communicative processes of design. Particular attention is given to how these approaches can cultivate a sustained sense of belonging among residents, enhance the overall quality of dwelling, and ultimately contribute to the formation and strengthening of civic ethics.

Link to prof. Baek's bio : https://architecture.snu.ac.kr/people/jin-baek/

Introduction:

1. Inwardness and Openness / Architecture Label 1458, *Shin Design Lab*
2. The Determinate and the Indeterminate/ ODETO.A
3. Terrain and Human Settlement/ Kim-O Architects, A.Root
4. The Sublime and "The Poem of the Right Angle" / Zitta
5. Everyday Banality and Creative Collage/ A.CO.LAB

Under what historical conditions do young architects practice architecture currently in South Korea? South Korea's postwar transformation has often been described as a case of *compressed modernity*: Industrialization, urbanization, political transformation, and globalization unfolded within a remarkably condensed timeframe. Architecture played a central role in this process. Under military authoritarianism and state-led developmentalism, architectural production was closely tied to a supply-driven growth regime. Government offices, corporate headquarters, industrial facilities, cultural complexes, and large apartment districts constituted the physical framework of modernization.

In this context, architecture functioned less as a cultural discipline than as an operative instrument within the state-led regime of accelerated economic expansion. Spatial production was closely aligned with national development objectives, and the built environment became a primary medium through which growth was materialized. Infrastructural networks, industrial facilities, public institutions, housing complexes and others were constructed at unprecedented speed and scale to organize labor, enable circulation, and sustain capital concentration. Architectural practice was structurally embedded within the quantitative paradigm that prioritized efficiency, delivery, and expansion.

Yet even within this climate, architecture was not understood solely as an instrument of efficient production. A parallel current persisted—one that approached the built environment from the standpoint of historical continuity and dwelling, and that insisted on raising the question of meaning. This inward inquiry was inseparable from external pressures. Korean architecture could not remain indifferent to the gazes emanating from three powerful referents—North Korea, Japan, and the West. Its search for cultural identity unfolded as a sustained response to these external gazes. In negotiating how it was perceived, evaluated, and positioned in relation to these others, Korean architecture sought to articulate and stabilize its own cultural self-understanding. Architects were repeatedly called upon to define a distinct "Korean-ness," even as their professional education and technical paradigms were largely shaped by Western modernism.

Figure 1: A flyover bridge through the city in 1976[i]

Figure 2: large apartment blocks became a dominant feature of the capital[ii]

At the same time, rapid urban transformation intensified this search for meaning. The swift disappearance of urban tissues and architectural artifacts, the acceleration of shifting value systems and patterns of life, and the emergence of unfamiliar and desolate cityscapes generated a heightened awareness of vanishing traditions. What had once been the unselfconscious stage of everyday life was reconstituted as an object of reflection. The lived milieu—formerly embedded in habit and routine—became something to be observed, analyzed, explained, and represented. In this reversal, the ordinary was estranged; the background of life was foregrounded as a cultural artifact.

Such conditions produced a particular creative tension. The desire to retrieve what had already disappeared—to recover forms, spatial sequences, or symbolic structures associated with a premodern continuity—inevitably risked entanglement in nostalgia. Architects confronted the paradox of attempting to revitalize a tradition that no longer functioned as a living horizon. Efforts to reconstruct or reinterpret inherited forms were haunted by the awareness that these forms could not simply be reinstated as they once were. The very act of preservation or revival transformed them into representations of loss.

The early 2000s marked an inflection point. Overcoming the IMF financial crisis[1], regained economic stabilization coincided with the gradual exhaustion of growth as a dominant paradigm. The expansive developmental model had largely saturated the metropolitan core. Simply participating in large-scale supply systems no longer guaranteed professional distinction and even survival as an architect. The market polarized: large corporate firms consolidated control over public and branded collective housing projects, while smaller offices emerged through single-family houses, neighborhood facilities, and small cultural commissions.

A younger generation—many educated or professionally trained abroad—began to move beyond earlier anxieties about Western comparison. Rather than reproducing imported formal languages or staging overt yet empty signs of identity, they treated local constraints as operative design conditions. Regulation, existing fabric, infrastructural remnants, climate, and patterns of social life became the starting points of architectural inquiry. Practice shifted from calculation, repetition, and expansion toward the discovery and interpretation of what is given—or what remains.

1. Asian financial crisis that seriously hit Korean economy in 1997.
i. source: Seoul Metropolitan Archives
ii. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seoul_Apartment_Buildings_(1509272335).jpg
iii. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seoul_from_Namsan_2.jpg

Figure 3: A scene of historic downtown Seoul / *source: Wikipedia commons*[iii]

Although Korean architecture was profoundly transformed in the post-war period—so much so that it may be read through the lens of replacement, as exemplified by the shift from single-family dwellings to standardized apartment complexes—this was not a process of total erasure. Condensed modernity did not yield a coherent field of efficiency and mechanization. Instead, it produced a stratified terrain of everyday life in which replacement and persistence coexist: conflictual, coarse, and often discordant. The contemporary city thus appears as an archive of unresolved interventions. Within this layered condition, obsolete or marginal elements—once dismissed as residual—re-emerge as potential spatial and cultural resources.

Simultaneously, the unprecedented concentration of capital and opportunity in Seoul has intensified regional decline. Center–periphery asymmetry has become a defining spatial condition of contemporary Korea. While migration to the capital remains the dominant professional trajectory, a countercurrent has emerged: architects returning to provincial cities, motivated by both ethical commitment, disciplinary opportunity and alternative style of life. In cities such as Chuncheon, Busan, or Jeju, differentiated climatic conditions, topographies, tectonics, cultural heritage, and social rhythms.

As the wave of compressed modernization has run its course, the present condition reveals infrastructural excess, metropolitan saturation, and peripheral depletion.

Young Korean architects operate within this inherited condition. Their work signals a shift from growth-driven production toward situated negotiation—from abstract expansion to contextually grounded interpretation.

This article analyzes the projects of contemporary young Korean architects through six thematic propositions. It argues that their work reflects an emergent architectural attitude shaped by the aftereffects of compressed modernity: an attention to the sense of security set against the bleak urban, to the restoration of meaning in the process of which neutrality and underterminedness are celebrated, to territorial differentiation rather than metropolitan universalism, and to accumulation of fragments and remnants rather than erasure of one by the other.

1. Inwardness and Openness

Housing projects by Architecture Label 1458 is fundamentally introverted. *SoYoYuga*, in particular, evokes the impression of a massive Romanesque structure. Thick perimeter walls enclose the building, and neither the entrance nor the windows are directly exposed to the street. The wall is deeply carved to create a niche, within which the porch and entrance door are positioned. The windows are treated in a similar manner. Instead of opening outward toward the street, a narrow and elongated courtyard is inserted, and the openings are oriented inward toward this void. The overall mass assumes the character of a two-story fortress. Only the southern corner is defined by a wall approximately 1.8 meters in height, behind which an additional courtyard is located. Yet even here, the interior remains entirely concealed from the street. The subtle height of 1.8 meters is sufficient to prevent visual intrusion while avoiding overt monumentality. The house maintains a resolutely closed presence toward its exterior context. Upon entering, however, a dramatic reversal occurs. Passing through the dark niche and stepping inside, one is suddenly confronted with the gallery space, the courtyard, the enclosing wall, and, beyond it, the distant mountains. Because the interior floor level is raised above that of the street, the outside world cannot penetrate visually into the house; yet from within, the street disappears beyond the wall, and the immediate interior merges visually with the distant mountain ridge. The intermediate urban layer is effectively erased. The city is masked, and the house establishes a quiet, almost secretive continuity with nature. This is not mere enclosure but selective editing. The city is excluded, while only the chosen external horizon is incorporated.

In traditional Korean houses, the boundary wall functioned differently from today's isolated and defensive enclosure. High walls were unnecessary. Walls were relatively low, and immediately beyond them lay the courtyard. This courtyard hosted weddings, funerals, and communal celebrations. Neighbors entered freely—often without removing their shoes—to participate in collective events. Traditional settlements were frequently clan-based villages, where families sharing the same surname lived together. Consequently, family ethics and neighborhood ethics developed in tandem. The common Korean expression, "neighbors are like cousins," reflects this spatially grounded social ethic. The sequence—street, wall, courtyard, main hall (*daecheong*), wooden veranda, and spatially private rooms—organized family and neighborhood relations spatially. The boundary was not a device of exclusion but a calibrated mediator between social realms.

SoYoYuga, however, inverts this traditional spatial configuration and the correlated ethics of the inter-personal. Rather than balancing openness and closure, it asserts a deliberate and heightened enclosure. The house fuses with the wall, and the courtyard is concealed within. Around this hidden courtyard, galleries and rooms are arranged to create an internal sense of openness and continuity.

The exterior presents a fortress-like solidity, while the interior unfolds smoothly. Yet the house does not sever all ties with the outside world. It selectively draws in the distant mountain landscape beyond the wall. The strategy is editorial: the city is erased, and nature alone is framed. The relationship with the exterior is not abolished but reconfigured.

What, then, does this evolution toward residential introversion signify? The rapid expansion of civil infrastructure and mechanistic urban planning in contemporary Korea has often failed to cultivate humane environments of settlement. Planned cities are frequently reduced to clearly demarcated plots and roadways. Upon stepping outside the house, one immediately encounters vehicular traffic. Pedestrian networks are inadequately separated from car circulation, and few public spaces bind the neighborhood together. Parks are not strategically located, and communal gathering spaces are scarce. As if sliced cleanly by a blade, plots and roads are mechanically divided. Within such an environment, neighbors disappear, both physically and socially, replaced by anonymous strangers. The city appears barren. In this condition of desolation, the introverted house activates a survival instinct—an attempt to secure an oasis of refuge and repose.. Introversion here is not merely an aesthetic preference but a response to environmental deficiency. It is the intimacy generated by a desolate urban context.

Shin Design Lab Campus by Shin Design Lab occupies a similarly barren context. It stands on a corner site within a planned city dominated by large-scale industrial and office facilities, each fronted by expansive parking lots. The surrounding environment is shaped by vehicular scale and spatial emptiness.

The central design element of this building is its courtyard. A U-shaped mass and a linear block meet with a narrow gap between them, forming a rectilinear and intimate courtyard. Pedestrian access is separated from the parking area. Unlike neighboring buildings that present their parking lots directly to the street and privilege vehicular arrival, this project guides pedestrians along a side wall and through a narrow passage before opening suddenly into a calm and proportioned courtyard. One moves abruptly from the vast scale of the planned city into a space of human scale. It is, once again, a modest oasis.

This building is not a private residence but the architect's office, combined with community-oriented programs. A café, a gallery supporting artists, a small lecture hall, commercial space, and offices are arranged around the courtyard. The front façade of the lecture hall is equipped with folding doors, enabling events to extend outward into the courtyard in favorable weather.

While the building maintains a relatively closed attitude toward the street, this too is a defensive response to its barren surroundings. Within, however, the courtyard anchors a range of cultural activities—café gatherings, exhibitions, performances—that offer citizens a reason to linger. In a city where opportunities to assemble and engage collectively are limited, such architecture becomes more than a functional office building; it serves as a local cultural node. In the midst of an austere urban landscape, the courtyard establishes a stable and sheltered interior realm. It suggests a fundamental reason for architecture's existence: not merely the creation of form, but the restoration of relationships.

2. The Determinate and the Indeterminate

Discourse on indeterminacy has become increasingly prominent in contemporary architectural theory. In the Korean context, such discussions often refer back to the traditional courtyard (*madang*), retrospectively interpreted as a space capable of accommodating multiple and shifting events. The term "indeterminacy" in Korean architectural discourse was largely formulated after the decomposition of this traditional spatial configuration and its performance, as an attempt to conceptualize what the courtyard once enabled. Yet the contemporary invocation of indeterminacy raises a fundamental question: does spatial openness truly suspend determination, or does it conceal new forms of fixation, while seemingly proposing indeterminacy? Can we understand the Korean traditional courtyard not as an empty space reserved for flexible activities but as an intermediary relational zone between the public domain and the private domain, in which clear and definite type of activities and the interrelated modes of rules and codes of conduct are suspended? Is this suspension the very condition of indeterminacy that allows unexpected situations to emerge?

Art Archives at Seoul Museum of Art by ODETO.A offers a telling case. The project was an interior work. What was initially given to the architects was an almost empty shell—structure, columns, ceiling, and floor were present, and programmatic articulation was also undefined. It was a type of emptiness which would remind one of Mies van der Rohe's notion of "universal space" and its limit: a space intended to accommodate everything, yet often incapable of meaningfully supporting anything specific. The paradox of radical openness lies in its tendency toward abstraction so extreme that it fails to sustain concrete forms of life.

The project's ambition, therefore, was to move beyond blank neutrality—introducing spatial differentiation without succumbing to over-definition. Variations in height and width, subtle modulation of ceiling levels, differentiation between flat ceilings and luminous ceilings, and a careful distinction among types of openings—windows framing exterior views, clerestories admitting light, and skylights filtering vertical illumination—were deployed to articulate contrasting spatial qualities. Through such calibrated differentiation, the interior was organized into identifiable rooms: gallery, library, archive storage, and reading areas. Yet the project simultaneously sought to embody indeterminacy. The double-height central library exemplifies this intention. Although designated as a library, it is presented as open, flexible, and adaptable—capable of accommodating various arrangements of furniture and potentially shifting programs. It is described as "open," "accessible," and "undetermined."

However, this discourse of indeterminacy leaves something to be desired. At the rhetorical level, the space is open; in practice, relationships seem to remain fixed. The central hall is the library; the gallery near the main entrance is for special exhibition; although located just beyond the library, the gallery remains quite isolated; and the archive above remains a strictly controlled zone. Programmatic divisions are clearly articulated, and their relationship is less interlocking than rigid. What emerges in the name of indeterminacy which is purportedly embodied in the central library is a sort of a neutral platform within a relatively fixed boundary: a spatial condition that rhetorically promises unlimited potential but, in reality, stabilizes relationships and allows at most variability of activities within the given emptiness.

Indeterminacy consists ultimately not within a given space reserved for flexible adaptation but in the relationship and reciprocity itself around which different spaces of atmosphere, program and modes of conduct collide and gather. To intensify performative suspension, intermediate conditions are required between library and gallery—spaces where books and exhibitions intersect; zones where quiet conversation is permissible; moments when display infiltrates reading; instances where furniture extends partially across boundaries. Here, programmatic borders remain perceptibly present yet are not absolute. Under these conditions, indeterminacy becomes performative as thresholds cease to function as mere passage devices and instead demand judgment for the nature of a setting, a situation that may take place in it and the mode of conduct. This type of indeterminacy embodies performative suspension, if the type of indeterminacy predicated upon emptiness of a given space ends up becoming a neutral platform. Such type of determinacy always leads us to revisit and refresh simultaneously what we have been doing habitually. It is also ethical and public in that such indeterminacy involves imagination on new mode of conducts and in extension a new experiment of human relationship.

Shin Design Lab Campus embodies flexibility, too. Constant is the height throughout the building, which is standardized at 4.9 meters. This dimension allows each floor to function either as a single volume or to be subdivided into two levels. The building can also be segmented into independent units, providing economic flexibility—facilitating lease, sale, or programmatic transformation in response to shifting conditions. For an architect who is simultaneously a business operator and community organizer of various cultural activities, this represents a prudent strategy. Interesting is the fact that the constant height appears as a condition to play with any future adaptations. It suggests an attempt to avoid setting a hierarchical articulation of space to remain universal. This gives rise a curious tension between the space and the program to be introduced. If the building shifts to a residence, the hierarchical ordering of living room, bedroom, corridor, dressing room, bathroom, and hobby room is challenged. Spatial uniformity comes to be matched with individual elements of the program, generating moments of surprises such as a bathroom that is probably too big and high, a room that is given an excessive volume, a corridor which is not a passageway but something closer to a distinctive room and so forth. It is a productive mis-match between the space and the program. The deterministic reciprocity between space and program is loosened. In doing so, architecture opens the possibility for unforeseen configurations of life.

Of course, such possibility exceeds the architect's intention. Programs may emerge unpredictably. If housing were introduced, how might the 4.9-meter height be inhabited? If a theater expanded, might the volume be subdivided differently? If converted into a kindergarten, perhaps the height would generate three tiers rather than two. Within the pre-existing spatial framework—already determined in width, height, and proportion—conflict, compromise, and potentially creative synthesis between space and program may unfold. The building thus condenses the possibility of productive misalignment, sustaining identity while accommodating temporal transformation. Over time, historical layering may render such moments visible, giving rise to what David Leatherbarrow called "internal symbol" of architecture, not the one imposed from the outside.

Amid the process of programmatic adaptation in the constant spatial framework, another constant element remains firmly determined: the courtyard. Its dimensions are fixed; its presence as center is unmistakable. Whatever transformations occur at the peripheral building blocks, each spatial alteration must take a position in relation to this undeniable center. To face it, to turn away from it, or to pass through it—each is already an ethical stance. The courtyard therefore operates not merely as a geometric center but as a shared reference. It calls every room into making a relation with a common world. In this sense, it is not an instrument of authority but a device of ethical conditioning. *Shin Design Lab Campus* conjoining the constant spatial framework embedded with potential adaptations and the courtyard situates any future transformation to be oscillating between totalizing centralization and fragmentary autonomy. Put differently, the building proposes a common ground without enforcing conformity.

3. Terrain and Human Settlement

Gotjawal, a pristine forest of Jeju island, does not readily accommodate human settlements. Its uneven basaltic terrain, moisture-laden soil, and densely entangled vegetation resist dryness, horizontality and spaciousness. *The Dwelling in Gotjawal* by Kim-O Architects begins precisely from these dualistic conditions: pristine yet unsuitable for dwelling.

The Dwelling in Gotjawal first levels the ground, establishing an artificial, raised, flattened platform upon which the building is to be placed. This act is not an erasure of nature but the very first step to secure conditions suitable for human settlement. Nature is not romanticized here, as did, for instance, Frank Lloyd Wright with his notion of organic architecture. *The Dwelling in Gotjawal* accepts the tragic reality that nature is dualistic. It presents conditions to work against, as well as to work with. This reality is ultimately concerned with the duality of the human being: man is part of nature yet distinctive from it simultaneously. Against roughness of nature, *the Dwelling in Gotjawal* posits flatness; against humidity, dryness; against density, openness. Articulating these qualitative oppositions characterize the first tragic and heroic intervention of architecture.

Yet the building does not freeze this contrast into unmitigated sharp opposition. Flatness and ruggedness, dryness and moisture, openness and density do not collide. Instead, a series of intermediate states mediate between these extremes. From the controlled interior floor, one moves to a wooden deck, then to basalt-paved ground, and finally to the raw terrain and thick forest density beyond. The sequence unfolds as a gradual transition rather than a confrontation and rupture. In other words, this concatenation of qualitative differences forms a spectrum from the civilized to the primitive, and vice-versa. The fully regulated horizontal plane gradually yields to less refined surfaces; the artificial slowly permeates the texture of the natural. Openness does not abruptly confront density. Instead, buffered layers intervene, allowing perception to shift progressively. The house acknowledges and establishes a dichotomy, yet it modulates or thickens the interval between them with multiple layers, thereby tempering extremes.

The curved roof that hovers above the platform is practical and symbolic. The planar floor and the gently flowing curved roof above stand in contrast while forming a unified spatial field. Thanks to the extended eaves, rain and wind are buffered. The eaves cast deep shadows along the perimeter, and the shaded threshold is enclosed in glass. The resulting space is something like a 'modern cave' joining protection and openness, and shade and luminosity. The combination of these oppositional conditions is crucial for the quiet and peaceful experience of gazing outward. While avoiding becoming an excessive exposure, protected openness operates as a place for a calibrated gaze.

The Dwelling in Gotjawal neither conquers nature nor dissolves into it. The building does not domesticate nature, nor does it merge indistinguishably with it. Instead, it stages a mode of inhabitation that holds distinction and reciprocity in a productive tension, negating any fairy-tale like romanticized union with nature. It embodies a state of separation without isolation, connection without fusion, sustaining differences while organizing connections. Ruggedness and flatness, moisture and dryness, density and openness do not negate one another. Through gradual transition, they co-exist, and human inhabitation stabilizes itself. Within this tension, dwelling finds its place. Nature emerges on account of the modern cave, yet is held at a measured distance—neither mastered nor abandoned. In doing so, *the Dwelling in Gotjawal* sustains a calibrated belonging.

Veke by A-Root Architecture works with Jeju island's volcanic terrain. Instead of designing the work as one singular volume, it is divided into modest individual pavilions connected by a linear corridor. The pavilions do not confront one another across the corridor. Each pavilion occupies one side, while the opposite side opens toward the terrain. Enclosure alternates with release; shadow yields to brightness; compression gives way to expansion. The rhythm between these sets of opposition is carefully choreographed. Balance is achieved not through mirroring, but through alternating presence and withdrawal. What is achieved is a high level of balance, which could be called 'an asymmetrical symmetry,' or 'an imbalanced balance.'

The corridor is the operative device of this equilibrium. Functioning almost like a *rang* (廊) in a Chinese traditional garden, it extends the path along which different pavilions appear and recede. Against it, the terrain undulates—rising, dipping, thickening with vegetation. Indeed, the constancy of the floor and ceiling of the corridor is significant. It establishes a datum of measurement. The body moves securely along a continuous plane while the terrain fluctuates beside it. Architecture does not produce sectional drama internally. Rather, it remains flat and constant, likening it to an ethical decision to remain silent in a conversation. Instead, it frames the drama of the site, operating as the party against which the variables of the terrain are exposed and measured. The steady platform and the ceiling render visible what might otherwise remain mute background.

A comparison with modern spatial strategies clarifies further this tactic of constancy and variation. Adolf Loos varied floor levels while maintaining ceiling constant, introducing sectional shifts within architecture itself. In contrast, Richard Neutra maintained the level of the floor constant while modulating ceiling heights, allowing spatial tension to be produced for the changes above. In both cases, variation was generated architecturally. In *Veke*, by contrast, both floor and ceiling remain constant. Sectional variation is transferred outward to the terrain. Architecture becomes the stabilizing reference against which the land's irregularity is perceived. The effect of the tactic between the constancy of the artificial datum and the variation of terrain is most intensely observed at the final pavilion. Here, the terrain is dramatically depressed and fluctuating. The pavilion appears as hovering in the air. While the pavilion opens toward light and air, the terrain beneath contains a grotto-like space—low, compressed, inward. Surprising is the fact that the dramatic terrain under and around the final pavilion was shaped through an intentional excavation. What appears natural is indeed artificial. It is a simulation of the natural. Why was the simulation of the natural terrain necessary? Is it a fake or does it have a different sense that can be justified? Simulation becomes necessary when original conditions have been broken. If the terrain had remained intact as lived condition, it could have been most likely undulating terrains with ups and downs. This will be particularly the case in Jeju, a volcanic island. Then, no simulation of the natural would be required. The intentional excavation thus signals an absence: a terrain that has long been leveled, optimized, and subordinated. This absence can be generalized further into the broader context of Korea. For decades, in the midst of operating compressed modernization, terrain has been considered an obstacle and flattened for frictionless designs and constructions. Hills were cut, valleys filled, surfaces paved.

On one hand, the simulation of terrain may be considered unnatural, confounding natural and unnatural. On the other hand, it is also an act with a historical significance. It indicates the extent to which terrain has been marginalized in everyday building practices. *Veke* acknowledges this condition and works within it. Through asymmetrical symmetry, it composes a measured equilibrium in which architecture and terrain remain distinct yet interdependent. The terrain, long treated as obstacle, returns as theme. Architecture does not relinquish control, yet neither does it overwhelm. It stabilizes, frames, and recalibrates—allowing terrain, once suppressed beneath relentless development logic, to re-emerge as an indispensable party that deserves to be present.

4. The Sublime and "The Poem of the Right Angle"

The East Sea of the Korean peninsula is often described as overwhelming in scale and force. Unlike the comparatively calmer waters in the southern and western part of the peninsular, the East Sea appears elevated above the shoreline and the ground on which one stands. Its depth is immeasurable; its wind, relentless; its horizon, oppressive in its vastness. The presence of the sea is not merely scenic but potentially destabilizing. It is a site of the sublime. For Immanuel Kant, unlike beauty, the sublime arises from confrontation with magnitude and power that exceeds sensory comprehension. Yet such an encounter requires a crucial condition: distance. The subject must stand at a secure remove from danger in order to experience the overwhelming force of nature as sublime rather than terrifying. Sublimity depends upon mediation of distance. If one imagines an architecture of the sublime that acknowledges magnitude of nature, yet secures the distance of safety, what would it look like then?

