

PROJECTS
FOR:
SEOUL

designing the megacity

Federico De Matteis

Luca Reale



PROJECTS FOR :

«Projects For:» is a book series dedicated to architectural design in international contexts. Looking at our own way of practicing architecture through the lens of “difference” can help magnify its identity, pointing out its most relevant characters and providing an appropriate ground for critical thinking. Creating designs – or reflecting on projects – conceived for “elsewhere” can, in our opinion, become a powerful tool to understand how to make architecture. The series wants to provide a space dedicated to this critical activity, where the pretext of a specific location around the globe can serve as the center of gravity for design-oriented considerations.

Series edited by

Federico De Matteis
Luca Reale

Università degli Studi dell'Aquila, Italy
Sapienza Università di Roma, Italy

Editorial board

Benno Albrecht
Alessandra Capuano
Luciano Cardellicchio
Giovanni Marco Chiri
Jinyoung Chun
Josep-Maria Garcia-Fuentes
Massimiliano Giberti
Mazen Haidar
Keya Mitra
Luca Montuori
Orsina Simona Pierini
Simona Salvo
Minghao Zhou

Università IUAV di Venezia, Italy
Sapienza Università di Roma, Italy
University of New South Wales, Australia
Università di Cagliari, Italy
Myongji University, Republic of Korea
University of Newcastle, United Kingdom
Università di Genova, Italy
Université Paris 1 - Panthéon Sorbonne, France
IEST, Shibpur, India
Università Roma Tre, Italy
Politecnico di Milano, Italy
Sapienza Università di Roma, Italy
Tongji University, Shanghai, P.R. China

Graphic design

Gina Oliva
www.console-oliva.com
Layout: Irene Turchetti

Publisher

Aracne editrice int.le S.r.l.
www.aracneeditrice.it
info@aracneeditrice.it

ISBN 978-88-255-2972-2

No part of this book can be reproduced without previous consent from the publisher.

This book has been co-financed by the
Department of Architecture and Design, Sapienza University of Rome
First edition: December 2019

PROJECTS

FOR :

SEOUL

DESIGNING THE MEGACITY

Federico De Matteis

Luca Reale

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Designing the megacity 7

[Federico De Matteis, Luca Reale](#)

When urbanism becomes a mayor's game 12

[Jinyoung Chun](#)

Landscape as a generator of the city's shape 17

[Luca Reale](#)

SEUNSANGGA

Seunsangga: the Korean way to Bigness 36

[Federico De Matteis](#)

CENTRAL AREA

Emptiness and topography in korean architecture 63

[Luca Reale](#)

SEOSOMUN 91

DONGDAEMUN

Cheong Gye Cheon: urban renewal in 21st century Seoul 106

[Federico De Matteis](#)

BIBLIOGRAPHY 123



INTRODUCTION

Designing the Megacity

Federico De Matteis, Luca Reale

Observed from the West, the Asian mega-cities appear as the most astounding hallmarks of the third Millennium. If the planet is rapidly changing in unplanned and often discomfiting directions that have become object of everyday talk – climate change, globalization, migrations and the like – these mutations only become visible through shards and clues, such as when a hurricane destroys a coastal area, and the blame is put on the human influence on the environment. Understanding these changes thus becomes an act of abstraction, connecting the dots of a constellation of apparently unrelated events. But if one travels to the “new” Asian capitals – Beijing or Shanghai, Delhi or Mumbai, Bangkok or Kuala Lumpur, in an ever-extending list – the effects of these gigantic and unprecedented transformations are plainly spread out before his eyes. These cities are not only *clues* of wider economic and demographic processes: they are their palpable results, hiding nothing of their gargantuan massiveness and energy. There has never been *anything* like this in the history of mankind.

The urban explosion is no new phenomenon: if we consider the Industrial Revolution as a watershed moment, we are already in its third century of history, with successive waves and geographies of expansion. One-hundred years ago, the early European masters of modern architecture travelled across the Atlantic Ocean to visit the “new” American cities: what they found both bewitched and repulsed them, culminating in Le Corbusier’s oxymoronic description of New York as a “fairy catastrophe”. We could state that, *mutatis mutandis*, the new Asian cities are the 21st century equivalents of what happened in America in the previous cycle of urban explosion. As citizens of the smaller, more familiar and intimate urban centers of Europe, when landing in Asia we feel both the immense energy and power of these expressions of human undertaking, and the alienating, dehumanizing effects of their sheer magnitude. As our architect forefathers negotiated – with greater or lesser success – their relationship with the emerging cities of the New World, so today we are called to understand what these new, immense urbanizations call for in terms of the design and architectural tools necessary to imagine their future.

