KOREA PROSPECTS

On a terrace in Heyri Art Valley, a new cultural development in Korea, Florian Beigel and the Architecture Research Unit's Pojagi building reflects their thinking about space, materials and landscape, while meeting an unusual brief

By Andrew Mead.
Main photographs by Jonathan Lovekin
Heyri Art Valley in South Korea is a cultural oasis—or at least that's the plan. Quite close to the border with North Korea, it's conceived as an eco-friendly arts colony, with housing, workspace and exhibition areas meant to epitomise good design.

Korean architect Kim Jong Kyu drew up the guidelines for Heyri's development, in a form that reflects the period he spent as a research fellow with Florian Beigel and the Architecture Research Unit (ARU), at what was then the University of North London. Now one of his country's leading architects, Kim invited Beigel + ARU to make more detailed proposals for a section of the valley, which led to them being there as well. With a most unusual programme, that building is now complete: the Pojagi gallery, jazz club, studio and house.

Heyri is an hour's drive north from the South Korea's capital, Seoul, on a motorway beside the broad River Han. Housing blocks give way to rice fields in a landscape that stays flat until the wooded slopes of Paik Mountain appear. Here, on ground reclaimed from the river, is the site of Paik Book City, for which Beigel + ARU produced the design guide, and where they built the Yool Hwa Dang Publishing House in 2004. After a few more kilometres comes the turn into Heyri Art Valley: clearly a landscape in transition, with completed buildings and construction sites, raw red earth and flint-chipped hills.

Kim wants Heyri's development to take place on a series of 'patches': irregular strips of land (none quite the same in shape or area), which are tailored to the contours of the valley, given a hard surface, and subdivided into plots. Half of each plot should stay 'green', while 40 per cent of each building should be cultural space open to the public. Scattered among the patches—singly or in loose configurations—are a number of 'object' buildings, while a 'green network' of paths and parks runs throughout the valley, whose creeks and streams are being conserved or improved.

This strategy resembles Beigel + ARU's 'landscape infrastructure' approach in such schemes as Paik Book City and Lichtefeld süd in Berlin (AJ 3.4.03), in the latter they subdivided an ex-military site into 'landscape fields' for housing of differing types, which can be added incrementally as the market permits. With deference to the landscape's history and ecology, they set parameters for development without being too prescriptive.

The Heyri project is the initiative of a 'community'—originally some 30 people, now more than 230 who purchased lots cheaply from the Korean Land Corporation and whose members include Y. K. Yoo, the client for Beigel's Yool Hwa Dang Publishing House. It all sounds rather utopian like a modernist paradise, but a century later and on a much bigger scale, in a cut-and-own culture, the urbanism for Heyri's cultural facilities is expected to come from Seoul. Already there are several galleries and theaters, cinemas, bookshops and cafes.

As for the buildings themselves, they are a kind of glue, a utilitarian framework that is not of any particular style. In other words, as Beigel says, 'Heyri can take it as long as the project is well thought through, present and presentable.'

With long retaining walls that resemble rock strata, Beigel + ARU's patch at Heyri will be terraced into plots for houses, slopes gently from one to another.
The Heyri project in the initiative of a "community," originally some 30 people, now more than 250—people who purchased the land cheaply from the Kosei Land Company, whose members include Yi Ki-long's ARU and whose members include Yi Ki-long. Kim Jong's ARU has subverted the split of the Heyri building into two. But they have not gone as far as Beigel in referring to a central tenet of the philosophy of space.

The simplicity and strength of this first idea survive in the finished building. The dark grey concrete walls are blank and emphatically solid; built analogous to natural exposures of rock. They have the aura of something archaic, in part because Beigel rejected the familiar concrete of Santo et al., with its grid of bolt holes, as "too mechanical"—you could think that prefabricated concrete slabs have been screwed into place—and opted instead for the draping method used by Peter Zumthor at his Congonha Foundation in the Ticino (see Architect's Account).