Starscape by Zitta can be read as an architectural apparatus that constructs precisely such mediation. The project frames a fragment of the vast spectacle rather than exposing it in its entirety. Individual volumes are arranged around a centrally positioned courtyard that opens toward the sea. This courtyard is not raw terrain but an artificial platform—a deliberately leveled and stabilized ground from which the sea can be encountered. It functions as a safe spot, a constructed vantage point that transforms the overwhelming horizon into a tamed spectacle.

The configuration of the platform is carefully articulated to enhance its role as a vantage point. It oscillates between enclosure and openness. It is both open and protected. One building mass is lifted on pilotis and positioned so as to partially shield the courtyard, still opening a window through which the turbulent sea comes to visibility. The projecting volume operates as a windbreaking device, too. The relentless gusts are softened. Consequently, the full force of the horizon combined with violent wind and sound is modulated before entering the courtyard. The project does not deny the sea's sublimity; it calibrates it. Awe is admitted, but fear is tempered.

The projected volume is supported by evenly spaced vertical piers. The number of the piers exceeds structural rationality, being intentionally redundant. The firm, repetitive vertical supports stand against the expansive horizontality of the artificial platform and the sea beyond. The windy fluctuating movement of the sea is resolutely confronted by the unmoving still enduring silence of the piers. The contrast recalls Le Corbusier's "poem of the right angle": vertical stability artificially constructed against horizontal infinity given as part of *physis*. White surfaces of the building intensify the distinction between the artificial and the natural, setting the human creation in sharp relief against the blue sea, as well as the sky. The engagement with nature here does not rely on mimicry but on deliberate contrast. Nature and architecture mutually define one another precisely because of their unmitigated opposition.

If the central courtyard with a pool establish itself as a strong center, the peripheral building blocks occupy the corners, projecting outward at every possible angle toward the sea and the horizon. In the units inside the building blocks, the advantage of the sitting at corners is maximized, inviting dramatic views towards the sea and the horizon into the heart of the interior. Here, the sea is not fixed as a singular frontal image but fractured and reassembled through oblique views. The infinity pool between interior and ocean operates as a horizontal mediator—neither fully merging with the sea nor entirely separating from it. It sustains a delicate interval.

The project thus stages a spatial dialectic between centrifugal and centripetal forces, between infinity and enclosure. The center gathers; the corners extend. Circulation reinforces this mediation. Elongated bridges and terraces delay immediate retreat into privacy, exposing the hotel guests to wind, light, and sky and exposing them to the gazes of the others. These paths function as devices of temporal extension. The inhabitant becomes part of the composition rather than a detached spectator.

One curious aspect of *Starscape* is the relationship between figure and ground. Here it remains unstable. The white masses of the building blocks do not permanently dominate the scene; at times, the sea and sky advance forward visually while the building recedes into background. Light and shadow further complicate any hierarchy that may exist. The building becomes a screen upon which the rhythms of nature are inscribed. Architecture does not disappear into nature, yet neither does it assert absolute dominance. Instead, fixing its status as an object of attention and as a background is always delayed.

This calibrated mediation that suits Kantian characterization of the sublime raises a critical question. If the sublime requires distance and safety, does it not mean that the magnitude of nature needs to be aesthetically manipulated? Extending this to architecture, does architecture aspiring to work with the sublime presence of nature risk aestheticizing what is overwhelming? By transforming boundless magnitude into a framed, inhabitable scene, does *Starscape* neutralize the threat that once defined sublimity? Is the sea encountered as existential force, or as a comfortably consumable spectacle? Whether *Starscape* constitutes a refined aesthetic domestication of natural power remains an open question. One thing seems clear. *Starscape* neither dissolves into romantic union with nature nor asserts heroic mastery over it. It keeps a tension alive between the infinite power of nature and artificial creation in reference to it.

5. Everyday Banality and Creative Collage

The trajectory of urban dwelling in Korea has moved rapidly from single-family houses to multi-family dwellings and ultimately to large apartment complexes. While this trajectory may appear as a clean linear history of replacement, it is equally a history of fragmentary co-existence and accumulation, in which earlier versions of houses such as single family houses still persists within the evolving urban fabric. *Painter N's House* by A.CO.LAB rediscovers the significance of what still survives amid the history of replacement and, through its careful reconfiguration, suggests—albeit modestly—a new direction in the trajectory of urban dwelling.

The project renovates a mundane brick masonry single-family house built on a sloped site during the 1980s—a speculative house designed and constructed by profit-seeking nameless local developers. It was closer to a product than to a piece of architecture, as it seized an economic opportunity out of an exponential increase in the population of Seoul and the ensuing voluminous demand for housing, or any housing. Rather than demolishing this non-elite housing type, however, A.CO.LAB undertakes its creative remodeling. Portions of the existing exterior walls are preserved, while others are boldly cut away. By removing sections of the façade, a terrace is secured on the first floor, and the distant mountain view—previously blocked by the wall—re-emerges on the second floor. Within the existing masonry shell, a timber structure is inserted. The upper edge of the original wall becomes a datum line, above which the newly introduced wooden frame accommodates clerestory windows. The second floor is thus transformed into a studio space with generous volume and natural light, suitable for an artist's practice. Its height is carefully calibrated to avoid obstructing the view from the living room of the neighboring house behind. Masonry and timber, gravity and lightness—materials and forces of contrasting character are brought into a deliberate conjunction. The heaviness of masonry, seemingly drawn downward by gravity, meets the airiness of the timber structure that rises toward the sky. The craftwork that interweaves what is given and what is newly introduced, lending the whole project the quality of a bricolage, is likewise evident in the dualistic fabrication of details. The downspout-column, which serves simultaneously as structural support and rainwater drainage, exemplifies this ethos. In the Korean climate, the gutter is indispensable; rather than concealing it—as would be the case in most elitist architecture—the design exposes its functional necessity.

This project neither treats the given mundane building with reverential preservation nor dismisses it as a structure devoid of value. Even if the existing fabric originated as a modest product of economic necessity, the traces accumulated over time—touches, scratches, abrasion, polish, and deformation—testify to the lived reality of dwelling. These marks are not incidental damage but inscriptions of habitation, carrying within them a form of meaning grounded in the authenticity of inhabitation. The project takes these traces as its point of departure and subjects them to further transformation.

Interventions operate through cutting, hollowing, inserting, and grafting. Rather than replacing the existing structure, the design works through it, gradually establishing a new and subtle order within the given fabric. This order reveals and activates latent possibilities embedded in the site itself. A particularly telling instance is the distant mountain view that had been entirely erased by the protruding wall of the old house. By removing and reconfiguring portions of the existing mass, the project restores this horizon, allowing the landscape to re-enter the spatial experience of the house. At the same time, the intervention recalibrates the building's relationship to the surrounding houses that have accumulated around the site, negotiating proximity, height, and orientation with a quiet precision.

Seen in a broader urban context, this strategy acquires a particular significance. Seoul's residential architecture has largely been shaped by a condensed and accelerated modernization, driven by the logics of standardization, automation, and repetition. In such a context, the patient discovery of a site's specific constraints and potentials has rarely been allowed to guide architectural production. Yet this house suggests an alternative trajectory. Without rejecting the realities of modern production, it demonstrates how architectural making might still operate as *poiesis* rather than *mere production*—an interpretive and transformative engagement with what is already there.

In this sense, the order embodied in this project reveals, belatedly, a path that residential architecture might once have taken under different historical conditions. By retrieving what had been neglected or discarded, the project does more than transform an existing structure; it reopens a possibility within the architectural imagination, redirecting the temporal narrative of dwelling toward a trajectory that had long remained latent.

Be-Fore by A.CO.LAB regenerates the former Siheung sewage treatment facility—once an invisible infrastructure buried beneath the expanding city. During the decades of compressed modernization and rapid urbanization, water in particular was reduced to an object of consumption, contamination, and technical management. Vast underground systems were constructed to capture, purify, and discharge it—removing it from everyday experience. This applies not to water alone. Air was framed as a medium of ventilation, and light, as an instrumental parameter. *Be-Fore* reactivates one of those very infrastructures to expose such technological framing of nature and to re-present aspects of nature that had long been disregarded or forgotten.

The regenerated ruin reverses this technological framing. Transforming the sequential logic of purification into a new spatial order of navigation—composed of the Circle Stair, Sunken Path, Timber Atrium, Tower, and Half Tank—the project allows light, water, wind, and the ecological processes that interweave them to re-emerge. A vertically inserted cupola above the distribution basin establishes a tower of light where none previously existed. Light descends to the cave-like underground cube. What once contained sludge becomes a setting where sensory phenomena of light, wind and water unfold and the ecology of restorative vitality of life becomes perceptible.

The transformed ruin thus operates as a reflective device. By opening the sealed geometries of the purification tanks to the sky, wind, and water, the project allows suppressed dimensions of nature to reappear within the very structures that once regulated them. What had functioned as an apparatus of control becomes a setting in which the multiple states of water—and the atmospheric forces surrounding it—can once again unfold. In this sense, the project enacts a purification of our prejudiced apprehension of water. Yet this purification carries another meaning as well: it is also a historical purification. Through this transformation, the relationship between human settlement and the natural elements is reconsidered. The infrastructures of modern urbanization—once instruments of concealment and control—are reactivated as settings through which the historical reduction of nature may be reconsidered and reoriented toward a more ecological recalibration.

Conclusion: Architecture and Contemporary Conditions of Everyday Life

The projects discussed above accommodate diverse programs and span both new construction and regeneration. They are also dispersed in different parts of Korea. Yet, they are collectively indicators of the conditions of everyday life. Put differently, they could be seen as less isolated objects than fragments of shared conditions of life. Then what do they reveal about everyday life in contemporary Korea? Above all, many of the works reveal a persistent ambivalence toward the city. They exhibit a pronounced introversion. Rather than actively projecting themselves into the street, they withdraw behind walls, elevated courtyards, filtered façades, and carefully framed horizons. The variegated spectrum between openness and closure characteristic of traditional Korean spatial configuration—wall, courtyard, main hall, veranda—gives way to higher boundaries and more selective apertures.

Neutrality is another characteristic evident in some of the projects. Surfaces follow standardized process of manufacturing; façades avoid overt symbolism; and expression is restrained. Space itself remains indeterminant for the accommodation of flexible events. This neutrality ranging from the treatment of the surface to the operation of a space is symptomatic of the era. It is an era saturated with meaning, in which restraint can become an ethical stance. It is also an era in which symbols are rapidly politicized and architectural intention is frequently subjected to ideological framing. Minimizing overt expression may constitute a defensive tactic. By withholding excessive signification, architecture avoids immediate appropriation.

Behind this introversion and neutrality lies a deeper context, which regards the nature of the shared urban settings. If the street does not operate as a festive or agonistic public realm—if it is regulated more by legal frameworks and safety protocols than by civic communality—then architecture alone cannot generate vibrant publicness. In this situation, architecture risks remaining a carefully composed refuge within an otherwise desolate urban field. Thus, while individual buildings increasingly achieve refinement, the broader urban setting often remains austere. One might ask whether architecture has become a site of consolation precisely because the city is found barren. Or perhaps these works represent the early stages of a more profound historical reorientation—one in which architecture, no longer driven by quantitative expansion, assumes the task of playing with the city to secure a spectrum from the domestic interiority to the communal common ground, and vice-versa.

Some works demonstrate already a notable historical shift. Even when working with the crude residues of compressed process of modernization—anonymous housing types, obsolete infrastructures, industrial shells—they adopt a new attitude toward what is given. Rather than erasing inherited structures as mere byproducts of accelerated growth, they interpret their spatial capacities and limitations. Through selective acceptance, bold subtraction, and strategic insertion, they implement latent possibilities out of what was once considered so banal.

Nature is also rediscovered in its magnitude and power. This shift signals a reconsideration of both the role of architecture in Korea and the themes with which it must engage. During the decades of compressed modernization, building largely operated as an instrument of production, within which terrain, climate, and the presence of nature as a source of the sublime were frequently suppressed or neutralized in the pursuit of efficiency and speed. The works discussed here recover what had long been neglected. Rather than treating nature as an obstacle to be overcome or scenery to be romanticized, they reintroduce terrain, atmosphere, and the sublime presence of the landscape as operative architectural themes. In doing so, they point toward a renewed disciplinary task: architecture not merely as a device for the production of space, but as a reflective practice that recalibrates the relation between human settlement and the order and effects of nature.

What might have emerged had Korea's modernization unfolded more slowly—had architecture been granted more time for reflection—appears belatedly in these projects. It is as though alternative trajectories, long deferred, begin to reassert themselves, suggesting a quieter transformation of the urban field. Whether the city itself will evolve to support and augment vibrancy of human life remains uncertain. Yet within these works one can discern the emergence of different trajectories. They reclaim lost time, reinterpret what is given to reopen possibilities once disregarded, and cautiously participate in the collective reconstruction of a shared world.

The rise of the 'Korean Cool' in Architecture

A guide for understanding the younger generation of Korean architects

Gibson Rhie, architect / VP ARCASIA zone C

Gibson Rhie is an architect and author with more than 30 years of experience in Architectural Design. Gibson is the Vice President of ARCASIA - a professional body of architects in ASIA with 24 member countries. His role as the Zone C Vice President covers Eastern part of ASIA. As the practicing architect, he is focusing on promoting architecture with growing awareness and commitment to 17 SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) set up by the United Nations in 2015. He has been a passionate supporter of International Collaboration in practice and academia. He is the founder and managing principal of a boutique architecture office -Studio 5- that focuses on Design and Project Management helping international clients to pursue project opportunities and design excellence in Asia. Gibson is a LEED AP and an ardent supporter of sustainable development. He is frequently invited by many institutes from Denmark to Sri Lanka to speak at architects' conferences and urban design forums. Gibson participated in many design forums, which aims to bring awareness of the Power of Design. Gibson wrote 3 books in Architectural theory and history.

A. Korean cultural scene at its height

If you look at South Korea through a screen these days, it is the coolest place on Earth. These days there are so many compelling cases that captures global attention to 'Things from Korea'. It is the dark portrayal of social ambivalence in the *Parasite* winning the Oscar; it is the candy-colored existentialism of *Squid Game* dominating Netflix; it is the "Demon Hunters" of K-pop leaping across digital stages with supernatural precision.

Figure 1: a poster of K-pop demon hunters, Netflix, 2025

South Korea seems to achieve a global cultural takeover. However, the Nation had been considered a cultural 'hermit kingdom' until South Korean singer/ songwriter Psy released "Gangnam style" in 2012, which became one of the most watched music videos of all time (it had 5 billion views in the You tube). The world has been watching Korean K-pop and movie's rise ever since.

Figure 2: Gangnam style music video clip from Psy, 2012

As American writer Euny Hong (she came from a Korean immigrant family) described in her book *"The Birth of Korean Cool: how one nation is conquering the world through pop culture (2014)"*[1] Korea's "Soft Power" is now becoming its most visible export along with high-tech semiconductor chips and automobiles.

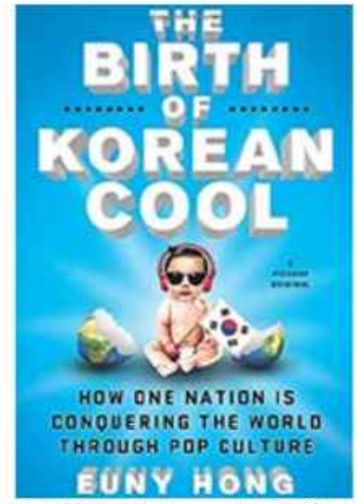


Figure 3: Euny Hong's highly energetic book - The Birth of Korean Cool: how one nation is conquering the world through pop culture, Picador, 2014

1. Hong, Euny (2014). *The Birth of Korean Cool: How One Nation is Conquering the World through Pop Culture. Picador*

However, there is a marked contrast in the Korean cultural scene. The highly successful Korean movies, dramas and K-pop that generated big global fans who are excited about the actors, singers such as boy band BTS but there is much less recognition towards Korean architecture. One of the important cultural genre – architecture is often considered silent or eclipsed by the other vibrant cultural scene. Why architecture in South Korea that contributed heavily to achieve "economic miracle of South Korea" that built cities that provided workplace and housing for the masses in the days of "Compressed Modernity" through 1980s and 1990s - as professor Jin Baek described in his essay in this magazine - now lackluster?

We may find the clue that architecture once performed well under the state-led development period. And the built environment functioned well as an operative instrument for the quantitative pursuit of industrialization and urbanization. This was Korea's "Industrial 70s and 80s," a period where speed and efficiency erased the nuances of place. As a result of this, Korean architecture has been criticized as the culprit of the cookie cutter buildings.

Figure 4: Spice Girls became the high-energy icons of Cool Britannia

With the advent of Korean culture phenomenon, someone can find similarity in Britain's "Cool Britannia" in the 1990s, which saw a surge of cultural optimism and a rebranding of national identity in Britain after the tumultuous 1980s' social unrest and economic hardship. However, contemporary South Korea underwent a profound social, economic and cultural change in modern times. As described by Euny Hong in her book *'The Birth of Korean Cool'*, the nation has successfully transformed their "*Han*, 恨" -collective sorrow that caused from the sufferings of the Korean people from invasion and oppression which made a deep and long-lasting resentment in the mind of Koreans, which can be found in the Traditional art that include songs and dances.
If *Han*—a collective sense of sorrow and repressed resentment—was the baseline of the Korean soul. There is something that made a stark contrast to *Han*. The opposite one that makes a counterbalance to *Han* is *Heung, which is a spontaneous, infectious energy that made a state of collective euphoria, buoyance and joy*. In the late 1990s, the nation pivoted. Koreans took that *Han* and channeled it into "*Heung*, 興 "—a state that creates charisma and fun in art forms. Many areas of Korean culture repeat this transformation from *Han* to *Heung* in various ways through their intensive effort.
With this fundamental shift, Korean cultural phenomenon of "*Hallyu*, 한류, 韓流 (Korean wave) came to the global stage throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, This global success is built on a profound psychological shift: the transition from "*Han* 恨 " to "*Heung* 興." But, there is one more essential thing to kick start the Korean culture to the next level.

B. Architecture is the only field still suffers from foot biding that prevents growth

There is a final "secret ingredient" to Korean wave's success story: abolition of censorship. It was widespread in Korea until it was finally abolished in 1990s. There was a landmark ruling from the Constitutional court of Korea which declared film censorship 'unconstitutional' on October 4th, 1996. After this ruling, Korean government's cultural policy quickly transformed "support but not interfere" the creativity. Suddenly, the "vocal cords" of the nation were set free. Directors and song writers were no longer struggling to evade censorship by civil servants from the relevant ministry; they were set free to be messy and provocative. Creativity flourished and as a natural extension of this unbound creativity, investment of long-term and large scale followed. That witnessed a lot of successful movie directors, actors and actresses who won so many recognitions emerged after abolition.

Yet, in this grand stage of cultural freedom, someone forgot to bring the keys for the architects. I argue Korean architects still suffer from the unfavorable condition that other genres of Korean artists and movie makers no longer consider it as obstacles. The major vehicle to block unconstrained and freewheeling architecture comes with good intentions. The architectural reviews from the local, regional and national government. The review committee's members are comprised with experts of design, engineering and public sector workers who has stellar CVs. The "limbs" of the nation's young architects remained tied in a web of local and governmental review boards as well as complex design guidelines. Architecture became the "last backwater," a final discipline still struggling to move from the industrial "Han" of the past to the creative "*Heung*" of the future.

C. The patronage paradox

To understand why Korean movies and song writing win awards while Korean buildings just play it safe and get less recognition. To decode the systemic silence of Korean architecture, we must look at the "patronage gap or support gap." Every cultural revolution needs its "Dealer in Danger." In London of the 1990s, that art dealer was Charles Saatchi. He didn't just buy art; he bought *attention*. The famed Young British Artists (YBAs) weren't born in the hallowed halls of traditional galleries; they were born in a warehouse in southeast London during an exhibition in 1988 called *Freeze*. Saatchi saw something in young artist Damien Hirst, who only had passion but no career. Damien and his band of misfits had something that the British art establishment missed: they had *energy*. When Saatchi funded Hirst's shark in a tank of formaldehyde, he wasn't just purchasing a dead fish. He was issuing a "Certificate of Audacity." He signaled to the global market that British creativity was allowed to be shocking, expensive, and profoundly weird.

Figure 5: 'The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living'- A shark in a tank of formaldehyde, Damien Hirst, 1991

In Korea, the "Saatchis" appeared in film and music entertainment—moguls who funded the gritty and the weird. These "Moguls" at Movie industry and Entertainment are the spiritual cousins of Saatchi. They realized early on that if you give a "young but no career" director like Bong Joon-ho enough room to be "weird," he may eventually bring back an Oscar along with tons of revenue. They understood that *Han* (the sorrow of the repressed) could be converted into *Heung* (the joy of the liberated) only if the artist was allowed to break the rules.
But in the world of Korean architecture, the "Saatchis" are missing. Instead, there is the mantra of "when it comes to architecture always play it safer then you will be fine". It is a Paradox. When a major Korean conglomerate or a local government decides they want a "cool" building, they don't look for the local "Damien Hirst" of architecture. They don't look for the Young Korean Architects (YKAs) who are currently operating out of small studios in Seoul, Busan or Jeju. Instead, they go "Global Shopping." They treat architecture like a luxury handbag—they want the "Hermès" or "Louis Vuitton" label of a European or American "Starchitect."

Figure 6: Saatchi gallery in London

The young Korean architect is trapped: too "small or local" for big corporate commissions, too "inexperienced" for important government competitions and too "crazy" for local review boards. They are the F-1 race car drivers being asked to drive in a school zone complying with every small details of speed guideline. While a Korean director can show a blood-soaked scene of social rebellion, a young architect sitting before a District Design Review Committee (DRC) is often fighting for the right to experiment with a roof form which does not follow the safer recommendation or guideline from the committee or use a shade of color that isn't "too depressing." This is the "Beige Mandate"—the idea that a building's primary job is to not "offend" the status quo. Most of the comments from the review encourage something safe, harmonious, and blends into both urban and natural environments.

Figure 7: a poster for movie 'the Fountainhead', 1949 original author Ayn Rand (1905–1982): In the Fountainhead, the anti–protagonist Ellsworth Toohey persuade the architect Howard Roark that "Nothing has ever been invented by one man in Architecture. The proper creative process is a slow, gradual, anonymous, collective one, in which each man collaborates with all the others and subordinates himself to the standard of the majority." And the protagonist refuses to succumb to Collectivism of the masses.

We have seen beautiful, floating roofs hilariously negotiated by redundant pillars because a bureaucrat or professor in structural safety committee "didn't like the look or didn't believe safety of it." In the DRC, *visual* anxiety has priority over *artistic* experiments. This is why architecture is still "backwater": Korean government stopped censoring movie Parasite, but they never stopped censoring the roofline with the intention of achieving 'maximum benefits for the greatest number of people'.

D. Emerging YKAs (Young Korean Architects)

As Britain had Young British Artists (YBAs) who emerged from the 1980s and dominated the global art scene for the last 30 years, Korea has YKAs. With the rise of Hallyu, there is a new generation of Koreans growing with self-awareness or self-esteem that 'things Korean is Cool'. Things once their predecessors consider ugly, quirky and behind therefore has no value of preserving, they view this something interesting and important. Architecture is not an exception. In this context, a new generation of architects is emerging. They do not have the Euro or American centric tendencies of their predecessors and they do not follow dogmas of the past. These young architects want to experiment with what they think important or they just follow what they like. This common trait can be found among the seven team of architects presented by Korea Institute of Registered Architects (KIRA) for this issue. In an era that architects no longer seek to build the fastest or the largest, which was the norm of the state-led development. Instead, these "Young Korean Architects" (YKAs) who treat the remnants of 'compressed modernity' as their fertile playground or workplace in their pursuit of their own architectural expression

E. The 7 demon hunters of Korean Architecture

Against this backdrop, the seven teams presented by KIRA are just a small fraction of creative Young Korean Architects in the country. As their works were analyzed by Professor Jin Baek in his essay, I attempted to see their works with a few tweaks using K pop satire. Although they practice architecture in different cities and regions all over South Korea, they realized that they are exposed in a totally different economic and social environment in a stark contrast their predecessors enjoyed during 1980s and 90s building boom. From early on they did not have the luxury of enjoying large scale commissions, they had to focus on creating projects such as small scale renovations, curating exhibition and interior installations. Therefore, they are not just designers in a traditional sense. To use the K-pop analogy from the popular Netflix hit animation – K pop demon hunters - they are like the demon hunters, who continually fight the market force to survive or wage a fierce battle against institutional barriers to restrain them in a cage to keep them harmonious and blend-in. Although they had to continue their daily struggle to survive and try to keep afloat in architectural design. They gradually contributed to transforming the city where they practice by using their design skills and knowledge as a weapon to bring positive change. In doing so the navigating treacherous paths in architecture, they somehow share the efforts and camaraderie with other Korean artists collectively change the architecture to move from *Han* to *Heung*.