Fig. 1: Aerial shot of the city, 2018. (Photo: Marius Mann)

Seoul, among the many Asian megacities, is a case of its own. Although none of them can be defined by a sheer matter of physical dimension or population, the Korean capital is an even more complex system of interconnecting urban phenomena. The fact that it ranks among the largest metropolitan areas of the planet, trailing only Tokyo, Shanghai and Jakarta, gives little account of its actual complexity, and the fact that, despite this size, it still hinges on a strong and clearly recognizable urban core. It is certainly wrong to identify the comparatively tiny area of “old” Seoul – the former walled city ringed by mountains north and south – with the entire urbanization, for vast neighborhoods south of the Han river have sprung up only in the last three decades. Yet the urban character, symbolic relevance, persistence of traditional fabric and overall recognizability of the city’s core is something that can only be found in a few other Asian supercities. And it is perhaps due to this strong structure that the Korean capital feels more alluring and less unsettling to European travelers than most of its counterparts.

One of the propelling forces in the city’s transformation over the last two decades has undeniably been the attention towards urban and architectural design. The pace at which change has occurred has certainly been high – albeit not as frenetic as in other locations – but this has nevertheless left some space for the quest for quality. A large number of competitions has given both international and Korean designers the opportunity of measuring various design strategies, and today Seoul boasts a panorama of contemporary architecture among the most interesting on a worldwide scale. As Jinyoung Chun highlights in his text published in this book, urban transformation has also become a prime political tool for the city’s mayors: although with varying results, it is a matter-of-fact that Seoul has thoroughly leveraged on these operations to transform its global image into that of one of the most dynamics metropolises on the planet.

Design is no strictly scientific method – there are no univocal theses to be demonstrated, nor results that can be replicated. In its empirical foundation, it can be employed as a tool to explore and bring to light the reality of urban space, in a cyclic iteration merging analysis and anticipation of future events. Thus, the work contained in these pages is not to be understood only as a foreshadowing of Seoul’s upcoming transformations, but also as what we can learn about urban life as it currently unfolds. This is especially true in architectural education, where design should serve as a means of unveiling successive layers of sense, from the immediateness of lived space to the articulation of language.

The projects illustrated in the following pages were drafted in many different occasions. A relevant part was developed as final theses work by architec-

ture students from Sapienza University's Faculty of Architecture who spent a three-month exchange period in Seoul, hosted by the College of Architecture of Myongji University. The in-depth analysis of the urban conditions in the areas assigned to them eventually fed into innovative architectural projects that engaged with the existing urban space and with its ongoing dynamics of transformation. Short-term design workshops were further occasions of exploring novel ways of understanding the city's conditions and forecast possible futures. Finally, two design competitions, Seosomun Memorial Park and Seunsangga City Walk, responded to calls from Seoul's administration to reimagine the configuration of some of the city's key areas.

All projects illustrated here engage with the urban configuration of Seoul's urban core. Although new buildings and structures are always at the center of the design work, they are always understood as extensions and amplifications of what was *found* in these areas, according to a fundamental philosophy that transformations become most effective when they are not disruptive, but rather intertwined with the existing and fertile vitality of a city.

