

# *Art & Seoul*

Not just hi-tech but increasingly high end, the South Korean capital is the model city of tomorrow, rapidly outstripping Western rivals as a hub of innovation for architecture, design and the arts

Writer Ekow Eshun. Photographer Christopher Sturman



## THE TRIP

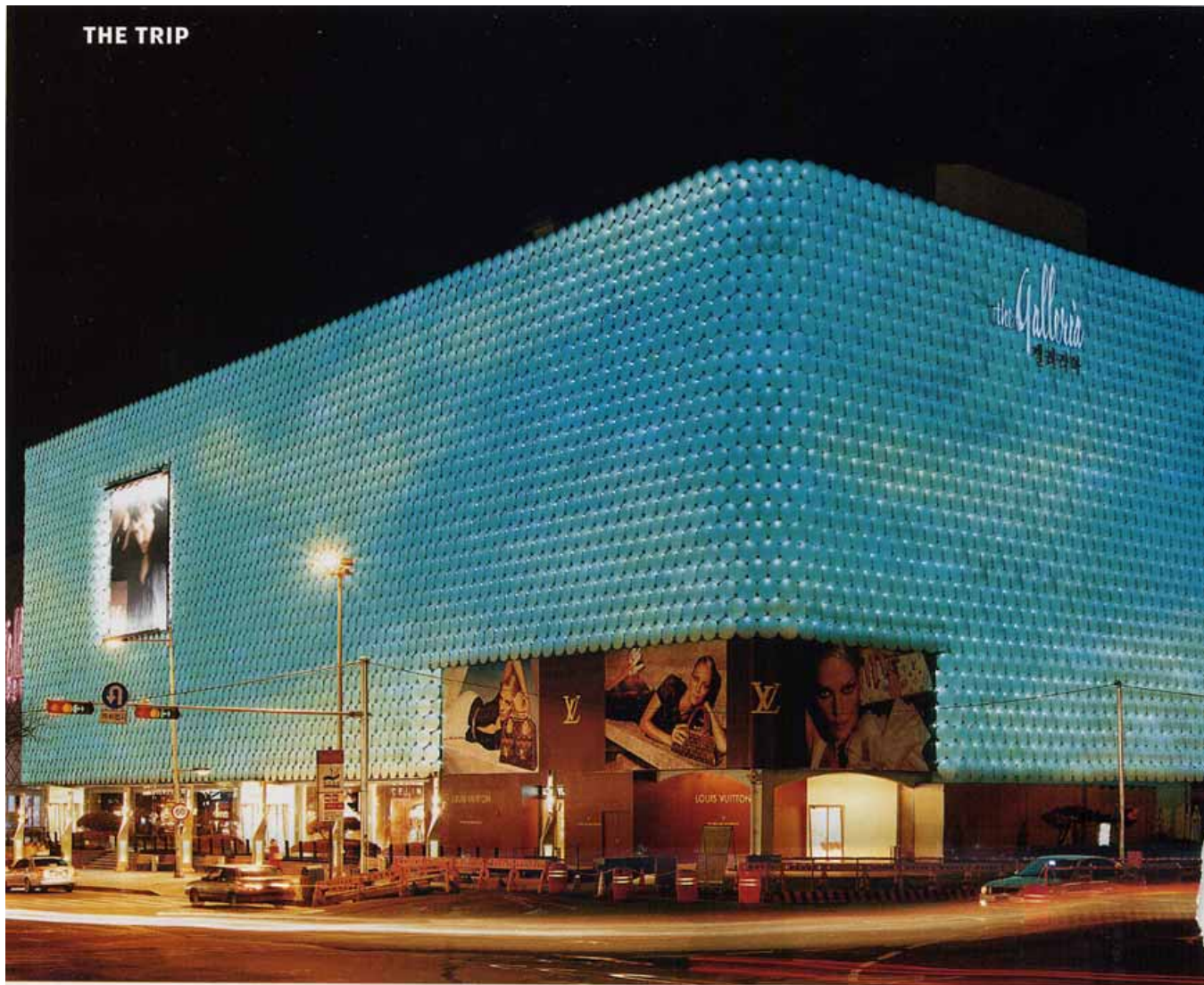
### CONCRETE PLANS

This page, one of the modernist buildings in Heyri Art Valley, Seoul's revolutionary suburb in the making

Opposite, the view across the Hangang river from the Grand Hyatt Seoul



## THE TRIP



**M**ore than probably any nation on earth, South Korea is a country defined by its neighbours. This is especially so of its capital city Seoul, which has played unwilling host over the centuries to hordes of invading Samurai warriors, Manchu dynasty Chinese forces, more Japanese fighters, communist North Koreans, more Chinese and, finally, by consent, to a sitting detachment of US troops. This is a situation that Koreans have come grudgingly to accept with stoicism and occasional flarings of resentment. It is also the reason Seoul is in the process of erasing its past and turning itself into the model city of tomorrow.

