

# The Architectural Review

## City within the city: Sewoon Sangga renovation in Seoul, South Korea, by E\_SCAPE Architects

24 January, 2018 By [Manon Mollard](#)

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

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.



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Historical images reveal the sheer scale of the behemoth when it was originally built. Image courtesy of the Seoul Metropolitan Government

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.



Ss tower ts mg 1212

The city today has burgeoned and the megastructure is vanishing amid a monotonous slick of towers. Photograph: Thierry Sauvage

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





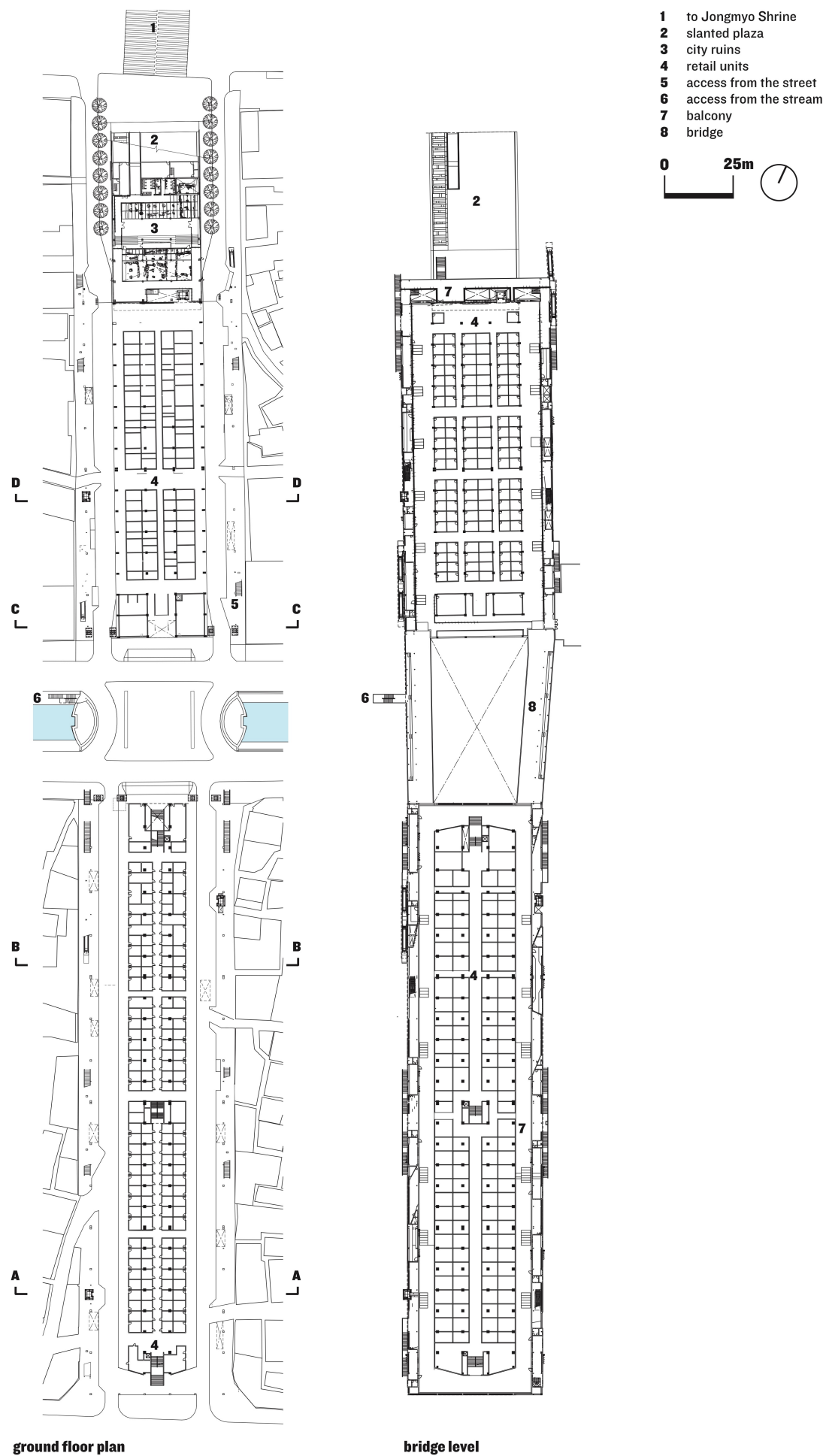


Sewoon sangga site plan

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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 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.