I would like to group these 7 architects into 3 categories.

1. The Introverts (Architecture Label 1458 & Shin Design Lab): Since the outside world is a barren wasteland, they have built their own"Secret Gardens." By blocking the barren city with massive walls or program components, they've created private oasis where creativity is finally gain individual freedom and establish a shelter from the harsh environment.
2. The Remixers (ODETO.A & A.CO.LAB): They treat space or programs like a musical score to be remixed to achieve different tonality. In projects like the *Art Archives*, ODETO. A uses light and height to create "Performative Indeterminacy." They didn't ask for permission to make the space interesting; they *engineered* it through the math of light. In the Painter N's house, A.CO LAB tried to do a renovation of a mundane house but transformed into a studio space with generous volume and natural light, suitable for an artist's practice. Its height is carefully calibrated to avoid obstructing the view from the living room of the neighboring house behind. In this house, materials and forces of contrasting character are brought into a deliberate conjunction. The heaviness of masonry, seemingly drawn downward by gravity, meets the airiness of the timber structure that rises toward the sky. The bricolage of the space and material choice completes the musical drama.
3. The freewheeling Fugitives (Kim-O, A-Root, & Zitta): When the "Review Board Republic" becomes too harsh, they find refuge at the far corners of the country either in a sub-tropical Jeju island or a port city of Busan. Whether it's the "Modern Cave" in the Jeju forest or the stark "Poem of the Right Angle" facing the East Sea, where you have to show you are capable of designing and building something meaningful and transcends the ordinary. And meeting the expectations of clients and users who expect otherworldly. These teams proved that you can still survive if you leave beyond the city limits, and achieving the Sublime is still possible.

V. Conclusion: The Final Act

The "Korean Cool" will never be complete until Korean buildings are as daring and innovative as Korean movies. Korean architects have the talent. YKAs have *the spirit to make people feel joyful and energetic*. We just need to stop treating architects like civil servants and start treating them like the brave "Demon Hunters" of the physical world.

For decades, during the era of "Compressed Modernity," architecture was a mechanical necessity. It was a tool for survival. We built "Match box Apartment" because we needed to house millions of people at lightning speed. In that era, it was a strategy for efficiency. It was the architectural embodiment of *Han*—the quiet endurance of a people focused solely on building a future they couldn't yet inhabit.

But that future has arrived. Korea is no longer a nation in the "Industrial 70s and 80s." Korea is a nation in the "Digital 2020s." We have moved from the "Sorrow" of the factory line to the "Joy" of the creative stage. Yet, our physical streets still look like they are waiting for a factory shift to end.

This is the manifesto for the "Final Act": We must stop treating buildings as passive containers for life and start treating them as active participants in our culture. If the younger generation of Koreans—the ones who queue for hours for limited-edition sneakers and follow avant-garde designers on Instagram—are still content to live in mundane "Beige Boxes," then the Cultural change has failed.

The YKAs are the "Demon Hunters" of this new era. They are trying to exorcise the ghosts of the industrial past and replace them with the energy of the present. They are trying to prove that a house can be as dramatic as a K-Drama and a street can be as infectious in a good way as a K-Pop hook. But they cannot do it alone. They need a new kind of "support for Korean Cities"—who values the "Certificate of Audacity" more than the "Safety of the Standard." It is time to let the *Heung* hit the streets. It is time to stop the motto of "comply then you will not fail". The final act of the K-architecture isn't just about winning awards; it's about finally building a world that looks as daring but humanistic as we want to feel.

8 X 6

Facade

Architect Firm: Architecture Label 1458	
Principal Architect: CHOI Saebeol	
Design Team: KIM Eunhee, Jo Jeongeun	
Location: Busan, Korea	
Area: 144.85 square meters	
Completion Date: June 2022	
Photography: YOON Junhwan	

Commission

8 m × 6 m. This concise set of numbers, revealed directly in the project title, paradoxically represents both the limitations faced by urban housing and the architectural intention to overcome them. Although not an official term in the Building Act, "narrow housing" has become a widely recognized concept, offering a viable alternative for those who aspire to live in a detached house within the city despite high land prices. In Korea, housing has long been perceived more in terms of real estate investment value than the quality of living, resulting in apartment housing becoming the dominant residential model. However, apartment living inevitably entails various forms of stress. Experiencing fatigue from this way of life, the client couple purchased a narrow site of approximately 80m² (24 pyeong) in an urban area close to their workplaces and their children's schools, and approached us to design their home.

The Boundary Between City and Architecture

The clients identified sufficient daylight and the protection of privacy as their primary requirements. In a dense urban residential environment such as Busan, creating a comfortable living space requires careful consideration of the boundary where the city and architecture meet. At this boundary, we sought architectural devices capable of blocking external views while simultaneously drawing natural light into the interior. Rather than responding to the street through a simple alignment of windows, this condition was addressed through a formal operation in which the building mass is folded inward. Instead of opening directly toward the street, the mass is set back to form an exterior space, toward which large interior openings are oriented. This strategy secures a buffer zone that protects the interior from external views while providing ample daylight and a sense of openness inside. Custom-made large planters were placed within this exterior space to reinforce privacy and to generate everyday scenery within the urban context. This space does not remain a mere intermediate zone; instead, it extends continuously upward as a passage through which light and vegetation grow. Through this configuration, natural light penetrates deep into the interior, and planting forms a vertical spatial scene that runs through the entire building. These architectural operations simultaneously satisfy the conflicting conditions of daylight and privacy, and the process itself ultimately defines the building's façade composition and formal identity.

Street View

Front Facade

Front Facade Night View

Selection and Concentration

Narrowness implies the impossibility of accommodating everything, inevitably leading to a redefinition of priorities. Rather than forcing programs into a limited area, a vertical hierarchy was established based on the spatial characteristics of each function and the occupants' patterns of use. Following this hierarchy, programs are arranged sequentially from the ground floor upward. Public spaces shared by family members and guests are located on the lower levels, while private spaces for sleeping and studying are stacked above. This approach pursues efficiency of area while prioritizing the quality of space and modes of occupation.

Small but Rich

In narrow housing, an excessive focus on securing standard floor areas often results in monotonous spaces. By defining appropriate dimensions and composing spaces of varied character and scale, the experience of living can become far richer. In 8 × 6, a living room sunken 60 cm below the entrance level, a stair illuminated by light falling from a skylight, covered and uncovered outdoor spaces, a void transformed into a net playground, a rooftop, and spaces shaped by inclined walls coexist within a compact volume. These small yet diverse spatial scenes operate as devices that expand everyday life within the constraints of a narrow site, and we believe they will allow the clients' daily lives to become more layered and abundant.

Living Room

Dining & Kitchen

2nd Floor Terrace

Stairs

Stairs & Sunlight

Window Seat

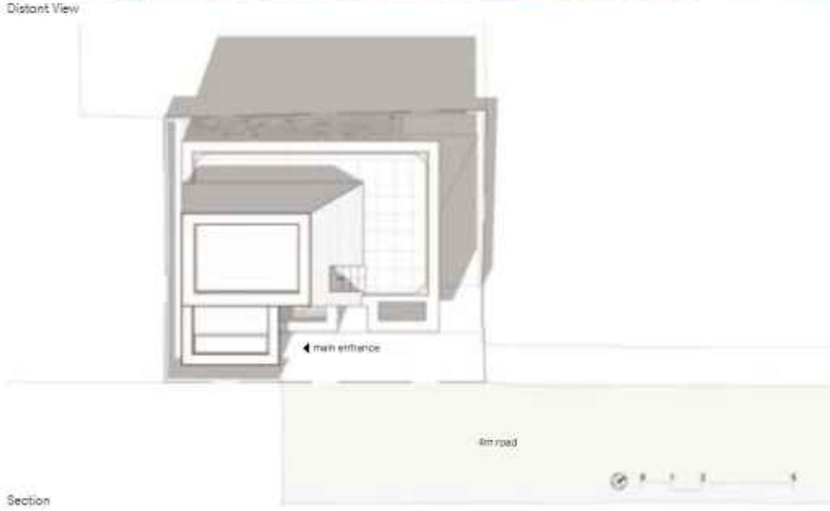
Family Room

Window Seat & 3rd Terrace

Family Room

Stairs & Sunlight

Distant View



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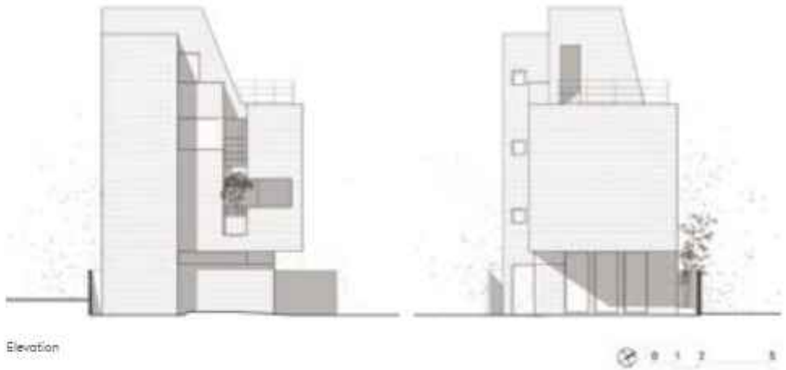

Elevation

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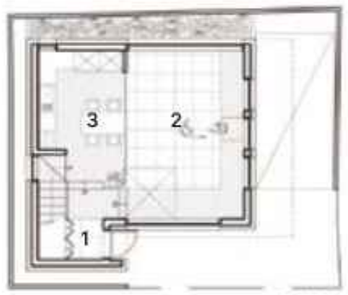
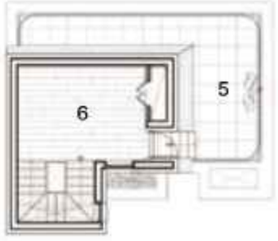


1F PLAN

2F PLAN

3F PLAN



4F PLAN

Floor Plan

SoYoYuGa

Drone View

Architect Firm:	Architecture Label 1458
Principal Architect:	CHOI Saebeol
Design Team:	KIM Eunhee, Jo Jeongeun
Location:	Yangsan, Korea
Area:	218.63 square meters
Completion Date:	October 2023
Photography:	KIM Myunggu

Commission

Most clients who approach us with the intention of starting a detached-house lifestyle still carry various prejudices and concerns about living in a single-family house. We believe it is the architect's responsibility to resolve these concerns through architectural means and to fully realize the spatial qualities unique to detached housing, thereby enriching and stabilizing the everyday life of its occupants.

The client of this project, who dreamed of leaving apartment living behind, presented two primary requirements: a strong organic relationship between interior and exterior spaces, and a living environment in which privacy is sufficiently protected, allowing for a calm and comfortable daily life.

Street View

Street View

Context

The site is located in Seodeul Village, a residential land development district in Jeungsan-ri, Mulgeum-eup, Yangsan-si, Gyeongsangnam-do. Most of the surrounding plots have already been developed, and the area has now formed a stable and established residential neighborhood.

However, as is typical of many Korean land development districts, while the site conditions are generally favorable for daylight and ventilation, they are relatively vulnerable in terms of privacy-one of the most critical factors in detached housing. The project site, in particular, is bounded by 8-meter-wide roads on two sides, making the issue of privacy from external views a key architectural challenge.

Drone View

Facade

An Inward-Opening House

The effectiveness of daylight and ventilation is closely related to the size and placement of openings, which in turn is directly connected to the issue of privacy. For this reason, securing daylight and ventilation-basic requirements of housing-must be addressed with particular care in urban detached houses.

Simply enlarging openings without regard for the surrounding context may bring in light and air, but it simultaneously demands constant defense against external views. This often results in the paradoxical condition of living behind curtains or blinds throughout the day, even in spaces designed for openness.

To address this contradiction, the house adopts the concept of an "inward-opening house," redirecting openness from the exterior toward the interior. The façades facing the surrounding roads are deliberately restrained, while the main living spaces are organized around an internal courtyard. This strategy allows ample daylight and ventilation while creating a living environment free from unwanted visual intrusion. The enclosed courtyard functions not merely as an outdoor space, but as the spatial core of the house-an intermediary that extends interior life outward.

Form Shaped by Conditions

The elongated east-west site configuration and the road conditions along the north and east edges played a decisive role in shaping the building's layout and massing. Openings were minimized along directions with high potential for privacy infringement, and the main entrance was deliberately bent and set back so that it is not directly perceived from the street. This creates a gradual spatial transition from the public exterior to the private interior.

A courtyard was placed along the southern edge of the site to secure distance from neighboring buildings, while a 1.8-meter-high screen wall blocks direct visual exchange. As a result, the courtyard is defined as an independent and protected living domain. The living room and kitchen are arranged in an L-shaped configuration facing this courtyard, maximizing contact with the outdoor space while reinforcing spatial continuity within the house.

Dining Area

Living Room

Living Room

The upper volume above the east-facing kitchen is partially projected outward to control direct sunlight and to form a semi-outdoor space with a depth of 2.4 meters. This space functions not only as a shading device but also as a buffer zone between house and courtyard, capable of accommodating diverse activities depending on weather and season.

Within the house, another layer of privacy is established through vertical separation. The first floor contains the family's daily living spaces and areas for receiving guests, while the second floor is reserved for the couple's private quarters, clearly distinguishing spaces according to the nature of inhabitation.

In addition, four skylights introduce natural light deep into the interior, allowing the seasonal and temporal changes perceived in the courtyard to continue indoors. The movement of light and shadow throughout the day constantly transforms the atmosphere of the spaces, enabling residents to engage sensorially with nature as part of everyday life.

Terrace & Courtyard

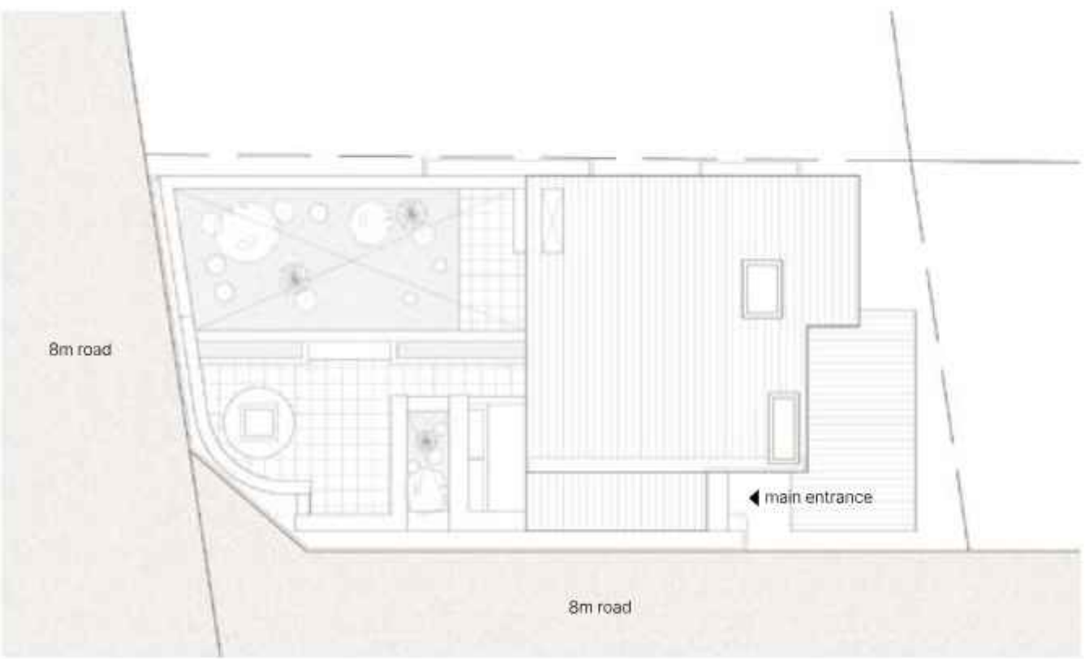
Courtyard

Terrace & Courtyard

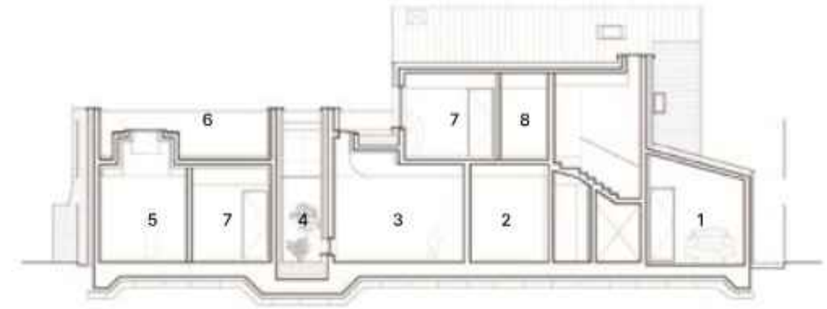
Stairs

Master Bedroom

Piano Room



Site Plan



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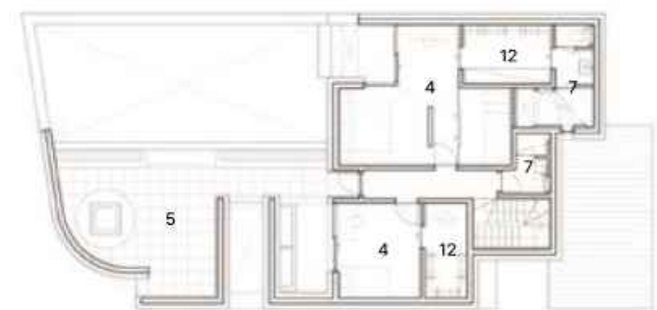


2F PLAN

1F PLAN

Floor Plan

MOKWOLJAE

Mokwoljae, overall view

Mokwoljae, representative view

Architect Firm: a root architecture
Principal Architect: LEE Changkyu, KANG Jungyoon
Design Team: LEE Changkyu, KANG Jungyoon
Location: Jeju-si, Jeju-do, Republic of Korea
Area: 149.25 square meters
Completion Date: June 2022
Photography: PARK Youngchae

A House Framed by What Lies Beyond: Mokwoljae

Mokwoljae[1] stands at the meeting point of two forests: Cheongsu Gotjawal[2] and Sanyang Gotjawal. Around it, orchards and cultivated fields extend outward, interrupted occasionally by scattered houses. It is a landscape typical of Jeju's mid-mountain region, where forest, farmland, and settlement coexist without sharp boundaries.

1. Mokwoljae combines the words mok (tree), wol (moon), and jae (house), suggesting "a house with trees and the moon."
2. Gotjawal is a Jeju term describing volcanic forest terrain formed over uneven basalt. Neither fully wild nor cultivated, it refers to a porous landscape that absorbs wind and moisture while sustaining dense vegetation.

Front elevation of Mokwoljae

Forested Olle leading to the house

Central courtyard with Gotjawal garden

From the outset, the project drew from earlier houses that held Jeju dwellings that closely absorbed the island's climate and sensibility without excess. Because the house was also intended to function as a working space, there was a desire to create an atmosphere resonant with Korean spatial sensibilities. The structure was therefore resolved as light-frame timber construction. Practical constraints of budget further led to a decision to build directly, allowing construction itself to become part of the design process.
The dark timber exterior absorbs light rather than reflecting it. Set quietly on a triangular site, the house maintains a subdued presence. Approaching along the stone wall beyond the Gotjawal, a narrow path appears between the road and the orchard. A low mound rises gently, planted with tall trees and flowering plants. This forested Olle[3] extends the edge of the woodland while softening the visual presence of nearby greenhouses. Passing through it, an open courtyard in the form of the Korean consonant "ㅁ"[4] comes into view, marking daily arrivals and departures within a familiar landscape.

3. Olle refers to a narrow approach path connecting road and dwelling in traditional Jeju villages, shaping both movement and social encounter.
4. The Korean consonant "ㅁ" (mi-eum) is often used to describe buildings organized around a central courtyard, as the letter's square form resembles the spatial configuration.

From the courtyard, movement continues inward toward the meeting room. This first interior space unfolds as a long volume, based on a 2.4-meter module. Early considerations allowed for exposed timber columns and beams, drawing from proportions studied through previous work with Hanok[5]. Over time, however, a different decision emerged. To look quietly toward the forest, it seemed preferable for structural presence to recede so that space itself could come forward. In place of exposed framing, hemp-lined wooden windows reinterpret the Deulchang[6], admitting warm, diffused light.

Subtle variations in floor level organize the meeting room, lounge, and study in relation to the surrounding ground. These slight shifts allow the forest to be perceived from multiple eye levels. The study, positioned between the meeting room and the working area, lowers its ceiling just enough to compress the space and deepen the outward view, calming the act of looking.

View of Mokwoljae from the front yard

Meeting room inspired by the three-bay doechung of Korean architecture

View of the meeting room from the lounge

Mokwoljae opens on all sides-to the forest, the road, the village, and the courtyard. In such a condition, openness alone is not the primary concern; careful closure becomes equally important. As a timber structure is exposed to Jeju's strong winds, certain wall surfaces need structural stability. Where openness was desired, reinforcement was integrated discreetly so that structure and aperture could be negotiated with precision.

Economic and practical considerations ruled out heavy timber systems or steel assemblies that would require additional trades. Instead, standard timber studs were laminated on site to form columns and beams, then wrapped in finely grained wood. Through this method, the weight and calm associated with heavy timber constructions were achieved using the logic of light-frame construction-a light structure carrying a heavier atmosphere.

Looking back, Mokwoljae reflects a Korean sensibility realized through contemporary materials and Western structural systems. Rather than replicating historical forms, it grows from continued exploration of regional architecture and timber construction. Through successive projects, this line of inquiry remains ongoing-tested, adjusted, and quietly refined.

5. Hanok refers to traditional Korean timber houses constructed with wooden frames and proportion-based spatial organization.
6. Deulchang is a traditional Korean window type that is lifted upward and secured with a latch.

Study with restrained interior finish

Lounge lowered to sit closer to the ground

Visual sequence from the lounge to the study to the office

View from the study toward the courtyard and layered Gotjawal forest

Aerial site photograph

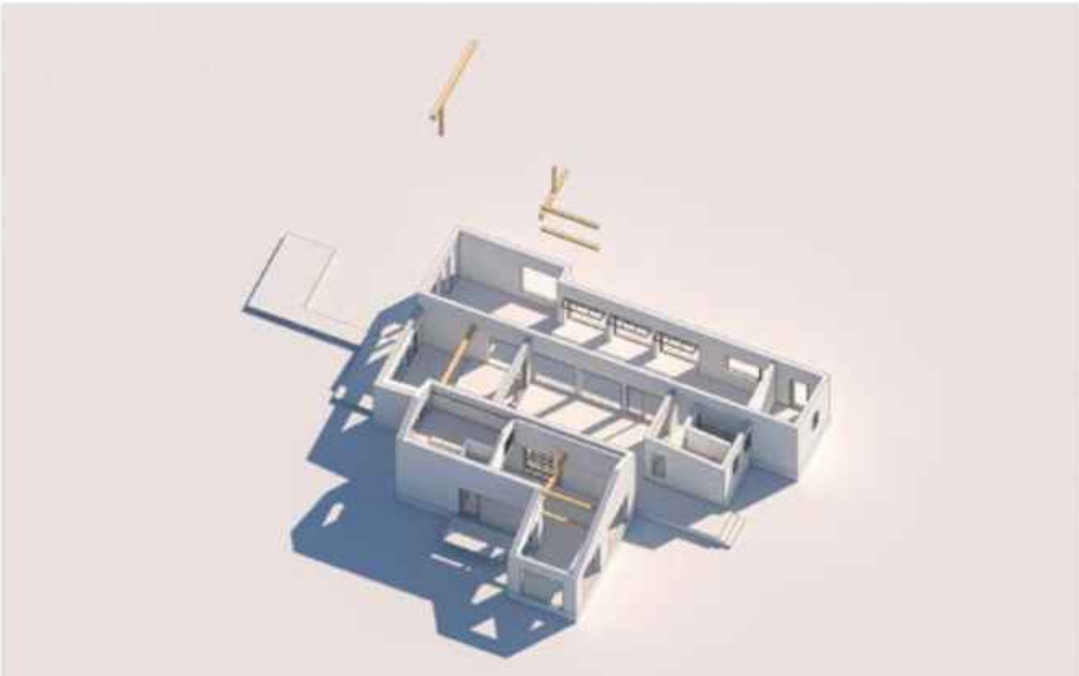
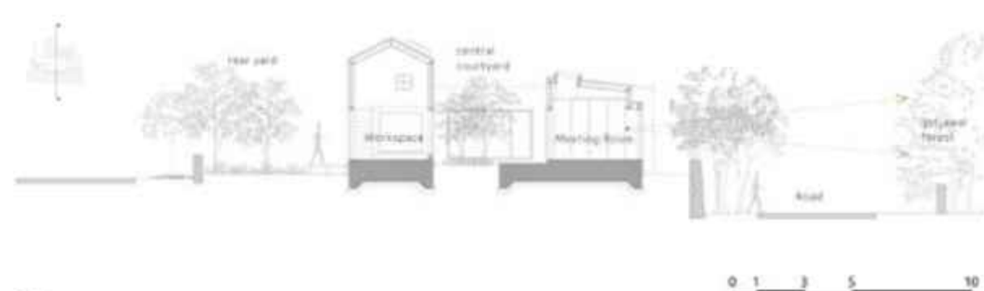


Diagram illustrating heavy atmosphere achieved through light-frame construction

Site plan

Floor plan



Section

VEKE

Exterior view of Veke

Veke, representative view

Architect Firm: a root architecture
Principal Architect: LEE Changkyu, KANG Jungyoon
Design Team: KIM Hyeonjun
Location: Seogwipo-si, Jeju-do, Republic of Korea
Area: 862.89 square meters
Completion Date: March 2024
Photography: PARK Youngchae

From the Tangible Toward the Abstract: Veke

Facing the road, Veke[1] presents a restrained and nearly expressionless façade. A heavy wall stands quietly, revealing little of what lies beyond. Passing beneath the lifted mass, visitors enter a broad, dim space and linger briefly as their eyes adjust. Through a narrow opening, movement continues into a deep corridor where light slowly returns and nature reappears. The sequence moves from solidity to openness, from shadow to light, guiding the body toward a gradual encounter with landscape.

