

IBP ARCHITECTURE WRITER 2018

Contact Name
Publication
Email Address
Telephone
Category

Manon Mollard
The Architectural Review
manon.mollard@emap.com
075 11 53 87 70
Architecture Writer

Statement

Holding the firm belief that a piece of architecture can never be considered in a vacuum, I always attempt to tell the broader story, engaging with the wider social, cultural and political context buildings sit it – I only write about projects that I visit personally, and make sure I speak to a wide range of people, from designers to clients to politicians to end-users and passers-by. Different threads run through a piece of architecture, and the buildings I choose to cover are often more interesting because of the urban narratives they are a part of, than simply because of pure architectural prowess. Through my writing, I seek to broaden the scope of the conversation and engage an audience of non-architects, to prove the relevance of the profession beyond its established circles.

Building study: Beit Beirut, Lebanon (128 words)

In a country where there are no urban memorials and no history textbooks, Beit Beirut is arguably the closest thing to a war monument. In this piece, I discuss the thorny conversion of a Lebanese snipers' nest into a space of collective memory. The contemporary intervention, by architect Youssef Haidar, is very problematic and yet, while this new platform of dialogue and exchange is largely imperfect and still the source of many controversies, Beit Beirut has the merit of existing. War's corrupting power reaches deep into the veins of a society, and manifests itself in the urban fabric long after the ceasefire has been pronounced. The recovery can only be a long and slow journey, and a piece of criticism can help play a part in this process.

Building study: Sewoon Sangga, Korea (120 words)

Unheard of in the West, Kim Swoo Geun is undoubtedly Korea's most influential twentieth century architect. As a symbolic gesture in war-torn Seoul, his colossal and uncompromising ocean liner sought to epitomise Korean modernity and lay the groundwork for what was to be an unprecedented urban transformation. Fifty years later, Sewoon Sangga still brings together the manufacturing facilities and distribution networks of tight-knit communities at the heart of Seoul, responding to the unpredictability of human lives and the urban chaos around it, and providing an alternative to the pursuit of lucrative real-estate endeavours. The piece starts with a 'photo-essay' introduction showing contemporary photographs of the megastructure, while the following pages feature archival material and drawings of the recent regeneration project.

Profile: Junya Ishigami (102 words)

There is a conspicuous resemblance between Junya Ishigami's original table designs and his most daring building proposals. It was the images of his early 'impossibly thin tables' seen alongside models of projects currently on the drawing board or on site that inspired the idea to feature this piece in the AR's Furniture issue. According to the young Japanese architect, a table is a lot like a building. In this piece, I seek to unpick how he manages to overturn established design conventions, and argue that it is the lack of concern for scale that truly frees both his imagination and his architecture.



SPENT SHELL

Emblematic of Lebanon's troubled past, the Beit Beirut museum seeks to prove that memory is at the root of the narrative of history, writes *Manon Mollard*

The history of the Bakarat family and the residential building they commissioned on Damascus Road strongly evokes Beirut's troubled past. Pictured in the 1970s (below) it was home to both Phalangist and Palestinian residents before the war – the portrait hanging on Najib Schemali's balcony depicts Pierre Gemayel, the Maronite Christian Phalangist leader whose attempted assassination triggered the Ain el-Rammaneh massacre. On the same landing, across the building's concealed atrium, lived a Palestinian family



On 13 April 1975, 27 Palestinians on a bus were killed by Christian Phalangist fighters in Beirut's eastern neighbourhood of Ain el-Rammaneh while, on the other side of town, the daughter of Nicolas and Victoria Barakat was having her hen party. Her wedding day, 14 April 1975, effectively coincided with the first day of the Lebanese Civil War. From the outbreak of the conflict, the Barakat family story is intrinsically linked to Beirut's tormented history. Today, while the city is subject to an aggressive market-led regeneration welcoming international architects to design high-end housing blocks and shiny office towers, bullet-riddled buildings remain an inevitable sight. The civil war officially came to an end in 1990, but the divisions remain entrenched in Lebanese society.

In the early 1920s, Nicolas and Victoria Barakat commissioned Youssef Aftimos to design their ochre sandstone mansion, the Yellow House, in the then outskirts of the Lebanese capital. The ground and first floors were completed in 1924, as the chipped stone relief above the main entrance still testifies, while a second architect, Fouad Kozah, was brought in to design the residential building's upper levels in 1932. By then, technological advances meant that concrete casting had replaced stone carving. Adopting the aesthetics in vogue, Kozah placed precast-concrete columns atop his predecessor's carved stone pedestals to convert the first floor's balustrade into a fragile colonnade supporting the second floor's terraces, and he convinced Mrs Barakat to conceal triple arch windows, typical of middle-class bourgeois homes, in the building's interior to free the outer facade of neo-Ottoman references, preferring instead streamlined Art Deco motifs. A sign of the times.

From the street, the Yellow House reads as a single volume, but the plan reveals that terraces on either side are, in reality, separated by an open slit. In the past, the thin wrought-iron handrail ran continuously between the two wings, a subterfuge to help dissimulate the narrow atrium awaiting the visitor directly beyond the main gate. This unusually hollow corner is undoubtedly the building's most distinctive feature: the cut's jagged outline turns every room into a corner room, and all interiors, even those recessed deeply into the site, are drenched with light. Yet, with hindsight, the fragility and artificiality of the link connecting the building's two volumes almost reads as an unfortunate symbol for entrenched divisions to come – an unintentional premonition.

At the strategic intersection of Independence Avenue and Damascus Road, the first Ottoman carriageway connecting Beirut to the Syrian capital, the Barakat building found itself on one of the five crossings along the city's demarcation line,

separating Christians to the east from Muslims to the west during the 15 long years of the Lebanese Civil War. As the Barakat family fled to a safer area north of the capital, a right-wing Christian militia moved in and converted the Yellow House into a snipers' nest. The architectural ingenuity of the design was completely re-appropriated into a horrifying killing machine, the porosity of the shell and its consequent deep sight lines making it a perfect redoubt. Snipers could shoot through up to seven spatial layers, directly out onto the street, and the crossroad became known as *takaata al-mawt* – 'the intersection of death'.