In the rear yard behind the living quarters, the concrete is interrupted by a cryptic rectangle of masonry, which Beigel likens to "a blocked-up door or cavernmouth, though he'd wanted the stones to be more rubble-like. This concept is a little fanciful (though it photographs well). There is a resemblance to some works by the Arte Povera artist Iannis Kounellis, which, if not intended, is nonetheless apt, given that Beigel and Kounellis have much in common in their way with materials: a feeling for their intrinsic qualities and for what happens when they're combined. In the front yard, which contains the jazz club, it would have been better to taper the concrete garage doors to fit the sloping site, keeping the sense of solidity intact. Beigel would have preferred the colour of the concrete to match the red earth of the valley—an effect that Kim Jong Kyu has now achieved in one of his Heyri buildings.

In its lightness and translucency, the polycarbonate that surrounds the gallery above the jazz club and the studio in the living quarters, contrasts strongly with the concrete. So the building has a dual identity. Whereas the concrete seems to be immutable, the polycarbonate is alive, responding to any changes in the light and weather. The sheets are fluted, which blurs reflections, making them more "atmospheric" than a mirror image. In the right conditions, these pavilions really do evoke the 'ice cubes' Beigel mentions. Seen from a distance when illuminated at night, they are suspended islands of light.
Above: the west facade of the gallery, with its neon sign for the jazz club. Right: the gap between the house and the gallery pavilion. Below: evening view of the front elevation, taken from the building across the street.

**KEY**

1. jazz club
2. parking
3. house

**Podium level plan**

1. jazz club
2. studio
3. gallery
4. kitchen
they're as glowingly insubstantial as one of Noguchi's paper lamps. Veiled but visible through the polycarbonate she supporting steel frame and a 'lattice' of timber battens. Like the patterns of the pojangi on show inside the gallery, and which give the building its name, the geometry of the lattice is irregular. Pojangi, used for wrapping and covering things, are often made from patches of leftover cloth - squares or triangles - which are stitched together into new asymmetrical wholes. The timber battens are arranged in much the same way, though Beigel had to persevere to use wood not steel, because it nestled figures in Korean construction and had to be engineered in London.

This unorthodox timber frame hints that something interesting is happening inside - it's intriguing; but the jazz club's solid wall gives nothing away. Behind the club's heavy concrete door, a ramp descends immediately on the right to a bar along the end wall, from where the jazz Hall floor slopes gently in the other direction.

Beigel remembered a photo of Andy Warhol's studio, in which the walls and ceiling were covered in aluminium foil, which appealed to his client, so he has done the same here - the shiny, silver, crinkled surface of the foil offsetting the matt concrete by the ramp.

'I don't think that a precise room for jazz is right,' says Beigel. 'The foil blurs the corners of the room and is better for the experience of the music.' At present, he is still fine-tuning the sound, intending to reduce reflection from the concrete with fabric stretched on an insulated wooden frame (the fabric decorated with photos of jazz musicians)."Piled above the club, the two-story gallery gains warmth, character and intimacy by the use of plywood on its wall and ceiling - it's not just neutral space - while the evenly diffused light through the polycarbonate is good for displaying the pojangi, which can be hung on the timber battens, if desired.

In designing the living quarters of the building with his clients, Beigel had in mind Ábalos & Herreros' seductive plan for the Casa Morea, Cádiz (sadly still not built). This offers an alternative to both the Modernist free plan and the more usual corridor and-rooms, by treating the house as a group of juxtaposed rooms (some unroofed), which lead directly one into another and become more private the further you move through the house. At the centre is an unadorned long room with no designated function, which may cross continually in the course of a day.

'A house like this has many more personalities, says Beigel. 'It's like a large room with its own particular character in its dictated by a specific house can easily accommodate change.' Beigel has already explored this concept on a much smaller scale - the Casa Morea, in a Hampstead apartment where rooms are differentiated not in style and proportion but by their materials - American white oak, stained glass, Korean paper - and where both facilities, showers, etc., are all master visitors to the space, they can cut and run.

Though again on a modest scale and radically than Casa Morea, the Pojangi reflects this idea. Immediately there's a long hall-like room of the others opens, and while the currently clear - a studio, a bedroom (which Beigel prefers 'personal rooms') - one could easily be being thought in the future. A degree. At a pivotal place in the building, in designing the terracing of this patch we have kept close to JKC's design guide. Two of the other eight houses were nearing completion when I last visited. There's more diversity than community and it remains to be seen if the new owners can be persuaded to adopt the design guidelines more wholeheartedly.

