



Dubbed "Ssamzie Street," the new building in Insa-dong, due to open Saturday, introduces the architect Choi Moon-gyu's new concept that a building can be a natural extension of streets. [GaA Architects]

Architect's new project is 'extension of the street'

Insa-dong building brings visitors in close contact with its shops

By Ines Cho
Staff Writer

Part of Insa-dong will "stretch and spiral upward" as of Saturday, when a new building in the heart of the district opens, according to Korean architect Choi Moon-gyu, who designed the project called "Ssamzie Street" or "Ssamzie Street" in English.

As viewed from the street, it's a simple structure adorned with wood, gray granite and black bricks that reflects its environment. Like the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, the building contains a gently sloping ramp, without a clear division of floors, allowing visitors unlimited contact with the shops within it.

When the project was given to him six years ago, Mr. Choi, who heads a small architectural firm, GaA Architects, in Seoul, didn't want to disrupt the natural flow of the famous antiques-and-crafts street in central Seoul that is crowded with vendors, shoppers and tourists.

The new building, he says, is a

mere "extension of the already existing street," where the main activities in the area — shopping and selling — will continue.

Ssamzie Street is a 5.5 billion won (\$5 million) project that took three years to plan and design, and another three years to construct. Gabriel Kloiz, a young American architect based in Baltimore, was involved in the early stage of the project. Given the conservative nature of the neighborhood, Mr. Choi maintained a low-key approach.

The building, legally registered as a four-story structure, has a total area of 4,026 square meters that will feature 72 arts and crafts stores of varying sizes. Except for four stores — Ssamzie, Sum, Palja and Y-shirts & Paintings, which are operated by Ssamzie Co. — they will be commission-based rental spaces. There will be a coffee shop, an art gallery, a Korean restaurant and a roof terrace, as well as a parking lot in the basement.

Complete with a courtyard on the

ground floor that will be used as a small amphitheater for outdoor performances, the edifice is expected to function as a new destination of art and culture. Events will be regularly organized by Ssamzie Co. staffers.

When asked about the meaning of the project, Cheon Ho-kyun, the president of Ssamzie Co. commented, "Ssamzie means freedom and youth, and Insa-dong history and tradition. How will the two go together? They are two different things but we expect to create harmony there."

"Our job is to implement our history and tradition in today's context, and that is not just limited to Korea but applies to the world. 'Ssamzie-gil' will be a people-oriented venue for all," he adds.

A cultural icon

To most Koreans, the name Ssamzie-gil is a reminder that the popular local brand Ssamzie is going strong after two decades. The owner, Cheon Ho-kyun, started the business by selling inexpensive casual handbags in the 1980s and is now a well-known fashion mogul. But Ssamzie is more than a company selling garments, shoes and accessories for men, women and children: It is something of a cultural icon in Korea.

What sets Mr. Cheon apart from most local businessmen is that he enjoys and invests in the underground art scene and promotes experimental events through his own arts center, Ssamzie Space, near Hongik University in western Seoul.

Six years ago, Mr. Cheon sought an architect who could create something that fit in well with Insa-dong. "The building had to be so humble that when it was done one couldn't tell whether the building was new or it had been there all along," he says. "By looking at his past projects, I had a gut feeling that Mr. Choi would be the right candidate."

The mutual trust and collaboration between the progressive client and the then-unknown architect had

resulted in another project. Around the time that Mr. Cheon was planning the Insa-dong project, he wanted to build a marketing mecca for "I Like Dalki," one of Ssamzie Co.'s brands for children, on land in the Heyri Art Valley, a new "art city" in Paju, Gyeonggi province. Mr. Choi recalls his client's comment: "He told me I could do anything I wanted."

Mr. Choi and two collaborators — Cho Min-suk of Seoul's Mass Studies and James Slade of New York City's Slade Architects — turned the field of grassy mounds into a wonderland of candy colors and childlike imagination, centering around the main character named "Dalki," or "Strawberry" in Korean. On the western side stands a box-shaped building which also houses Ssamzie Co.'s art collection.

Since Dalki's opening in May, the site has had an average of 2,000 visitors on weekends, creating a major traffic jam and media hype. Thereafter, Mr. Choi became one of the most sought-after architects. Profiles on the 43-year-old architect appeared in both local and international magazines, and project commissions followed.

In 2003, the "I Like Dalki" project won the prestigious P/A [Progressive Architecture] Award in the United States, and in September 2004, the site was introduced in the Venice Biennale's International Pavilion, the first time that Korean architecture has been included in the International Pavilion.

The future of Korean architecture

The Heyri complex, due to be completed in the next decade or so, features another stunning structure by Mr. Choi. The October issue of "Wallpaper," an avant garde British magazine, selected his steel-framed glass building, Cheong Han Sook Memorial, as the work that best represents the future of Korean architecture in the newly built art complex.