No monorails or flying cars just yet. But thrusting buildings designed by the West's architectural aristocracy. The most hooked-up, thoroughly wired city in the world, evanescent fashion trends whirl through Seoul like a sandstorm. Teams of computer gamers hunker down in PC dens for days and nights competing in professional leagues. Beauty parlours and 'aesthetic clinics' offer radical cosmetic surgery to walk-in customers. Any vision of tomorrow involves

stretching the parameters of the possible until they intersect with the boundaries of the fantastic and, in the case of Seoul, I can confirm that I have glimpsed the future and walked its neon streets.

Take my hotel room. When I check into the W Seoul, grimy and befuddled after an 11-hour flight from London, I am shown into a circular room with a circular bed, decorated in pure white with flashes of fire-engine red. A 42in plasma-screen TV is suspended from the ceiling and the many bridges of the Hangang river stretch into the distance from beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows.

W hotels has built an international reputation on pop styling, but this is like stepping into an episode of *The Jetsons*. Later that night, when I retire, exhausted, to bed, I find it impossible to sleep. Initially I blame jetlag. Then it strikes me that the room itself is keeping me awake. Far from being a place to retreat, it is plugged into the pulse of Seoul. Between the plasma TV, the lambent cityscape outside the windows and the thump of bass speakers emanating from the lobby bar, I have never stayed in such a violently

### MALL ADDICTION

Above, Galleria shopping mall in Cheongdam, with an exterior covered in LCD discs, was designed by Dutch architects UN Studio

Opposite, local artist Nancy Lang, photographed on Gwangjang-dong, is part of Seoul's thriving creative scene



stimulated place. It's impossible to turn off my senses. The future is all around me.

More than half a century ago, on 25 June 1950, North Korean troops invaded the South. They overran Seoul and quickly advanced through the rest of the country before UN forces, led by General MacArthur, beat them back across the border. In 1951, Seoul was invaded again, this time by the Chinese army acting in concert with its North Korean allies. The Chinese were forced out later the same year, but not before prolonged fighting brought devastation to Seoul.

Following the war, the city was rebuilt. The ornate Gyeongbokgung, the royal palace, and its immediate environs were preserved as an oasis of tradition. But otherwise, what was left of Seoul's houses and streets was replaced with utilitarian office blocks and apartment buildings. Most redevelopment was centred on the northern side of the Hangang and many of those buildings can still be sighted as you ride in a taxi beside the river, past acres of dour grey blocks. Look across the water to the south, however, and another story reveals itself. Buoyed by an economy that's

been booming for five years, developers are razing old buildings to make way for new skyscrapers and apartment complexes of such profusion that, in the dawn of a new day, cranes and scaffolding rise above the city like a man-made bamboo forest.

It is here, in the Cheongdam district, that you find yourself wandering the narrow streets gazing at the window displays of the new stores and, eyes craned heavenward, the architectural adventurousness of the buildings that house them. This is where you'll find Galleria, the upmarket shopping mall whose exterior is coated in hundreds of iridescent LCD discs that ripple through a spectrum of pinks and purples and sea greens like the skin of a fish flashing through the water. Here, too, are clothes stores such as the ultra-chic Mue and Boon the Shop, just six months old, part art exhibition space, part high-end couturier, where you'll find European and Japanese labels such as Yohji Yamamoto, Martin Margiela, Burberry Prorsum and Dries Van Noten.

