

34

IS THE DESIGN HOTEL DEAD?

how elite retreats are reinventing the timeshare
the biggest brands you've (probably) never heard of

tel aviv opts for aesthetics over politics

KOREA'S HAPPY TOWNS

idyllic hubs for artistic production, creative thought and idealized living

why catching a criminal has never been so easy

the revolving restaurant renaissance, lighting up lebanon, prada epicenter #3, undemocratizing denim,
being creative with cork, eternal optimists, soviet cigarettes, buddhist bhutan, mixing fashion and politics,
the new-look zappaloni, unfinished sentences, belgium's belgitude, yes men, walls that talk, australian
fashion overview and the importance of ugliness to art



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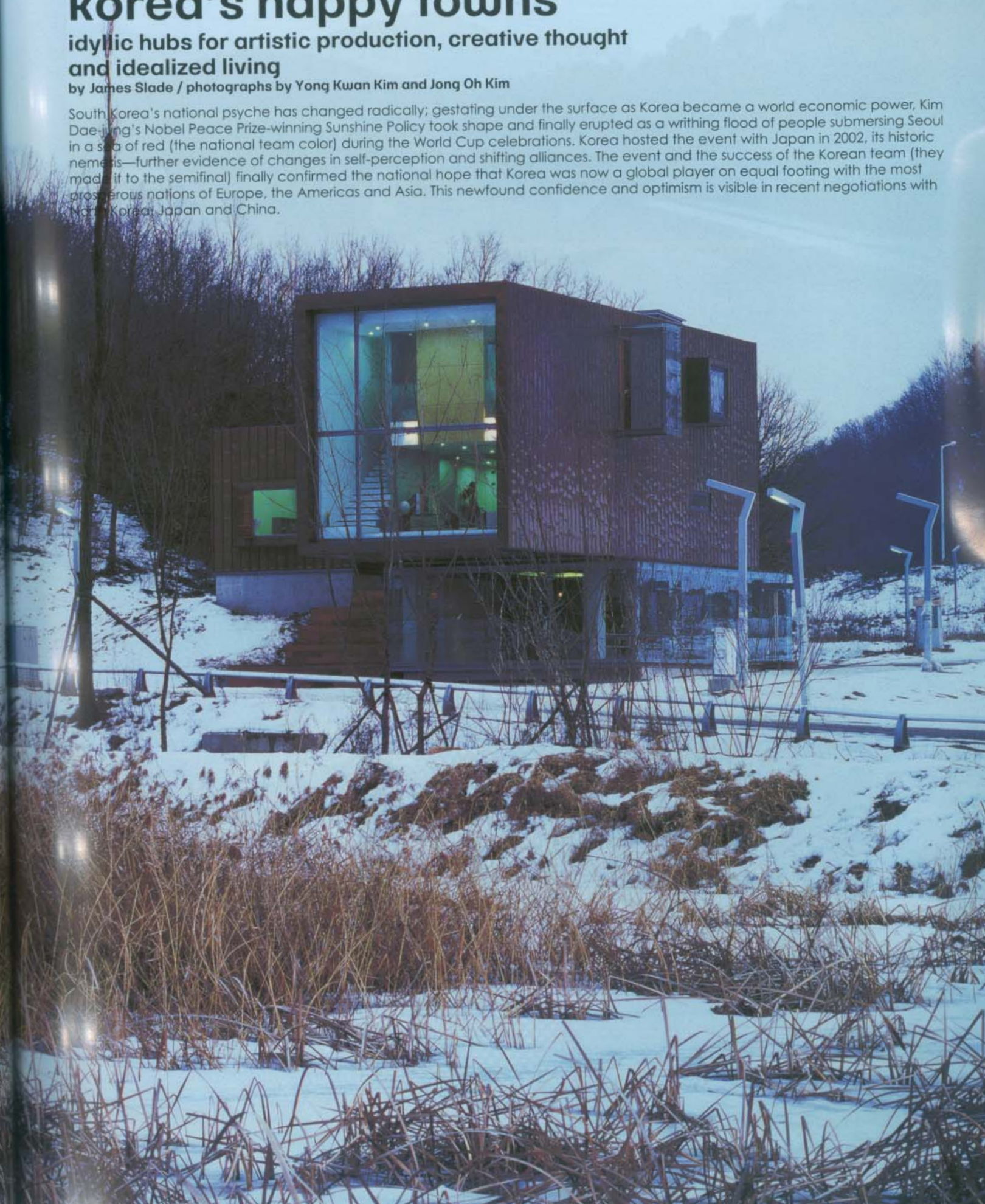
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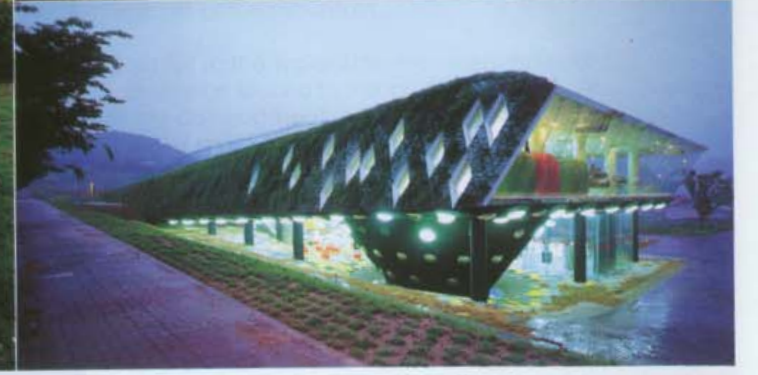
korea's happy towns