1. Veke is a Jeju dialect term referring to piles of stones gathered and stacked after clearing fields for cultivation.

Veke functions as a garden, office, and café. Several years after completing the first Veke-conceived as a place for quietly observing nature-the second project began with a different intention. Rather than framing nature as something to be viewed from a distance, this iteration encourages it to be encountered through movement. Two principles guided the design: to allow nature to be met while walking, and to prevent the building from becoming dominant within its surroundings.

With a total built area of approximately 860 square meters, disappearance was never truly possible. Instead, a subdued architectural language was adopted so the building could recede into the background. Simple massing, elongated corridors for unhurried circulation, and a courtyard enclosed by buildings create repeated meetings between architecture and nature.

The buildings are distributed across a broad and irregular site. This arrangement responds to Jeju's strong winds, forming sheltered zones where light settles gently among trees and gardens.

Programmatic elements are divided into several volumes according to function and scale, then reconnected by corridors. This fragmentation reduces the overall visual weight while maintaining efficient circulation and management. At the far edge of the site, the ground is shaped into a geumburi[2] form, a concave depression characteristic of volcanic terrain, extending the surface of the land itself.

Ordered building mass and natural walking path

Exhibition hall and Stewartia garden

Aerial view of Veke

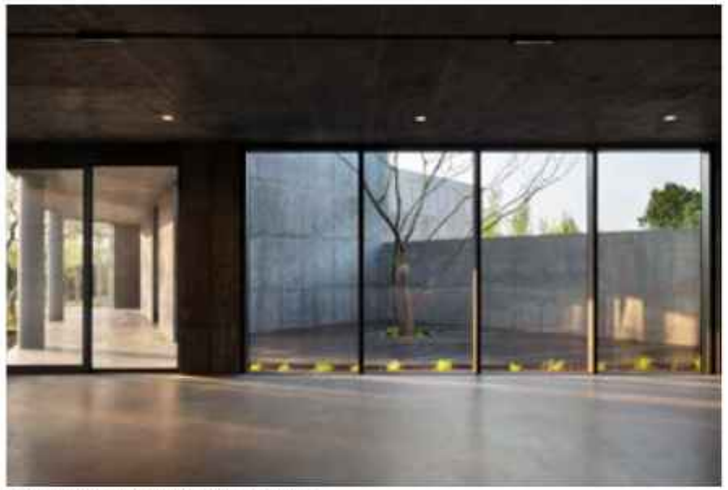
Entrance lifted to create a transitional space

2. Geumburi is a Jeju term referring to a shallow volcanic crater or depression. In this project, it describes a carved landscape condition that deepens spatial experience rather than forming a single focal point.

Planting plays a central role in mediating the relationship between building and ground. Strong or ornamental species were intentionally avoided in favor of slender vertical trees, soft grasses, and modest flowering plants. In the central courtyard, densely planted thin trees form a quiet forest that resonates with the building's horizontal geometry. Where architecture meets earth, moss, volcanic gravel, and delicate grasses blur boundaries. In the recessed geumburi garden, native Jeju species are introduced so that nature is discovered gradually rather than presented as a single framed image.

A gentle dimness forms another essential condition of Veke. The low, elongated massing and the deepening sequence of spaces allow light to filter gradually into the interior. Beneath the building, columns, terrain, and trees overlap, producing a shaded garden where shadow itself becomes part of the experience. Along the corridors, one side remains enclosed so that darkness can settle, intensifying the contrast between brightness and shade.

Tunnel-like corridor where darkness and brightness overlap



Quiet lounge encountered after passing the entrance

Corridor leading to the exhibition hall and café

Stewartia garden in autumn

Layered view of corridor, Stewartia garden, and distant cedar windbreak forest from the exhibition hall

Exhibition hall interior with integrated furniture, lighting, and mechanical systems

Café located at the far end of the sequence

Material selection reinforces this atmosphere. Concrete mixed with basalt-toned pigment recalls the color of Jeju stone. Cylindrical columns reveal small voids left from formwork, producing a porous texture reminiscent of volcanic basalt rather than polished concrete. Dark concrete surfaces and transparent glass recede visually, allowing the lines of trees, scattered leaves, and shifting shadows to come forward.

Mechanical systems and lighting were considered from the outset with the aim of remaining unnoticed. Exterior equipment is gathered discreetly at both ends of the building, and lighting fixtures were predetermined and embedded before construction. Furniture follows the same restraint: elements are kept low and unobtrusive. Softwood pine finished with a dark stain introduces familiarity and calm.

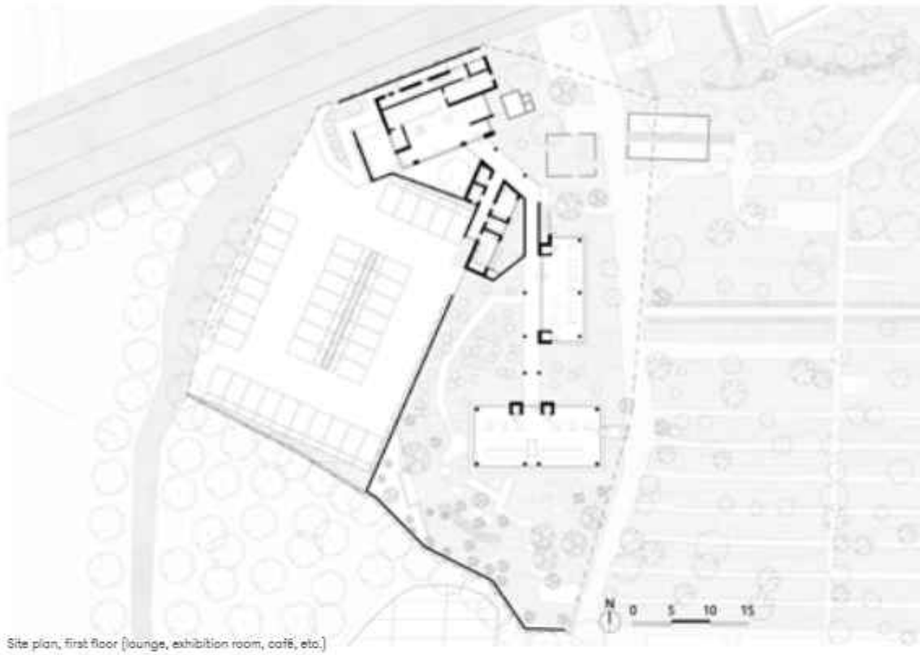
Since completion, Veke has passed through four seasons and continues to evolve. While architecture presently provides shelter and shade, the intention is for the building to recede further over time, gradually blending into its surroundings. Rather than treating nature as a backdrop, the project reverses the hierarchy. Architecture remains quiet, becoming the background for terrain, stone, trees, and plants. Veke seeks a condition in which architecture and nature meet as distinct presences, blur their boundaries, and settle into coexistence.

Café floating above the geumburi garden

Detail view of the shaded geumburi garden

Geumburi garden beneath the café with moss and ferns

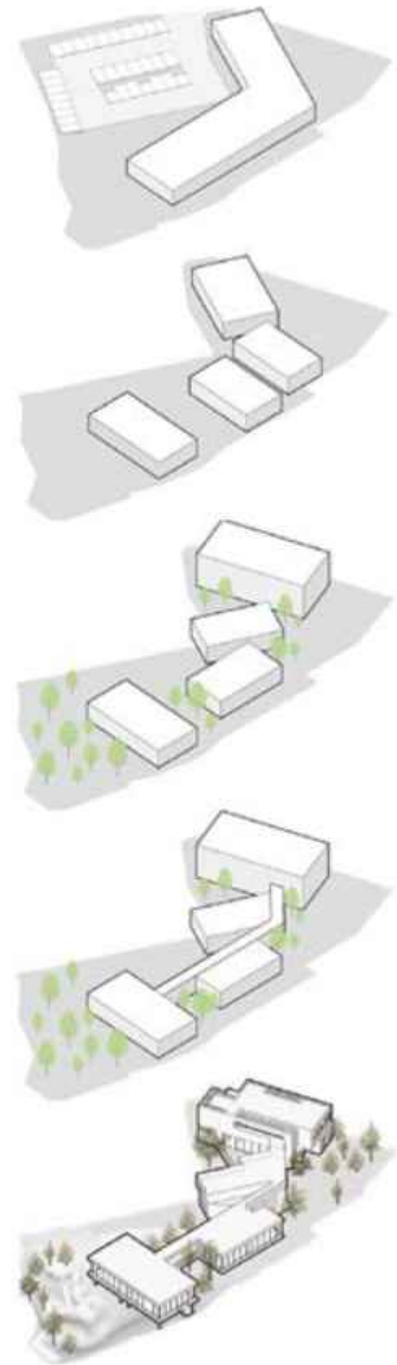
Veke in autumn



Site plan, first floor (lounge, exhibition room, café, etc.)

Site plan, second floor (a landscape architect's office)

Section



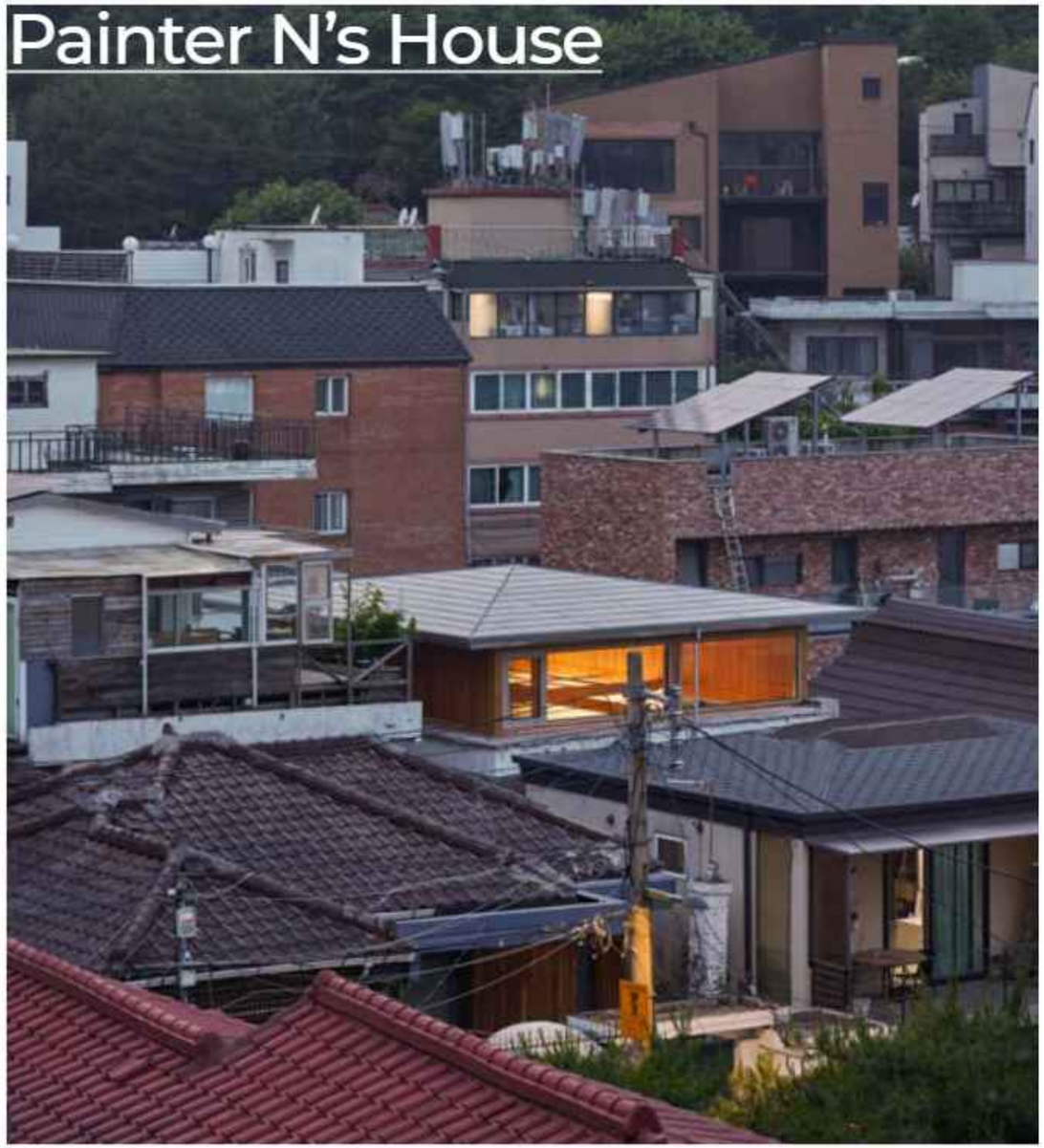
Massing diagram

Initial sketch dividing the project into four volumes

Second sketch separating the service volume

Third sketch refining axes and garden proportions

Painter N's House



Urban Context

Architect Firm: a.co.lab	
Principal Architect: Isak CHUNG, Jinpyo HONG	
Design Team: Youhwan CHO, Jangwoo BAE, Heejeong YOU	
Location: Seoul, Republic of Korea	
Area: 114.62 square meters	
Completion Date: 2024	
Photography: Kyung NOH, Yong Joon CHOI	

Painter N's House is a remodeling project that reinterprets an old house built in 1969 - where an artist couple had lived for ten years - adapting to a new way of life. The goal was to find a new form of use for the house while respecting the owners' long-established living patterns and preserving the village landscape. The original construction quality was poor, but we found meaning in embracing and improving that imperfect, everyday structure, and we sought to connect it to contemporary functions and forms.
For the exterior, although the easiest choice would have been to simply cover the old facade with a new one, we instead removed the added external insulation and exposed the original material to preserve the alley's texture and the village streetscape. We even salvaged missing decorative bricks from a redevelopment demolition site over the hill and reused them to patch the walls.

The Building and the Streetscape

Extended Roof

Since the existing brick exterior walls had no structural function, we built a new structural system inside them, running from the basement up to the attic. Within the irregular layout of floors and walls, we discovered a three-dimensional orthogonal grid shaped like the character 田, which we used to reinforce the structure while adding vertical and horizontal extensions.
We opted for timber in the structural reinforcements and additions so that the structure itself could serve as interior finish. On the first floor, columns that touch the body are wood while the beams are steel, and on the second floor the entire structure is wood.
The house sits in a village terraced along a steep slope at the foot of a mountain. We added an attic level within limits that would not obstruct the uphill neighbor's view. The first-floor slab over the damp, unused basement bomb shelter was removed, and in its place we built a new wooden platform connected to a first-floor timber column. This platform loosely links the basement and the first floor into one space, and it projects outward to function as a toetmaru, the narrow porch.

First Floor

Second Floor

A wooden shelf between the first-floor living room and the bedroom was designed to double as a column, supporting a steel beam. The movable dining table follows that shelf's same detailing. In the second-floor studio, the storage cabinetry, the lighting, and even the bathroom partition were all designed within the order of the timber structural grid.

We also added eaves and gutters to protect the new extension's wood cladding and to prevent water from seeping into the gap between the existing exterior wall and the new wooden frame. To guard against wind-driven rain, we filled irregular gaps between the old wall and the new structure with additional insulation. We also lined the sides and the top with brass to create channels that guide water away, providing extra moisture control.

View from the Courtyard

View from the Alley

Detail of the Eaves, the Downspout, and the Steel Column

Detail of the Eaves

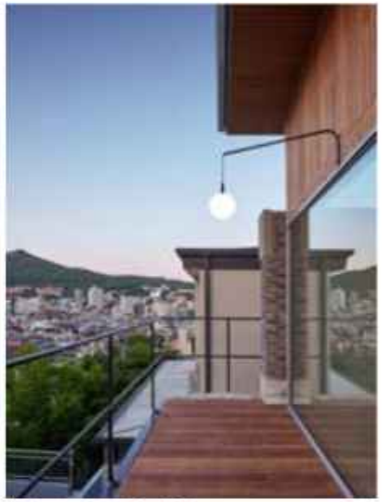
View of the Second Floor's Elevation

View from the Kitchen

The Basement

Detail of the Table

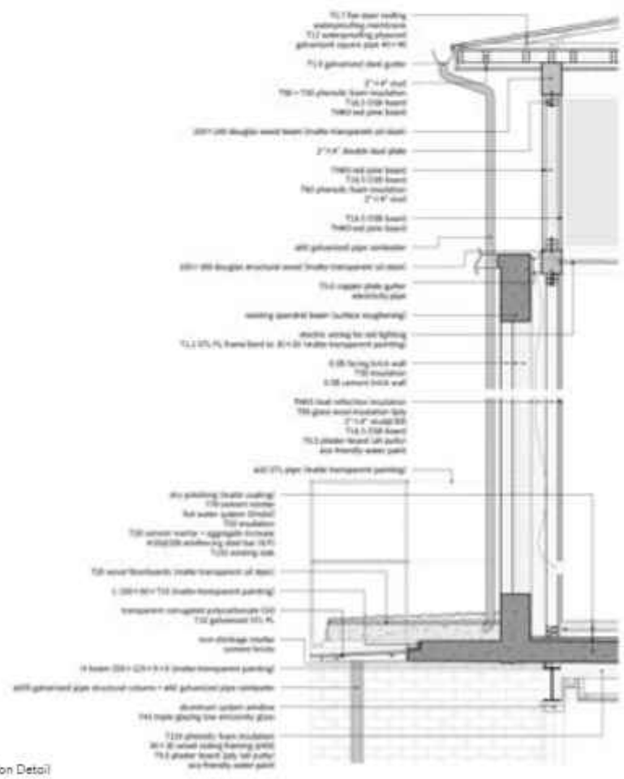
Detail of the Downspout and the Steel Column

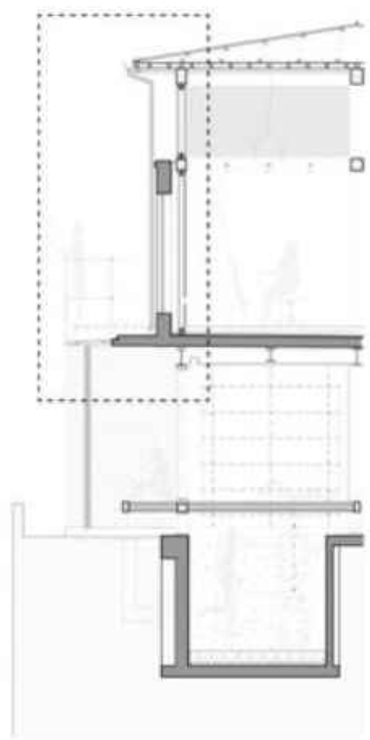

View from the Second Floor's Balcony

Attic

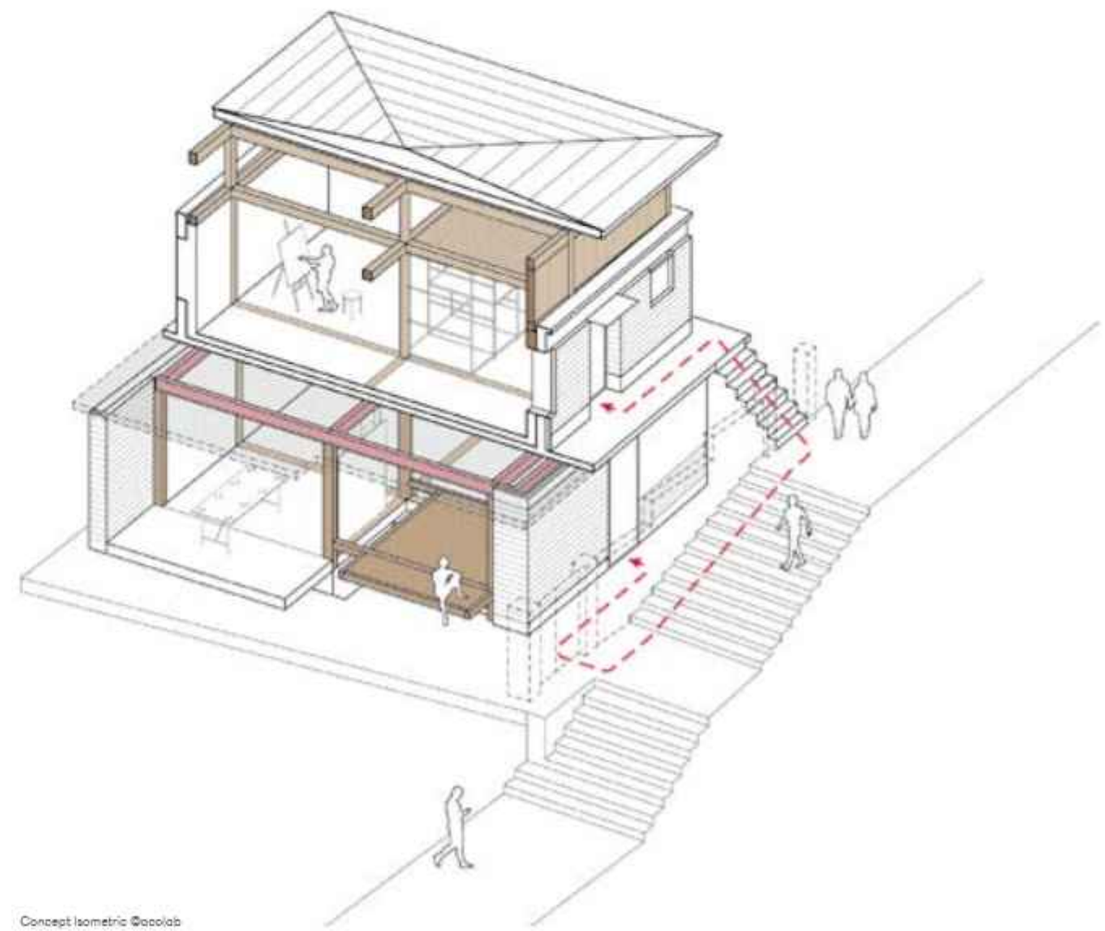
Shape of the Roof

Process Diagram ©acolab





Section Detail



Concept Isometric ©acolab

Be-Fore

Tower

Architect Firm: a.co.lab
Principal Architect: Isak CHUNG, Jinpyo HONG
Design Team: Jeongwoo SONG, Youhwan CHO, Jangwoo BAE, Heejeong YOU
Location: Siheung, Republic of Korea
Area: 1,217.66 square meters
Completion Date: 2024
Photography: Kyung NOH

Be-Fore, in Siheung, is a project to regenerate a portion of the disused area at the Sihwa Industrial Complex wastewater treatment plant. When we first visited the site in preparation for the design competition, we realized that this place's role could not be decided by the quick judgment of a few people over a short period. We wanted it to become a backdrop where diverse activities could unfold before anything is built. We also hoped that after fulfilling the urgent demands of the industrial age and then being abandoned, this place could become an environment where it returns to being part of nature.

Timber Atrium

View from the Timber Atrium

Stair

Inside of the Half Tank

We studied the sewage treatment facility's operating principles and the faint context of the site to create only the bare minimum of experiential interventions. Our determination to "build less and provide a base" became less of a concept and more of a self-hypnosis when, after our submission, the construction budget was slashed from 4.2 billion KRW to 1.1 billion. Even within the reduced scope, we strove to realize the essence of the original scheme and to reveal a subtle order within the site's irregular reality. We took alignments such as the centerlines of the distribution tank and the thickener tank, and the axes of the inspection deck and the utility piping, as reference lines for our plan. In doing so, we linked the previously scattered civil structures into a continuous, open sequence. We intended the new insertions to act not as industrial facilities but as minimal devices to guide visitors with water and light.