Mr. Choi seems overwhelmed by the sudden media attention this year.



The glass-and-steel-framed Cheong Han Sook Memorial in the art city of Paju stands almost transparent in nature, reflecting its landscape. [By Moon Jung-sik]

He considers himself "anti-social" and prefers to work quietly by "hiding" in his small studio in the residential area of Bangbae-dong in southern Seoul.

Viewing Mr. Choi's work, one cannot help wondering how the same architect designed all the buildings. If the "Dalki" project is a "maximalist" project of a child's fantasy come true, the memorial takes the opposite tack — a minimalist effort. Another building, Korea Reading Guidance, in Paju, shows yet another concept that's completely different.

Mr. Choi's explanation is simple: "There are budget, location and architectural issues to consider, and I design and build what works best. So each project is different, that's all."

He says ideas for architectural plans start from thinking about people's changing relationships and social contexts.

Upon graduating from Yonsei University and Graduate School, Mr. Choi won a full scholarship to study at Columbia University, where he

earned a master's degree in architecture in 1991. After a brief apprenticeship under Japanese master architect Toyo Ito in Tokyo, he returned to Korea to work on various projects, both commercial and residential. Six years ago, Mr. Choi started his own company, GaA Architects. The name, he says, is a combination of the first letters of the Korean and English alphabets.

Beyond the opportunities for emerging architects in the vast Heyri compound still under development, Mr. Choi is optimistic about the future of Korean architecture.

"There is a new generation of young architects, like myself and my friends in the industry, who can help shape the landscape and lives of people in Korea," he says. "I'm interested in small projects that are directly related to people's lives. Like a great chef who can cook anything with the available ingredients, architects should be able to build anything."

inescho@joongang.co.kr



Creative collaboration with Ssamzie Co. president Cheon Ho-kyun resulted in an innovative marketing mecca/children's theme park, "I Like Dalki," in Heyri Art Valley, an hour from Seoul. [By Kim Yong-kwan]

Structural variety is key

Architect Choi Moon-gyu expands on his thoughts about his field in an interview with the IHT-JoongAng Daily.

Q. Are there any architects you are inspired by?

A. Not really. I don't stick to the same themes or styles. My projects have not had structural consistency, which means elements used in the buildings change every time. They vary depending on the client, budget, location and [purpose].

To get ideas, I read a lot of books. These days, I'm reading "The Culture of Time and Space" by Stephen Kern. I'm interested in relationships in this world — how people live in a culture, their relations and how they change over time. A building is not just a heavy object, but represents the relationships of its occupants.

Architects are often considered visionaries.

Buildings in modern times are less meaningful; they don't last as long as before. After about 20 or 30 years, they are torn down, mostly for economic reasons. Buildings are no longer conferred with a sense of heritage, so architects can offer a vision for the near future only.

Mobile phones have changed the way we live and relate to one another. Relations among family members have changed, too. Before, a house for a family was divided into rooms, but because people's view toward marriage has changed, privacy in the home is not as important.

This year, my company won a competition to build nine community centers for state-run apartment complexes. There, children will play in the yard, and elderly people will

watch them play and naturally mingle. The centers will reflect relationships in modern families. But no one knows for sure how relations will evolve in the future.

What's the idea behind the Insa-dong project?

When I was given the job, I asked myself, "What is Insa-dong?" Insa-dong is a street. I didn't want to create a heavy structure that would disrupt the natural flow of the area. I wanted to introduce an extension of the street, but vertically.

The ramp inside the building has a very gentle slope, so [vendors'] carts can be pulled around there. But because the building has no clearly divided floors, I had a hard time getting it registered.

I thought about where the boundary of genre, purpose or concept of

architecture lies. A building and a street are supposed to be two different entities. Now, a space is connected by a street within a building.

Without Mr. Cheon, the project would not have been possible. Because it mainly consists of a street, the building is not so pragmatic. The rental space is smaller than in ordinary buildings, but there's a lot of contact with stores.

All your buildings are very different from one another.

I'm interested in skin [surface materials of buildings], space and relations in architectural and spatial contexts. The use of materials often lags the technologies. I think about how new materials can be applied in buildings. I've tried to utilize materials and textures that are not commonly used in architecture. The con-

crete in the Korea Reading Guidance building is used in unusual ways, for example. Roughly cut pebble stones used on the exterior wall to give a rough texture, like fish scales or mussel shells on a rock, create interesting facades.

The Cheong Han Sook Memorial is in the middle of a mountain. I wanted a transparent building that reflects the surrounding environment as it is.

Korean architecture is considered pretty ugly.

So-called real estate developers build buildings quickly and easily to make a lot of money, so small firms don't get to try new ideas. But now that young Korean architects are featured in prestigious art magazines and invited to international events, I anticipate changes ahead.

