

## A new soul, and style, for Seoul



Michael Fitzpatrick MARCH 22 2008

It was only a trip to the local shop but Park Danbi had quickly donned a cocktail dress, Cleopatra earrings and full warpaint. “Style is everything in Seoul, especially in fashion-conscious Hongdae,” explains the 23-year-old art college student and interior designer, referring to the area where she studies and works.

It is also where South Korea hatches and develops much of its creative talent – architects, interior designers and product designers.

Park is very much of her milieu. With her steely determination for money and desire for a more “beautiful life in a more beautiful Seoul,” she represents a generation of Koreans keen on distinguishing themselves from their parents, who sought, on the whole, a more mundane life with functional buildings and interiors to match.

“Koreans are the most hard-working of all the countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD],” suggests Park Seong-Tae, editor of South Korea’s leading architecture magazine, Space. “As a result, urban structures are not so important. Instead, people have traditionally valued convenience, not lifestyle.”

The results are plain to see in the incoherent, unlovely mess of signage, concrete and utility poles that makes up much of urban South Korea.

However, it was not always thus. Korea did have style, says Park, but it was largely swept away in the rush to mimic America.

The post-Korean war period was marked by deep poverty. Bulldozing the country's heritage to build tawdry, western-style homes certainly helped boost the economy and quickly housed its people, but sadly, it was done at such breakneck speed that much of Seoul verges on slum dwelling.

The younger generation says it would do things differently. Its members want money, yes, but they also want beauty and style, which is why ambitious art student Park works for one of the country's now booming interiors and architect firms.

"Everybody wants homes like film stars these days, so we are very busy," she says. Tired of the shambles that is the result of war and unrestrained economic development, today's Koreans look to their past, to Japan and to the west's best architects for inspiration.

What is emerging is a new vernacular – a hybrid style that is sparse and lucid like the best Japanese contemporary architecture, but also marked by renewed interest in the peninsula's own cultural heritage.

Kim Jong-ho, director of Design Studio and one of the country's top architects, says this is an important step towards South Korean design gaining worldwide recognition.

"To compete on an international level, we need to develop our own design language that has distinctive cultural elements," he says.

He argues that South Korea has been the Cinderella of north-east Asia's architectural and cultural renaissance for too long. But he suggests that thanks to a plethora of savvy designers and architects who, like himself, have studied abroad, the country is starting to punch – in design terms at least – more in line with its economic weight.

Like Tokyo, Seoul is rethinking its philosophy of building cheaply, quickly and unimaginatively. Instead it is re-evaluating past design triumphs and producing – albeit on a small scale so far – works that stand out boldly, such as the Leeum Samsung Museum of Art, which comprises three outstanding buildings rising out of suburban Itaewon.

The movement, kickstarted by Seoul's design elite, has political converts, too. The country's new president, Lee Myung-bak, once nicknamed "the Bulldozer" because of the redevelopment work that made him rich in the 1970s, declares he is now reformed and keen to emphasise preservation and more sensitive town planning.

“Koreans have a tendency to follow the trends in lifestyle matters as well as fashion,” points out Kim. “Although this makes Korea one of the fastest-evolving markets in interior design, it also means architecture tends to be stylish and trendy while lacking in concept.”

But there are changes for the better, says Marcia Iwatate, a Japanese restaurant and design consultant and co-author of *Korea Style*, a handsome compilation of some of South Korea’s best residential architecture and interiors.

She suggests that, with the return of Korean graduates of top foreign architectural schools, the country is starting to rediscover its distinctive vernacular style – one so potent that elements of it were purloined by the Japanese over a thousand years ago. Iwate says her own interest in Korean architecture and interiors arose from researching the origins of Japanese minimalism.

“I wanted to point out to the world that Zen and the simplistic style is not just Japanese, so I came to Korea 16 years ago to find out more. Now I see it in these returnee architects. They have an architectural nationalism.”

What impresses these former expatriates is the work of past Korean master builders – the buildings all but obliterated by zealous modernisers a generation ago.

