

KOREASTYLE

Korean architecture
is having a moment.
Ellie Brannan meets *Korea Style*
author *Marcia Iwatate*



Fashion Designer's Muse



Maestro's Utopian Vision



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From Chinese heritage to Japanese minimalism to Asian-chic hotels – there's been an influx of architectural publications to hit bookshelves in recent years, signifying a worldwide fascination, celebration and demand for Asian design and style.

One country whose architectural identity has remained overshadowed by its Asian neighbours is Korea. That is, until now. The recently produced *Korean Style* is the first international publication devoted to Korean architecture and interior design – propelling Korea into the international style arena.

Compiled by Marcia Iwatate author of *Japanese House* and *eat.work.shop* and gallery director Kim Unsoo along with photography from *Maison Marie Claire's* photo director Lee Jongkeun, this coffee-table tome explores 24 exceptional heritage buildings, homes and studios belonging to and designed by some of Korea's leading architects, artists and fashion designers. It captures beautifully Korean aesthetics in an evolving modern architecture.

Ranging from the vernacular to cutting-edge, collectively the buildings represent the fundamental elements of Korean style through a respect for heritage, the natural world and functionality. "The concept of the book," explains Marcia, "is to show the world that the Korean traditional vernacular and the aesthetic

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are minimal and take great use of the natural form of the material. Korean aesthetics are about flexibility and harmony and we have picked up on the very modern architecture which embodies all that."

The book's glossy pages are dominated by a vision of pinewood. Bleached by the sun, worn and reshaped by wind and bare of all embellishment, this natural form is treasured in Korean design over any lavishly decorative furnishings, just as the natural landscape is favoured over artificially preened gardens, "thus exposing the simplicity and purity of the materials." Many of the homes featured contain floor-to-ceiling windows and varying skylights providing a gateway for the natural light and surrounding landscape to seep inside.

The natural landscape is a paramount consideration, even for the city homes featured in the book, "Seoul is one of the few large metropolises in the world that actually has several mountains in the city," explains Marcia as I marvel at the dramatic mountain view from the gallery's window where we meet. Architect Choi Du Nam for example was able to design his Historical Stone Wall House in commuter reach from his wife's downtown office yet with the Bukhan Mountain forming a backdrop to their dining room.

Another impetus for doing the book was to define Korean design in its own terms, which

according to Marcia has been difficult during the country's rapid industrialisation. "Minimalism, organic, respect for nature all these kinds of things – right now the international community identifies with Japanese design but in fact it's also Korean. In fact so many things in Japanese culture come from Korea." Says Marcia, who herself is Japanese and commutes between Tokyo and Seoul, where she lives with her Korean architect husband. "Our [Japanese] culture and our aesthetics are much more perfect. Everything's very symmetrical, detailed, formal and symbolic, whereas the Korean aesthetic, although very similar, is much more flexible, spontaneous and about harmony. For example Koreans can adjust the distance between the pillars if the beam they want to use is not quite right, they will just shorten it, whereas the Japanese will insist on finding the exact measurement necessary. So it is very similar but also very different at times."


Central to the functional aspects in Korean design and prevalent in the book are *ondol* floor heating, *daecheong* summer rooms and antique furniture. An antique such as the Korean dining tray in Folding Screen Mountain Retreat – "it's a very functional piece of furniture as a big part of Korean culture is to have the entire meal laid out and then just carried to the diner" – is now used as a bedside table. Pragmatic *jang* and Joseon-period antique chests that may have once stored books, medicine and money now double up as storage

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containers for modern cosmetics and linen. "Korean antiques are devoid of almost any decoration so they work anywhere and as you will see in the book, they work very well in a contemporary design space," says Marcia.

Courtyards form an essential design element of many Asian buildings, created to link nature with the interior in a free-flowing space. The *daecheong* (as seen in Hanok Case Study and Masterpiece of Confucian Architecture) is Korea's functional interpretation of a courtyard, a summer room of which the doors are removed and hung on eaves during the warmer months. As Marica explains, "it's a living room, a function room, a work room, there are so many uses. I'm not saying Japanese architecture is not functional, just that Korean is more so; that's the beauty of it."

Many of the architects chosen for the book may have been educated abroad and influenced by Western modernisation but what's paramount is that they are all striving to integrate their own history, culture and identity with "a drive towards invention, experimentation and individuality"; establishing a Korean style worth noting. ||

 *style* **Korea Style**, by Marcia Iwatate and Kim Unsoo, photography by Lee Jongkeun. Periplus Publishing under Tuttle Publishing imprint, 1,695 baht, available nationwide