idyllic hubs for artistic production, creative thought
and idealized living

by James Slade / photographs by Yong Kwan Kim and Jong Oh Kim

South Korea's national psyche has changed radically; gestating under the surface as Korea became a world economic power, Kim Dae-jung's Nobel Peace Prize-winning Sunshine Policy took shape and finally erupted as a writhing flood of people submersing Seoul in a sea of red (the national team color) during the World Cup celebrations. Korea hosted the event with Japan in 2002, its historic nemesis—further evidence of changes in self-perception and shifting alliances. The event and the success of the Korean team (they made it to the semifinal) finally confirmed the national hope that Korea was now a global player on equal footing with the most prosperous nations of Europe, the Americas and Asia. This newfound confidence and optimism is visible in recent negotiations with North Korea, Japan and China.





The Han River embodies the political, social and environmental attitudes in South Korea, which have been driven by fear of an invasion from the north, defining the national psyche since the Korean War. Over the last thirty years, this fear has forced development in Seoul to the south side of the Han River, behind this natural moat—both a symbolic break in the land and a physical barrier to a potential land invasion. But the river is a Jekyll and Hyde personality: on the one hand it provides safety while on the other it serves as a possible conduit for a waterborne invasion or as a potential weapon of mass destruction (North Korea has considered using an enormous dam in the north to gather and hold an unstoppable mass of water that could be released on the south). Caged with chainlink and razor wire fences and military lookout towers, the river writhes through Seoul, bound but threatening—nature as protective symbol, infrastructure and weapon all in one.

Development in Korea is characterized by extreme opportunism; modeled on the Japanese paradigm, it is a reaction to the socialist regime of North Korea. Buildings and land are commodities—maximizing building area is often the main design criteria. Land is not seen as a landscape but as a base upon which to place a building. Concurrent with this type of development and the hyper opportunistic pursuit of profit above all else, there have been many voices lamenting the density and disorder of the urban environment in Seoul and throughout Korea. New towns have been planned to offer a more harmonious model of living. Sometimes these are purely commercial ventures. Often they are organized around a religious theme and sponsored by powerful church groups. The most recent developments in Heyri Art Valley and Paju Book City look towards culture and in particular the arts as the unifying theme for development. These developments are north of Seoul, adjacent to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), in areas that are classified as reunification zones by the Sunshine Policy of the government, which foresees economic

and social cooperation with North Korea leading to an open relationship between the two countries. In an effort to decentralize the government and distribute the benefits of economic development beyond Seoul, many cities (some of them recent upgrades from small town status) have been designated as cities and regional government centers. This has also encouraged recent developments outside of Seoul.

Created to become a hub for artistic production and creative thought, Heyri is a planned community that occupies vacant lands that were formerly military training grounds in Gyeonggi province, northwest of Seoul, in the reunification zone adjacent to the DMZ. The master plan foresees a 'rural city' of 370 buildings, each less than three stories tall, for writers, directors, artists and others involved in cultural/artistic production. The master planners are a group of well-respected Korean architects headed by Jong-Kyu Kim and Jun-Sung Kim. Their plans call for a community developed around "the principles of an environmentally friendly urban landscape," merging the mixed-use characteristics of a city with an open, low-rise development of a suburb. Each area contains both residential and cultural/community programs. There is also a network of paths and hardscape areas to encourage mixing and to foster a strong sense of community. The holistic combination of prescribed architectural, environmental and social agendas is unusual for a commercial development. It is closer to utopian developments of constructivists and early modernists at the turn of the 20th century, which envisioned lifestyle and 'habitat' as a total work of art.

The Unification Highway dead ends into a razor wire fence at the DMZ, where anyone who continues on the path would instantly be shot.