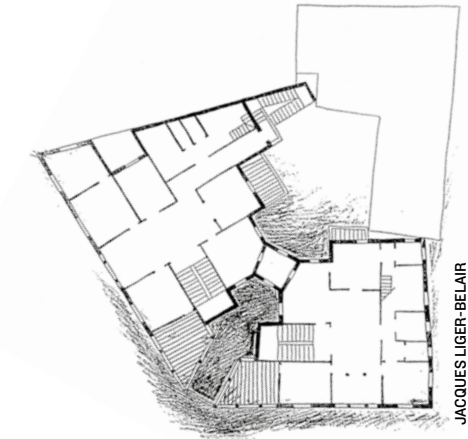
The staircases of the lower levels were immediately demolished by the snipers themselves to stop the enemy from intruding into the stronghold – the steps' cornerstone was sold by the kilogram, while the upper flights were left hanging in mid-air and the snipers used the service stairs at the back of the property instead. In the second half of the 1970s, the Yellow House became a construction site again, rapidly transformed into a fortified retreat: sandbags were carried up, concrete was poured, bunkers were created and occupied, and innumerable bullets were fired. Every component, no matter its scale, was repurposed into a weapon, the function of the most innocuous design elements was distorted, subverted, perverted. The Art Deco bead mouldings of a timber door became the frame for a gun loop. Both in its entirety and down to its most seemingly insignificant details, the building speaks of the war. To this day, it is an unsettling display on the art of killing. In places, it looks like someone has tried to peel back the added bunker layers, making the interior unintentionally reminiscent of installations by Doris Salcedo or Rachel Whiteread – certain processes and traces cannot be erased easily.

After the war, the Barakat family intended to sell the property, but a coalition of architects spearheaded by Mona El Hallak, a Lebanese architect and heritage-preservation activist, fought for its preservation, leading a seven-year campaign to convince the municipality to expropriate the building. El Hallak first pushed aside the ground floor's rusted rolling shutters and infiltrated the Yellow House's crumbling structure in 1994, to find the floors strewn with layers of countless personal documents, left untouched since the outbreak of the conflict: personal correspondence, cinema programmes, photographic negatives, all witnessing an epoch long gone. From that day she has been, akin to an archaeologist, meticulously reconstructing the timeline of events, piecing together the life of the building and its residents in an attempt to lay the foundation stone for a collective memory.

Following the expropriation of the building in 2003, the municipality embarked on an ambitious yet complex project: turning the



Perhaps the most unforgiving act of the recent renovation project was the demolition of the service stairs at the back of the plot, pictured below in 1994. Both local and international architects, including Zaha Hadid herself, sent written support to Beit Beirut's Scientific Committee – in vain



building into Beit Beirut, ‘the house of Beirut’, a museum-cum-cultural centre-cum-urban observatory. There is a culture of silence around the war but, as a publicly funded institution and one of the city’s very few buildings left intact after the conflict, Beit Beirut could not be left mute. ‘The architecture is its permanent collection’, believes Youssef Haidar, the architect designated to transform the crumbling carcass into Beit Beirut, following a public call for bids in 2007, ‘so I worked on its preservation and *mise en scène*.’ ‘The museum starts out here in the street’ he explains, while standing on Damascus Road, across from the main entrance. Keen to understand the building as a living organism rather than a pile of rubble, Haidar speaks of suturing the wounds and, drawing an analogy with a Frankenstein creature, diagnoses three layers of intervention: the ‘skeleton’, the ‘flesh’, and the ‘skin’. Regrettably, his words suggest an elegance and a nuance that are absent from his design proposition: the outcome is cumbersome and unpolished.

Instead of a careful surgical intervention, the exterior facade looks like a messy patchwork dominated by the multiple colours and textures of the artificial additions that compete for attention, relegating the original yellow structure to a secondary role. Steel beams are inserted both on the facade and in the interior, akin to a skeletal prosthesis, stitching large material lumps together and stabilising the remains – although their thickness is apparently justified by anti-seismic requirements, they appear oversize. On the balconies’ colonnade, the war damage had exposed the precast concrete’s steel reinforcement, now replaced with artificial grey limbs, but the design of the new pedestals is inconsistent, differing slightly in shape from column to column. The building’s reconstructed ‘flesh’ includes the atrocious and unnecessary recreation of bullet holes and craters, and its ‘skin’ shiny stainless-steel shingle cladding – a test that was eventually not applied to the overall facade.

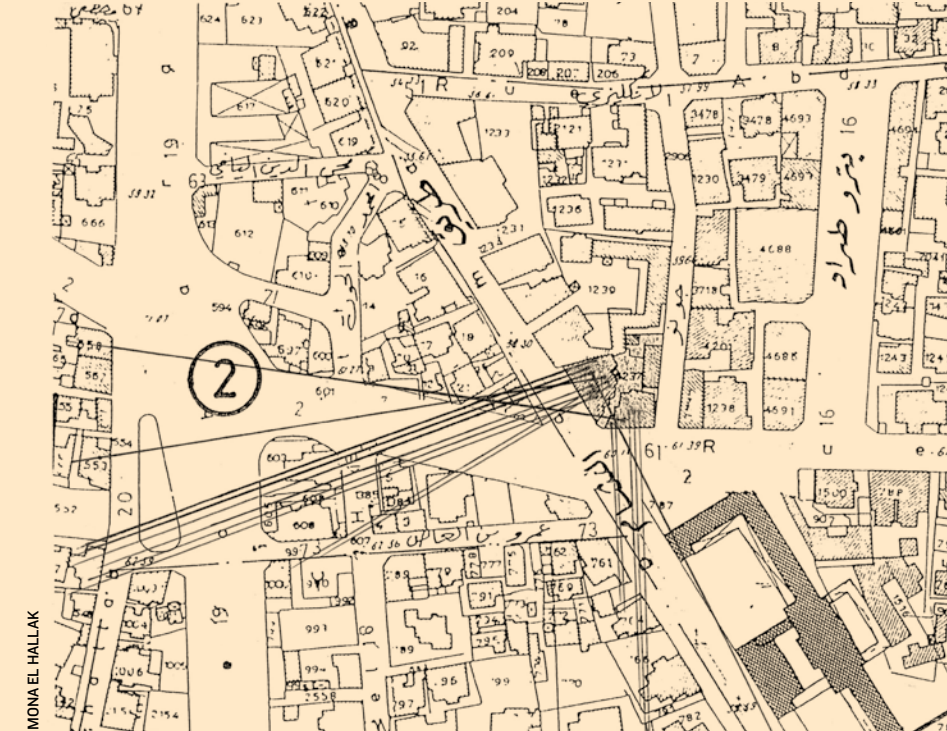
At the rear of the property, Haidar’s parasitic extension clogs up the site, as if smothering the original building from behind. Required to facilitate circulation across the whole, providing offices for researchers as well as a few other auxiliary spaces, the contemporary addition intentionally contrasts with the original neo-Ottoman building but, once again, it dominates the complex. The original back garden is filled with a large entrance hall, an uncomfortable inclined stepped ramp leading visitors to the upper floors. Inside, the architectural project is organised around a vertical narrative in line with the level of damage caused by the war – as a rule of thumb, the more intact the spaces, the more successful the intervention. Walking through the first-floor rooms as they are, where the snipers built two bunkers, is

