SEOUl PATROL

THE HONEYCOMB KIDS (Left to right)
The Seoul Concourse 2030 concept (2005) addresses overpopulation by combining residential and park spaces; “hubs” in the complex house reedbeds, the temporary Rink Dome (2005) in New York was made from 1,000 hula hoops wired to glow at night.

An architect's triumphant return to his native South Korea results in imaginative spaces and wild ideas. Writer: Johanna Leanders

After decades of rapid urban expansion, Seoul is experiencing concrete fatigue. The densely populated city of 11 million people strives to attract foreign capital and tourists by beautifying its cluttered and monotonous landscape. "They're trying to brand the city with design," says architect Minsoo Cho, principal of local firm M3 Architecture, 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

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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 Bricked” issue 47). 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 Belgian fashion designer Ann Demeulemeester, which has received a lot of attention for its plant-covered facade and off-white shape. The green exterior is a recurring theme in Mass Studies’ work, as it brings a hint of lush nature into Seoul’s brutish urban landscape. It also creates the illusion of a soft, overgrown piazza, 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 2006, which consists of 15 bulwark residential towers covered in perennials 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 amount 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 likes his output to pop music. “We used to have a few hits here and there, but now people want to buy the whole album.”