There are multiple ways to enter the site, but the main approach leads you toward the thickener tank while facing a new tower built atop the central distribution basin. From that point, a spiral wooden stair takes you down to the underground level, allowing you to sense traces of the old tank still imprinted on the thickener's walls. You then slip through a gap where two walls peel apart and emerge into a bright space - a circular atrium. What was once a pit brimming with sludge now holds clear water with aquatic plants and even small wildlife.

Moving across the atrium, you enter the tower area, which we created by adding new walls while leaving remnants of the existing structure. Daylight from a skylight above the tower's pendentive washes down along the surfaces where old and new overlap. Passing through the tower to the "half-tank," you can now take in at a glance the original circular forms of the old thickener tank and the adjacent clarifier, revealed beyond two cut-away walls. Abandoned industrial space and primeval human space were made with opposite intentions, yet they share a surprisingly similar spatial sensibility. The techniques and forms of this "the residual" are things we often do not consciously notice or consider important. Yet a.co.lab believes that within such trivial remnants lies the most important collective unconscious we all share. By preserving as much of the existing form as possible and intervening with cheap, contemporary materials in only the slightest ways, we aimed to reawaken the primeval human attitude toward nature that resides within all of us.

Not long ago, we went back to this site again, this time as casual visitors. In the thickener tank that was once filled with black water, lotus flowers were blooming and frogs had appeared. Between the concrete structures, wild daisies and briar roses had sprung up. In one corner of the distribution tank, even the cleaning supervisor's plants had taken root. The dreamy statement we made during our competition presentation - "We hope this place returns to being part of nature" - had, on that day, come a little closer to reality.

Tower

Isle to the Timber Atrium

Circle Stair

Timber Atrium

Detail of the Circle Stair

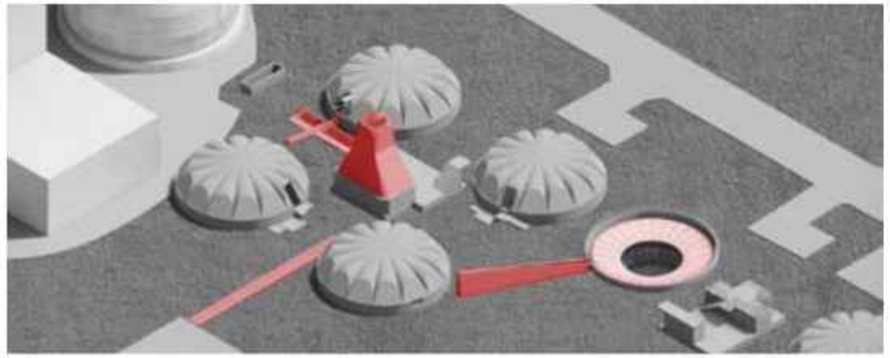
Inside of the Tower

Skylight of the Tower

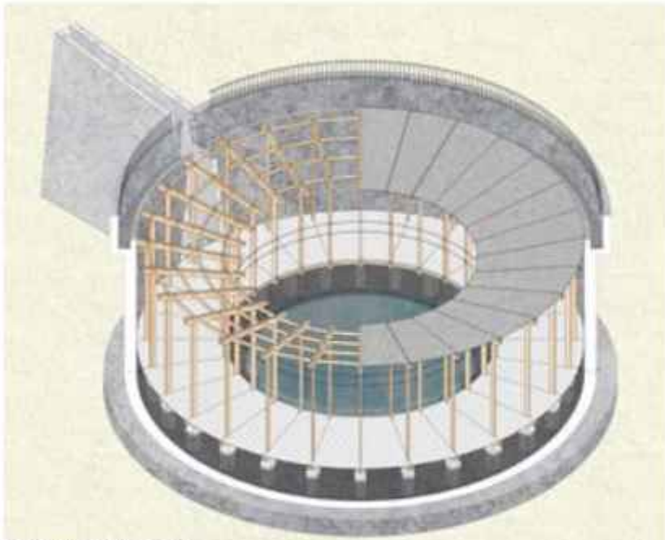
View from the Aisle

Inside of the Circle Stair

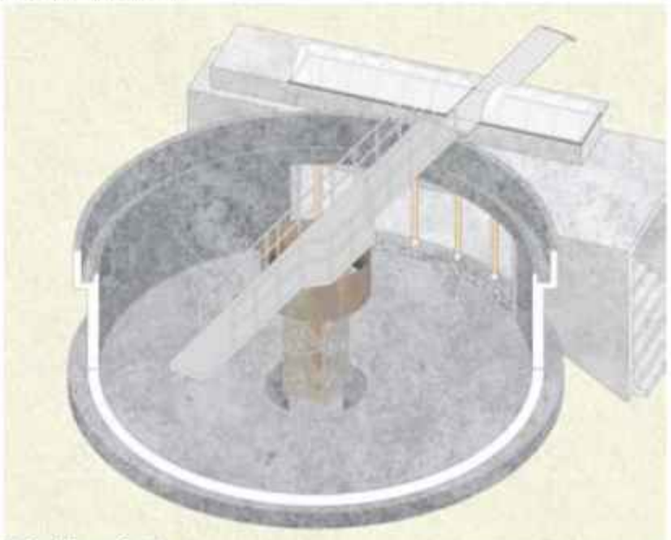
Roof of the Timber Atrium



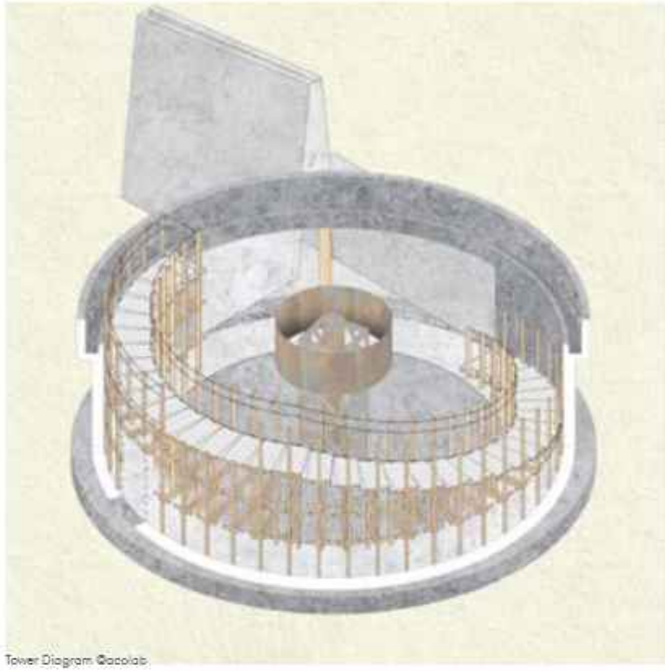
Concept Isometric ©acolab



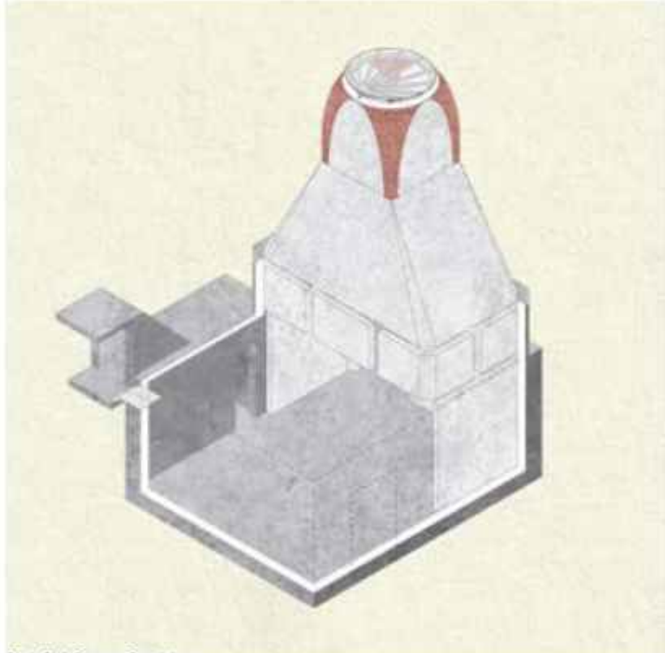
Timber Atrium Diagram ©acolab



Half Tank Diagram ©acolab



Tower Diagram ©acolab



Circle Stair Diagram ©acolab

Dwelling in Gotjawal

Aerial view showing the house within Jeju's Gotjawal forest ecosystem

Main facade with raised concrete plinth and curved eave engaging the Gotjawal

Architect Firm: Kim-O Architects Co., Ltd.	
Principal Architect: KIM Jihee	
Design Team: KIM Jihee	
Location: Jeju City, Republic of Korea	
Area: 195.21 square meters	
Completion Date: May 2025	
Photography: HWANG Hyo-chel	

Project description

The Gotjawal House articulates the Korean notion of byeolseo-dwelling as reflective distance, where withdrawal from routine becomes engagement with presence. As a second residence for an elderly couple, the project reinterprets the traditional form of byeolseo[1] incorporating nugak[2], structures open on all sides yet maintaining enclosure, where one sits elevated, looking down upon the landscape.

1. Byeolseo (別墅) refers to a secondary dwelling maintained apart from one's primary residence, historically associated with scholarly retreat and reflective distance from daily routine.
2. Nugak (樓閣) denotes an elevated, open-sided structure, frequently employed within byeolseo compounds to frame the landscape through raised sitting and unobstructed views.

North elevation facing the forest, establishing the dwelling's principal orientation toward the landscape

Evening view where interior light extends into the forest, revealing continuity between structure and terrain

Anchored in Jeju's volcanic forest terrain, it mediates between body and landscape through awareness rather than form. The Gotjawal-dense lava rock, fractured topography, uneven ground-was physically present yet perceptually severed from dwelling. Instead of reproducing separation as distance, the architecture internalizes that distance as perception, transforming dwelling into an act of mindful coexistence with nature.

In phenomenological terms, seeing and being are inseparable. As Merleau-Ponty observed, "We see the things themselves; the world is what we see." This reciprocity between perception and existence forms the foundation of architectural thought. Seeing is not passive observation but an existential relationship between self and the world. To see the Gotjawal is not to register its form, but to sense its density-the air, humidity, and silence that shape one's being within it. The way of seeing determines the way of dwelling. The Gotjawal House perceives the forest not as scenery, but as a subjective field that defines dwelling itself. Here, the inhabitant's life is shaped through coexistence with the forest, as nature becomes a partner in forming the inner structure of dwelling rather than its external backdrop.

Approach view showing the house settling on the raised plinth within the volcanic landscape

Side view along the forest path gradually revealing the building's form

Textured concrete facade above the raised plinth echoing the rough stone surfaces of Gotjawal terrain

Detail of brick volume and concrete eave emphasizing the eave's measured thickness

Exterior deck beneath the curved eave acting as transitional threshold between dwelling and forest

The architecture translates this reciprocal relationship through three spatial strategies. First, a subtly raised concrete plinth negotiates fractured topography while preserving rock outcrops and drainage, lifting dwelling above the forest floor. This measured elevation creates a threshold where perception begins-a quiet separation that transforms distance into awareness. Rough concrete surfaces echo the volcanic stone, grounding architecture in landscape.

Second, internal passages allow air to move slowly through the house, drawing the forest breeze inside. Wind and humidity are not excluded but become part of the lived atmosphere of dwelling. The forest's atmosphere becomes the medium through which daily life unfolds.

Third, the curved northern eave extends outward to receive light and shadow as fluid boundaries of space. It does not frame a view but orchestrates an atmospheric encounter, creating enclosure without closure, transforming the Gotjawal's density into a living membrane where interior and landscape engage in quiet exchange.

Facade detail where shadows animate the rough concrete surface as a living texture

Interior view toward the forest where transparency blurs boundaries between inside and landscape

Interior threshold detail with concealed door emphasizing spatial transition and minimalist detailing

Curved passage detail where minimal white surfaces and gentle articulate spatial flow

Together they structure perception as a slow sequence: stepping stones extend arrival, turning entry into ritual. Movements-stepping onto the plinth, sitting and gazing down at the forest, looking up at the sky beneath the eave-become moments of awareness.

The project demonstrates, through spatial restraint, that the mode of seeing does become the mode of dwelling. The forest becomes not scenery but what structures daily life. The Gotjawal ceases to be a passive backdrop and becomes an active condition of dwelling itself, reorganizing the way life is perceived and practiced.

Here, seeing is not an act within dwelling but dwelling itself. Seeing as dwelling. Dwelling as seeing.

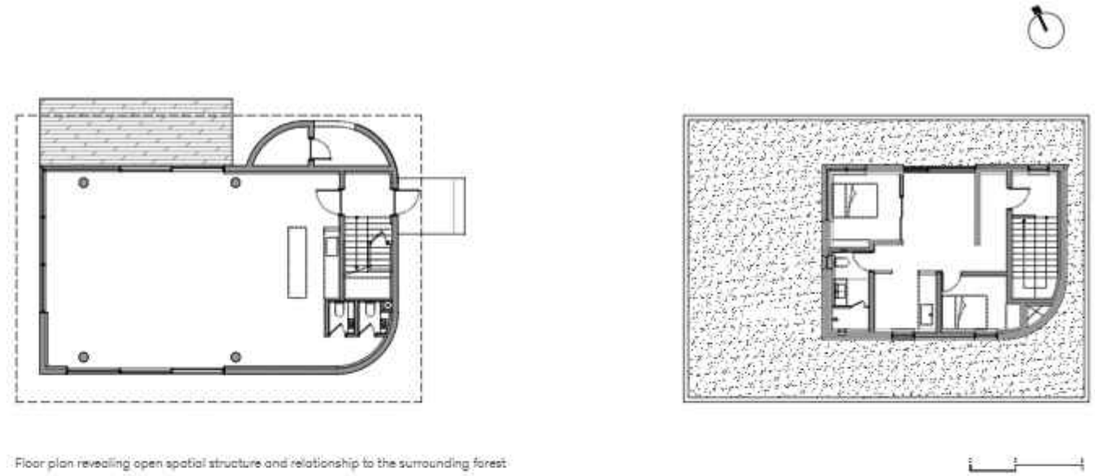
Main living space where full-height glazing dissolves boundaries, allowing the Gotjawal to structure daily life

Atmospheric view on humid day where moisture and material merge into quiet tone

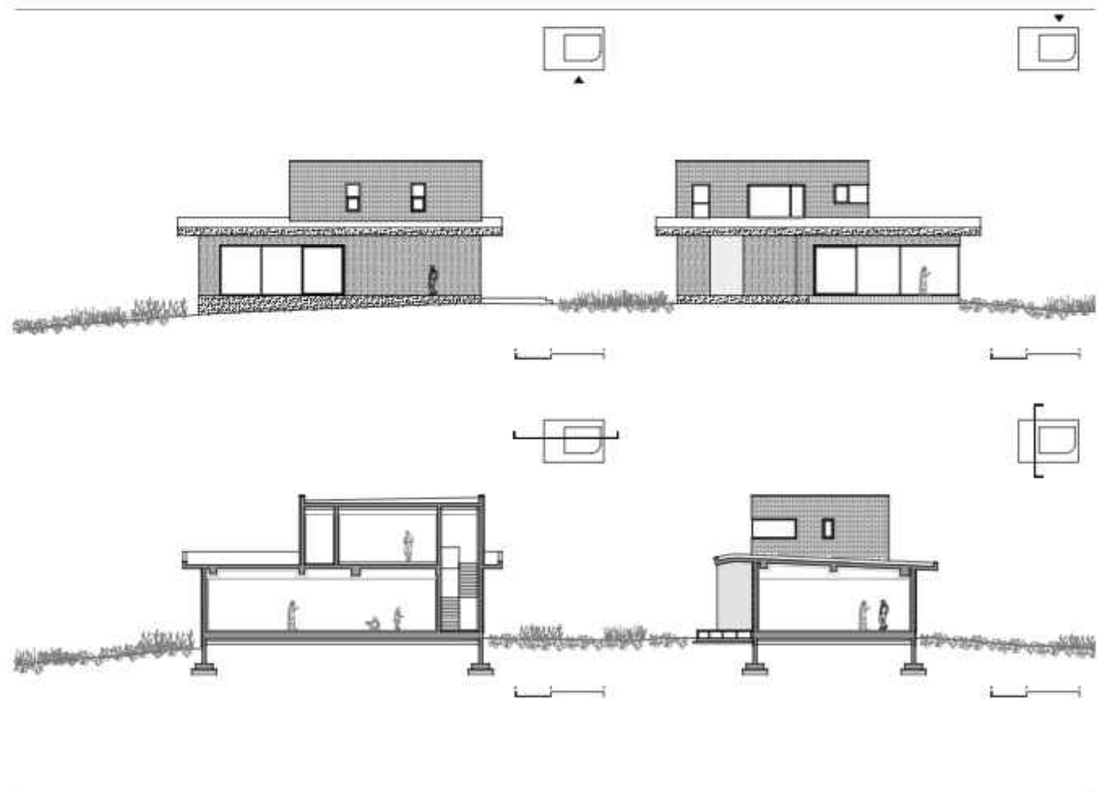
Curved eave and linear volume forming rhythmic boundary between built and natural order

Subtle curvature of the eave drawing the forest inward, articulating alignment between structure and landscape

Site plan showing the house's placement within the Gotjawal forest terrain

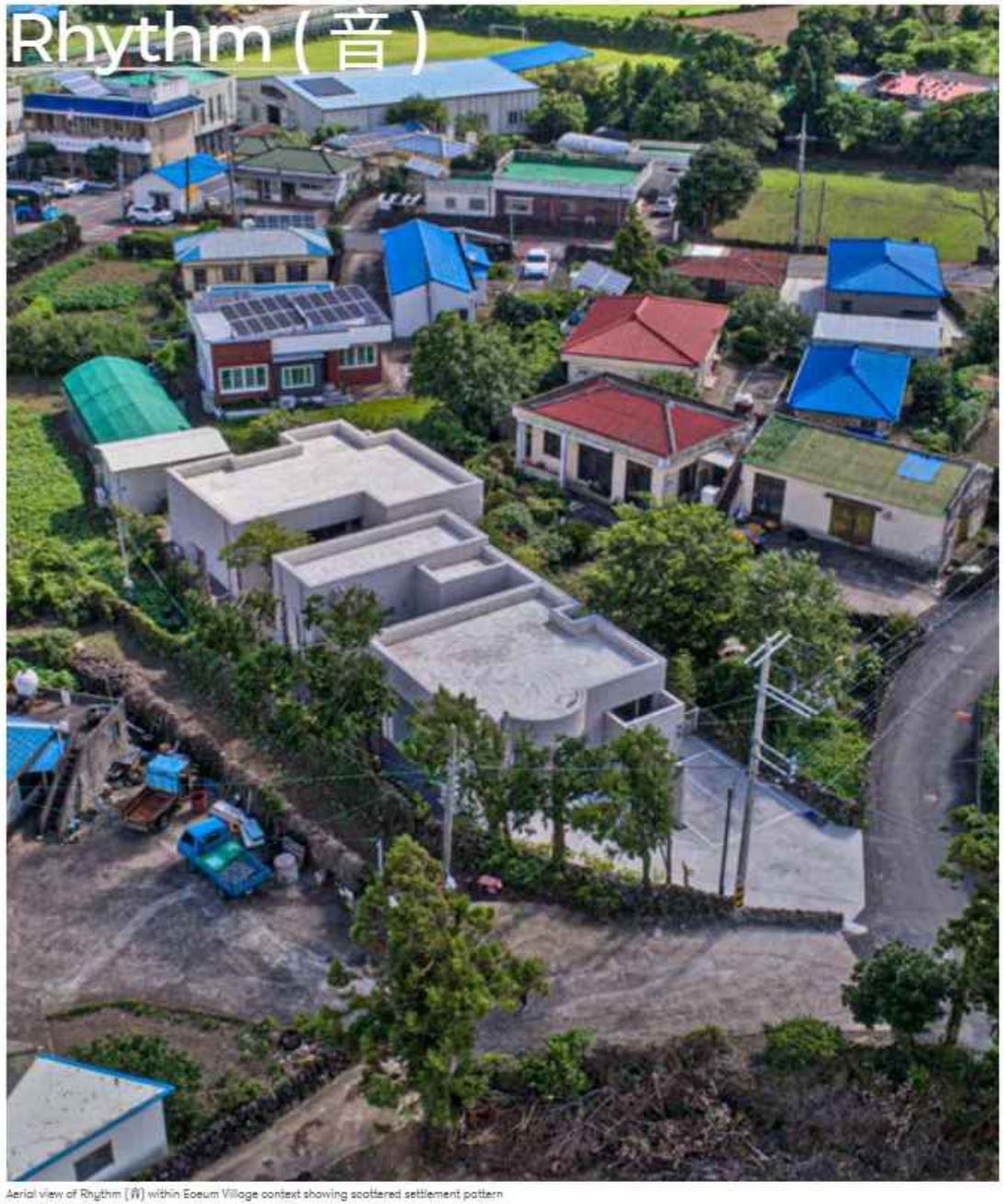


Floor plan revealing open spatial structure and relationship to the surrounding forest



Section and elevation illustrating the raised plinth, curved eave, and spatial sequence

Rhythm (音)



Aerial view of Rhythm (音) within Eoeum Village context showing scattered settlement pattern

Architect Firm: Kim-O Architects Co., Ltd.
Principal Architect: KIM Jihee
Design Team: KIM Jihee
Location: Jeju City, Republic of Korea
Area: 188.12 square meters
Completion Date: April 2024
Photography: HWANG Hyo-chel

Project description

Rhythm (音) is a house in Eoeum Village, a mid-mountain village in Jeju, designed to enter an established settlement quietly. Three volumes-a guest stay, a workspace, and a dwelling-are arranged to form loose boundaries and layered thresholds.

Rather than separating functions, these thresholds register different rhythms of life. Some filter external impressions to allow privacy to deepen, while others respond to the village's everyday sounds, placing quieter rooms further inward. In this way, the house participates in village life not by asserting itself, but by listening before it speaks.

The site lies at the edge of Eoeum Village in Jeju, where houses are scattered rather than gathered. Paths are marked by single stone walls, and the atmosphere remains dry, restrained, and quiet. Here, the way architecture enters the village matters. The building lowers itself and moves in without emphasis. Long and low, it avoids frontality and aligns itself through placement rather than form. What matters here is not standing out, but staying within the village's existing rhythm-while allowing a slightly lighter tone to settle into the landscape.

In Eoeum Village, eum (音) means sound. The project begins from the idea that rhythm does not come from form, but from spacing. Rhythm (音) is composed of three buildings: a stay for visitors, a studio for work, and a dwelling. Each serves a different function, yet none is treated as primary. Depending on where one stands, boundaries shift. A facade becomes background, a structure enters the view, and distance is neither fixed nor absolute. The buildings do not divide the site; they hold one another within view.

View from village path revealing the house's low profile aligned with existing buildings

Village approach showing entrance facade with glass block and curved brick tile roofline

The project unfolds through two sequences shaped by thresholds. The first belongs to the resident. A long approach extends arrival, and small changes in level are felt through the body before they are understood. Crossing a threshold, passing a narrow corridor, moving through the central space, and arriving at a private room-these ordinary actions accumulate, and enclosure forms gradually. The central space opens outward, yet the sense of being inside remains. Beyond it, the deepest exterior space is connected only to the private room; it is not meant to be seen and belongs to the resident alone. The outermost enclosure, walled on three sides and open only to the sky, remains as a condition rather than a visible space.

Exterior terrace with wood decking connecting to private courtyard space

Dining area interior with glass block wall filtering natural light

The second sequence is for visitors. Scenes are divided carefully, and each entry compresses movement through a different threshold. In the late afternoon, light filters through windbreak trees and glass blocks. The body turns to open a door, and space unfolds sideways. A few steps lead upward, like entering a loft, and beneath the deep eaves settles the body. The level changes are small but familiar, allowing the body to rely on habit. Where light passes through glass blocks and meets water, contact between body and architecture becomes direct. A few steps lower, where only the sound of water remains, the space shifts-unfamiliar at first, then comfortable. The spaces remain fragmented; what lingers is not the sequence, but the bodily memory of moving through them.Across the spaces, each is tuned to a slightly different register—some closer to the ground and the sound of water, others rising toward the eave and filtered sky. The glass blocks hold light without fully releasing it, allowing the interior to remain in a state of quiet suspension. In this way, the project operates as a tempo—one that slows the body and allows perception to reorganize through movement.