a harrowing experience. More work was done to the top floor, converted into a standard white box and used for temporary shows. Unlike the empty carcasses of the city centre’s Holiday Inn (left in limbo due to disagreements among shareholders) and the unfinished Burj Al Murr trade centre (too tall to knock down and too dense to implode), Beit Beirut is arguably the closest thing to a war monument in a country where there are no urban memorials and no history textbooks in schools. No collective history has been written yet and, since the conflict is still highly unresolved, there is a pervasive fear that explicit discussions about the war risk rekindling tensions. As a result, from its inception to its delivery, the project has been plagued with disagreement, and the museum’s opening date endlessly postponed – on my visit in April there was a temporary exhibit on the top floor, but the museum is only open to the public sporadically, and there is currently no director, no cultural policy and no staff.

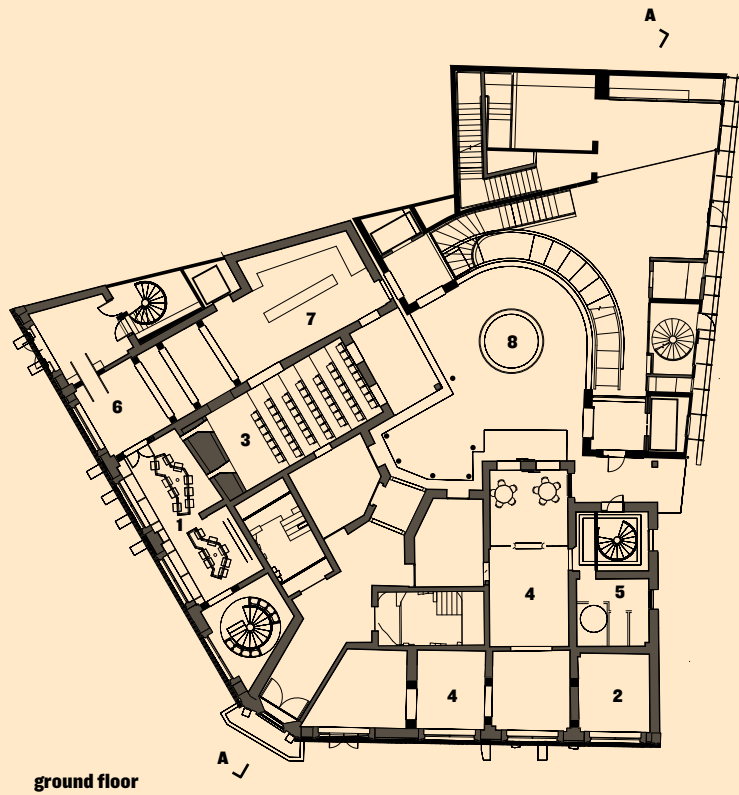
The need for memory is a need for history and, without commemorative vigilance, history would soon be swept away. But the duty of remembrance is a thorny subject. ‘A museum of the civil war, as a more factual recalling of events, is needed. But it is too early’, believes El Hallak, who advocates the display of people’s stories and memories – *des histoires personnelles à portée universelle*. A lot of Beit Beirut’s artefacts, ‘evidence’ as she refers to them, are currently stored in her attic – including the dental chair of Najib Schemali, who used to live on the eastern wing’s first floor. ‘What happened to Schemali outside this building is irrelevant, but this,’ she says pointing at some of the dentist’s belongings, ‘this is what the building tells us.’ As a disruptive force altering cities and societies beyond a delimited timeframe, she situates the war within a broader narrative, one that is still shaping the city of Beirut.

‘So all a man could win in the conflict between plague and life was knowledge and memories’, wrote Albert Camus in *La Peste*. War’s corrupting power reaches deep into the veins of a society, and manifests itself in the urban fabric long after the ceasefire has been pronounced. The recovery can only be a long and slow journey. ‘They experience the deep suffering of all prisoners and exiles, which is to live with a memory which serves no purpose’, Camus writes of the inhabitants of Oran when contaminated by the plague, ‘hostile to the past, impatient of the present, and cheated of the future, we were much like those whom men’s justice, or hatred, forces to live behind prison bars.’ While it is largely imperfect and still the source of many controversies, Beit Beirut has the merit of existing. As a project still in the making, it should become a rich platform of dialogue and exchange, conveying a powerful message of hope and human resilience in today’s still heated climate.