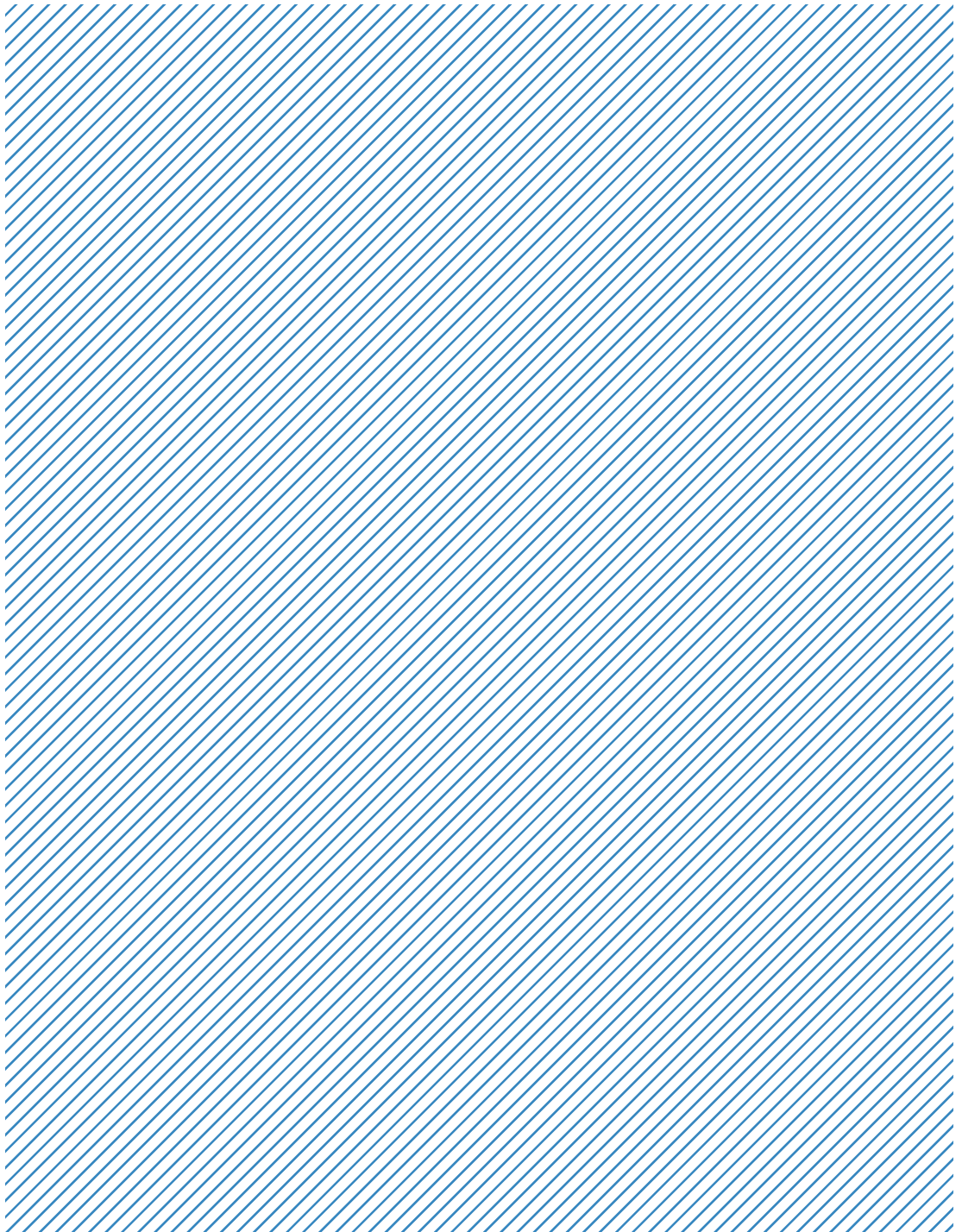
In an ideal promenade cutting west to east, we have focused on the areas of Seosomun, the now-disappeared city gate hosting a memorial to the Christian martyrs of Korea; Gwanghwamun square, the monumental axis leading towards the royal palace at Gyeongbokgung, object of a recent and controversial design competition; Myeongdong, the vibrant neighborhood enclosing the city's most important church; the two arcade buildings at Nakwongsangga and Seunsangga, legacy of Seoul's post-war reconstruction; finally, the area of Dongdaemun, epicenter of the city's creative and fashion scene. All projects engaged with key topics such as the existing urban fabric, the relation to transport infrastructure, the intersection with the multi-level underground galleries, the adaptive reuse of extant buildings, the interaction with heritage sites, etc. But in all cases, the final goal consisted in forecasting the rise of a renewed urban space, capable of accommodating the life of the city's inhabitants, combining the existing and the new through architectural interventions that would install previously unthought-of possibilities of use. Along with endless design occasions, Seoul offers a wide variety of thought-provoking spaces, buildings and processes that are worth exploring. The very urban history of the city, from its foundation in the 14th century to its most recent transformations, provides an insight into how urban structures grow, evolve, decay, are destroyed and rebuilt, and adapt to the changing needs of their citizens' lives. Peculiar stories, such as that of the Cheong Gye Cheon channel, showcase an approach towards urban transformation that is on one hand common to many Asian megacities, but also very specific to the character of Seoul. Another building, the now-famous Seunsangga arcade, is a

clear example of how urban and architectural culture has evolved in Korea over the last decade: from the initial hypothesis of razing it to create a bland, globalized business district, to the recognition of its value as a testimony of a regional declination of modernist architecture, to the various competitions calling for its reuse. Investigating and reflecting on these topics helped us approach the design occasions with deeper insight and awareness.

