



From Hab to Habitat

THE WORKS OF MINSUK CHO

Given the North/South divide, Korea’s ‘schizoid’ urban reality would appear to have many personalities on the go at once. Seoul in particular is Change City and Minsuk Cho is an architect whose work challenges concepts of territory, typology, programme and representation in the region and in doing so, reveals the most radical form of public space which latently existent in the contemporary Asian city: the ‘public living room’.

Text by Ilka & Andreas Ruby, images by Mass Studies

Minsuk Cho is probably not the most typical Korean architect. He spent 14 years of his life in the US, to get his education and most of his architectural training, acquiring his first professional experience and launching his first own architectural practice in New York City. No wonder he speaks English with ease quite uncommon in a country where every cab offers a free translator telephone service to help foreign guests reach their final destination. When he came back to Korea in 2003 to start his office Mass Studies, Seoul had changed so much that he had to ‘re-learn’ it, Cho says. And he sure has. His work displays a passionate desire to engage with the urban reality of Seoul. But he also wants to transform it. A traveller between the worlds and an embedded outsider in Korea, Cho sees Seoul with an extra eye few locals have, acutely framing what could be described as the schizoid logic of Korea’s urban condition, and Seoul’s in particular: On the one side, there is an incredible cultural versatility which seems to consume all parts of daily life - the sophistication of Korean food, the zillions of leisure activities taking place in closed rooms invisible from the street, the joyful and instant appropriation of all kinds of techno-

logical gadgets. On the other side, there is almost a curse of the normative that prevents this highly sophisticated art of living from becoming the visible and generative model for the production of identity in the public realm of the society.

In the quick and brutal urbanisation following the Korean War, the country was rebuilt using urban typologies such as the Hochhausstadt of German visionary architect Ludwig Hilbersheimer, which presents an uncanny déjà-vu for a western visitor. Seoul is a high-rise-high-density metropolitan field produced by a sheer repetition of generic apartment slabs. Leaving little room for difference, they render a startling image of mass. It’s a binary regime of social space, which locates the production of identity predominantly in individual transactions of people (very often in the intimacy of enclosed rooms), yet does not seem to allow that fascinating social production of space to spill out into the open space between buildings. Whereas in the European city this negative space is identified, almost by default, as public space, and mostly charged with symbolic and representative functions, it appears to be mostly programmed with infrastructural and logistic functions in the Korean urban condition. Even so, it often does work as public space, especially in the more traditional urban fabric, but its publicness is something that occurs through ad-hoc-appropriation - such as people sleeping on benches or in the grass at lunchtime, or a crowd of people playing games under a highway.

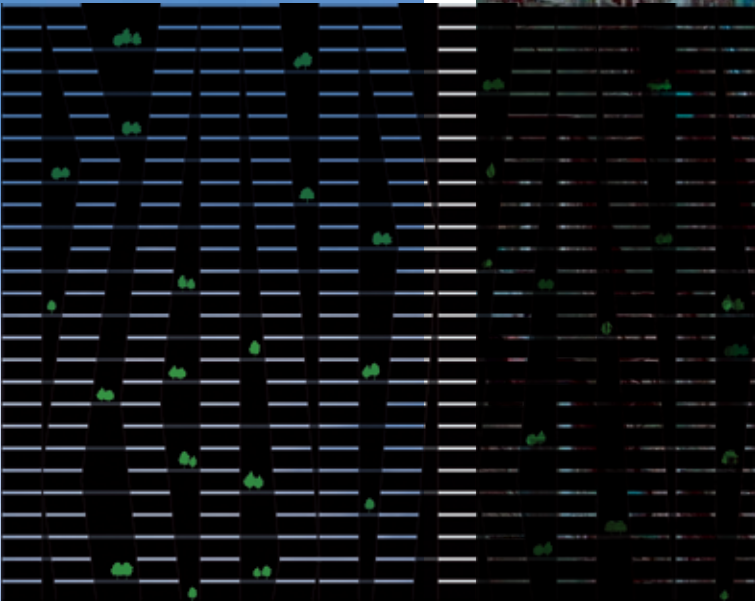
Minsuk Cho tries to overcome this schizoid condition by transforming architecture on the levels of territory, typology, programme and representation, in order to differentiate a generic condition that is most emblematically embodied by the Hilbersheimer Apartment Building (HAB).