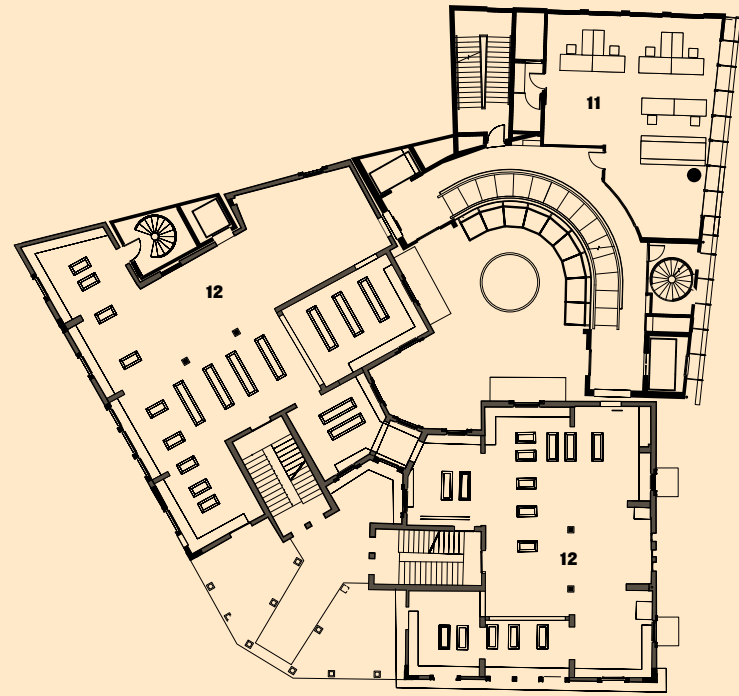
‘The building’s porous shell and its consequent deep sight lines made it a perfect snipers’ redoubt during the war’



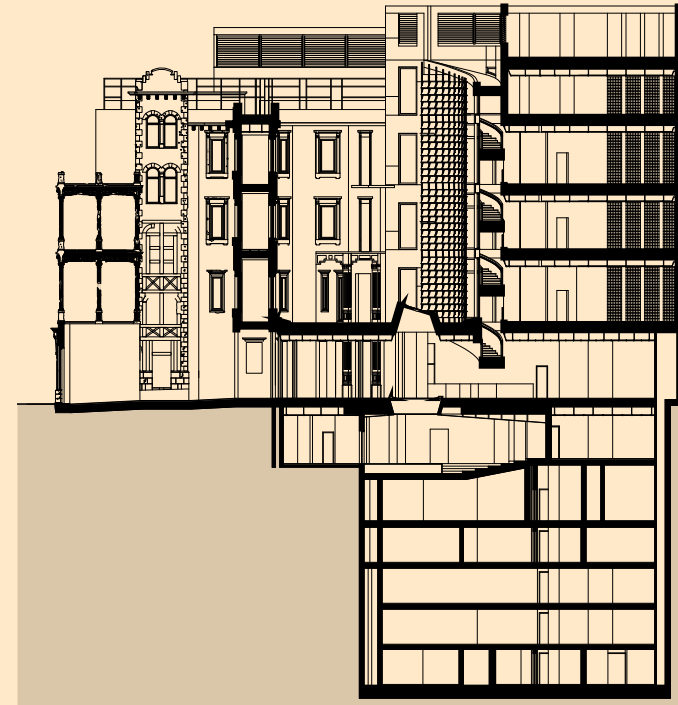
Separating Muslims to the west and Christians to the east, Beirut’s demarcation line (far left) became known as the Green Line after vegetation reclaimed the no man’s land. At one of the divide’s five crossings, the Barakat building was occupied by snipers and turned into a horrifying killing machine (bottom left). After the war, thousands of warped, torn and stained negatives were found amid the dust and debris of the building: one of the ground-floor shops was Photo Mario, a photographic studio used by Christians and Muslims alike to have their portrait taken (below) to commemorate special occasions. Prints are currently displayed on Beit Beirut’s ground floor, encouraging neighbours and visitors to delve into the city’s past



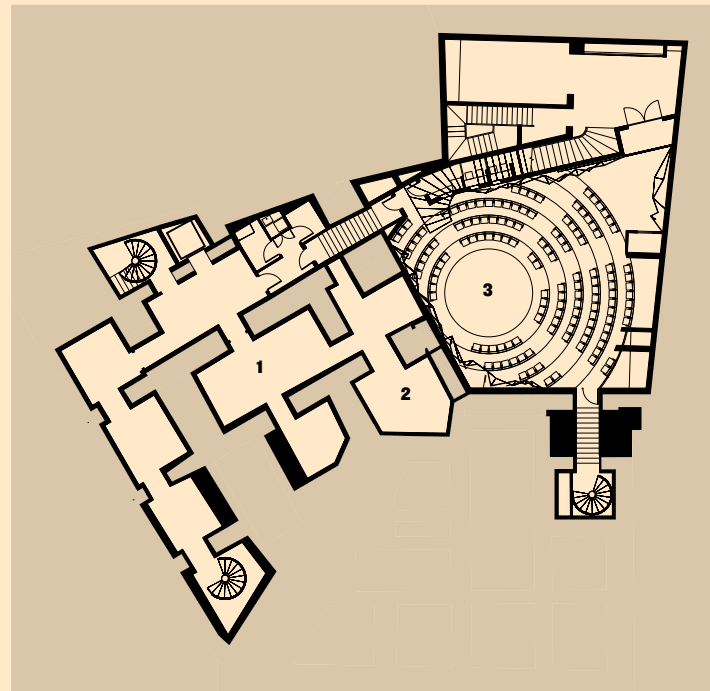
ground floor



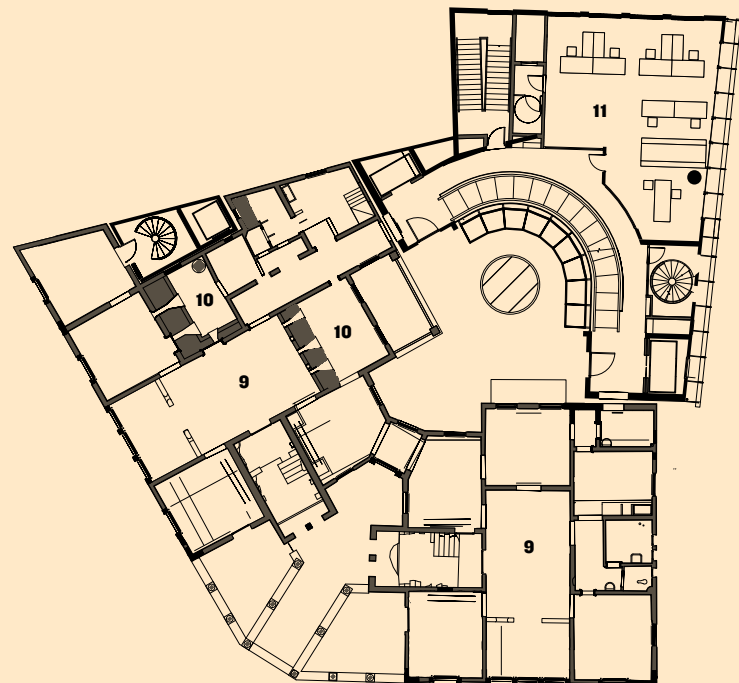
third floor



section AA



lower ground floor plan



first floor

- 1 library
- 2 plant room
- 3 auditorium
- 4 café
- 5 WCs
- 6 museum shop
- 7 reception
- 8 foyer
- 9 permanent collection
- 10 bunker
- 11 research centre
- 12 temporary exhibition space