All in all, we could say that this book is about *learning from Seoul*. Learning from its vitality and dynamism, but also from its ability of preserving the traces of the past; from its successes as well as from failures, all feeding into a process of transformation that appears to have a life of its own; from its ancient and contemporary buildings, its streets and spaces pulsating with life. To reach, perhaps, one fundamental conclusion: that despite all its limits and pitfalls, and the loss of trust that we may have in it, architecture still has the power of improving the way we live in our cities.

Acknowledgments

This small book comes to life as a record of over a decade of joint work between the Department of Architecture and Design of Sapienza University of Rome and the College of Architecture of Myongji University. The number of students, both Italian and Korean, who have traveled between Rome and Seoul from 2007 to this day is by now remarkable, and we believe that for each one of them the experience of interculturality has represented a central step in their architectural education, developing a bond to the host country that will be hard to sever. Our gratitude goes firstly to professor Jinyoung Chun, who has animated this exchange from Seoul with endless passion, supporting all students in their Korean adventure, and serving as a true cultural ambassador. Many colleagues from CAMU have also contributed to the success of this long-term exchange. Finally, a special recognition has to be paid to Dr. Byong-Jin You, President of Myongji University, who has so often welcomed us in Seoul, making us always feel as if his institution were truly our second home.



WHEN URBANISM BECOMES A MAYOR'S GAME

Public projects in Seoul in the 3rd Millennium

Jinyoung Chun

Seoul is a city established in 1394 as the capital for the Joseon royal dynasty. Since then, through drastic and dynamic changes, unprecedented in the history of urbanism, Seoul has reached its present condition. If we take Rome as an example of well-matured historic city, Seoul stands exactly at the opposite side: in Rome, we may easily find every layer of time accumulated through three millenniums, but it is not easy to imagine how Seoul looked like just three generations ago.

Systematic researches and studies on the city of Seoul have been carried out to enrich the documentations up to 20th century. But to the extent of my knowledge, its urban phenomenon in the last two decades, from 2001 to the present day, has not been discussed in terms of the city's complex reality.

In Seoul, the 3rd Millennium begins with the restoration of the Cheong Gye Cheon (1) canal. It was an electoral commitment (2) of Mr. Lee Myung Bak (3) for the candidacy to mayor of Seoul in 2002, and the first urban project realized for political purpose after the military regime (4). This project was completed in two years, obtaining a great success that eventually brought mayor Lee Myung Bak from city hall to the "Blue House" (5). But as a negative consequence, this success has pressed the succeeding mayors to start mega-projects and finish them in their own office term.



Fig. 1: View of the Cheong Gye Cheon channel

Fig. 2: MVRDV: Seoullo 7017

Mr. Oh Sehoon (6), the mayor who followed Lee, shows this exhibition-istic obsession. In 2008, he established a specific organization called Seoul Design Foundation to promote public projects at the urban scale. He urged to simultaneously carry out several large projects including the Hangang Renaissance Project (7) and the Namsan Renaissance Project (8). It is interesting to observe that he used the term Renaissance to name these mega-projects: he might have referred to the city of Florence under the Medici family or to Rome under Pope Sixtus V.

Since the adoption of the election system for the local government in 1995 (9), mayors have given priority to public projects at the urban scale among many other agendas. This has both merits and demerits: the positive aspect is that municipal governments provide sufficient budget for public projects, and that the value of architecture as a basic element for the quality of life is highly recognized.

Meanwhile, in the early 2000s the system of architectural education in universities in Korea had to be changed. According to the WTO agreement, Korea had to open the market of architecture, so the international accreditation system of architectural education was introduced. Many universities changed their didactic curriculum of architecture from a four-year to a five-year course with professional degree.