Interior corridor view showing level changes and spatial transitions

View through threshold revealing layered spaces and the dining area beyond

Central passage with glass block partition and wood slat screen defining boundaries

Shower space wrapped in glass blocks, where light descends from skylight above

Private room interior with raised platform and view to exterior courtyard

Living space with view through glazing to interior courtyard

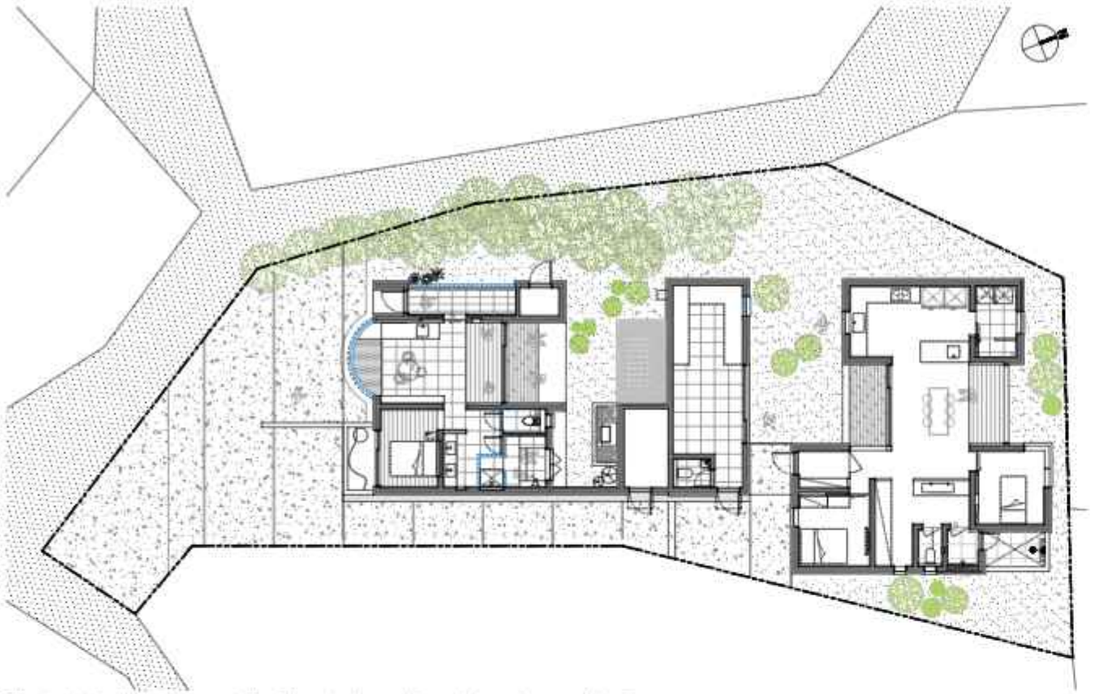
Entrance sequence with glass block facade and wood door revealing interior layers

Exterior courtyard between workspace and dwelling volumes with planted garden

Bedroom interior showing spatial continuity and minimalist detailing

Private room with window overlooking exterior landscape

Outdoor shower with indirect natural light creating intimate atmosphere



Floor plan showing three-volume composition with courtyards connecting guest stay, workspace, and dwelling

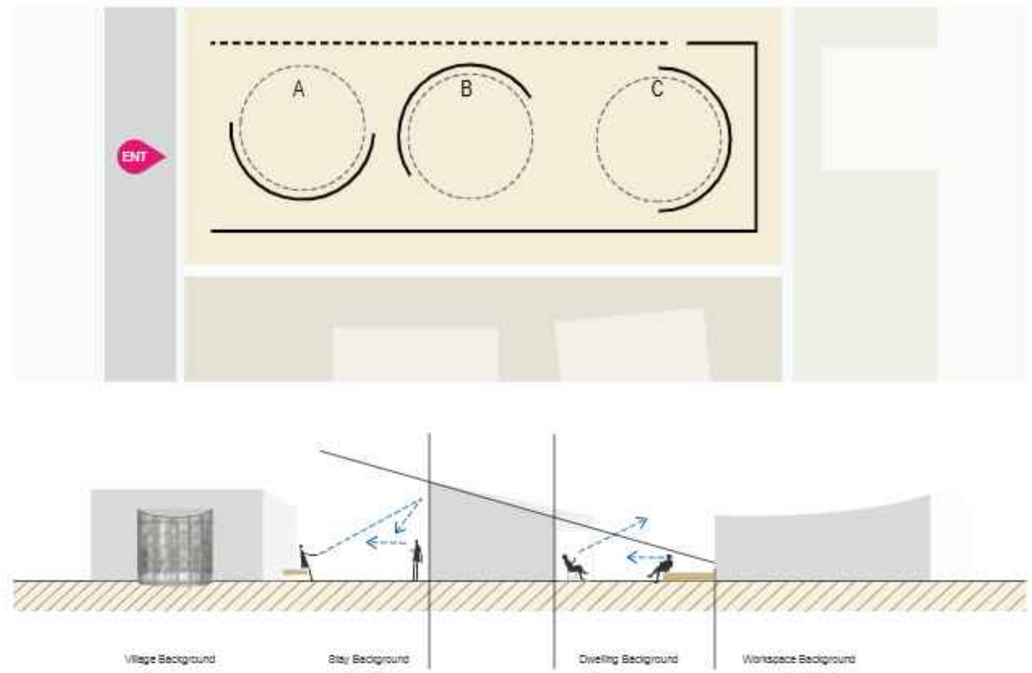
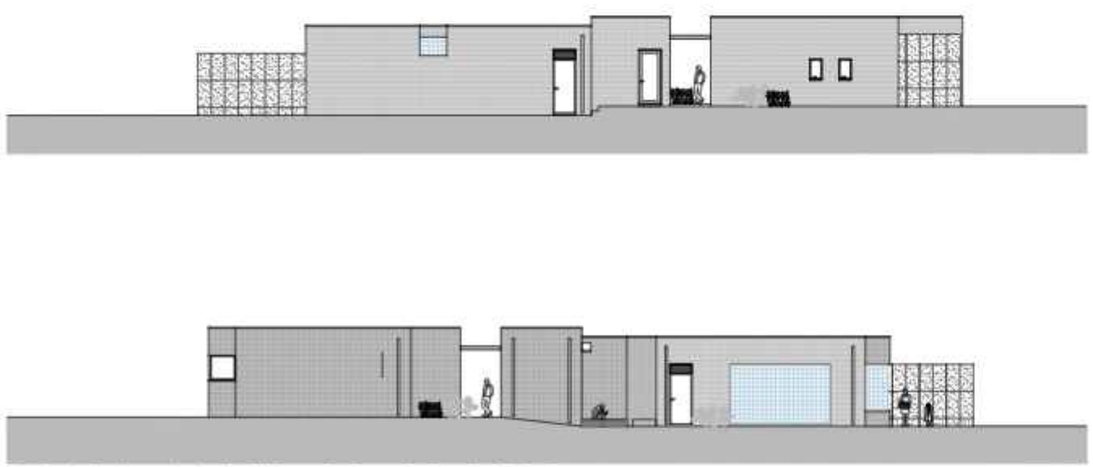
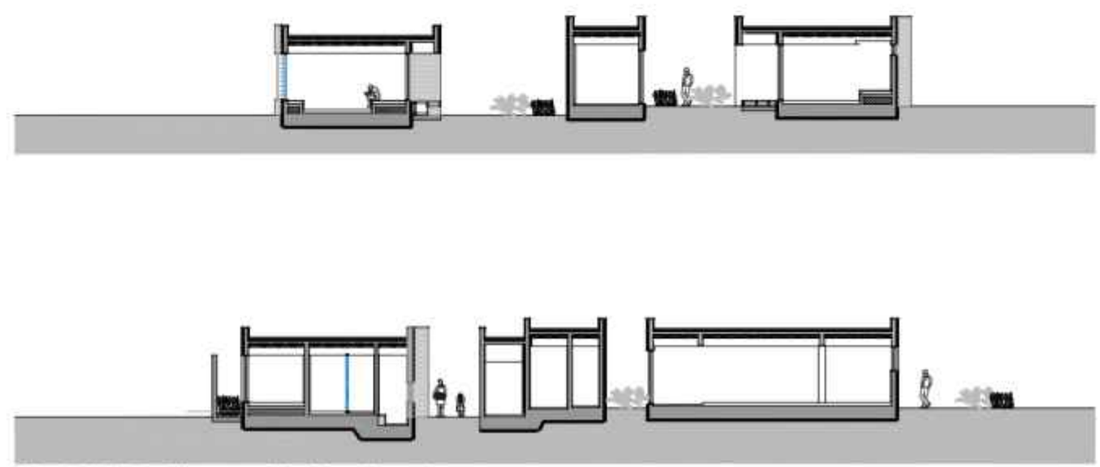


Diagram illustrating how each volume's exterior serves as background for the others depending on viewpoint



Elevations showing how each volume's exterior becomes background and boundary for the others



Sections illustrating threshold sequences and level changes between volumes

PKM+

View from the yard (daytime)

View from the yard (nightime)

Architect Firm: ODETO.A + University of Seoul
Principal Architect: Eunju Jeong (ODETO.A), Heewon Lee (University of Seoul)
Design Team: Eunju Jeong, Heewon Lee
Location: Samcheong-dong, Jongno-gu, Seoul, Republic of Korea
Area: 484.93 square meters
Completion Date: May 2017
Photography: Kyungsub Shin

View from the yard (before)

Project description

Just beyond the main street of Samcheong-dong, where cafés and galleries begin to thin out, a quieter Seoul takes over. Following the walls of Gyeongbokgung Palace and the former presidential compound, the city slips into an alley that feels improbably still. The guarded boundary lends a faint tension to the air; together with the low-rise fabric, the neighborhood seems slightly out of time. Several large houses have lingered here unoccupied for years, and this building was one of them.

Completed in 1968, the house is an uncommon reinforced-concrete residence for its era: one basement level and three stories above grade. The frame remained structurally dependable, but the building had lost much of its usefulness. Renovation, rather than replacement, became the clearest response-regulatory limits on coverage, height, and development volume left little room for expansion, while the existing structure offered a solid base for a new spatial and environmental strategy.

Partial front elevation view

Partial front elevation view

Stairway accessed from the main gallery

View from the main entrance stair connecting to the gallery

The client envisioned a hybrid program-gallery and home-requiring both clarity and intimacy. Yet the inherited interior resisted both. Thick floor build-ups, redundant service shafts, and mechanical ducts that no longer functioned had accumulated over decades. These layers compressed ceiling heights, deepened soffits, and turned circulation into a sequence of detours. Thermal performance was weak, and worn finishes blurred the character of rooms that could otherwise have supported new uses.

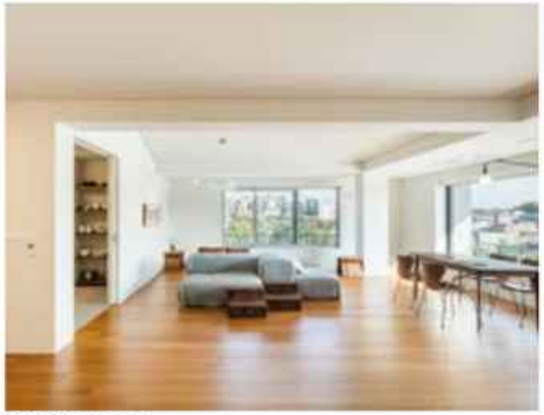
The strategy began with subtraction and reorganization. The structure and select portions of the exterior wall were retained; interior and exterior finishes were reset, and the electrical and MEP systems were redesigned. The most consequential move was to externalize the building's service infrastructure. Except for electrical wiring, ducts and pipes were rerouted along the outside of the existing walls-moving drainage, exhaust, and gas lines outward-then covered by a new facade. Freed from redundant ducts, floor and ceiling build-ups were thinned to recover volume and height. Exterior insulation was reinforced to improve comfort and reduce heat loss around exposed lines. The new envelope also edited the building's previously irregular exterior into a calmer, more legible presence suited to its gallery-residence identity.

First-floor exhibition space

Stair connecting the basement and ground-floor exhibition spaces

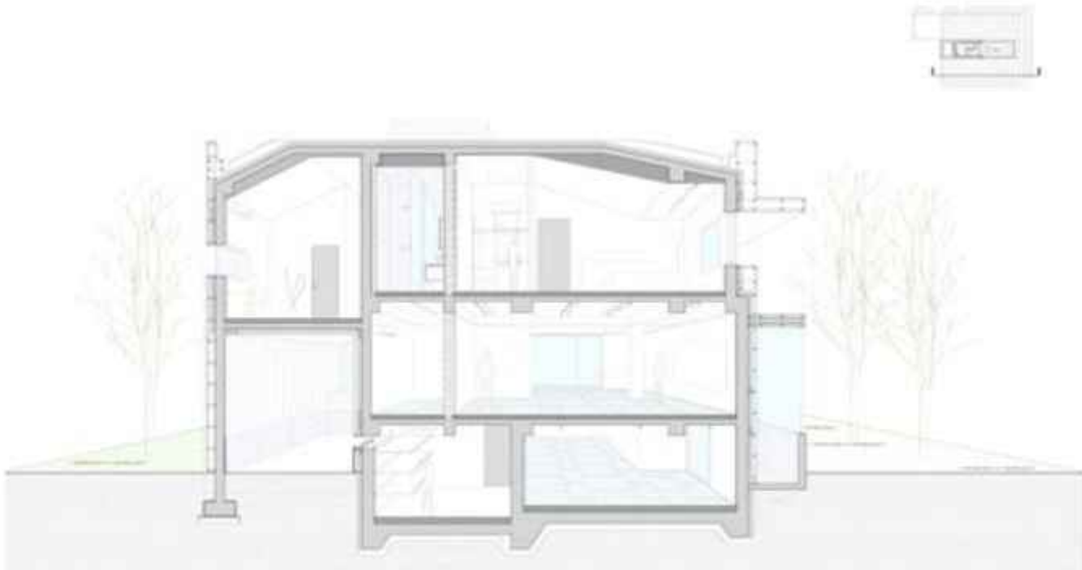
Basement exhibition space

Experimentation and combination of diverse materials



Second-floor living room

Stair connecting the residential levels



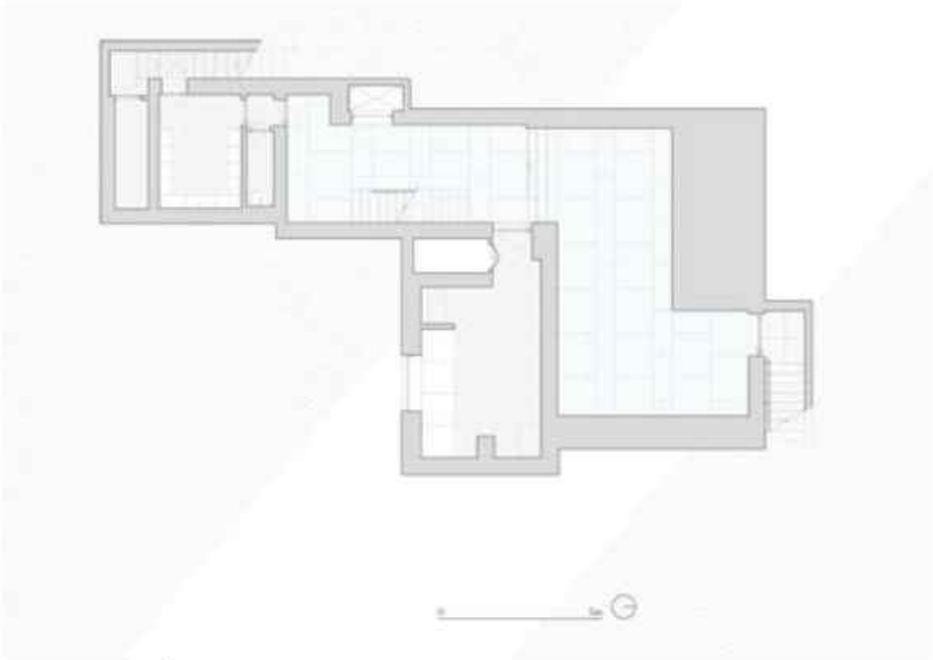
Section perspective

Surrounding site context

Approach matters here. Walking down the narrow, deep alley, the west elevation appears beyond a low, open wall-an unforced threshold rather than a dramatic reveal. The façade is deliberately restrained: openings are minimized, and material choices are reduced to a small set. Brick tile forms the primary cladding, its tone selected to sit quietly with the terrazzo base. The client was drawn to the intimacy of small-module masonry, but the added build-up required by exterior services and insulation made full brick impractical; brick tile delivered the desired grain without excessive thickness.

Light completes the architecture. The surface registers weather and time with subtle shifts as fine shadows gather at joints and edges. In late afternoon, when the façade holds the warmth of the setting sun, the building remains simple-yet leaves an unfamiliar afterimage.

Renovation, especially of a house long unoccupied, demands careful calibration rather than heroic transformation. Unlike new construction, it asks what the existing frame can still offer-its proportions, its constraints, its quiet potential-and how those qualities can support new meaning. This project did not erase the traces of time; it reorganized them, returning a once-silent structure to the city as a place for both viewing and living.



Basement-floor plan (gallery)

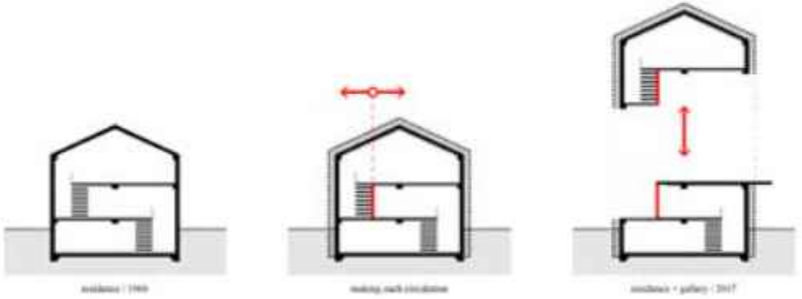
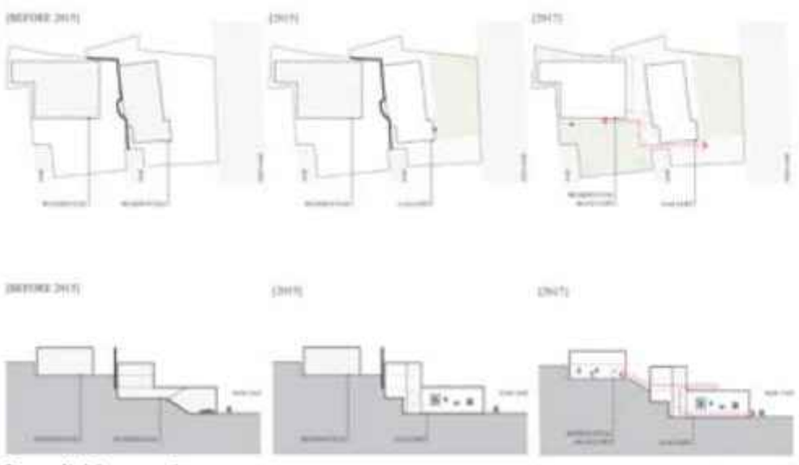
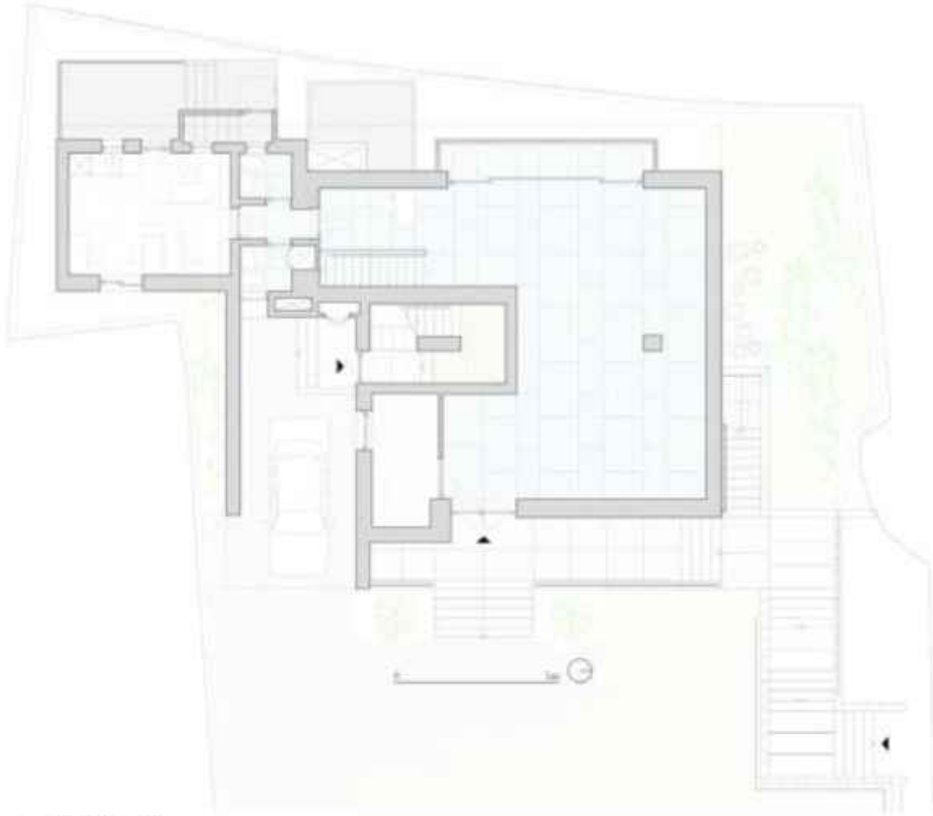


Diagram of vertical and horizontal program separation



Change of building use over time



First-floor plan (gallery)

Second-floor plan (private house)

Art Archives, Seoul Museum of Art

View toward the open archive platform (main space)

View from the entrance

View toward the open archive platform (main space)

View toward the open archive platform with integrated furniture (main space)

Architect Firm: ODETO.A + University of Seoul
Principal Architect: Eunju Jeong (ODE-TO.A), Heewon Lee (University of Seoul)
Design Team: Taewoo Kim, Dahye An, Hyunjin Choi
Location: Pyeongchang-dong, Jongno-gu, Seoul, Republic of Korea
Area: 5,690.05 square meters
Completion Date: March 2023
Photography: Texture on Texture(figure2,3,5,9,11,12,13,14,15), studio_kdkkdk(-figure1,4,6,7,8,10)

Project description

To become a civic place, Art Archives, Seoul Museum of Art (SeMA AA) has been shaped through a long chain of collaboration: two public clients (the City Infrastructure Headquarters and the Museum Division), the competition-winning architect, and-during construction-the team responsible for space planning and interior architecture (ODETO.A). Furniture and signage designers joined the process, as did the contractor and construction management team working on an active site, alongside local residents who will ultimately use and reshape the Archive. Within the inevitable frictions of public architecture-multiple decision-makers, shifting requirements, and finite resources-space planning had to move forward without diluting the project's public promise.

The central challenge was that constraints did not simply accumulate; they contradicted one another. The footprint was compact, yet it had to feel generous. It was small, yet it had to host a wide range of functions. The aspiration for an open, freely accessible plan-available to anyone, anywhere, at any time-collided with operational realities: security, staffing, preservation, and maintenance. Beyond the familiar functions of a museum-exhibitions, education, and the management and conservation of collections-an art archive demands another layer. It must hold the traces of making: records, drafts, documents, and other materials through which works come into being, and it must allow those materials to be stored, accessed, read, and interpreted.
Our response was to divide and connect at once. Within a compact interior, we organized a library, exhibition rooms, collection storage, education spaces, and areas for rest so that each remained legible while enabling smooth transitions and multiple scenarios. The aim was not a fixed, single-purpose layout, but a framework capable of absorbing different sequences-public events, study, viewing, workshops-without collapsing into disorder. Instead of a single, totalizing order that claims to resolve every conflict, we pursued possibility through looser relations: overlapping partial orders-small rules for small parts-layered through careful coordination. In this sense, the work of sharing judgment and reaching agreements-among stakeholders, and with the citizens the Archive serves-became an architectural task in itself, as important as the built outcome.