Architect
Youssef Haidar
Project team
Henri Franjeh, Nadine Sakr, Dana Bazzi
Structural engineer
Nabil Hennaoui
Photographs
First photograph by Youssef Haidar, all other photographs by Geraldine Bruneel unless otherwise stated

The architectural language of Youssef Haidar's parasitic extension at the back of the building clashes with the original structure. Its central oculus attempts to link the underground auditorium with the ground floor's central hall, the new courtyard on the first level and the sky above



‘At the rear of the property, the parasitic extension clogs up the site, as if smothering the original building from behind’



CITY WITHIN THE CITY

Despite falling into a state of disrepair and disrepute,
Sewoon Sangga remains a vibrant hub of human
industry and leisure, writes *Manon Mollard*



Large sheets of paper are fed into printers and steel welders fuse together rods of hot metal while, across the hallway, arcade game repairers fix machines straight out of the 1980s. As young creatives move into the megastructure with 3D printers and other robotic arms, the knowledge of Sewoon Sangga's experienced technicians will now be passed on to the next generation of makers





Sewoon Sangga's troubled fate saw its original promise of brighter tech-savvy futures evolve into a dark and isolated underworld, secluded from the surrounding streets. Today, it is a lively marketplace where open-fronted workshops coexist with wholesale and retail units displaying old television sets and new air conditioners, circuit boards and other electronic components





The cramped interior of the linear megastructure spills out onto its wide balconies and into the surrounding narrow alleys down below, its permanent concrete superstructure concealed in parts by layers of signage and ill-considered cladding refits. As an electrifying 'city within the city', Sewoon Sangga gives central Seoul drama, form and a sense of place





Although today the city around Sewoon has burgeoned and the megastructure is vanishing amid a monotonous slick of towers oozing between the capital's rounded hills, historical images reveal the sheer scale of the behemoth

Megastructures amount to only a short chapter in architectural history books, yet the idea of encapsulating the city in a single building continues to captivate the imagination. As complex amalgamations of architecture and infrastructure, based on reconciling the large with the small, the permanent with the temporary, megastructures took flight at a time when 'architects had talked themselves into the position where they had no option but to propose megastructures if they were to retain any credibility as comprehensive designers', wrote Reyner Banham in *Megastructures*, 'The Dinosaurs of the Modern Movement'.

Chaos was sprawling, but it could be controlled. And in the context of Seoul, the stakes were even higher. Fifty metres wide and more than a kilometre long, the strip of land on which Sewoon Sangga stands today was flattened during the Second World War to contain the spread of fire in the event of air raids and act as an urban evacuation corridor. Following the departure of the Japanese and, eight years later, the end of the Korean War, the vacant stretch was appropriated by squatters, refugees and prostitutes, causing the authorities to eventually take action: the young and



visionary Kim Swoo Geun was commissioned to fill the gap.

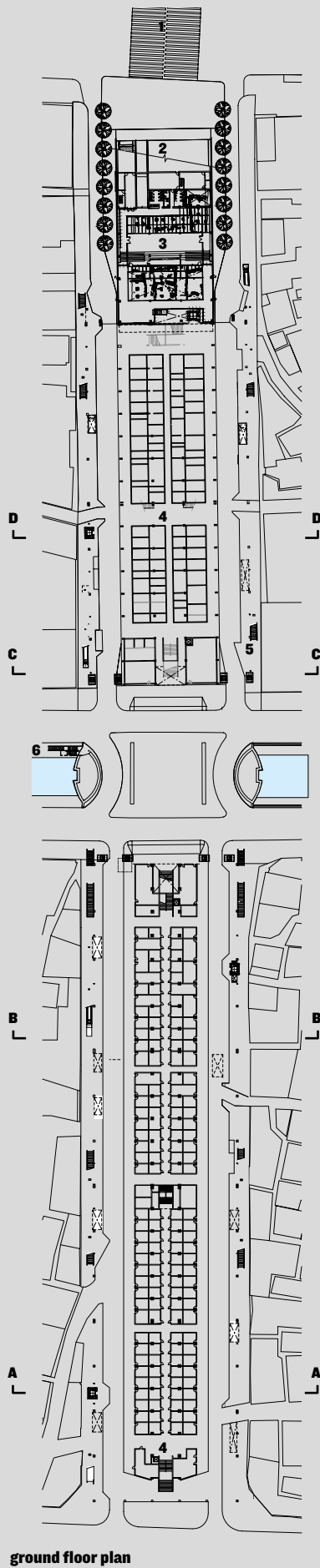
Indisputably the 20th century's single most important Korean architect – although almost unheard of in the West – Kim was the 'virtual state architect' of the newly industrialising nation, as Hyungmin Pai put it, creating 'spaces and forms no one had ever seen before'. The country had failed to modernise, and his career 'coincided not only with the formation of Korean modern architecture but also with the very creation of a culture of the modern'. Constructed in 1967-1972, Sewoon Sangga is the first modern building on the Korean Peninsula, and the first mixed-use complex, combining residential and commercial activities.