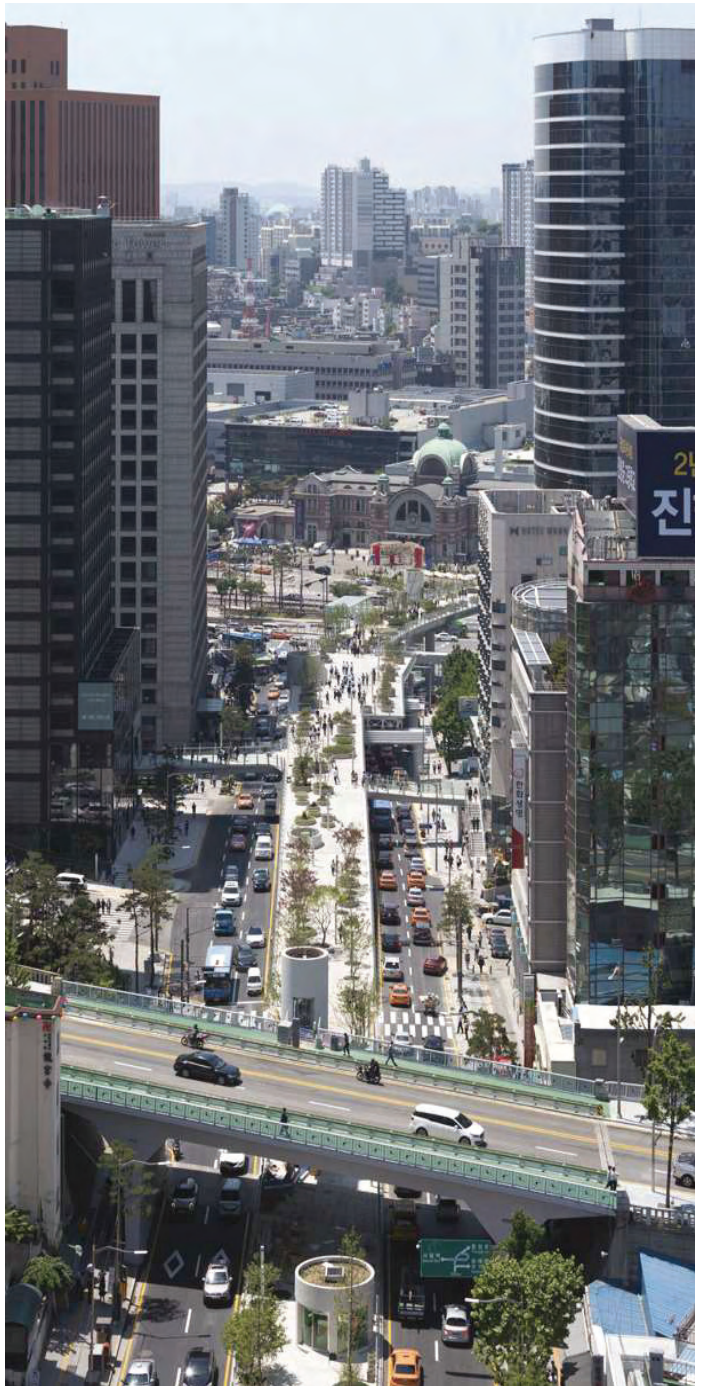




Fig. 3: New Gwanghwamun Square design competition: perspective view of the winning project

Fig. 4: MVRDV, Seoulo 7017, general plan

Fig. 5: MVRDV, Seoulo 7017, view from an adjacent building

This brought many changes to the culture of architecture in Korea: for example, investment in public architecture is considered to be the fundamental condition to bring Seoul to the position of a world-leading capital city.

With Mr. Lee Myungbak at the head of the list, the mayors of Seoul continue to aim at the presidency of Korea, and the public projects have been elaborated as the decisive tools for these political ambitions.

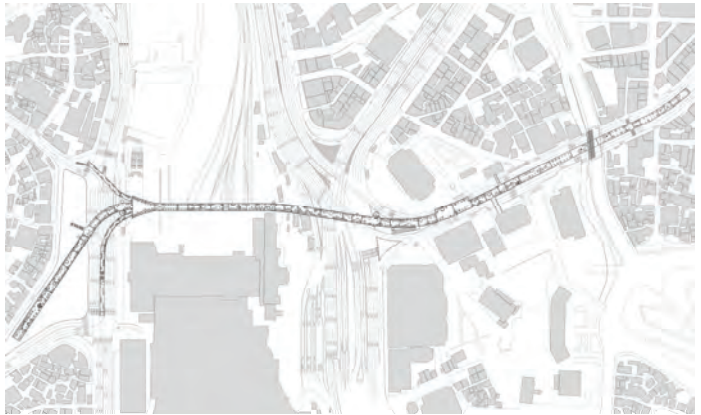
It seems that the present mayor Park Wonsoo (10) also pursues the same strategy, with the pilot project Seoulo 7017 (11). This project, inspired by New York's Highline, has been completed complying with the prize-winning proposal in the international competition. Even though there are both favorable voices and oppositions, the project had some positive impacts.

