**The Critics**

**The vision of a city**

The design for a new island city in South Korea perfectly showcases the Architecture Research Unit's rich imagination and ambition, writes Andrew Mead.

*Architecture as City: Saemangeum Island City* by Florian Beigel, Philip Christou and the Architecture Research Unit. Springer-Verlag New York, 2010. 152pp. £44.99

The model we design the city not for itself. This was how Florian Beigel, who runs the Architecture Research Unit (ARU) at London Metropolitan University with Philip Christou, summed up their scheme for a new, military site on the edge of the water (A 01/0.30).

Beigel and Christou talk about the importance of infrastructures not just in the city itself, but how it interacts with its landscape and topography. While it's clear the designers have considered the cultural and geological context of the site, they also aim to design a city that can be 'read' as an ensemble of buildings and the spaces in-between them. With specific short-term proposals but open long-term uses, their schemes can accommodate change. 'What we try to do is design the site before development, but not necessarily the development itself,' says Beigel.

Partly because of its landscape and infrastructure plans for Paju City in South Korea, ARU was one of seven teams invited to enter a competition held in 2007-2008 for the design of a new city, Saemangeum, on the north-west coast of South Korea.
ARU’s scheme was one of the three joint winners and this book presents it in detail, but also serves as a dossier of ARU’s thinking about architecture and cities.

In the case of Saemangeum, it means thinking about a city whose 400km² site would swallow up Paris and its suburbs. To be built on reclaimed land behind a 34km sea wall, and with an expected initial population of 750,000 in 2020, it’s a hugely ambitious project.

ARU envisages the city taking shape on six new islands, located where land can be reclaimed most easily. Accentuating their man-made character, all these islands have straight edges, though their shapes are individual and irregular. These sharp edges recur as sprawl-resistant boundaries to the new settlements on these islands, with ARU citing such dense compact towns in the Dordogne as Monpazier, France, that are clearly bounded and leave the surrounding landscape untouched.

As in the Berlin scheme, ARU’s proposal responds to the history of the site by highlighting what Beigel calls ‘time witnesses’. In Berlin, such keys to the past included some disused railway tracks overgrown by silver birches – a reminder of industrial use in the 1930s. Such elements at Saemangeum include the mountains on the horizon – ‘witnesses to the life that has been played out in front of them for thousands of years,’ says Beigel – and wooded rocky outcrops, once underwater but now exposed. For ARU, the site is emphatically not a clean slate.

Adapting one of Cedric Price’s concepts, ARU has incorporated some ‘city magnets’ in its plan: seven nodes of greater density in the otherwise dispersed city. South Korean planners are apparently still keen on zoning cities in an orthodox modernist way. But, believing this to be a discredited practice, ARU has pressed for mixed-use and diversity throughout.

In starting to define Saemangeum’s built form, ARU identified a number of ‘city structures’ (mostly >

Opposite page

Saemangeum island
City, long-term urban design plan.

This page Spreads from the book
Top Mapping water bodies in Stockholm, Venice and Cadiz on to the Island plan
Bottom One of the project’s precedent studies, Weymouth Mews in London
The idea is that the everydayness of the city carries civility and culture.