As a symbolic gesture in war-torn Seoul, Kim's colossal and uncompromising ocean liner sought to epitomise Korean modernity and lay the groundwork for what was to be an unprecedented urban transformation. *Sewoon* stands for 'erecting good energy' in Korean, while *Sangga* means 'shopping mall', promising a better, more prosperous future. With a spatial organisation clearly articulated in plan, and sections revealing the complexity of three-dimensional journeys through it, via an intricate network of alleyways, passages and staircases, this urban microcosm efficiently accommodated planned housing units augmented with abundant commercial and communal spaces – schools, playgrounds, gardens, hotels, cinemas, restaurants, care centres, and even a swimming pool.

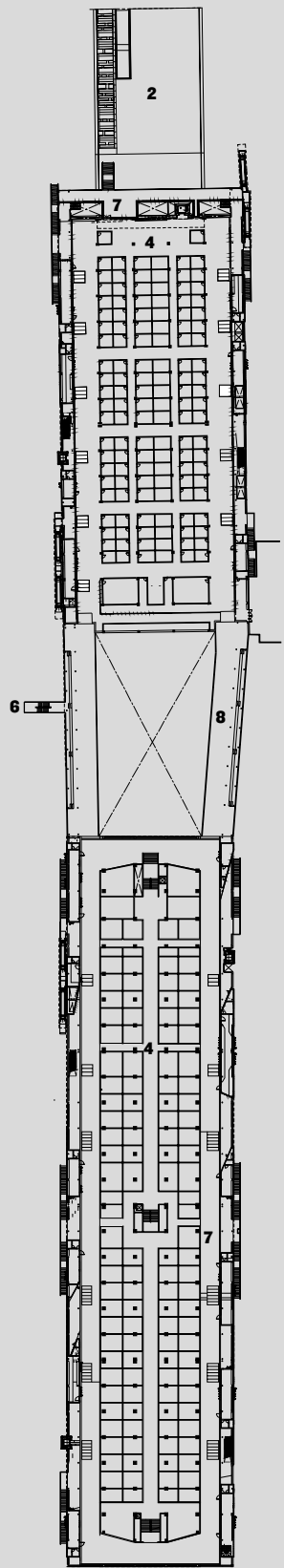
Yet the megastructure's heyday was short-lived. Already in the '70s, informal traders had started to occupy the elevated walkways. Secluded from the streets, the structure's indoor arcades provided a haven for illicit practices and a retail hub for the porn industry, censored records – by groups such as Queen and Pink Floyd – and other

smuggled goods. As artist Seo Hyun Suk put it, Sewoon soon 'embraced the impossibility of what it had promised'. But if up until now the megastructure was more of a passive victim, subject to the transformations around it, today it seeks to be the catalyst for urban change. It was often voted Seoul's ugliest building in press polls, and the current regeneration project is arguably doing little to improve its appeal, but that's beside the point. The utopian ideals underpinning Sewoon's beginnings are still intact.

The uniqueness of the megastructure lies in how it brings together the manufacturing facilities and distribution networks of tight-knit production communities. Over the years, both the monolith's interior and its surrounding side streets have been colonised by the electrifying world of electronics, the smelly chemicals and pigments of print shops, and the noisy cutting, rolling, bending, fusing and riveting of metal workshops. During the Cold War, rumours had it that tanks and nuclear submarines could be assembled here. The simultaneous planning, producing, displaying and selling of artefacts at the very heart of a 'developed' metropolis is almost unheard of in the 21st century. While its European counterparts have pushed most manufacturing out to the periphery, Seoul's centre still contains about five per cent of the city's semi-industrial zones. Sewoon was threatened with demolition, but the 2008 global financial crisis miraculously saved it (bar one volume) and the regeneration project initiated by the Seoul Metropolitan Government seeks to guarantee manufacturing functions are preserved in the city centre instead of being erased by services, consumption and real estate. Phase One focuses on the first three blocks, while Phase Two will tackle the remaining volumes. Italian architects

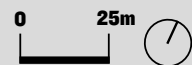


ground floor plan



bridge level

- 1 to Jongmyo Shrine
- 2 slanted plaza
- 3 city ruins
- 4 retail units
- 5 access from the street
- 6 access from the stream
- 7 balcony
- 8 bridge



Architects

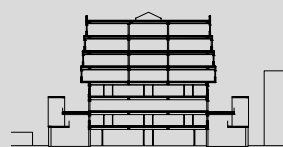
Chang Yong-soon
and Kim Taek-bin/
E_SCape Architects

Project team

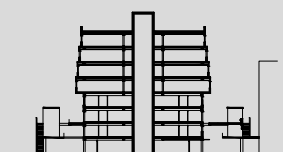
Park Ho, Seo Jinseok,
Han Jeonghan, Min
Sojung, Yang Joongsik,
Ryu Jeongyeon,
Park Soyoung, Park
Sewon, Oh Jinju, Park
Geunyi, Choi Seonwoong,
Ko Jongwook,
Cho Kyoungmin,
Kim Jinseol, Minjeong
Kim, Lee Jeongmin

Photographs

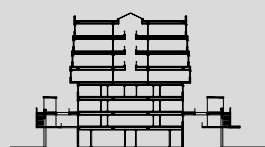
All photographs by
Thierry Sauvage unless
otherwise stated



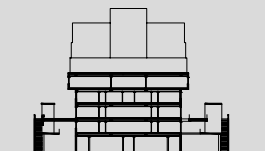
section DD



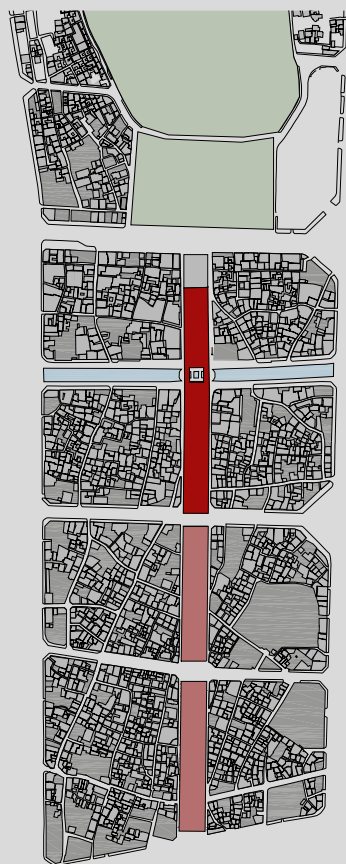
section CC



section BB



section AA



Once disconnected
from its neighbourhood,
the thresholds between
Sewoon Sangga and the
surrounding streets
have been 'softened'.
The addition of
pedestrian walkways
and elevated bridges
open up the once-
impenetrable site and
reinstate the original
linearity of the
megastructure

Modostudio won the competition for the west part, and construction is due to be completed by the end of 2019.