But the recent episode of Gwanghwamun Square shows how political ambition can go bad. Mayor Park wanted to bestow to the so-called Gwanghwamun Square greater magnificence and solemnity. The long square should become the national core space in front of Gyeongbokgung, the main royal palace of the Joseon era. In October 2018, the municipal government opened an international competition for "New Gwanghwamun Square". However, since the guidelines were elaborated in a rather awkward way, this competition met serious criticism from the very beginning. Nevertheless, the mayor's impatience drove to carry on the competition and achieve a visible result during his office term. In January 2019, the competition was concluded by choosing a winner, but negative opinions on the results prevailed and, in September 2019, mayor Park had to announce that the project was entirely canceled.

The mayors' priority to give birth to large public projects of architecture may be successful or entirely fail. Apart from political ambitions, the success of public project always depends on the consensus of citizens, and this can only

be found when precise and sophisticated studies of the theme guarantee good results.

Seoul is a city of dynamism and enthusiasm. Its one year is not the same as 12 months of any European city. If Seoul meets a mayor who has insight and patience, this city can be ranked even higher in the list of the world's best cities. I really hope to see a good mayor for the next election.



(1) Cheong Gye Cheon is an historic urban canal covered to create an elevated expressway in the late of 1960s.

(2) Korea adopted the local autonomy system in 1995 and since then the chiefs of local governments were to be appointed by election.

(3) Lee Myungbak was the 3rd elected mayor of Seoul from 2002 to 2006. Soon after the role of mayor he was elected the president of Korea in 2007.

(4) The first civilian and non-military government arose in 1993 with president Kim Youngsam.

(5) Blue House is the residence of the president of Korea.

(6) Oh Sehoon was the 4th and 5th elected mayor of Seoul from 2006 to 2011. He resigned for political conflicts regarding social welfare policies during his second term.

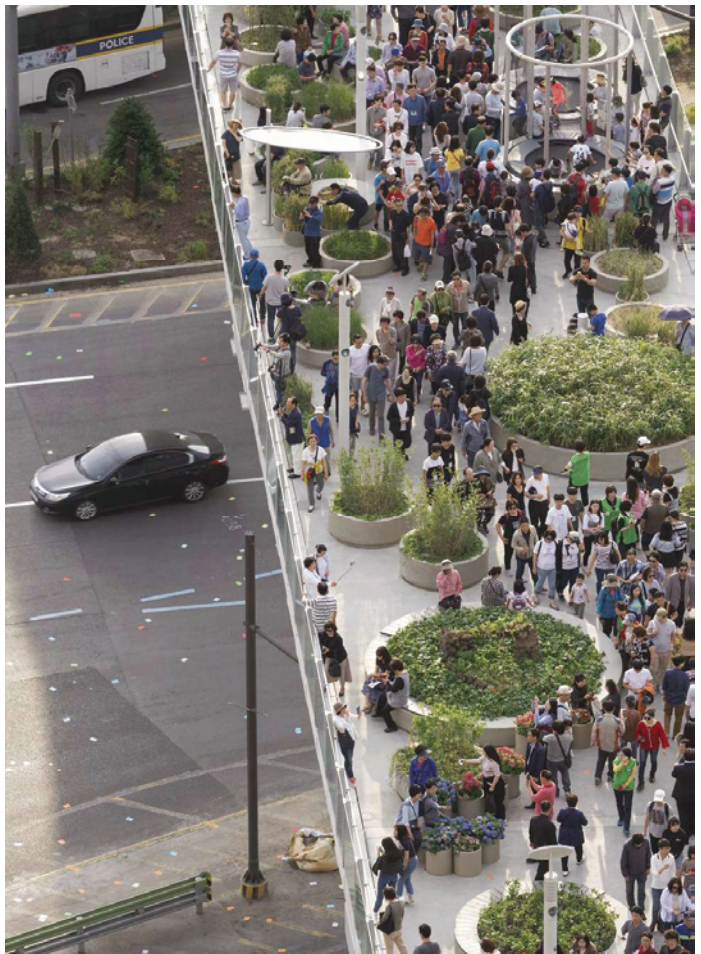
(7) Hangang is the name of the river passing inside Seoul.