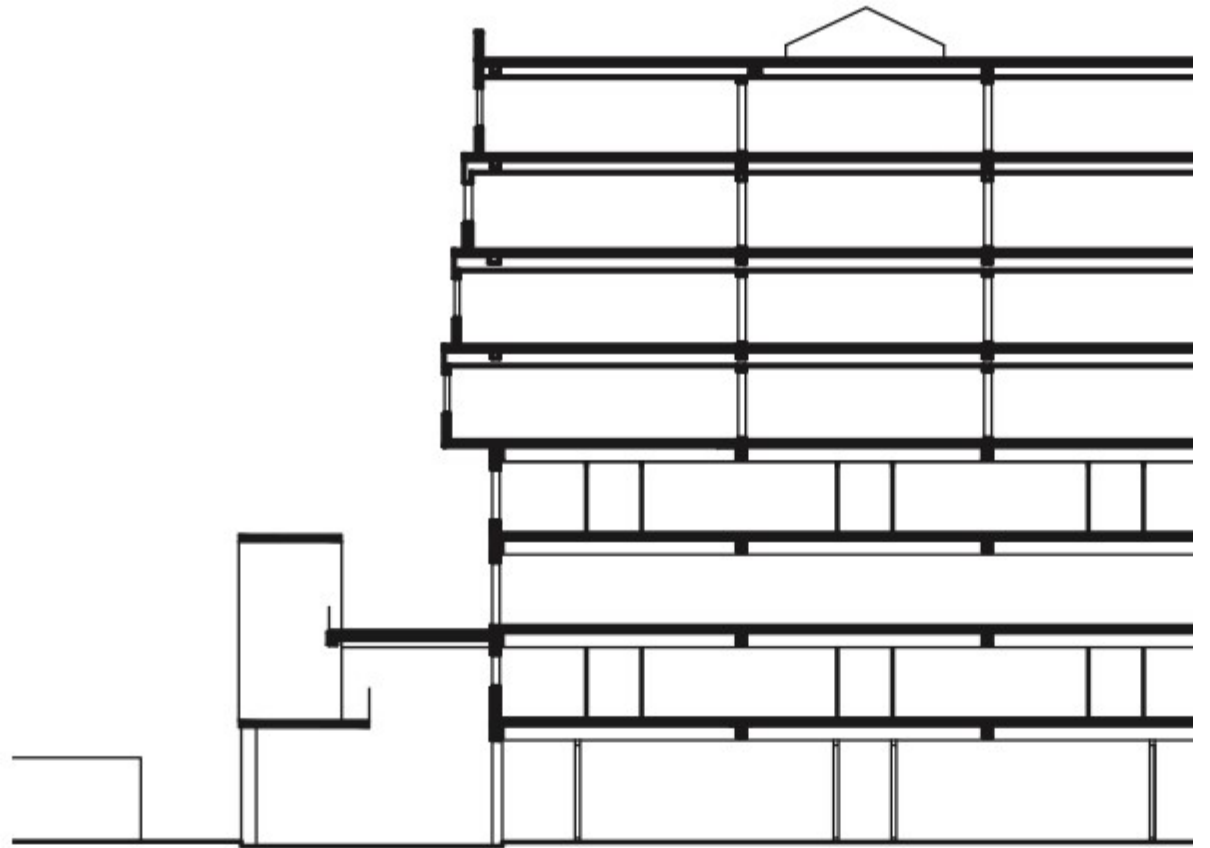
Sewoon sangga plans

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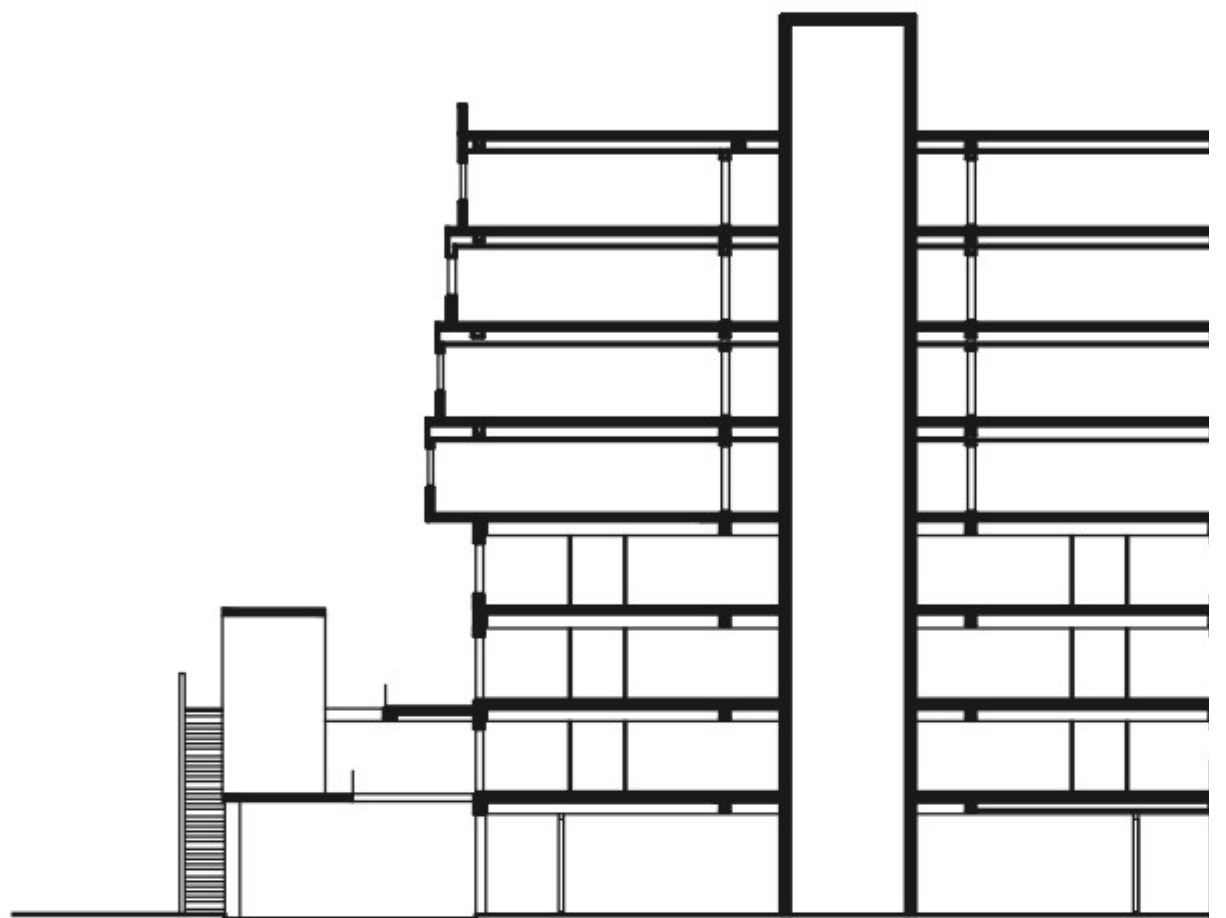
One of the ideas was to bulldoze the megastructure and replace it with a linear park, but 'green isn't the solution' argue Phase One architects Chang Yong-soon and Kim Taek-bin, who instead advocate the densification of urban centres. 'It is a modern misconception that vibrant cityscapes are created 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.



