Today, Seoul is looking back at its revolutionary development during the last 40 years, and is exploring the potential of an evolutionary, qualitative growth for the future. Atlantis interviewed Seog-Jeong Lee, who recently completed a project on the future form of Seoul. She has a multi-faceted outlook on Korean, Chinese and European urban practice from her role as an urban designer (she is partner of ISA Internationales Stadtbauatelier in Germany), professor (urban design faculty of Hanyang university in Seoul) and as member of the city planning committee of Seoul. She holds strong views on the shortcomings of Korean cities and from her interesting, comparative view of east and west, proposes potent visions for their future.

What is the situation and are the key issues of Seoul in terms of urban form, density and public space?

South Korean urbanism seems to have focused in only a two-dimensional way and has regarded the city as a planning subject with a quantitative process until even a few years ago. Now, the city is gradually being planned in a spatial way that takes into consideration people’s visual and emotional experiences. It is no exaggeration to say that previously there has been no attention on ‘urban form’ or ‘public space’ in Korean cities. It is no wonder that these cities have not consciously urbanized, because agriculture mainly supported the society of Korea until the mid twentieth century in terms of economics and politics, which means that it was a rural and not an urban society.

The city of Seoul has tried to become a global metropolitan city from the 21st century. After the Cheonggyecheon project (transforming inner cities highway with new public spaces) was completed in 2005, the project became a turning point that shifted the view on urbanism from a functional, infrastructural process to an emphasis on the importance of the public street, square and its representative role in the city. At the same time, it is expected to play an important role in the city not only in a quantitative way, but also qualitatively. The city of Seoul began to realize that the physical form of the city is the outcome of urban culture, and created several regulations to manage the city in terms of beauty and quality.

Nevertheless, there are several obstacles that need to be overcome in order to achieve these goals. There is still a belief in an out-of-date modernism, where many people, even urbanists, are convinced that tall buildings surrounded by vast open spaces are the only solution for achieving high density. This blind belief brought about great failures in the city and its architecture under the modernization of politics and society after the mid 20th century. The building of new super blocks and iconic high-rise buildings over the top of the existing urban fabric has served to erase people’s memories of the city both physically and mentally.

However, the city of Seoul has experienced a paradigm shift. Existing small urban tissue, street and public space and urban compactness are becoming hot topics of debate in Korean urbanism. This phenomenon can be comparable with a similar shift in the European urban planning paradigm of the mid 1970s.

You have been working in Germany, China and South Korea. What kind of image and urban characteristics does the city of Seoul have in comparison to these regions?

Primarily, the term ‘dynamic’ comes up for the image of Seoul. It can be seen as a non-stop 24 hour city with its ever-crowded streets, busy roads, night markets and so on. In these days, the city is globalized and regarded as ‘the city of opportunities for foreigners’. This multiculturalism can be heard in the multiple languages of the announcements in the metro. In spite of this, it is not easy to describe the image of Seoul’s physical form. The city has many historical locations and amenities that are only known by the locals. Visitors and newcomers can experience 600 years of history by only visiting certain places such as the
museum and old palace. The physical features of Seoul that we experience daily show a contrast between massive tall buildings and old degraded buildings as well as monotonous high-rise apartments. The confusion between ‘old’ and ‘new’ in Seoul is the most serious problem, which is comparable to Chinese cities. On the other hand, Seoul and Chinese historical cities are entirely different in character. China’s historical cities have an amazingly rich past combined with the urbanization and modernization of the 19th and 20th centuries, while Seoul does not possess these qualities as it stands today.

Consequently, Seoul now needs to confront the major issue of how to deal with fine urban tissues that could not adapt to the radical urbanization that took place in the last few centuries. The city now needs to create a strong urban fabric that is accommodating towards Seoul’s past as well as its future.

Recently, your team finalized the municipality project for the city of Seoul. What are the intentions of the municipality and the position of your proposal?

The city of Seoul is now struggling to be competitive with other global metropolises. Seoul has begun to recognize that the city needs to change its direction from quantitative growth towards a far more ambitious vision.