Spread:
Gourd Bottle Tower Matrix
& Honeycomb Matrix: Seoul
Commune 2026
Photography by Michael Wolf from the series ‘Architecture of Density’ altered for Mass Matrix Studies



S-Trenue, Bundle Matrix
Architect: Minsuk Cho + Kisu Park
Location: 26,26-1 Yeouido-dong, Yeongdeungpo-gu, Seoul, Korea
Site Area: 2,931.00 m²
Gross Floor Area: 1,745.01 m²
Total Floor Area: 39,898.56 m²
Building-to-Land Ratio: 59.54%
Floor Area Ratio: 799.86%
Building Scope: 36f,b7
Structure: RC, SRC
Finishing: T3 Al.sheet, T24(T28) Low-E double glass, Flit glass, Marble
Construction Period: 08.2006-08.2009
Bridge: 32
Unit: 118

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Photo by Michael Wolf from the series Architecture of Density
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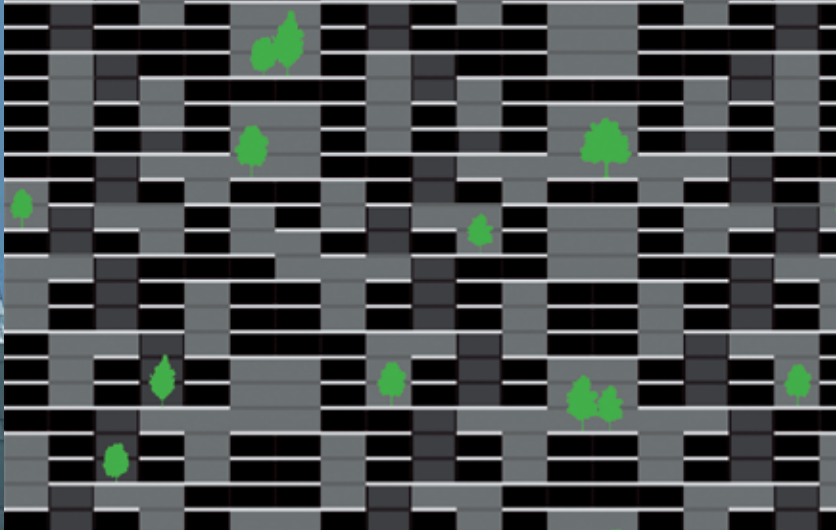


TERRITORIAL DIFFERENTIATION

The first strategy refers to the most atavistic act of architecture, touching the ground. It addresses one of the most crucial axioms of modernist urbanism, the figure-ground-antagonism of building and urban space. In Le Corbusier's urbanist ideology, the building is a singular object that is placed on a flat ground, with no overlap between the two. Fully compliant with this dogma, the HAB, when imported to Korea in the 1960s, was bound to fail to engage the country's unique topographical condition in a meaningful way, raiding its landscape instead with a carpet-bombing of housing slabs. A lot of projects by Minsuk Cho display a desire to overcome this alienation of building and its surroundings, and we can identify two different techniques for doing so: firstly, by fusing figure and ground by a continuous surface connecting both of them in one single tectonic movement (Chungam Media Headquarters, I like Dalki) and secondly, by amplifying the 'voided ground floor of modernism' in scale and filling it programmatically with all kinds of urban attractors (Nature Poem, Boutique Monaco). In both cases, the figure of the building and the ground it stands on give up their antagonistic posture in favour of new spatial continuities.

TPOLOGICAL DIFFERENTIATION

Much of Cho's urban research challenges the HAB as a typology. His 'Matrix Studies' are a systematic effort to genetically engineer the HAB's major typological shortcomings, such as the usually hermetic appearance of the architecture. By cutting openings into and carving voids out of its volume, Cho interlocks the building's interior and exterior spaces to enhance the functional and environmental performance of the dwelling. The standardised, stacked-up ground plans of the HAB are replaced by a whole array of different ground plan typologies differing in size, sectional organisation, outdoor-indoor continuity, and material organisation. Making room for extra spaces in between apartments creates new spatial relationships that allow for different ways of life such as the corridor-connected apartments in Boutique Monaco, efficiently separating living from working environments. In the S-Trenue Office Building, Cho continues these extra-space experiments leading to a different typological deviation, the Bundled matrix, yielding additional space with special properties in between bundled high-rise cores. The Wave matrix explores a single-loaded ring of split-level apartments, which allows for very slender building volumes or even wrapping existing buildings as if with a bandage.



