From Hanok to Today’s Apartment
How Standardized South Korean Homes Provide Residents a Free Hand

Andrea Prins

At first sight, their massiveness is most outstanding: Korean apartment blocks. Their white-gray silhouettes loom everywhere, in urban areas [Fig. 1] and also close to the beautifully wooded mountainsides. It is easy to despise those blocks as repetitive ugliness. However, the apartments are extremely popular. Having lived in the flats myself, I discovered why: they are not only rooted in centuries-old housing traditions but also offer smart solutions for today’s cohabitation – in South Korea and far beyond.

A bed covered with a bright blue spread, a mirror, a closet, some chairs on a wooden-like floor: my home for the coming weeks. Behind the sliding window, the evening sun colors the nearly identical neighboring apartment blocks pale orange. “Normally, this room is my mother’s pied-à-terre,” explains my host Yeon-Ho Choi, a young man in his twenties employed by the multinational Lotte Corporation. My room’s annex bathroom is near the entrance. In addition, the flat consists of my host’s bedroom, his studio, and a second bathroom. Situated between “my” and his rooms is the living area. The surrounding Hanam district – with its 255,000 inhabitants – is brand new. Sales were frantic: downtown Seoul is only 60 minutes away by subway. The apartment itself is anything but special. Having lived in the flats myself, I discovered why: they are not only rooted in centuries-old housing traditions but also offer smart solutions for today’s cohabitation – in South Korea and far beyond.

Hanoks: more than a romantic tradition

Two years earlier, my partner and I traveled through South Korea. Call it a professional deformation, but I can’t resist looking at architecture, even in holidays. So all over the country we visited hanoks, the traditional, seemingly unpretentious houses made of wood, clay, paper, straw, and tiles. This article does not discuss their sophisticated heating system and their perfect climate adaptation, but instead concentrates on floor plans. As a building type, hanoks appeared during the late fourteenth century on the Korean peninsula. Unless inhabited by the noble class, hanoks had but few, relatively small rooms. The open, south-oriented daecheong maru – “hall with wooden floor” – is a collectively used living space [Fig. 2]. In winter, wooden panels hung in front of the opening to convert the open hall into an interior space. Intimate rooms are located on both sides of the daecheong maru. Hanoks only recently experienced a revival, not only as residential homes, but also as restaurants, offices, and guesthouses. My real discovery occurred near the construction site for a typical, large-scale housing project. Billboards usually show renderings of people happily lounging in their perfect home, but this time floor plans were presented. The eye-opener: the flats-to-be had a centrally located living area with smaller rooms on either side, just like the hanoks. So the traditional spatial structure of the hanoks seems to be vivid in today’s serial mass housing.

The Apartments Republic

The rebuilding of the capital, once destroyed in the Korean War, was followed by a period of rapid urban extension. Since 1970, one type of serial mass housing predominates: elongated in form and 15 to 20 stories high. From conversations with residents and Korean architects, I understood that there are many reasons for the ongoing popularity of the mass housing blocks. The government provides excellent schools and stores nearby, and even suburbs located far from the city center are conveniently accessible by (public) transport. Following the successful regeneration of the Cheonggyecheon the Cheonggyecheon
River in downtown Seoul, each new housing development has a lively park area, where people can stroll, play, and exercise. Unlike similar building types in Europe, these developments are not neighborhoods for marginalized populations, but for the well-to-do middle class. Other researchers, too, have wondered why the now-prosperous South Korea clings to the construction of repetitive ugliness. In 2007, geographer Valérie Galéaudeau published The Republic of Apartments about Koreans’ astonishing love for their standardized apartment blocks. Galéaudeau concluded: the force behind the mass construction of standardized flats is a cleverly forged alliance between government, influential family conglomerates who control the big construction companies, and the middle class. In other words, standardization is not seen as an inevitable consequence of mass production, but as a strength which guarantees a predictable product of homes and housing. Her previous publications on South Korea include the series “Learning from Seoul” at ArchNed and a chapter in her book Wonen. De fascinerende gelaagdheid van een alledaagse bezigheid (Wauberg Pers, 2021).

The Study

Housing in Europe: built immobility

Instead of the one- or two-room accommodations that were common some 150 years ago, the northwestern European middle-class of the 19th century invented homes with distinct chambers. This idea of rooms tailored to one function (e.g., “living room,” “master bedroom,” or “bedroom”) was not broadly questioned during modern movements. Consequently, until today, most floor plans are designed according to this functional idea. Furthermore, they exclusively fit the concept of living as a nuclear family, while today more and more people live together differently. Of course, Korean housing cannot be applied one-to-one to other countries. And I do not want to advocate a massiveness, which does not pay any attention to urban or rural surroundings. Yet, the floor plan of the three-bay condo is an example of affordable housing in which people can live together in different and changing ways. The use of rooms is not fixed, but can easily be adapted: homes as “free space” rather than built immobility.

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Notes

4. Interviews with Yoon-Ol Nam, Sungyung Chough (Bauk Architecta), Daniel Tändle (architect) and Byungchan Kim, 2017 and 2019.
8. Alio van Eijk, “Statement Against Rationalism”, in Alio van Eijk, Writings (Amsterdam: Sun, 2008). Originally, the text was written for the Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) VI in 1947.