Like the presidential *Grands Projets* that have left an indelible impression on Paris, mayoral interventions in Seoul are shaping the capital's urban development. But instead of succumbing to the lure of glitzy buildings, Korean mayors and their city architects have been focusing on large-scale regeneration, converting dilapidated infrastructure into new pedestrian routes and reclaiming the city as a three-dimensional territory to be experienced on foot. 'Preservation has replaced reconstruction', explains Hwang Jie-Eun, co-curator of the Seoul Biennale's Live Project 'Production City', 'human concerns are now prioritised when, previously, a project was conditioned purely by physical and economic factors.'

Described as 'both hardware and software regeneration' by city officials, it ticks three of the Seoul Metropolitan Government's boxes: industry, community and pedestrian environment. While both Cheonggyecheon and Seoulo meander through the city's urban fabric (the stream a few metres below street level and the skygarden a few metres above it), Sewoon is a very grounded complex. Because of its terrain and topography, the Korean capital originally



SEOUL METROPOLITAN GOVERNMENT



COURTESY OF THE ARCHITECT

structured itself around horizontal, east-west axes. North of the Han River, where the city was founded, recent history sees vertical elements introduced, with Sewoon's concrete megastructure a conspicuous monolith connecting the Jongmyo Shrine to the north with Namsam, the capital's most famous hill, to the south.

One of the ideas was to bulldoze the megastructure and replace it with a linear park, but 'green isn't the solution' argue Phase One architects Chang Yong-soon and Kim Taek-bin, who instead advocate the densification of urban centres. 'It is a modern misconception that vibrant cityscapes are created by vast empty spaces', they explain. Rather than bringing in actual vegetation, they take advantage of the megastructure's multiple floors to carefully frame views of Seoul's verdant landscape. To reconnect Sewoon with its ground level and immediate neighbours, the premise of Chang and Kim's winning competition entry is to 'scale the megastructure down' and re-implant it in the surroundings. A lower level is added directly under the balcony of the original design - deemed too high, on its own, to be successfully connected to the street. Grafted on either side of the monolith and running along its full length, the revamped balconies, populated with small retail units, behave as soft thresholds, dissolving the old rigidity, creating a structure that starts to resist order and hierarchy. Scattered remnants of the concrete superstructure stand as vestiges of a previous ideology. When handrails need to be trimmed, or beams and slabs chopped off, the surgery is apparent, revealing urban layers and transforming Sewoon into a palimpsest of Seoul's recent history.

The elevated walkways connecting the first two volumes were destroyed during the daylighting of the Cheonggyecheon stream,

and a lively market lodged under the highway was forced to relocate further out. Beyond the literal rebuilding of the mid-air pedestrian bridges, there is a strong sense that the city has learnt from previous regeneration projects, and is keen to avoid repeating the same mistakes. The nearby and highly controversial Dongdaemun Design Plaza was intended to serve as an incubator for young fashion designers, but the consensus, so far, is that it has failed to do so. At Sewoon Sangga, manufacturers are to remain an essential part of the life of the megastructure with the aim of 'bringing together the skills of experienced craftsmen and technicians with the imagination of the younger generation'. There are workspaces for start-up companies, a drone development lab and a fab-lab in the old boiler room.

Mass production gave rise to the modern city as we know it, yet networks and scales of production are being reassessed. As the survival of industrial clusters, the preservation of historic heritage, and the pursuit of lucrative real-estate endeavours offer conflicting views, the future of central Seoul is at the heart of vigorous disputes. In his epilogue 'The Meaning of Megastructure', Banham concludes that megastructures were 'an invention of architects [...] as a way of imposing a form of order on "the chaos of our cities"', before they were 'finally abandoned by them because it offered to generate a form of order that they themselves could not manage'. Welcoming the multiplicity of anonymous forces and personalities that enliven it, Sewoon Sangga seems to prove that a megastructure can find its own alternative scenarios. Freed from controlled design and planned evolution, the rigid skeleton is now responding to the unpredictability of human lives and the urban chaos around it, making its own future uniquely fascinating.



Balancing act

Junya Ishigami's delicate oneiric world
obscures the confines of furniture and
architecture, writes *Manon Mollard*



‘I see in a table not a piece of furniture to be placed in a space as much as a space in its own right’

GIOVANNI EMILIO GALANELLO



JUNYA ISHIGAMI ASSOCIATES

What makes a table a table? Is it still a table if its top surface wobbles? If the objects resting on it cannot be moved because their repositioning threatens its structural integrity? In 2006, Junya Ishigami’s first built project was the ‘Impossibly Thin Table’, a daring ultra-lean horizontal plane supported by four skeletal legs. When sketched in plan, the outer edges of the pre-stressed metal sheet resemble the walls of a rectangular room, the methodical composition of bread baskets, salad plates and potted plants akin to the careful arrangement of furniture pieces and exotic bibelots in an interior. The structural integrity of this banqueting scene hinges on the exact positioning of individual element: each was carefully weighted and counterweighted and, if too much load is displaced, the 3mm thin tabletop would buckle, and the entire dinner party fall apart.

According to Ishigami, a table is a lot like a building. ‘The top board is like a roof, the legs like columns. You could almost see it as an archetype of architecture. I see in a table not a piece of furniture to be placed in a space, as much as a space in its own right.’ Comparing his wafer-thin tabletop to a drawing made in space when seen from the side, he insists on the fragility of his creation and the precision required to reach a state of perfect equilibrium on a nearly invisible object. The fact that the stability of the table is dependent on the arrangement of smaller, secondary objects reverses the natural order of things. Yet for over a decade, the 44-year-old architect has been challenging preconceptions and overturning established conventions of architecture. He prefers lightness to mass, fragility to gravity, finds inspiration in the shapelessness of a cloud, the weightlessness of a water droplet, the vast randomness of a starry night sky.