It is in Cheongdam and other hip areas such as nearby Insadong, that Korean »

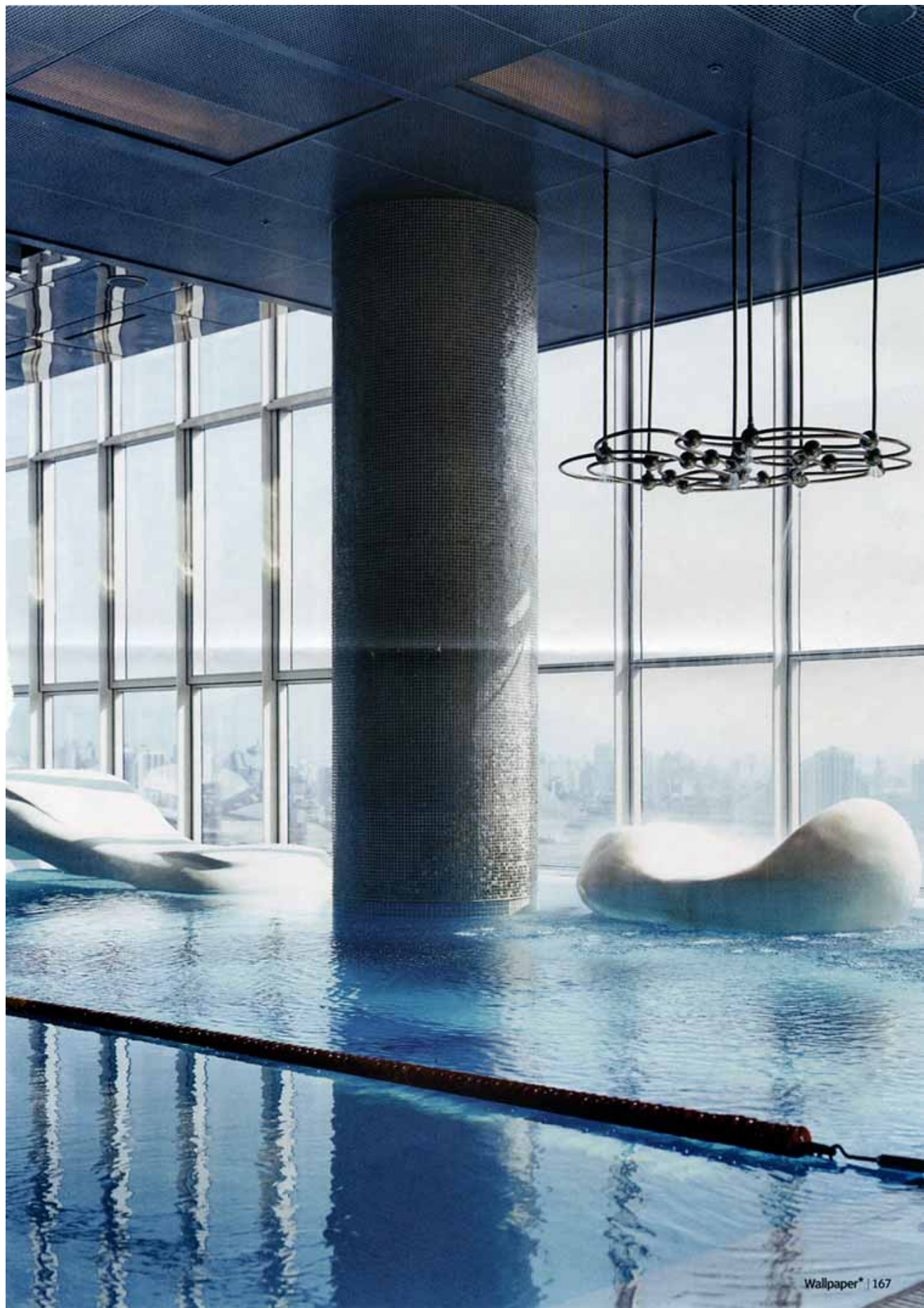
## THE TRIP

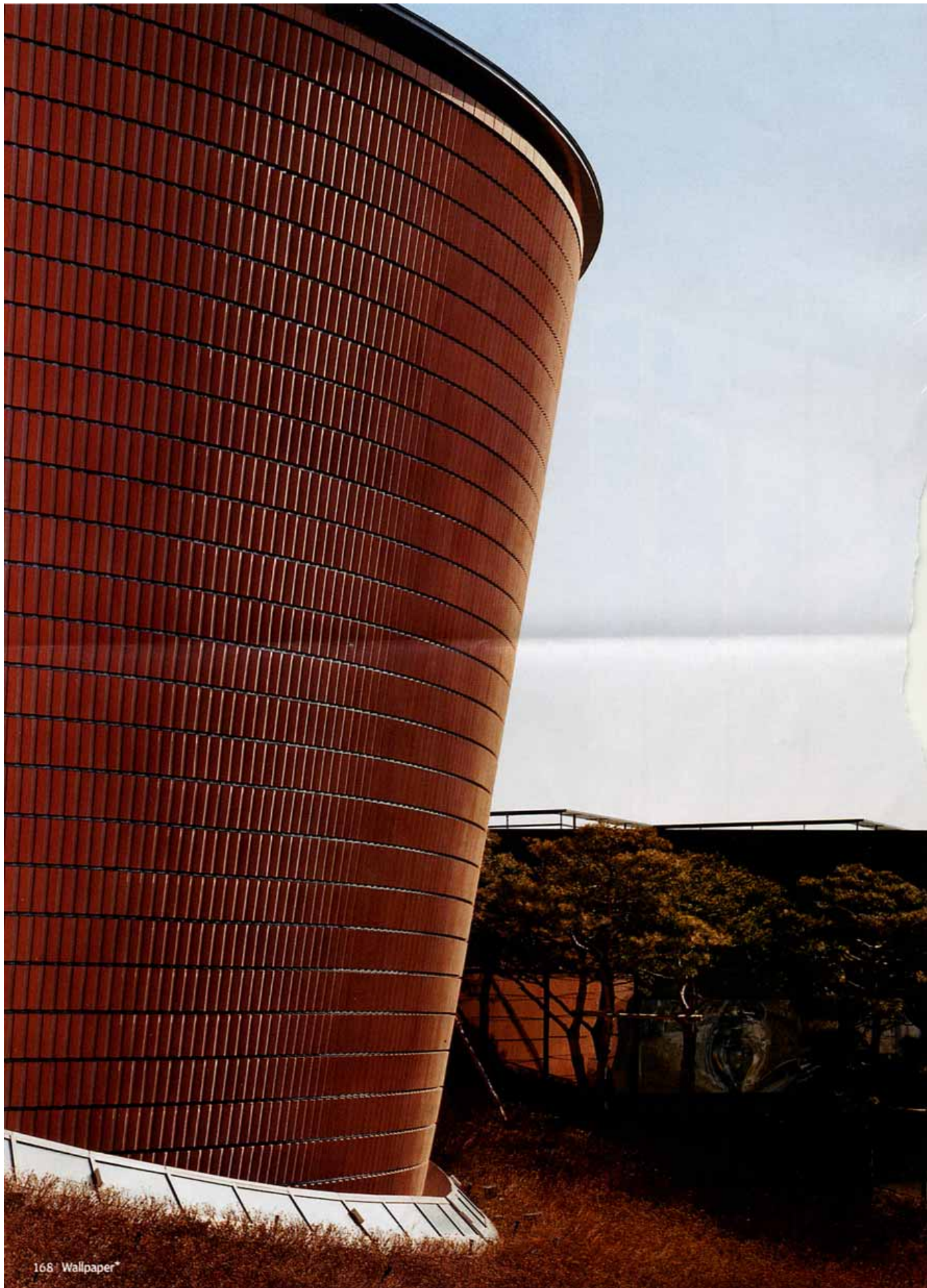
### MAKING HEYRI

Heyri Art Valley is set to be completed in the next decade and will have nearly 400 buildings, many of them belonging to artists and writers

Opposite, the luxury swimming pool at the W Seoul hotel







## THE TRIP

**SMART GALLERY**  
The Leeum, Samsung  
Museum of Art,  
houses the private  
collection of the  
company's chairman,  
Kun-hee Lee, in  
buildings by, from left,  
Mario Botta,  
Jean Nouvel and  
Rem Koolhaas



## THE TRIP



architects like Youngbeom Mah and Jeonghan Yoo have made their name, by building restaurants and boutiques with interiors that oscillate between high sophistication and raw simplicity. Near Doosan Park, a small, beautifully tended green space overlooked by high buildings, Mah has designed a café called Slow Food, where you can sip tea and contemplate the park as light filters through ceiling panels of mulberry paper.

'Korean people always want the new thing,' Mah says. 'So spaces have to change all the time to keep up. A few years ago, hip meant bright and colourful, now people want nature and wellbeing.'