Housing in Korea has increasingly been built along the base of the many mountains that occupy Seoul, the only open areas in the hyper-dense chaotic urban fabric. When building these sites, developers cut into the slope of the mountain, erasing the form and history of the landscape to make a level tabula rasa upon which to build. The byproducts of these cuts into the landscape are multistory retaining walls behind the apartment buildings. The existing slope becomes a series of vertical and horizontal surfaces, like a pixelated image of the original mountain. Though the physical presence of the mountain is erased, its form, history and meaning reemerge in marketing materials. The developments are named to evoke natural mountain life and sold with aerial views that exaggerate the natural features of the mountain.

Counter to the typical development in Seoul, the Heyri master plan looked to the landscape to generate the form of the development, converting the structure of the land into the structure of the city. Five 'mountains' left as green landscapes and visual markers within the development distinguish the master plan, maintaining the most distinctive landscape elements in the virgin site and also referring to the open mountains in Seoul. The roads meander their way through the development following the existing contour lines and respecting existing landscape features such as streams and significant trees. The master plan requires that buildings built along the base of the five mountains step up along the slope, rather than the slope being stepped to accommodate the building—a reversal of the typical development strategies in Seoul. The landscape is now a point of differentiation, an asset rather than a pure commodity. This is possible as a strategy because of the relatively low density of the surrounding rural area. It will be interesting to see how the increase in value will affect these green zones; already one of the mountains has been razed to provide a base for a shopping mall, and it is hard to imagine an extended resistance to the development of these open areas as the economic value of the land increases over time with the development of existing lots.

Unlike themed developments in the United States, such as Florida's Seaside, that tend to focus on leisure, getaways and a small town typology (the characteristics of New Urbanism), the theme in Korea is more often centered on production—cultural production in Heyri or literary production in Paju Book City, another nearby development. The master plan requires that a percentage of every building be dedicated to cultural or social/group activity. The organization is not a nostalgic return to the past but a forward-looking, optimistic projection of an idealized future. The focus on ecology, open spaces and a modern aesthetic as a reflection of idealized living is a reaction to the typical Korean development. The goal is to create a productive city, where each building is required to contain a productive social/cultural component.

This page and next: community building by SHoP + Jun Sung Kim



Heyri's collection of significant architectural objects are exhibited in a landscape in much the same way that Donald Judd's sculptural objects occupy the landscape in Marfa, Texas.

Along with these considerations of the landscape and the socioeconomic vision, Heyri pushes purely formal/aesthetic requirements encouraging modern houses built of concrete, stone, glass and steel. These formal directives aim to create a collection of significant architectural objects in the landscape. This focus can lead one to imagine the development as an architectural art park where the buildings are objects exhibited in a landscape in much the same way that Donald Judd's sculptural objects occupy the landscape in Marfa, Texas. Coincidentally, Marfa, like Heyri, was also an abandoned military facility. In Marfa today, the previous use is almost irrelevant to the art park. In the case of Heyri, the shift from military occupation of the site to a semi-utopian development parallels the shifting relationship between North and South.

The image of this museum of idealized living can be compared with its grotesque twin, Kijong-dong, on the North Korean side of the border. From the South Korean viewing platform, called (not without irony) Freedom House, the village of Kijong-dong, which means Peace Village, is clearly visible. This Potemkin city is an empty set piece inhabited only by guards who blare North Korean propaganda from loudspeakers. The names of these places—Freedom House, Peace Village or Unification Highway, the latter a highway that dead ends into a razor wire fence at the DMZ, where anyone who continues on the path would instantly be shot—are evidence of the profound paranoid schizophrenia affecting both North and South Korea. This same condition may explain how hyper-dense apartment blocks within the unrelentingly overdeveloped parts of Seoul can be named 'Nature Poem' or other such doublespeak names. From the Freedom House viewing platform you can turn from the view of Kijong-dong to see Heyri Art Valley. Heyri's existence in this incongruous setting is evidence of South Korea's renewed optimism in a collaborative and mutually beneficial future relationship between North and South, a confidence founded on a newly confirmed national identity.

Although many galleries and art institutions from Seoul have opened satellites in or moved entirely to Heyri, many people have built getaways from Seoul, not primary residences. But if Heyri is to work successfully, the full-time community will have to grow significantly. If the development is to become a paradigm for a new way of living in Korea—driven more by quality of life—the houses have to be more than vacation or weekend homes and the mixed program must be established and maintained. (Our own project for Dalki Theme Park faced this challenge of balancing a profitable retail facility with the desire to offer educational exhibits and spaces.) It will be interesting to see how Heyri evolves and how the economic pressures created by its own success transform the area in the future.