There is a conspicuous resemblance between his original table designs and his most daring building proposals. In the first room of the *Freeing Architecture* retrospective currently on show at the Parisian Fondation Cartier, a model of the 1km-long Shandong Cultural Centre (see opening spread) is effectively a narrow tabletop-like surface resting on a series of skinny legs planted in what would be the artificial lakebed. Varying in width between 5m and 20m, the sinuous promenade subtly rises above the surface like a tidal shoal or sandbank formed naturally by the slow accumulation of sediment, with water penetrating underneath the lateral glass panes. The oneiric atmosphere is reinforced by a series of handwritten observations stuck on the model’s flat roof – ‘are we inside or outside?’, ‘from here I can see all the way to the end of the route’, ‘look mum, my feet are in the water’.

Next to it is a 1:10 model of the Park Groot Vijversburg Visitor Centre (2017), in a historic floral park in the Netherlands, where the existing curved pathway becomes the template for the building’s footprint. Gently sunken into the ground, the concrete base is hidden from view, allowing the roof slab to sit solely on glass partitions. Here, the table legs have disappeared entirely, the architecture appears to float mid-air. Throughout the serpentine promenade, the visitor’s perspective is framed by the horizontal planes of ground and ceiling, with the landscape in between, stretching out to infinity. Out of the 19 projects on display, six have been realised and all the others are under development, an important precision proving the sceptics wrong: no, his work isn’t all unbuilt and unbuildable.

Ishigami was propelled almost instantly to international fame following the completion of his very first building, the Kanagawa Institute of Technology, in 2008. Its outer perimeter is demarcated by glass partitions and its interior filled with an artificial forest made of 305 slender columns, each with specific dimensions and a unique orientation. It took two years to determine the size, position and rotation of each column. A series of drawings (presumably only a small selection) is displayed on the exhibition walls, testifying to this immensely rigorous, painstaking process. Rather than creating solid boundaries and divisions, the forest of columns defines loosely zoned spaces of multiple densities for different activities. In this ‘wall-less’ interior, the distinction between furniture and architecture is blurred and eventually lost. Ishigami speaks of ‘making the



JUNYA ISHIGAMI ASSOCIATES

Ishigami’s most impressive project to date is the University Multipurpose Plaza (opposite, top), the immediate neighbour of KAIT Workshop (opposite bottom), where a 12mm-thin steel sheet makes a 100x70m roof, without a single pillar in sight in the interior. The gentle dip of his early table designs (left) is amplified, with the floor and the roof both gently curving in section. Columns of rain pour through the rectangular skylights, further dissolving the established notion of interior. In the Park Groot Vijversburg Visitor Centre (below), views are framed only by the narrow concrete floor and roof slab



JUNYA ISHIGAMI ASSOCIATES



JUNYA ISHIGAMI ASSOCIATES

plan invisible' and designing randomness, as if placing order and disorder on equal footing.

Ishigami's distinctive, slightly whimsical representation techniques, which rapidly became his signature, are crucial in conveying architectural atmospheres and concepts. His is an intricate visual language of extremely delicate lines, conscientiously drawn plant leaves and flower petals, hatches made of multiple dots and minute strokes, pen marks overlaid on photographs of bare card cut-outs and frail furniture pieces, flat textures collaged on pastel green and blue backgrounds. What is impressive is that the built reality conveys the ideas even more powerfully than the two-dimensional renderings, in an age where seductive digital images flatter to deceive with dispiritingly mediocre outcomes in real life.



The apparent simplicity and sobriety of Ishigami's architecture is misleading, concealing its structural complexity and the efforts of the design team, often working in collaboration with structural engineer Jun Sato, to devise particularly innovative solutions. When buildings are not floating, structural systems play the role of interior partitions. In a project for eight holiday homes in Dali, southern China, boulders from the adjacent riverscape support a 300m long reinforced concrete roof. When viewed in photographs of the landscape, their sheer size is not perceptible. It is only when seen confined to the villas' interiors that their colossal mass is revealed, strangely out of scale in a domestic environment.



New contexts trigger new meanings. The architect moves back and forth between the site and the model, elements are scaled up and back down, the model becomes the site. The 1:1 is redefined, the landscape moves to the interior where, no longer subject to weathering, the passage of time and the processes of erosion, its state is preserved. Architects like to say they blur the boundaries between inside and outside, but few have done it as boldly and literally as Ishigami.

The lack of concern for scale seems to be what truly frees both his imagination and his architecture. The playful shift

in scales is evident throughout the exhibition and the work itself. Photographs of the cuboid House with Plants (2012), complete with wooden furniture and neatly arranged pairs of slippers, resemble a carefully crafted miniature, while the stripped back model of the house's structure features real life vegetation, set against the backdrop of the Fondation Cartier's wildflower garden, visible behind Nouvel's diaphanous glass facade, itself already fusing interior with exterior. Described as 'a home to several living spaces, in which furniture, plants and architecture constitute the elements of an inner landscape', this Tokyo dwelling for a young couple seeks to abolish traditional hierarchies, granting living organisms, furniture pieces and architectural tectonics the same degree of importance. Permanence is no longer relevant.

When designing spaces for children, adults are forced to rethink standard measurements. The reinterpretation and misinterpretation of everyday elements, often left unquestioned, suggests new meanings and opens up a world of possibilities. Of his Forest Kindergarten in Shandong, Ishigami writes: 'Building is playground, building is secret fort, building is attic, building is table, building is tunnel, building is wing, building is slide, building is pool, building is musical instrument, building is building and yet no building.' Thin pieces of paper gently lift up from the model's base, as if peeling from the earth's crust, creating pockets of activities and nooks to hide in. The ability to bend, manifested in the initial tabletops as wobbliness, becomes premeditated and voluntary through gently curved surfaces – yet the gesture itself remains almost minimal. 'Architecture doesn't create space. Architecture is merely the beginning', argues Ishigami, who sees the role of the architect as a 'tour guide into another world'. Making structures is about discovering those new worlds rather than creating something new, he believes. When we turn what we know on its head, we liberate the power of the imagination.

Freeing Architecture, Fondation Cartier, Paris, until 9 September 2018