Layered composition of furniture, stairs, walls, and windows

Layered composition of columns, walls, space, and light

Black-box gallery with natural light

Space composed of layered ceilings, columns, double-height voids, light, and stairs

We also asked what kind of ground is needed for a place where plural values overlap and fuse. The Archive must endure far into the future, able to accommodate unknown situations and users without becoming brittle. Architecture is not completed at a single moment; it continues to be built through those who inhabit it, and its time moves more slowly than we assume. For an institution that must continually update programs and reinstall exhibitions, interior flexibility is not optional; it is foundational.
For that reason, we aimed for a deliberately neutral space. If visitors are to encounter art and archival material with all their senses, the architecture surrounding them may need to step back-less a figure, more a ground. We sought a durable framework that can present what will be filled without distortion, and that can be filled by almost anything. Preserving the original scheme's structural character-its interpenetrating volumes and horizontal connections-we worked with basic architectural elements (floor, wall, ceiling, column, stair) to tune openness and enclosure, light and shadow, separation and connection, expansion and division. The result is a spatial rhythm that feels continuous and dynamic, yet can be read as distinct rooms when required.
Although our formal scope was limited to the interior, we treated it as an interface rather than a finish, allowing the building's overlapping volumes and exterior scenes to extend into the interior experience of the Archive.

Atmosphere shaped by walls, ceiling, and lighting

A space where furniture becomes a spatial layer

Exhibition view expressing the spatial concept of layers through the mode of display

View from the second floor toward the two-story open archive platform

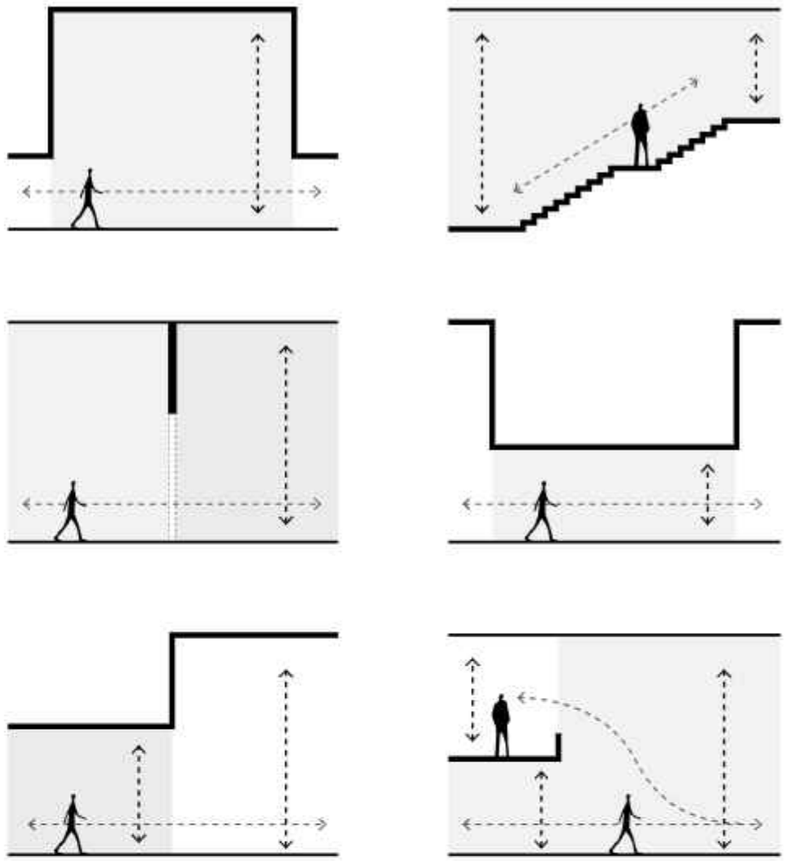
Space formed by layers of railings, columns, a louvered ceiling, lighting, and the exterior

View from the second floor toward the two-story open archive platform

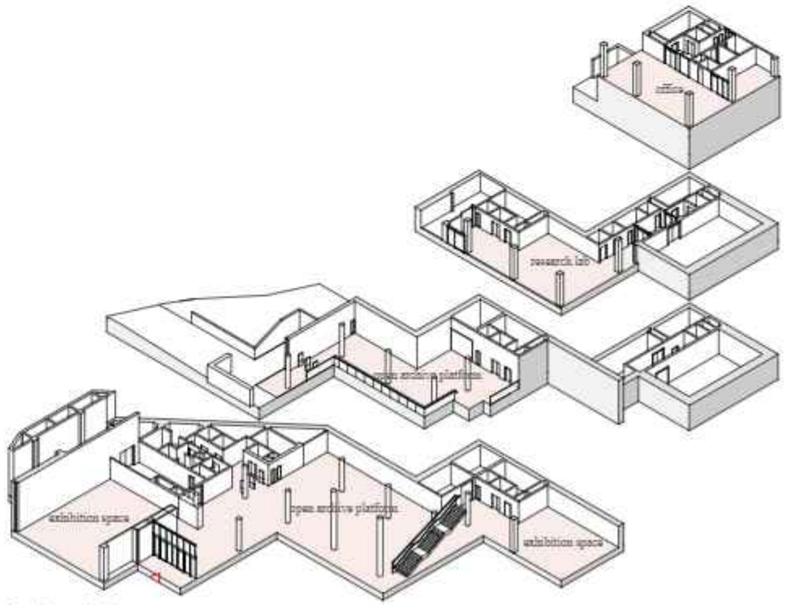
Separating and connecting spaces through architectural elements

Existing floor plan

Revised floor plan (after renovation)



Architectural elements that create spatial quality



Spatial organization

Shin Design Lab Campus

Rooftop view overlooking the city and Uiam Lake ©Yoon,joonhwan

Architect Firm: Shin Design Lab
Principal Architect: Shin Jeongyeap
Design Team: Shin Jeongyeap, Chung Dukyoung, Kwon Jaesoong
Location: Chuncheon-si, South Korea
Area: 974 square meters
Completion Date: May 2023
Photography: YOON Joonhwan

A Voyage Toward the Lake

After many years of design practice in Seoul, the capital of South Korea, Shin Design Lab decided to embark on a new challenge. We sought a place that could embrace creative people and inspire diverse forms of work-one that would go beyond a conventional workplace and actively realize our core values of community activation and sustainable development.

Entrance leading to the Shin Design Lab Campus ©Yoon,joonhwan

Rather than setting out on a larger voyage across the sea, Shin Design Lab chose to change course toward Chuncheon, a lakeside city in Gangwon Province where regional decline is rapidly accelerating. This decision was an intentional commitment to engage with the challenges of our time, shaped by a sense of moral debt for having benefited from Korea's major historical achievements (independence, industrialization, and democratization) and by gratitude toward previous generations. After five years of site selection, land acquisition, design, and construction, the place was completed. A mixed-use cultural complex comprising design studios, a cafe, a gallery, an art library, an auditorium, and multiple gardens now stands at the western edge beyond Lake Uiam in Chuncheon.

View from Northeast ©Yoon,joonhwan

View from Southwest ©Yoon,joonhwan

View from South ©Yoon,joonhwan

View from Southeast ©Yoon,joonhwan

A Dialogue Between Tradition and the Future

The Shin Design Lab Campus accommodates a wide range of programs to support community activation, with its spatial organization inspired by traditional Korean architecture. The main design studios are oriented due south, while the width of the courtyard and the floor-to-ceiling heights were carefully calibrated in response to neighboring buildings, enabling the complex to adapt wisely to Gangwon's cold winter climate.

The auditorium, a space for education and performance, is located on the eastern side, where the rising sun symbolizes inspiration and creativity directed toward a new future. The gallery, drawing inspiration from the placement of Jibokjae, the royal archive of Gyeongbokgung Palace, is positioned to the west. This minimizes direct sunlight during peak viewing hours, while allowing the warm glow of the setting sun to render the artworks inside more atmospheric at dusk.

On the northern side, the cafe and art library function like a traditional front courtyard or gate, becoming a space of encounter and communication for those who visit the campus.

The Courtyard and the Bird Garden (Rooftop) That Holds Time

The inner courtyard between the two buildings was designed not merely as a landscape space but as a place for diverse cultural and artistic activities. Its proportions and scale were inspired by the courtyards of hyanggyo, Confucian academies from the Joseon Dynasty found throughout Gangwon Province. Ten katsura trees planted there release a sweet, sugarcane-like fragrance in summer, while their leaves change color with the seasons, allowing the courtyard to hold a sense of time and seasonal rhythm.
The Bird Garden on the cafe rooftop takes an alternative approach to conventional rooftop landscaping, which is difficult to maintain during harsh winters. Instead of artificial management, it prioritizes natural pollination by birds and insects, allowing native plants from the surrounding area to take root, fade, and regenerate year after year in repeating cycles of life.
Here, bricks absorb the passage of years.
Seasons express change through color and scent.
And the rooftop landscape, transformed annually, becomes a quiet record of time like tree rings that do not accumulate.

Central Garden during the nighttime ©Yoon,joonhwan

Brick Façade of Arcape Coffee ©Yoon,joonhwan

Entrance leading to Arcape Coffee ©Yoon,joonhwan

Arcape Coffee ©Yoon,joonhwan

Way to the Bird Garden ©Yoon,joonhwan

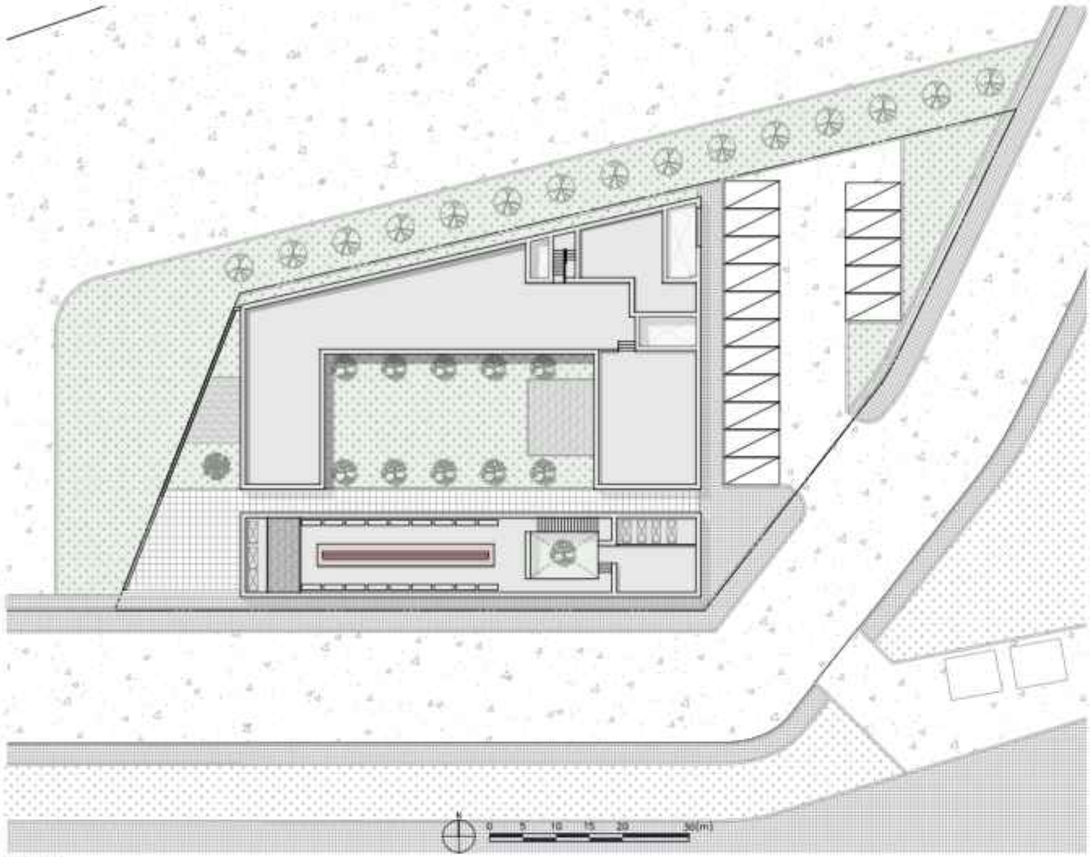
Bird Garden ©Shin Design Lab

Auditorium ©Yoon,joonhwan

Shin Design Lab Office ©Yoon,joonhwan

Beyond Architecture

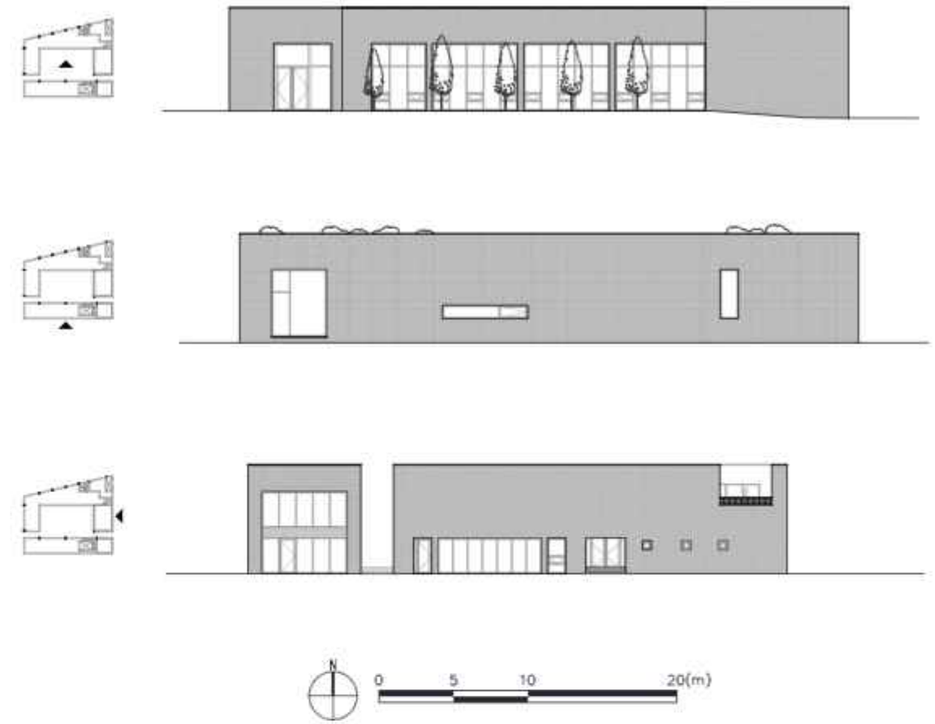
Beyond serving as a place for designing architecture and outdoor spaces, this site has become a platform for cultural and social life in a small city facing the risk of decline. It hosts a successful art fair (Chuncheon Art Road), welcomes world-renowned scholars through public lecture programs (The Grand Lecture), brings young people together through group social events (Hamkke Seomyeon-a community matchmaking program), and provides a stage for a wide range of performances.



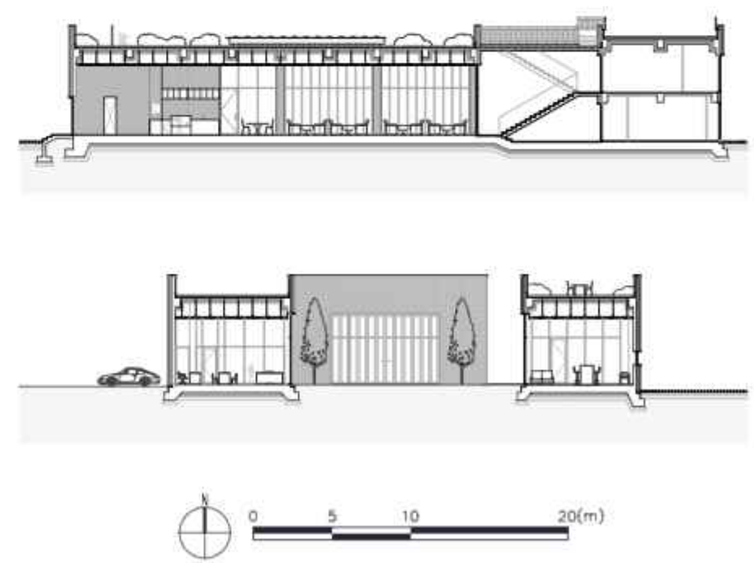
Site Plan

First-floor Plan

Second-floor Plan



Elevations



Sections

Design Proposal: Gangwon State Government Office

[5th place, International Design Competition for Gangwon State Government Office]

View from Northwest ©Shin Design Lab

View from Southwest ©Shin Design Lab

Architect Firm: Shin Design Lab
Principal Architect: Shin Jeongyeap
Design Team: Shin Jeongyeap, Chung Dukyoung, Lee Mingyu, Kim Gwangho, Min Kyeongmin
Location: Chuncheon-si, South Korea
Area: 114,647 square meters
Completion Date: September 2024
Photography: Shin Design Lab

Who Is the Building For?

As a metropolitan government building, this project inevitably accommodates diverse administrative programs. However, planning a public facility with a construction cost of approximately USD 250 million and a total floor area of 110,000 square meters implies significance beyond its physical scale. It signifies not just an administrative space for governance, but a place expected to embody broader public values and social roles. For Chuncheon, it offers the first large-scale urban park since the cancellation of the Civic Park plan at the former Camp Page. For Gangwon Province, it provides a long-missing venue for conventions and exhibitions that were previously difficult to host due to spatial limitations. Nationally, as a government of a divided region, this site holds symbolic potential as a place representing a future vision of peace. Thus, this building is designed not only for public officials, but for Chuncheon citizens, Gangwon residents, and Korean people as a whole.

Voyage, Borderless, Formless

At its core, this is a workplace. Plans and sections are designed to strengthen communication and support recovery from everyday stress. Beyond the office, open spaces and public amenities extend the complex into a community destination. Major shared programs-auditorium, reception, and large conference rooms-are clustered around a central park (the Lake Garden), so the complex can operate as a platform for the local economy as well as governance. Rather than emphasizing aerial views, the massing and facade are designed to express symbolism at eye level, enabling the architecture to represent the future peace of the Republic of Korea on the international stage.

Urban Proximity and 365-Day Public Life

The site plan prioritizes proximity to the public. Rather than retreating from pedestrian streets, the buildings remain close to everyday movement. Public programs and convenience facilities are placed at lower levels adjacent to the central open space, ensuring the site remains active beyond office hours-designed to be filled 365 days a year, not emptied after work.

View from West ©Shin Design Lab

View from North ©Shin Design Lab

A Commons-Based Workplace: Floors, Sections, Facades
Work floors share common spaces on each level to improve efficiency, increase chance encounters, and encourage collaboration. Two stacked floors meet near the core at an open shared common. These linked shared zones reconnect separated levels into one continuous "commons." In section, varied heights and circulation enrich the public interior and intensify social interaction. A two-floor open shared space links to a southeast atrium, supporting natural ventilation while serving as a key workplace element for communication and relaxation.
Facades respond to four criteria-symbolism, solar control, insulation performance, and views. Stone composite panels address high-insulation areas; aluminum louvers manage solar gain; large louvers form symbolic elevations on key public views; and BIPV is applied where views are limited but insolation is strong, allowing the envelope to produce energy.

Lounge ©Shin Design Lab

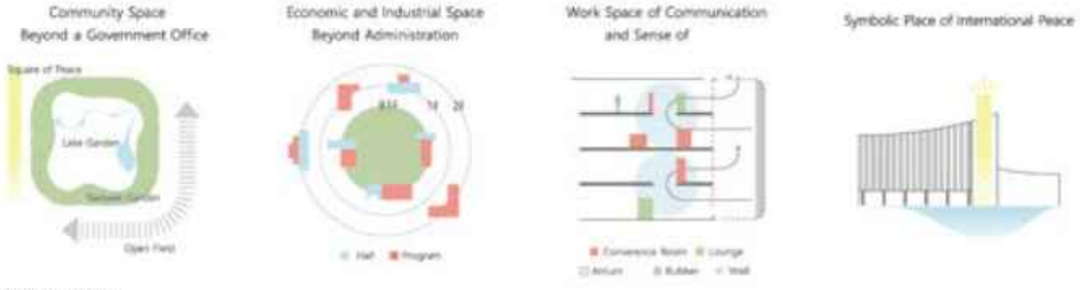
Nursery School ©Shin Design Lab

Council ©Shin Design Lab

Site Plan ©Shin Design Lab

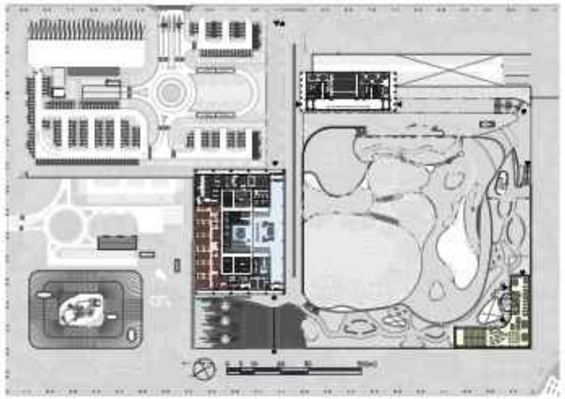
Restaurant ©Shin Design Lab

Fitness Room ©Shin Design Lab

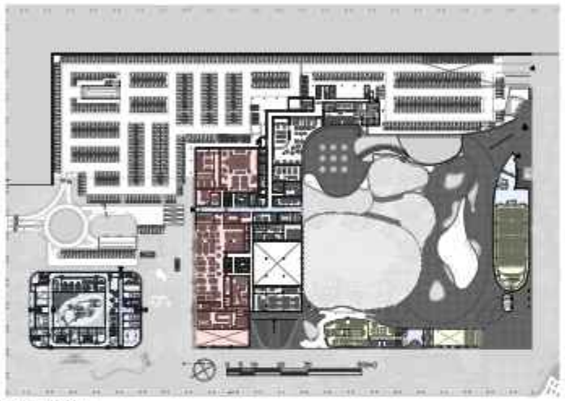


Basic Plan Diagram

Landscape System: Gangwon's Eighteen Cities In One Park
Open spaces translate the diverse landscapes of Gangwon Province's eighteen cities into a connected park system. The central Lake Garden (up to 40 meters wide) draws from lake-culture cities and integrates water management: runoff collected along site steps is purified through natural filtration and hydroponic planting, while a portion is stored and reused for irrigation. The rooftop Taebaek Garden echoes dynamic mountain topography, carrying a hope for renewal in former coal-mining regions. Road-side public open space references border-area field landscapes, providing rest and everyday permeability. Signature places include the Square of Peace, Water Square, a 2,000 square meters lawn for major public events, Terrace Garden, Outdoor Theater, a pollinator production garden, and a protected children's landscape called the Dream & Future Garden.