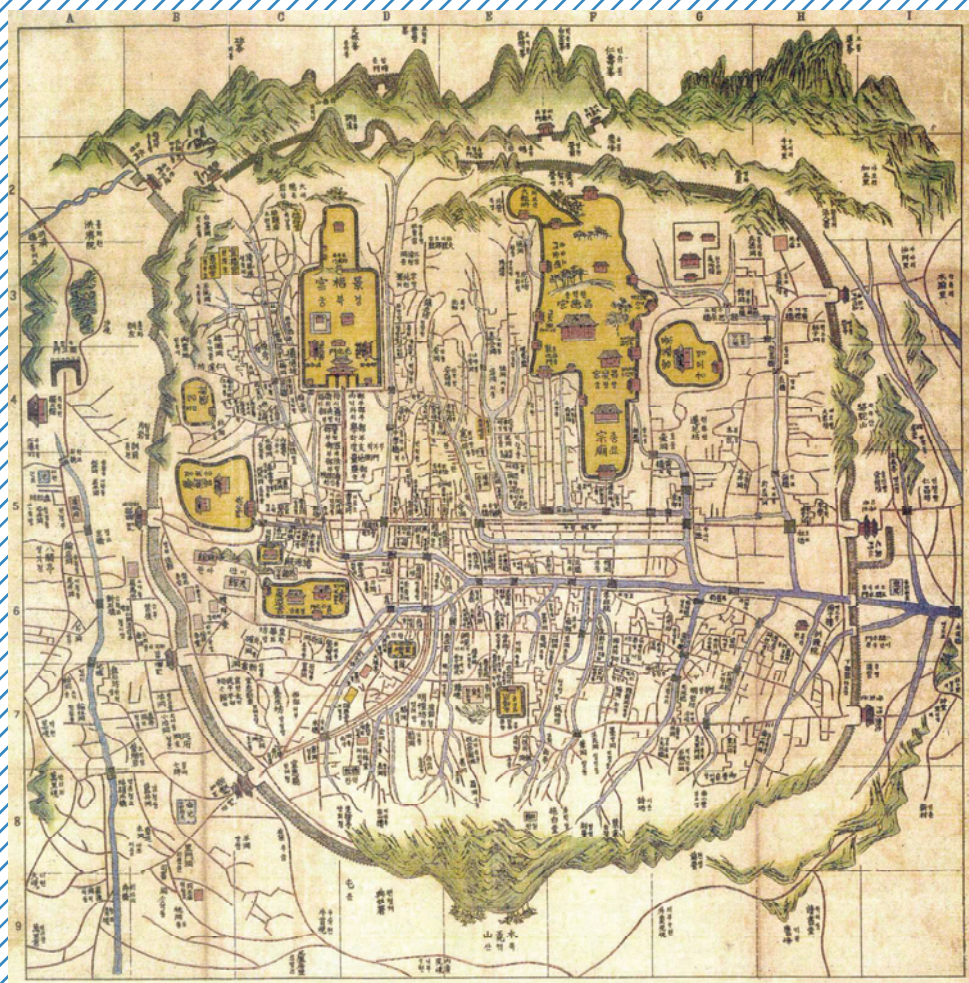
(8) Namsan is the name of the hill that delimits Seoul's historic center to the south.

(9) Until 1995, the mayors of Korean cities were nominated by the Ministry of Home Affairs.

(10) Park Wonsoo is the present mayor of Seoul, serving his third term from 2011.

(11) Seoulo 7017 is a project that in 2017 transformed an old vehicular overpass built in the 1970s into an elevated, pedestrian green passage.





LANDSCAPE AS A GENERATOR OF THE CITY'S SHAPE

Urban form and transformation of space in Seoul

Luca Reale

Observing the historical map on the facing page, representing Seoul (at that time known as *Hanyang*) at the beginning of the Joseon dynasty (1), the original characters of the city are immediately clear: a site surrounded by mountains, a city wall incorporating some of them, a main road network connecting the eight entrance gates to the city, a network of canals grafted onto a main waterway flowing east-west, a series of enclosures with buildings, temples and gardens that mark the urban space within the city walls, while at the same time “extending” the wooded landscape of the mountains into the city (Fig. 1). Such a site is not only in harmony with the landscape, but has the ideal characteristics for the foundation of a new city: it is protected and responds perfectly to the concepts of the *pungsu-jiri-seol*, literally “wind-water-earth-principles-theory”, a Korean version of the geomantic doctrine of the so-called Chinese *feng shui* (wind-water).

