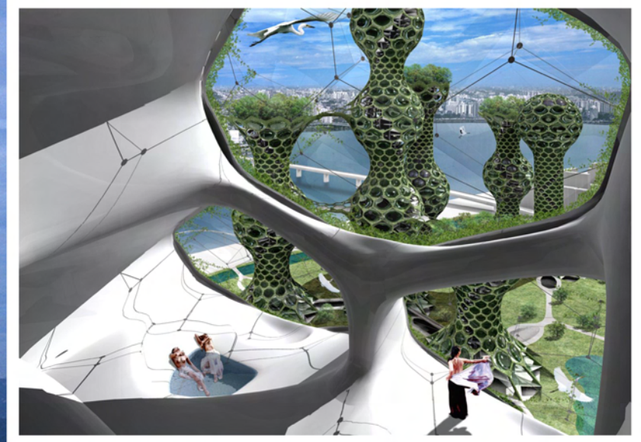
SEOUL PATROL



THE HONEYCOMB KID: (Left to right) The Seoul Commune 2026 concept (2005) addresses overpopulation by combining residential and park spaces; "cells" in the complex house individuals; the temporary Ring Dome (2007) in New York was made from 1,000 hula hoops wired to glow at night

PHOTO: RING DOME, RIGHT) GAIA CAMBIAGGIO

AN ARCHITECT'S TRIUMPHANT RETURN TO HIS NATIVE SOUTH KOREA RESULTS IN IMAGINATIVE SPACES AND WILD IDEAS **WRITER: JOHANNA LENANDER**

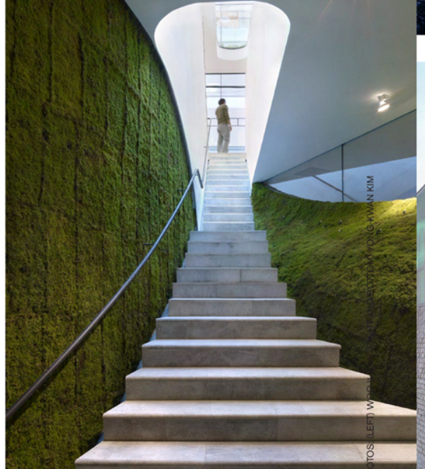
After decades of rapid urban expansion, Seoul is experiencing concrete fatigue. The densely populated city of 11 million people aspires to attract foreign capital and tourists by beautifying its cluttered and monotonous landscape. "They're trying to brand the city with design," says architect Minsuk Cho, principal of local firm Mass Studies, whose elegant and innovative work comments on the current changes in Korean society.

Cho spent most of his professional life in Rotterdam and New York, where he founded the firm Cho Slade Architects with

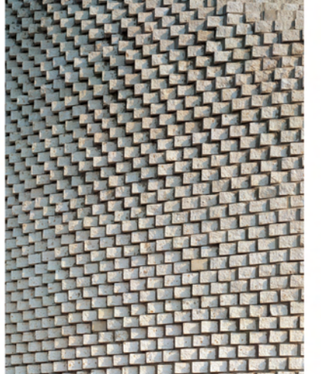
partner James Slade in 1998. But Korea's makeover movement prompted him to return to his native Seoul in 2003. "Seoul is an exciting place for an architect these days," he says, noting that he felt working in New York was frustrating. "It was hard to get projects where you were able to build from the ground up." Cho discovered the creative possibilities of his homeland when he and partner Slade were invited to create a home from scratch in the upscale experimental art community, Heyri Art Valley (see "Double Booked," issue 67). The result was Pixel House, an asymmetrical brick residence for a young family with a playful and airy layout that served both as a communal daycare and private residence. Since then, Cho has gained a reputation as one of the most exciting forces in Korean architecture. "We're quite selective in choosing our clients," he explains, "We're not interested in the large-scale developer projects that are built just to make money. There should be a genuine interest in architecture."

One such project is the recently completed Seoul flagship for

IT'S ALWAYS GREENER: (Left) Interiors of Mass Studies' MUE Shop in Seoul (2004) use mechanically operated hangers and movable display cases to reconfigure the space each season; (inset and below) Their Ann Demeulemeester shop (2007), also in Seoul, garnered attention for its moss and plant-covered surfaces



A BIT STEEP: (Inset) The angular Xi Gallery (2007) in Seoul is both a cultural center and exhibition space for a residential development; (below) the Pixel House (2003) in Korea's Heyri Art Valley uses orthogonal bricks to achieve an 8-bit effect



Belgian fashion designer Ann Demeulemeester, which has received a lot of attention for its plant-covered facade and off-kilter shape. The green exterior is a recurring theme in Mass Studies' work, as it brings a tiny slice of lush nature into Seoul's brutally urban cityscape. It also creates the illusion of a soft, overgrown patina, according to Cho: "We would like the city to look more ancient, like Angkor Wat." Another project that features a vertical "garden" is their futuristic proposal, Seoul Commune 2026, which consists of 15 bulbous residential towers covered in perennial plants and featuring a honeycomb grid of small, capsule-sized studios and larger communal spaces. The towers are designed for individuals, since one-person households are the most common in Korea. "In the future, you'll live and work in a minimum of space and share larger leisure areas with others," says Cho, who claims he'd like to retire in the Commune. But before then, there's a lot of work to be done – Mass Studies' increasing notoriety has generated lots of work for the firm. "We used to be known mainly for creating interesting proposals, but now a lot of our projects are being realized," says Cho, who likens his output to pop music. "We used to have a few hits here and there, but now people want to buy the whole album." ◗

PHOTOS: YONG-KWAN KIM