PROGRAMMATIC DIFFERENTIATION

Benefiting from this typological diversification, the Matrix Studies are also a call to arms against the entropic monofunctionality of the HAB. They advocate architecture able to rejuvenate itself according to evolving life-style trends, new forms of organisation in the workplace, different demographic trends leading to new forms of individual and collective living. Instead of being labelled as a public or private building, a museum or a department store, it can negotiate particular programmatic qualities in specific ways. What ensues from this are buildings with ambiguous identities, a quality we often find and appreciate in many of Cho’s projects. I like Dalki for example combines qualities of a museum, a shop, a showroom, and a playroom; and the actual identity of the building will more than likely vary depending on the needs and attitudes of a specific user. With the Xi Gallery, Cho completely rewrites the rules of the model house, a typically Korean form of ‘House Hunting’: It’s a temporary building filled with mock-ups of different apartment types, which is usually built at the beginning of a commercial housing project to help facilitate the sale of apartments before the construction of that housing building has even started. Once all apartments are sold, the model house is usually destroyed. Cho ends this unsustainable routine by upgrading the model house with a substantial array of public cultural functions on its ground floor, which together take more space than the show flats. As a result, Xi Gallery is not a model house propped up with some cultural programmes, but rather a cultural centre that features, among other things, some show flats. The fact that they are presented in a space that, in terms of its placement and organisation, is very similar to a temporary exhibition space in a contemporary art museum provokes multiple readings. While they still serve their commercial purpose (allowing home buyers to test and decide on an apartment to buy), they are simultaneously transformed, due to the allusion to a museum gallery, into a quasi-art installation that allows us to view it like a potential exhibit of a future archaeology of our present.

REPRESENTATIONAL DIFFERENTIATION

Minsuk Cho’s sophisticated programme cocktails not only organise the interior performance of his buildings, but ultimately generate their architectural iconography as well. This is an anomaly in the context of Seoul with its mostly generic volumes differentiating themselves either by the inscription of their devel-

Gwell Tower, Eroded Matrix
Location: 1,678-4,5 Seocho-dong, Seocho-gu, Seoul, Korea
Site Area: 1,083.20 m2
Gross Floor Area: 510.19 m2
Total Floor Area: 10,278.83 m2
Building-to-Land Ratio: 59.99%
Floor Area Ratio: 799.76%
Building Scope: 15F, B5
Structure: RC
Finishing: Curtain wall
Construction Period: 12.2005-10.2008
Outdoor Gardens: 32

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Nature Poem, Skipped Matrix
Location: 118-17 Cheongdam-dong, Gangnam-gu, Seoul, Korea
Site Area: 1,980 m²
Gross Floor Area: 1,175.02 m²
Total Floor Area: 11,256.54 m²
Building-to-Land Ratio: 59.34%
Floor Area Ratio: 298.26%
Building Scope: 6F, B4
Structure: RC
Finishing: Exposed concrete, Glass, Semi-reflective glass
Construction Period: 09.2003-06.2005
*Units: 34, Unit Types: 14
Private gardens: 10*

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Photos by Michael Wolf from the series Architecture of Density
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Photo by Michael Wolf from the series **Architecture of Density**
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Boutique Monaco, Missing Matrix

Location: 1316-5 Seocho-dong,
Seocho-gu, Seoul, Korea

Site Area: 4,284.80 m²

Gross Floor Area: 1,713.13 m²

Total Floor Area: 54,859.92 m²

Building-to-Land Ratio: 39.98 %

Floor Area Ratio: 866.54%

Building Scope: 27F, B5

Structure: RC, SRC

Finishing: Lower floors:

- High gloss white concrete
- Moss panel system
- T12 Tempered glass
- T24 Low-E pair glass

Upper floors:

- T24 Low-E pair glass
- T24 Pastel pair glass
- T19 Cedar siding

Construction Period: 09.2005-08.2008

Missing Matrices: 15

Units: 172

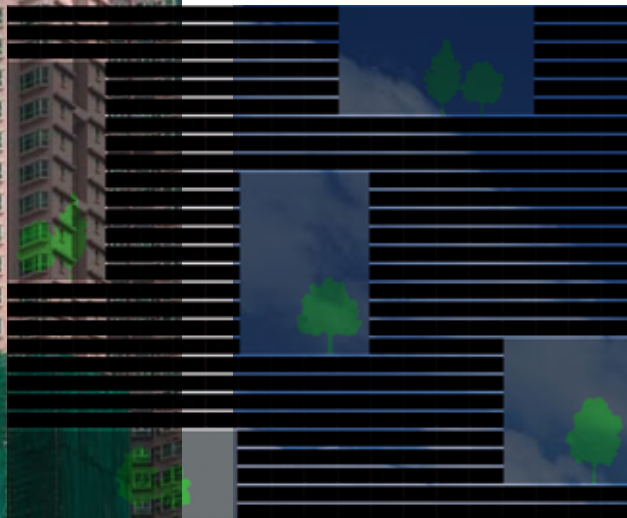
Unit types: 49

Bridge Units: 40

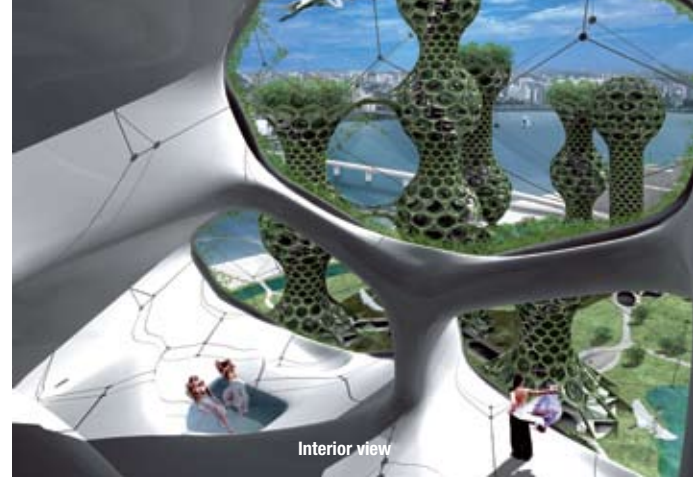
Gardens: 22

oper's brand names (as in most apartment complexes), or by means of huge advertisement billboards covering the façades, or else by postmodern curtain-wall façades that bear no relationship to the space behind. The notion of a façade as a vital architectural medium to negotiate between inside and outside hardly seems to exist. For Cho, however, the visual identity of a building is part and parcel of the architectural body. Therefore he defines the exterior appearance of his buildings using specific material and iconic techniques. Sometimes he uses unusual materials to create surprising atmospheres and identities. In the interests of estranging the classic representation of a given typology he may build a house that does not look like a house, but which causes an uncertainty as to its identity instead - and thus makes us curious to find out what it is about.

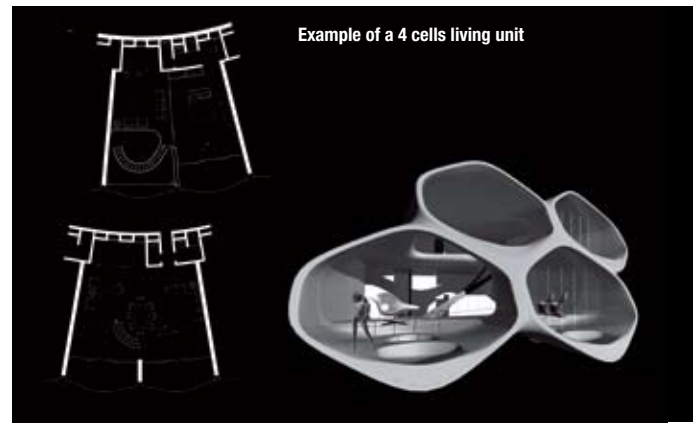
For this displacement of the real he works with two techniques in particular. One is the abuse of convention. In this case he uses a conventional material but applies it in an unconventional way, such as the bricks sticking out at sharp angles in the Pixel House. The other is a material decontextualisation. In that case he takes, for instance, materials from domains other than building in order to generate an atmospheric estrangement. It is noticeable that he has a preference for creating organic atmospheres by employing different kinds of planting, such as in the Torqued House, I love Dalki or the Seoul Commune. Interestingly enough this atmospheric transformation does not stop at the outside. The Xi Gallery features different kinds of vegetal implants such as cactus trees and bamboo to further question the identity of this hybrid space through a calculated atmospheric irritation. In the Boutique for Ann Demeulemeester three different kinds of vegetal atmospheres are staged in such a way that the interior and exterior spaces of the building coalesce into one coherent sequence. The main façade is planted with Pachysandra, an evergreen groundcover. The walls of the stairway that leads to the basement are covered in moss, as if to allude to moist underground caves. Inside the shop, a layer of light bamboo is planted just in front of the generous windows; tainting our vision of the outside world effectively with more green. The façade becomes something like a wallpaper of urban space. It embraces the public space that surrounds the building, as if to entice the public to take over space, ultimately turning it into the most radical form of public space which is latently existent in the contemporary Asian city: the 'public living room'.