Geomancy is “a unique and comprehensive system of conceptualizing the physical environment that regulates human ecology by influencing man to select auspicious environments and to build harmonious structures such as graves, houses, and cities on them” (2). While in Chinese culture the emphasis of *feng shui* is mainly focused on the flow of water, Korean geomancy mainly focuses on mountains. Someone has suggested that this reflects the typical Korean topography, which is strongly mountainous, whereas large parts of China are rather flat (3). The place where the capital of the Joseon dynasty was built was therefore considered to be the most favorable in relation to the balance of *yin-yang* and the harmony of the five elements (4). From 1394, the year of the foundation of the new capital, subsequent urban choices (road axes, the main street connecting the east and west gates, location and number of imperial palaces, city walls and a series of four main and four secondary gates) are also attributable to the emphasis on aspects related to geomancy. The 1912 map (Fig. 2) shows that the suitability of the choice of the site is not limited only to the first circle of reliefs but extends to the territory on a larger scale. The relieving system defining the site north of the Han river is connected to the mountainous rib leading to

Fig. 1: Comprehensive map of the Royal Capital (*Suseon Yeondo*), 1861

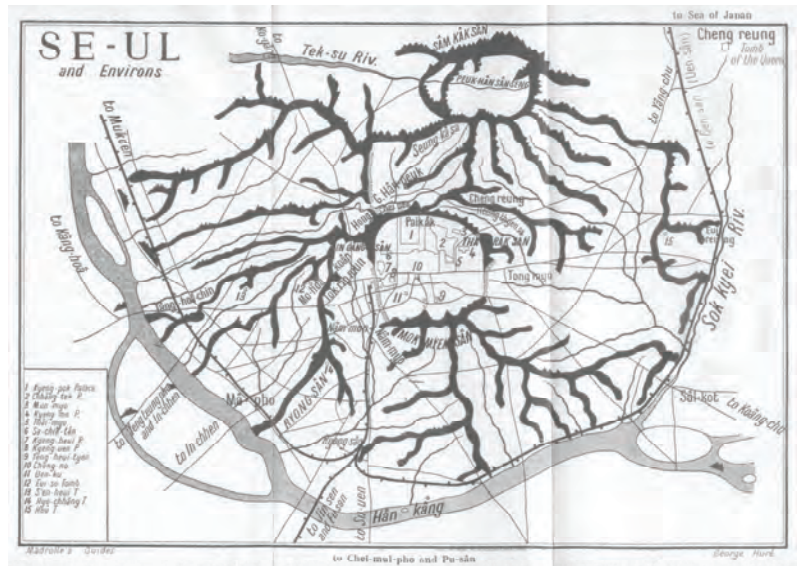


Fig. 2: *Seul and Environs*, from Northern China, *The Valley of the Blue River, Korea*. Hachette & Company, 1912

Fig. 3: Four inner mountains (Bugaksan 342 m, Naksan 125 m, Namsan 262 m, Inwangsan 338 m) and four outer mountains (Bukhansan 836 m, Yongmasan 348 m, Gwanaksan 632 m, Deogyangsan 125 m)

Fig. 4: Gwanghwamun Square, 2010

Fig. 5: Seoul city wall surrounded by mountain ranges (Photo: Ko Byungsuk)



the Samgaksan peak, which – according to *feng shui* theory – constitutes the “back mountain”. From here the ridge extends towards three lower mountains, namely Inwangsan (tiger hill), Bukhansan (back hill) and Bukaksan (dragon hill). A region so contained by mountains – which is the heart of old Seoul – acquires from this geographical conformation a convergence of prosperity and wealth. To complete this ideal scheme there is also a hill, the Namsan, which continues this form on the south side, creating a closed basin for the city that is also good as protection against enemies and bad weather (Fig. 3). Whether you want to consider *feng shui* a series of principles of common sense, a pseudoscience, or even a form of ancient superstition, there is no doubt that the strength of this geographical scheme is still one of the elements of strong recognizability and power of the urban form of Seoul. About six centuries later the city has grown in an extraordinary way, completely changing scale, relationships between built fabric and nature, becoming a vertical and multilevel city. In the last fifty years Seoul has evolved from a rural town into a modern metropolis, and eventually a high-tech megalopolis of 10 million inhabitants, which doubles if we consider the entire urbanized area. But despite this, contemporary Seoul still maintains the characteristics that are in its DNA. The presence of skyscrapers standing against the profile of the mountains is contrasted by the large, low-lying royal palaces (Fig. 6) and temples, urban structures that have partly resisted the transformations over the centuries (eg. Jongmyo), partly were altered and then rebuilt (like the Gyeongbokgung Palace, partly were altered