We very much like JKC's design attitude to the whole landscape. This patch is a staged podium type, with material differentiation between the earthbound elements and the elevated ones. Perhaps we accept gravity a bit more than him. We are content with the land walls, terraces, with pavilions perched on top of them. It's a topographical architecture. Our only variation from the guidebook was to divide the pavilion in two and sit them down on the terraces. Making a towniness out of a openness is for us the first move from architecture to city.

We see the little buildings perched on top of the land wall terraces as buildings of light - lanterns in the landscape. Their grey wrappers reflect the daylight and give you a blurred image of the timber sticks (pojangi) pattern and the plywood inner walls. At night the spatial volumes behind the wrappers become more clearly visible. The size of the lanterns is small in relation to the terraces, and they are slightly set back from the edge, as is the minimal roof parapet. The gap between the upper 'light house' and the lower one is a positively charged void, like those of the Economist Building in London. We wanted the concrete of the land walls to say 'wall' and not 'mechanically fastened panels'. We are not very fond of the notion of architecture as a machine. That is why we have chosen a concrete shuttering similar to Peter Zumthor's locally sourced house for the sculpture of Hans Josephson, housed in the Swiss Ticino. We have painted the clamped-off metal ties in a dusty colour. They look like little stitches in a patchy wall, an association we prefer. The shuttering of the concrete doors picks up the pattern of the rest of the walls. We have been extremely fortunate that JKC's office has been our partner architect. It is somewhat frustrating not to be able to make a stronger personal contribution to this design process on site, so one has to find ways of working with these limitations. One strategy is to refer to architectural precedents that both the partner offices admire. This makes communication faster and easier.

Florian Beigel
is the dining table, placed strategically in the long room by the shutters that open onto the timber-boarded terrace, and with a view onto the private courtyard as well—a dual connection between inside and out.

To cut cost, there's less material distinction between the rooms than Beigel had anticipated—more white-painted plaster and less plywood. But, while the floors are epoxy throughout, there's some variation in color (though not quite the Marzak shades seen in ARU's early model).

As for the integral 'in-between spaces,' the little courtyard between the living room and bedrooms is already a true outdoor room, its open side framing the boundary wall with its puzzling machinaryst insertion. The space between the gallery pavilion and the house, which then opens out as a roof to the jazz club, is somewhat underemphasized at present, though that should change once the outdoor jazz café is in action, and Beigel's clients begin annexing this area in whatever ways they choose.

Was it wise to light these in-between spaces with Leverence lamp standards, straight from Kipling? They're so personal to him that they risk being alien or unintegrated, even in a scheme by an admirer. Beigel explains this as a way to specify at a distance: 'It's a bit cheeky, but I knew that they would look good and that Mr. Leverence wouldn't kill me for it."

In Beigel + ARU’s approach to this Korean project, one can't but be reminded of the Smithsons. For Beigel + ARU, as it was for them, architecture is about thinking, researching and writing as well as building, which means that when a commission does come, what they build has a gravity that much other work lacks. It embodies ideas. Like the Smithsons too, Beigel consciously situates his practice, not just in an architectural context in which certain forebears and contemporaries are an acknowledged source, but in a broader visual culture, in which artists supply a constant stimulus. Both deal with the dimension of time, accepting change and letting occupants make their own mark. The Smithsons tried to encourage 'the art of inhabitation;' Beigel too, though more overtly, provides a frame for others to fill.

Just as with the Smithsons, there's a wish to accommodate building to the landscape as deftly as possibly 'to treat the landscape kindly,' as Beigel puts it. Moreover, there's the same emphasis on the space between buildings: the title of the Smithsons'own work complete/InCharged/Void, makes that clear.

But notwithstanding Beigel + ARU's focus on space rather than object, their Peking building has a most distinct presence. Without any attention-seeking gestures, it commands attention nonetheless, through its compactness, refraction and studied materiality.

However, things turn out in Hanoi, and whether or not Kim's patch gravity keeps development there cohesive, those spaces will surely still make themselves felt.