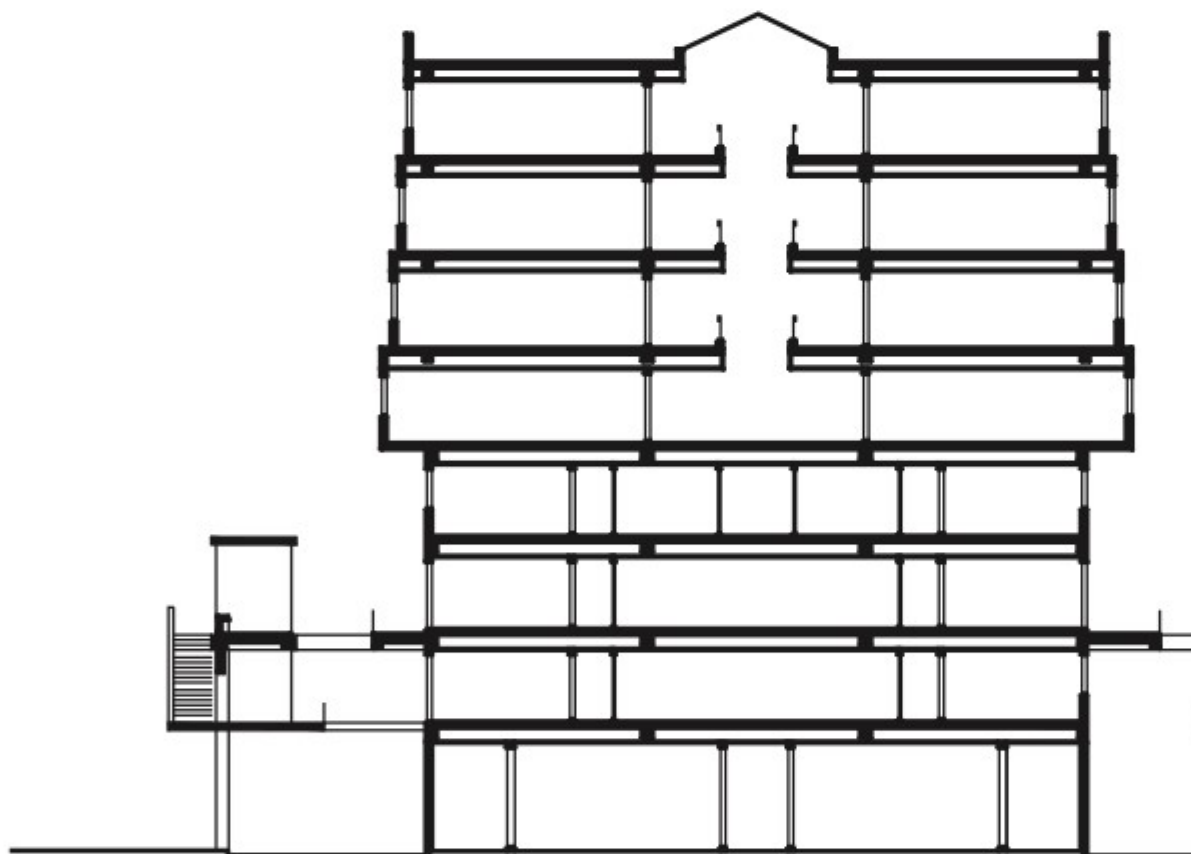


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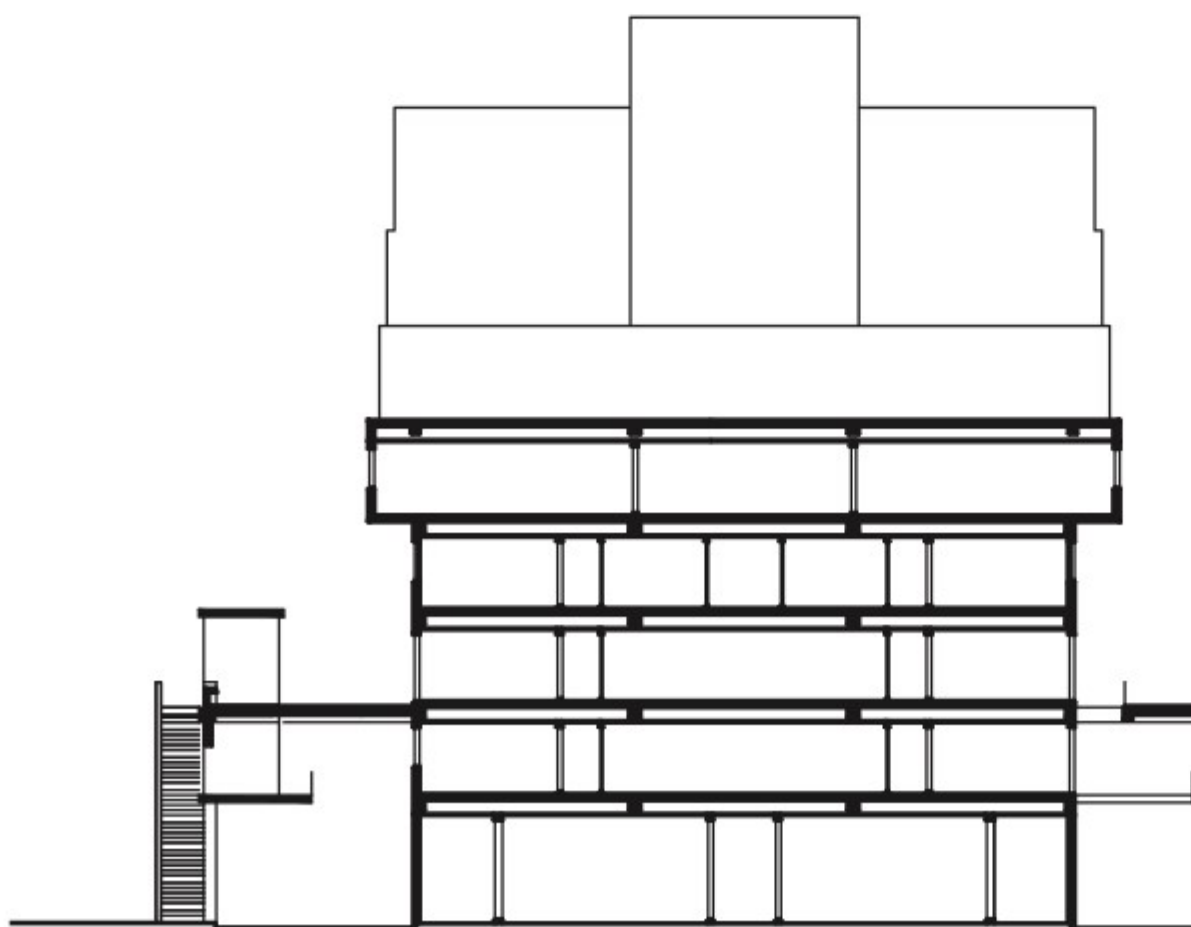


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The elevated walkways connecting the first two volumes were destroyed during the daylighting of the Cheonggyecheon stream, and a lively market lodged under the highway was forced to relocate further out. Beyond the literal rebuilding of the mid-air 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.

## **Sewoon Sangga**

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