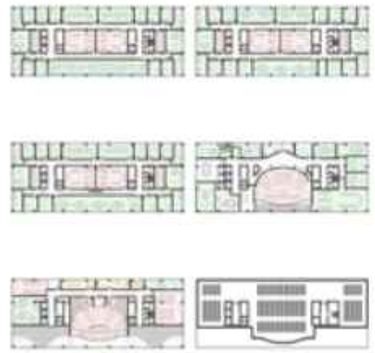
Second-floor Plan

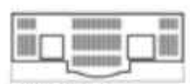


Frist-floor Plan

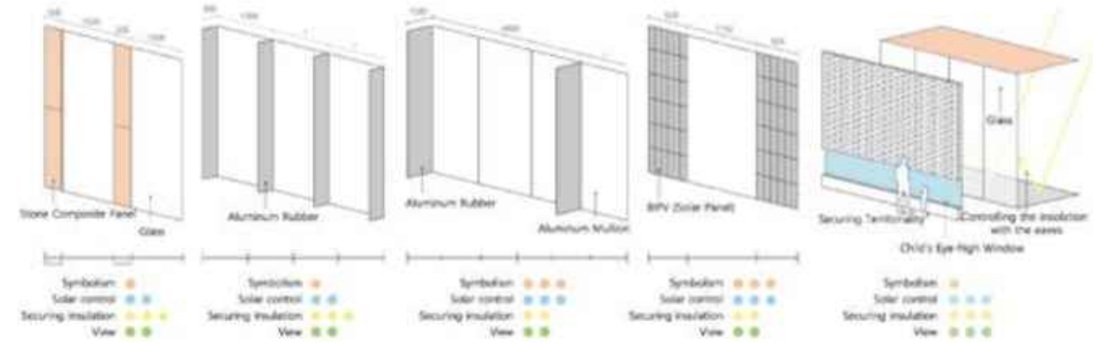
Basement-floor Plan

Government Office-floor Plan

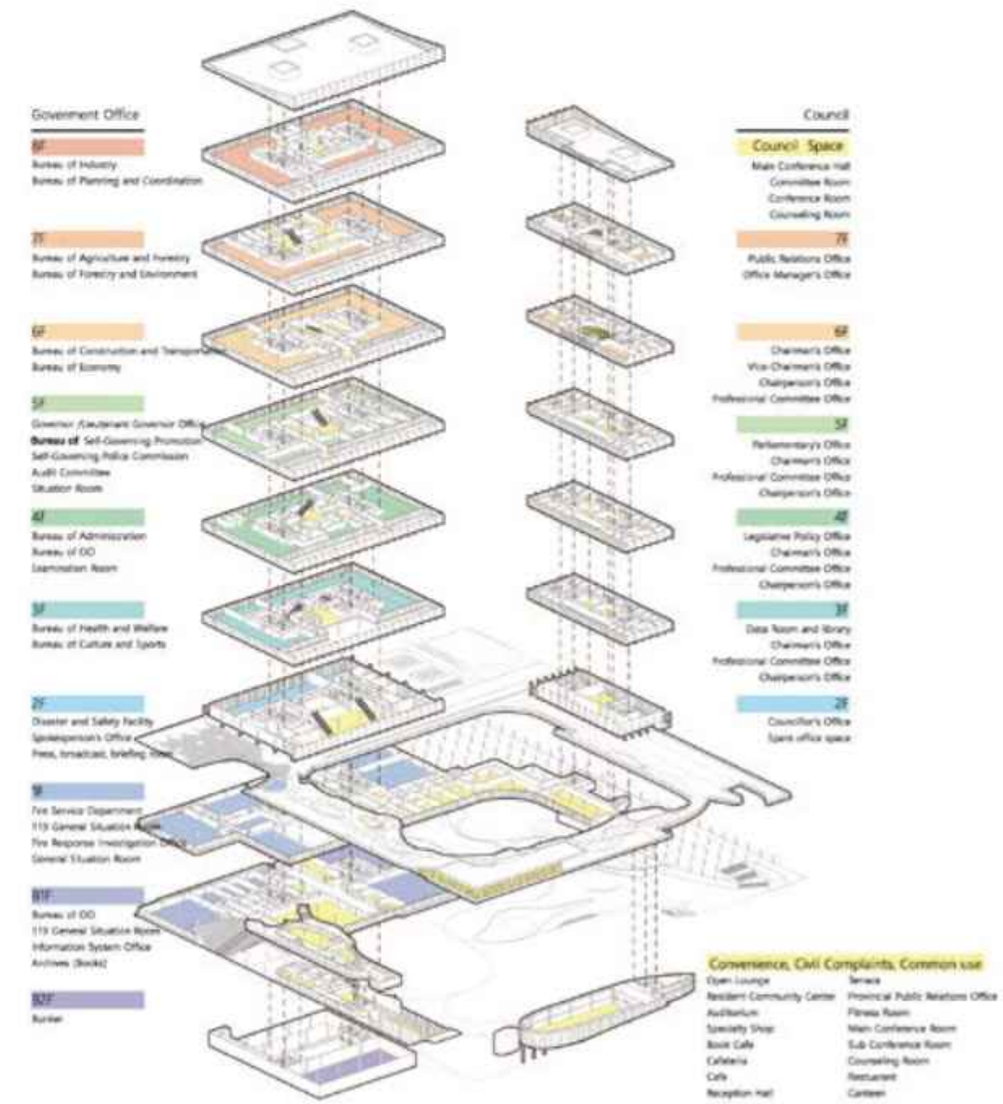




Council-floor Plan



Elevation Diagram



Floor Map

TIDEAWAY

View of the building from across the harbor ©Yoon,Joonhwan

View from the road ©Yoon,Joonhwan

View of the building from across the harbor ©Yoon,Joonhwan

Architect Firm: ZITTA Architects
Principal Architect: Younkyoung Cho, Donghyun Kim
Design Team: Hyeran Jeong
Location: Busan, Republic of Korea
Area: 1,887.84 square meters
Completion Date: May 2020
Photography: Joonhawn Yoon

The border of Earth and Ocean

Stepping away from the urban clamor, one arrives at a site situated on the exquisite threshold where the land meets the sea. Even in a coastal city like Busan, such a location-directly abutting the shoreline-is rare. The project began with a profound respect for this border condition, adopting a posture of coexistence to ensure the architecture does not sever the long-standing visual connection between the community and the sea.

To honor the visual rights of passersby, the ground floor is elevated via a pilotis structure, creating a transparent void that preserves the coastal vista. By intentionally displacing the guest units to the subterranean level and upper floors, the design secures a high degree of vertical privacy, shielding inhabitants from the gaze of the street while maintaining an architectural dialogue with the surroundings.

View from across the road ©Yoon,Joonhwan

Massing Strategy: A Dialogue Between Two Axes

The border where the site meets the sea deviates slightly from the linear flow of the adjacent road. Rather than conforming to the street grid, the building is oriented along the coastal axis. This strategic alignment directs the interior gaze toward the dense pine groves of Gongsu Village and the "Julbawi" rock formations emerging from the water, rather than a monotonous horizon of the open sea.

The composition is defined by the fragmentation of three distinct masses. A horizontal volume on the second floor, cantilevering along the road axis, intersects with the vertical core, creating a rhythmic tension in the building's silhouette. This horizontal element acts as a visual conduit, "opening up" the space to link the mountains and the sea, while defining the building's architectural identity.

View from the terrace ©Yoon,Joonhwan

View from the guestroom ©Yoon,Joonhwan

View from the infinity pool ©Yoon,Joonhwan

View from the terrace ©Yoon,Joonhwan

View from the guestroom ©Yoon,Joonhwan

Overlapping Proximal and Distant Views

The ridgeline of Mangdeokbong Peak flows across the road, traversing the building's volumes before descending into the sea. The articulation of these three staggered masses creates a variety of interstitial outdoor spaces, fostering a symbiotic relationship with the surrounding context. As guests ascend the stairs, glimpses of sunlight, mountain, and sea flicker through the voids, evoking a sense of anticipation inherent to travel.

The exterior corridors leading to the guest rooms offer a curated visual experience: the proximal view of the bamboo forest juxtaposed with the distant view extending toward Songjeong Beach. On the third floor, the lounge-barn from the shifting of masses-provides a panoramic sweep from Mangdeokbong and Songjeong Harbor to the pine forests of Jukdosan.

View from the rooftop ©Yoon,Joonhwan

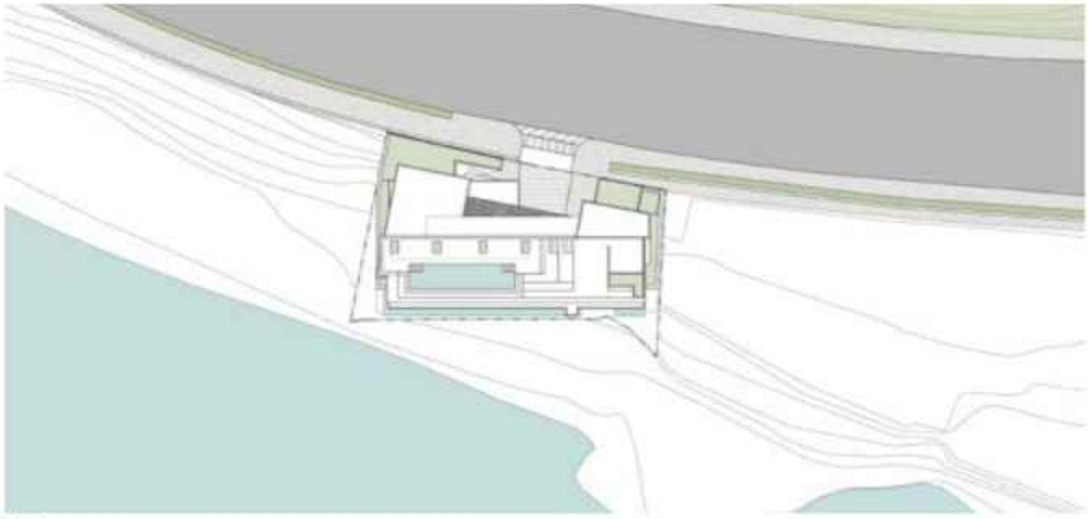
View from the seaside ©Yoon,Joonhwan

The ambiguous boundary between outside and inside

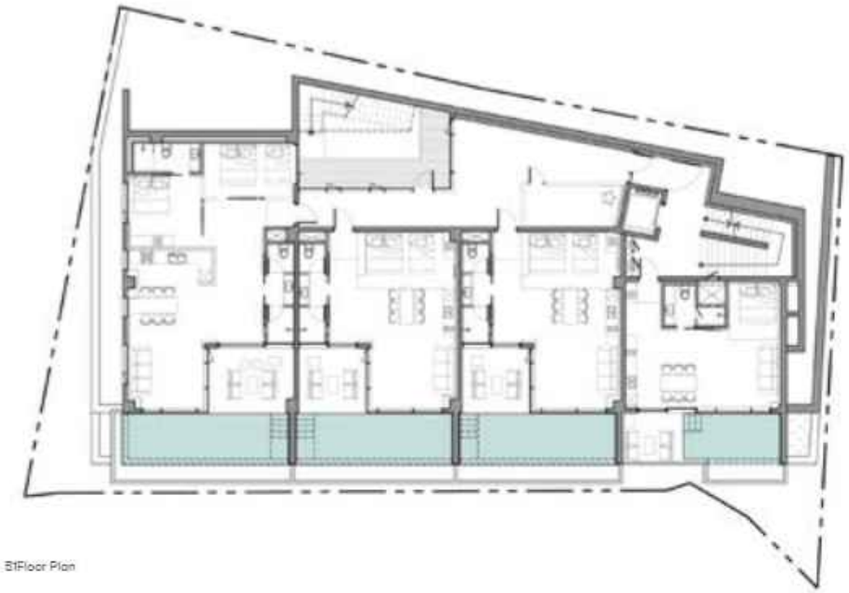
By exposing circulation spaces such as corridors and staircases to the exterior, natural elements from the surroundings were guided to permeate the building interior. The sea breeze, the movement of the forest, and the rhythmic sound of waves converge with the picturesque scenery of the village harbor and its lighthouses. This culminates in the rooftop infinity pool, where architectural barriers vanish, leaving only the user in an immersive encounter with the vast, boundless ocean.

View from the stairs ©Yoon,Joonhwan

View from the sunken ©Yoon,Joonhwan



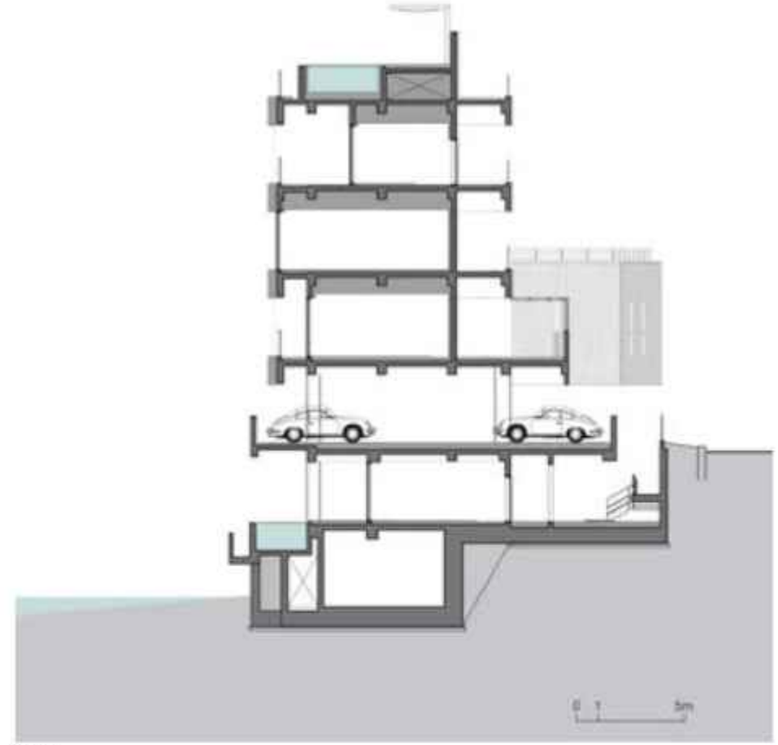
Site plan



B1Floor Plan

3Floor Plan

4Floor Plan



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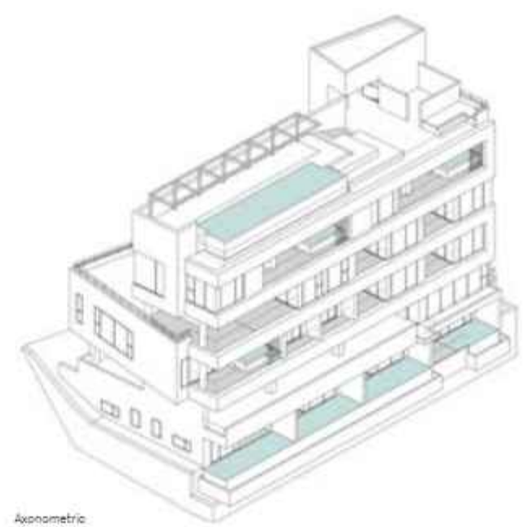


Axonometric

Axonometric

STARSCAPE

Bird's eye view

Architect Firm: ZITTA Architects
Principal Architect: Younkyoung Cho, Donghyun Kim
Design Team: Hyeran Jeong
Location: Pohang-si, Republic of Korea
Area: 845.96 / 1,801.24 square meters
Completion Date: July 2021
Photography: Joonhawn Yoon

The Site: A Coastal Hill Where the Sea and Fields Converge

Situated on a gentle slope adjacent to a coastal road that traces the deep blue shoreline, the site possesses a unique geographical identity. To the north and east, the vast sea unfolds, while to the south and west, open fields extend toward distant, low-lying mountain ridges. Thanks to its protruding topography, the land offers a panoramic three-sided view of the ocean, while the pastoral landscape on the opposite side provides a contrasting, evocative experience.

Elevated approximately five meters above the road, the architecture was conceived to appear as if delicately perched upon the hill. The structures are oriented outward toward the sea, yet at their heart lies a "Madang" (central courtyard), reached via an upward architectural promenade. This courtyard serves as a pivotal node connecting multiple volumes, inviting the sea, mountains, and fields into the interstices between the buildings.

View from the courtyard

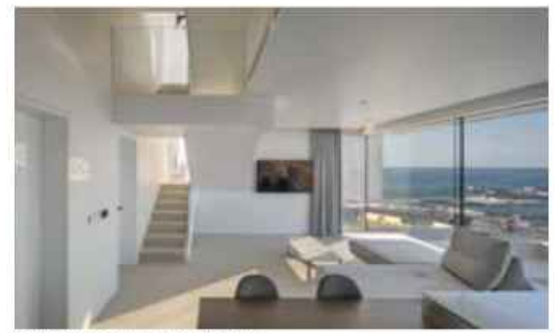
View from the bridge ©Yoon,Joonhwan

View from the courtyard ©Yoon,Joonhwan

The Courtyard: A Three-Dimensional Sequence of Voids and Solids

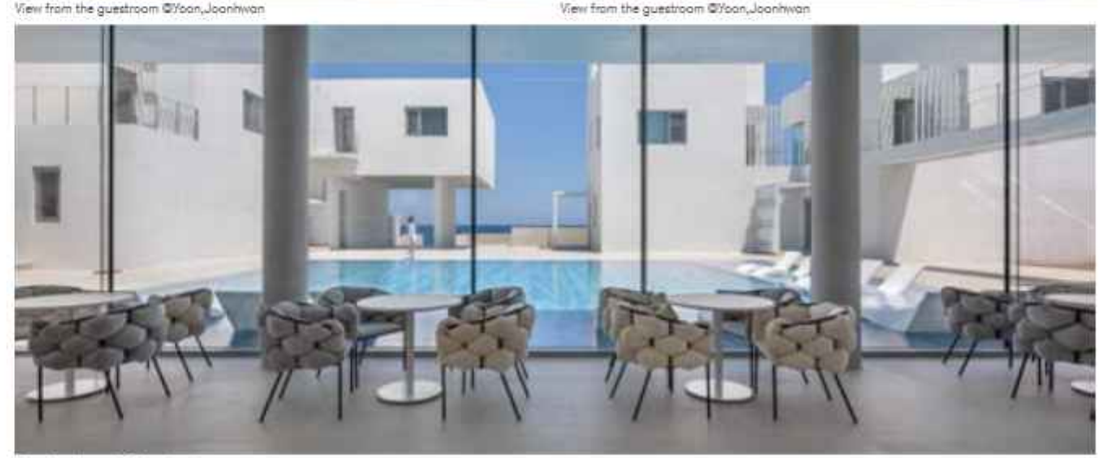
Retail units and parking are positioned at the street level, with a grand staircase designed to overcome the site's elevation. Ascending this staircase and passing through the void beneath the building leads one into the central courtyard.

Within the courtyard, a communal swimming pool and a cafe instill a sense of vitality into the static architectural form. The interplay of white geometric masses, vertical louvers, bridges, and the pool creates a rich spatial density. The buildings surrounding the courtyard are fragmented into individual units separated by terraces and private pools.



View from the guestroom ©Yoon,Joonhwan

View from the guestroom ©Yoon,Joonhwan



View from the cafe ©Yoon,Joonhwan

Openness and Reflection: An Architectural Landscape Blurring Boundaries

The essence of this project lies in the "openness" that draws nature inward-facilitated by the voids on the ground floor and the interstitial spaces between the segmented masses on the second floor. By hollowing out parts of the structure, the design pulls the surrounding natural elements into the heart of the courtyard. As the building rises, the reduction of mass toward the courtyard and the integration of bridges ensure the space remains porous. Notably, the communal pool serves as a reflective plane. From any angle within the courtyard, the architecture is mirrored on the water's surface. While the reflection of the azure sky evokes a crisp, ethereal clarity during the day, the transition to dusk invites a warmer, more emotive atmosphere as the interior glow and the hues of the sunset dance upon the water. It is hoped that travelers seeking refuge from the mundane will find this encounter with nature's charm a profound catalyst for rejuvenation.

View from the courtyard ©Yoon,Joonhwan

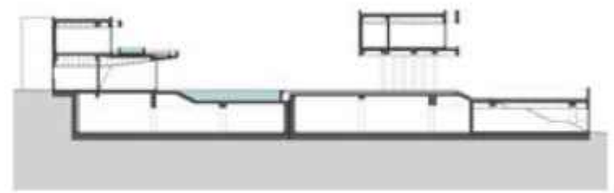
View from the guestroom ©Yoon,Joonhwan

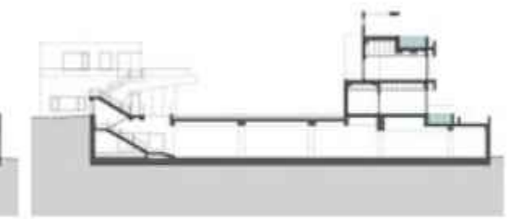
View from the guestroom ©Yoon,Joonhwan

View from the parking area toward the first floor ©Yoon,Joonhwan

View from the courtyard ©Yoon,Joonhwan

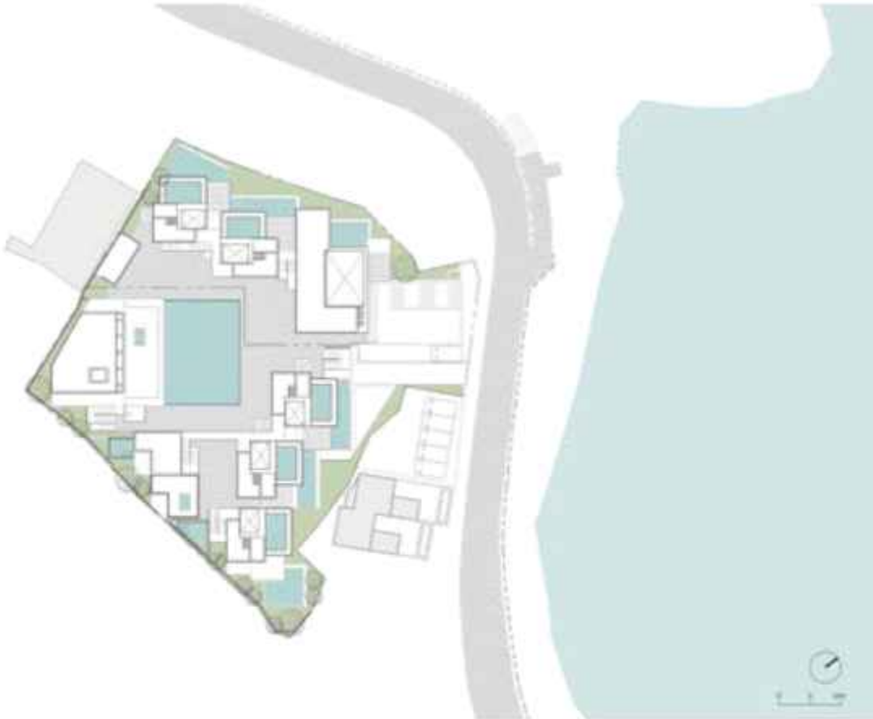
View from the courtyard ©Yoon,Joonhwan



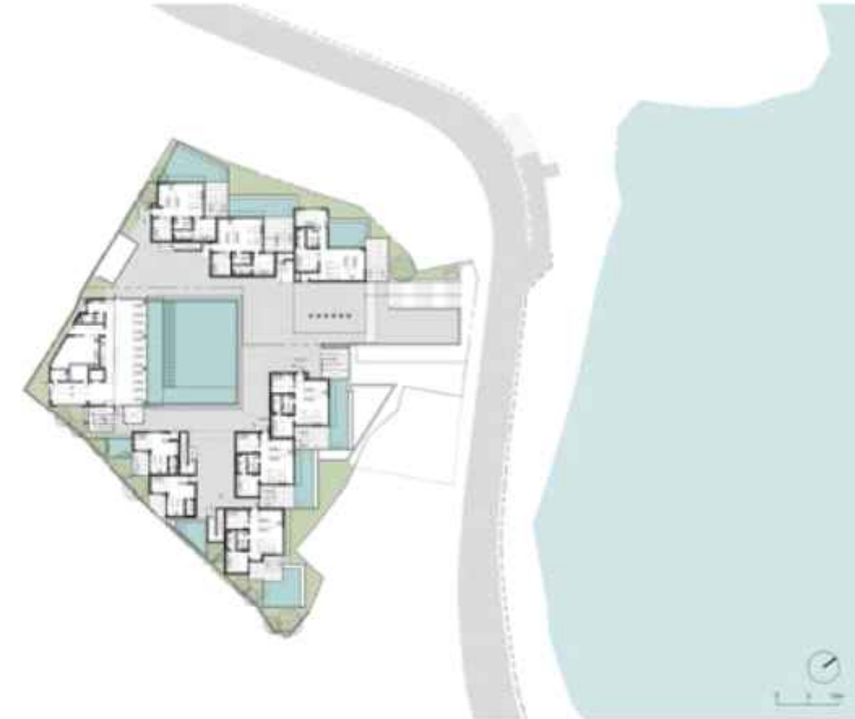


Section

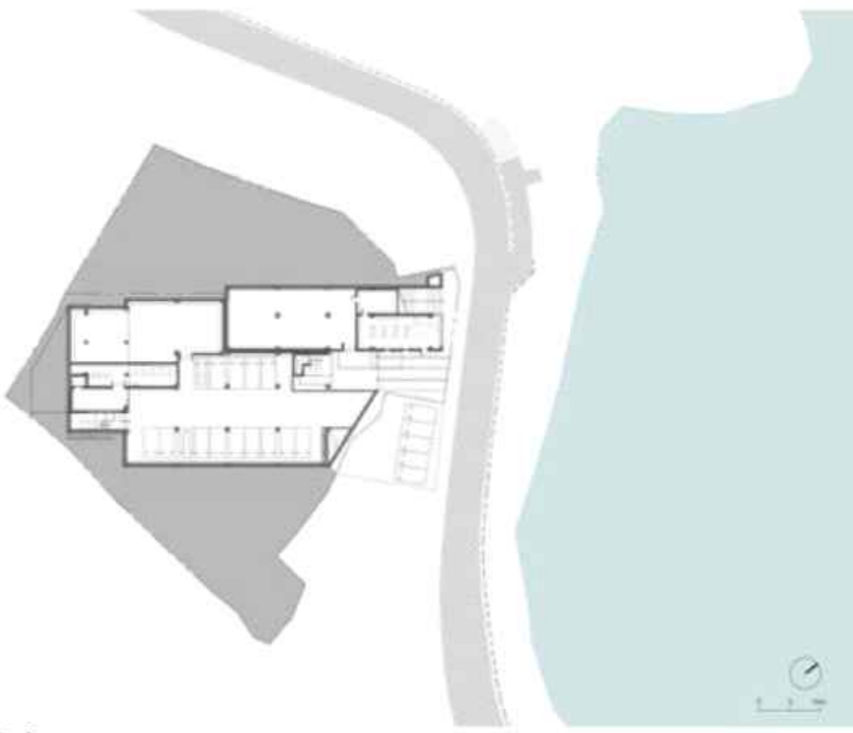
View of the building from near the site ©Yoon,Joonhwan



Site plan



1Floor Plan



B1Floor Plan

2Floor Plan

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