Seoul Commune 2026, Seoul Korea
We have imagined a spatial condition
in which the towers become the park
and the park becomes the towers,
with the total emerging as a seamless
whole.
Site Area: 393,326.00 m2
Gross Floor Area: 66,234.00 m2
Total Floor Area: 817,513.00 m2
Residential concept



Interior view



Example of a 4 cells living unit

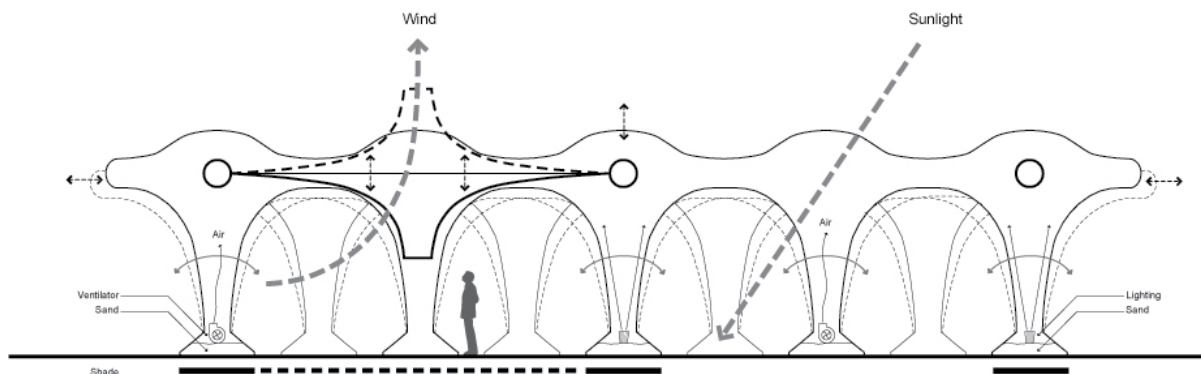


Sprinklers to water the green skin



Inspired by lotus vases





Air Forest, inflatable forest
For the Democratic National Convention 2008 (USA), Mass Studies was one of 10 teams invited for the Dialog: 'City', for which it installed a pneumatic pavilion in the City Park of Denver as a large open space to host a variety of public events.
Photos: Jason Walp

MAKE YOURSELF A HOME IN THE CITY

In fact we had a flash of this public living room when we were in Seoul for the first time in 2006. It was the time of the Football World Cup in Germany. We went to the big plaza in front of the City Hall and found it totally filled with people watching the Korea vs. Switzerland match. It was just turning night and a myriad of illuminated red lights transformed the surface of the square into a chilli version of Walter De Maria's Lightning Field - people were all wearing illuminated red 'devil's horns', to support their team. The audience consisted of all kinds of people, old and young, even families with their small kids. Everybody had made themselves a home in the plaza by simply laying out a newspaper on the ground large enough to sit on. The sensation of the air was filled with excitement, but quiet and attentive, just like you would be sitting with friends in your living room, watching the game.

This very longing for a collective appropriation of space is palpable in many of Minsuk Cho's projects across all scales. We can find it in small installation projects like the Ring Dome or on the slightly bigger scale of the Media Bowl or even in his utopian mega-city project Seoul Commune. They are all different prototypes of the public living room that transcends the traditional opposition of city and building. For ultimately, a home alone might be sufficient to dwell, but to live you need the city. #

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