Korean contemporary style might still borrow heavily from Japan and the western modernist tradition – employing concrete, glass and high-tech materials – but a Korean character is fast emerging, says Iwatate.

“And what characterises Korean style? Simplicity, modernisation, restraint and a deep respect for all things natural,” she says. It is a style that has its roots in the traditional Korean house, the *hanok*.

This is strikingly akin to traditional Japanese wooden homes, with latticework doors and paper windows, but a peek inside reveals heated flooring, rather than reed mats and a womb-like, intimate rusticity.

Features include exposed pine pillars rough hewn with a knife, rice-papered walls and, for lighting, the moon reflected in a shallow courtyard well.

“I admire the older Korean traditional style as it is good architecture not just because it is traditional,” says Choi Wook, an

architect who builds and renovates *hanok*-inspired homes for contemporary living.

“The Korean aesthetic is very thick, very heavy; you can really sense weight in these interiors.”

His work has a distinctly luxury feel. “To build like this is very expensive,” he says. But others believe *hanoks* can be re-invented or renovated in a 21st century setting, even for the non-super rich.

Doojin Hwang is spearheading a *hanok* revival movement in Seoul. His mission? To rescue and modernise what is left of the city’s ravaged stock of traditional homes on a hill in the city centre.

Yoon Young-Ju, a restaurant business owner, lives in a 70-year-old home renovated to the modern standards expected in ultra high-tech Seoul. The wooden-beamed, six-room, one-storey structure built around a courtyard has lightning-fast wireless, a modern kitchen and a state-of-the-art security system that at first seem at odds with the disarmingly simple living space, with its white-papered walls and calm light diffused through paper windows.

“There is certainly a joy of serenity that these old houses offer,” he says, “but we need our conveniences too.

“These houses teach us a lot. They evolved over a long period of time and whereas modern construction is toxic, you will find *hanoks* are actually quite healthy,” says Yoon’s architect, Jin Hwang, referring to the unecological nature of many modern building techniques and the use of unhealthy chemicals, plastics and solvents that contrasts strongly with the *hanok*’s use of natural, renewable materials such as pine wood.

Artist, writer, musician and *hanok* fan Lee Ansoo goes further, suggesting it is not just the construction methods that promote well-being but the traditional Korean use of space and natural materials that makes for health, tranquillity and harmony.

“It has lot to do with our use of pine. You could say we are a pine culture,” he says, pointing to the heavily cut, low tea table in his otherwise exceedingly modern architect-built home, Motif One.

It is one of many examples of Korean creativity at its best in the hamlet of Heyri – an eight-year-old architectural showcase also known as “The Artists’ Village” near the border with North Korea.

The community exemplifies new Korean style. Despite the village’s

thoroughly modern aspect, wood, especially pine, is everywhere. Tree stumps make engaging stools while strips of timber add harmony and elegance to two of the key buildings – the Book House and the award-winning Camerata music studio designed by Jo Byung Soo.

Lee's six-bedroom house, which he also runs as a bed and breakfast, is another harmonious blend of Korean tradition and western comforts. Externally it is a sleek, boxy ode to modernist style but inside Lee worked with the architect to bring in more Korean elements: the *ondol* heated floor, a feature in even the most humble of Korean homes, multi-purpose rooms and, through large glazed features, an interplay between indoors and outdoors that pays homage to the *hanok* and its traditional garden or courtyard.

Lee is something of an ambassador for Korea's emerging new style. "It is true we have been vastly influenced by the west, where we all seem to have been educated, but there is movement towards a more Korean design and that inspiration comes from the *hanok*."

The rooms in Lee's home are large and filled with paper-filtered light. Tea is taken sitting on the polished oil paper *ondol* flooring, the immense untreated pine table brimming with Korean earthenware. The rooms fulfil many purposes: clever detailing means bookshelves double as a film screen, a kitchen is tucked behind folding white panels and gaudy mirrors are hidden inside doors.

"Life is good here in Heyri with all its artists and wonderful buildings and of course it all looks very modern and contemporary," he says.

"But look closer and you will see we still live *hanok*-style. That is the secret of the Korean way."

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