Indeed, trends move at a mercurial rate in Seoul. Not so long ago, logo brands such as Louis Vuitton and Gucci were all the rage. Now sales of those brands are being matched by the more subtle register of Chloé and Marc Jacobs, for instance. 'Before, all we knew was buying a matching Louis Vuitton handbag to go with a pair of shoes,' a fashion buyer tells me. 'Now our taste is changing. We want to mix things up a bit. We want to surprise ourselves.' Tastes shift in lifestyle, too. A big

trend not so long ago was for wine bars – scores of which opened in neighbourhoods such as Insadong to varying degrees of commercial success. This has since been superseded by a wellbeing craze that has seen the development of yoga centres, cafés such as Slow Food and emporia like Aldo Coppola, which houses a celebrity hair and nail parlour, a spa, a beauty academy and a sushi restaurant within its seven storeys.

Spend any time in Seoul and it quickly becomes apparent that the key to the city's new vibrancy lies in design. South Korea's wealth has traditionally lain in the hands of the *jaebol*, powerful family-run conglomerates such as Samsung, with a stake in everything from textiles and electronics to car production. The fortune of such companies is now largely tied up with digital technology, as Seoul-based giants, including Samsung and LG Electronics, energetically assert themselves on the world stage through innovative mobile phones, cameras and TVs. To differentiate themselves from Western brands, they have invested heavily in design, creating products that, in recent years, have

## KOREA PROSPECTS

Clockwise from above left, Seoul's ongoing boom is good news for talent such as Taehee Kim, a marketing director; musician Sotho la Deck; and Ma Koung-bam, an interior designer



approached an elegant simplicity and turned their manufacturers into global players.

Smaller brands have reaped rewards from the same formula. For instance, in 2002, Reigncom, a struggling electronics firm, joined forces with product designer Young-se Kim, founder of a thriving practice called INNO Design, to create the iRiver brand of MP3 players. By designing products that functioned intuitively and could be worn like fashion accessories, Kim helped turn iRiver into the South Korean version of Apple, in the process boosting Reigncom's market worth to over \$3bn. Such companies are pumping new wealth into Seoul. And the lesson they've learned – that design matters – is driving the architectural flowering of the city.

It is the reason the Hyundai Corporation invited Daniel Libeskind to design the iPark Tower, its newly opened office building in Cheongdam. And why, should you stray north of the Hangang up to Itaewon, you'll discover the Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art, which opened in 2004 to house the collection of Rothkos, Judds, Hirsts and priceless Korean porcelains owned by Samsung chairman

#### **BOON TO SHOP**

**The novel interior, complete with art installations, at high-end fashion store Boon the Shop, within Galleria mall, which doubles as an exhibition space**

Kun-hee Lee. Housed in three spectacular galleries, designed by Rem Koolhaas, Jean Nouvel and Mario Botta, the Leeum puts Western private collections such as the Saatchi gallery to shame.

Nevertheless, it's only when you venture beyond the city limits that you'll find Seoul's most striking evocation of faith in design. Follow the motorway for an hour out of town and you will arrive at Heyri Art Valley (see W\*72), a new development that sits on what used to be fallow ground unfashionably close to the Demilitarised Zone between North and South Korea. The earth movers are still at work in Heyri, but once they retreat they will leave behind the most uncompromisingly imagined suburb in the world. Every building in Heyri is designed according to the austere principles of modernist architecture in steel and glass and exposed concrete, like plans

ripped from the pages of Zaha Hadid's sketchbook. Yet for all the minimalist restraint on show, the effect is surprisingly welcoming. Heyri houses have swooping lines and vast windows that make for an impressive sight. Many of them have been built by artists and writers who have also opened their galleries and bookshops in the neighbourhood. There's even an impossibly sophisticated coffee bar-cum-music space, the bare concrete walls of which are embedded with enormous antique stereo speakers pulsing to Eric Satie. Explore for a while and you realise that Heyri exists as a rebuke to the gated communities and sterile suburbs of the West that are built in fear of a changing world. And this surely is true for all of Seoul.

Desperate to step out of the shadows of its powerful neighbours and its own troubled past, the city has already hosted both the Olympics and the football World Cup since 1988. Now it is pinning its hopes for the future on such audacious projects as Heyri – embracing art and design to rearticulate what a city looks like and feels like. For Seoul, it seems, tomorrow can't come soon enough. ★