Our ambition is to remove the stigma attached to Seoul as a ‘republic of apartment blocks’ driven by citizens’ personal financial motives towards a city that possesses genuine cultural value. Although these issues are certainly crucial, it is nevertheless impossible to solve them in the short term, like the work I have done in the last year. Time and a long-term vision are the key ingredients for creating culturally valuable urban space. It is first necessary to modify the way in which urban development is managed before we even consider the physical fabric of Seoul. So what we suggested in our proposal was for evolutionary urban remodeling instead of urban revolution.

What are the main issues and proposals of the project in general?

Above all, my team tried to establish future images of physical space in Seoul. It was our intention to change the development paradigm of function and infrastructure oriented urban reality towards city beautification.

However, beauty in this sense is about the composition of urban tissue rather than creating a merely picturesque environment. In this context, the main aim of our project is to create a harmony between the underdeveloped old urban structures of the Middle Ages with the modern urban structures that were built towards the end of the 20th century. Our strategies categorize Seoul spatially into three types: city core, residential area and nature on the edge of the city (figure 1).

Figure 1. three main topics in the proposals

City core: 14th century historical center and 21st century center

The core of a city generally forms the main image of that city, but Seoul’s urban center does not (figure 2). This 14th century historical area has not adapted well in terms of urban and economic development from the 18th century onwards and instead, development has shifted from the 20th century to the south of the river. It is necessary to manage the historical center as the symbol of Seoul in order to restore its historicity and other characteristics. Also, we conclude that the core should extend outside of the historical city wall and consider the expansion and evolution of the city. So, we suggested that the new extension of the core should go southward to the Han River, creating a clear legibility between a 14th century historical center and a 21st century one. The 14th century historical center is defined as a walkable and compact urban area surrounded by mountains, and the 21st century center is defined as a high-rise area with a park and waterfront. High-rise development is shifted to the 21st century center instead of cluttering the historical center. This kind of relationship is analogous to Paris’ historical center and La Defense. The main issue regarding the historical center is how to maintain the existing fine urban grain while forging a stronger organizational structure.

Residential area

Currently Seoul’s housing types consist of high-rise apartment complexes, detached housing areas, and old housing areas. The first is the most representative housing type in Seoul; the second was built according to a planned grid pattern that now has a deficiency of parking spaces and public spaces due to the individual redevelopment of each parcel into urban villas. The old housing areas are characterized by narrow alleys, a small organic parcel form, poor living quality, dense buildings and so on.

Based on this situation, we suggested basic, gradual interventions instead of total redevelopment. For the apartment complexes, we propose to open up the gated
communities in the surrounding context, and diversify the urban and architectural space by adding or removing buildings and architectural elements. We thought that the second and third typologies could be modified into low-rise, high-density urban neighborhoods that conserve the existing fine urban grain while also respecting topography and urban context.

**Nature on the edge of the city (figure 3)**
The proposal for the edge between city and nature is due to a radical shift of thought on the importance of water in urban areas, especially for the Han River. In the 14th century, the river was used for logistics and recreation for the higher social classes. However, it became cut off from the southern and northern parts of Seoul after a massive urban highway was built along both sides of the river during the late 20th century.

Now it is time to change the role of the river Han. It became the central location of the city geographically, because of the city's huge expansion towards the south. Moreover, the waterfront will have a crucial role in defining the physical space and image of the 21st century center in our proposal. We also propose ‘artificial urban islands’ on some areas of the river in order to connect the north and south both spatially and programmatically. These islands also represent the old islands that were removed during the urbanization of the city in the 1970s. We expect these urban islands to work as stepping stones on the 1km wide river Han.

*What do you think about TU Delft’s Vertical Asia competition and what should be its main focus in your opinion?*

Vertical Asia? Why not Vertical Europe? I am suspicious towards these supposed ‘solutions’. Increasingly, Asia seems to be the place for the experimental high-rise works of western architects who do not consider the local Asian context. I think that our cities need to discover alternative ways to combine high density with urban quality without resorting to verticality. (MY & SHL)