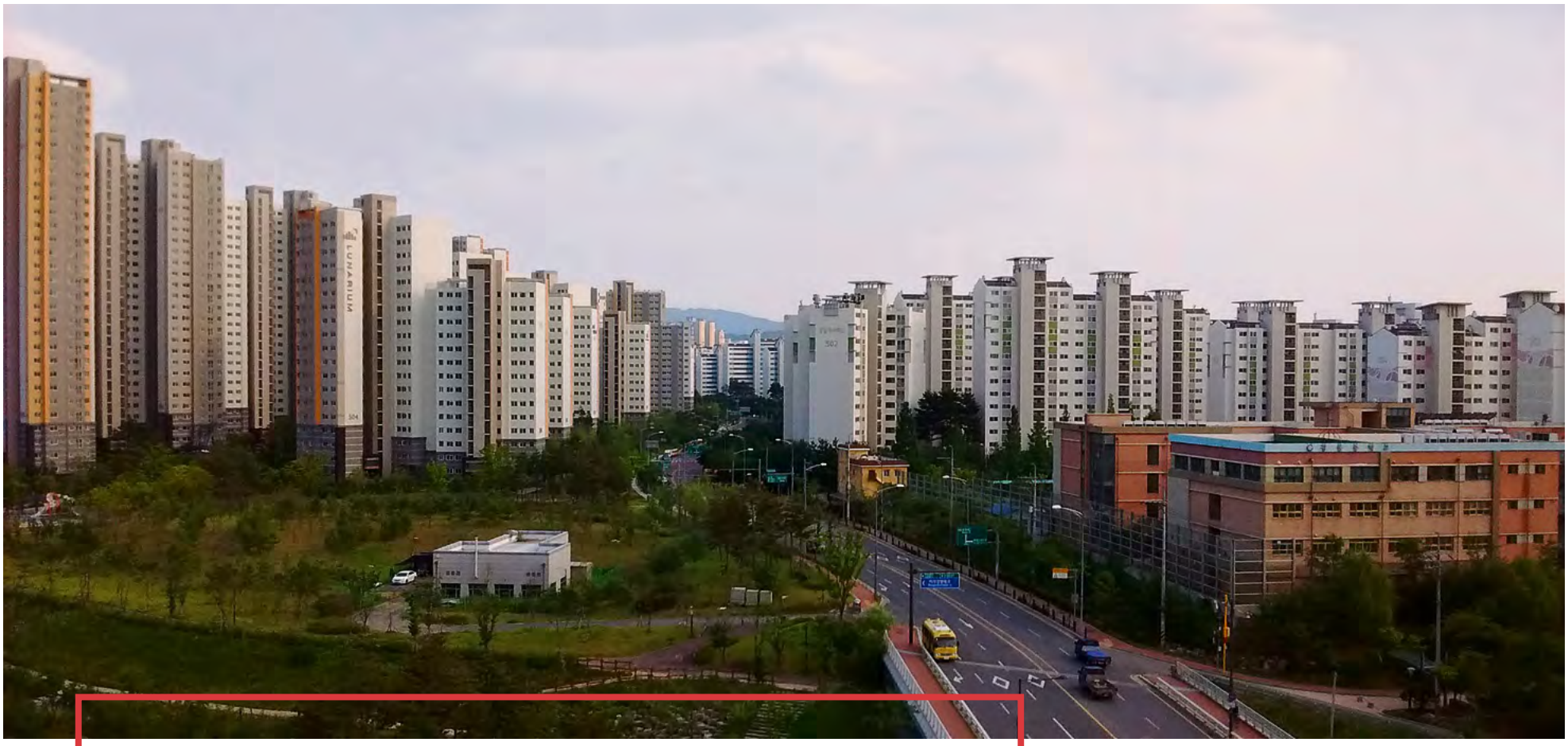

Fig. 1: Room with a view: residential buildings seen from “my” home in Hanam. In the foreground, the park zone meandering through the neighborhood towards the left side for kilometers (Image by the author, 2019).

From *Hanok* to Today’s Apartment

How Standardized South Korean Homes Provide Residents a Free Hand

Andrea Prins

At first sight, their massiveness is most outstanding: Korean apartment blocks. Their white-gray silhouettes loom everywhere, in urban areas [Fig. 1] and also close to the beautifully wooded mountainsides. It is easy to despise those blocks as repetitive ugliness. However, the apartments are extremely popular. Having lived in the flats myself, I discovered why: they are not only rooted in centuries-old housing traditions but also offer smart solutions for today’s cohabitation – in South Korea and far beyond.

A bed covered with a bright blue spread, a mirror, a closet, some chairs on a wooden-like floor: my home for the coming weeks. Behind the sliding window, the evening sun colors the nearly identical neighboring apartment blocks pale orange. “Normally, this room is my mother’s *pied-à-terre*,” explains my host Yeon-Ho Choi, a young man in his twenties employed by the multinational Lotte Corporation. My room’s annex bathroom is near the entrance. In addition, the flat consists of my host’s bedroom, his studio, and a second bathroom. Situated between “my” and his rooms is the living area. The surrounding Hanam district – with its 255,000 inhabitants – is brand new. Sales were frantic: downtown Seoul is only 60 minutes away by subway. The apartment itself is anything but special. But that’s exactly why I’m here. In the summer of 2019, I lived with different hosts in Greater Seoul to study those flats, and I spoke with residents and architects about housing habits. What makes these repetitive flats so popular?

Hanoks: more than a romantic tradition

Two years earlier, my partner and I traveled through South Korea. Call it a professional deformation, but I can’t resist looking at architecture, even in holidays. So all over the country we visited *hanoks*, the traditional, seemingly unpretentious houses made of wood, clay, paper, straw, and tiles. This article does not discuss their sophisticated heating system and their perfect climate adaptation,[1] but instead concentrates on floor plans. As a building type, *hanoks* appeared during the in the late fourteenth century on the Korean peninsula.[2] Unless inhabited by the noble class, hanoks had but few, relatively small rooms. The open, south-oriented *daecheong maru* – “hall with wooden floor” – is a collectively used living space [Fig. 2]. In winter, wooden panels hung in front of the opening to convert the open hall into an interior space. Intimate rooms are located on both sides of the *daecheong maru*. *Hanoks* only recently experienced a revival, not only as residential homes, but also as restaurants, offices, and guesthouses. My real discovery occurred near the construction site for a typical, large-scale housing project. Billboards usually show renderings of people happily lounging in their perfect home, but this time floor plans were presented. The eye-opener: the flats-to-be had a centrally located living area with smaller rooms on either side, just like the *hanoks*. So the traditional spatial structure of the *hanoks* seems to be vivid in today's serial mass housing.

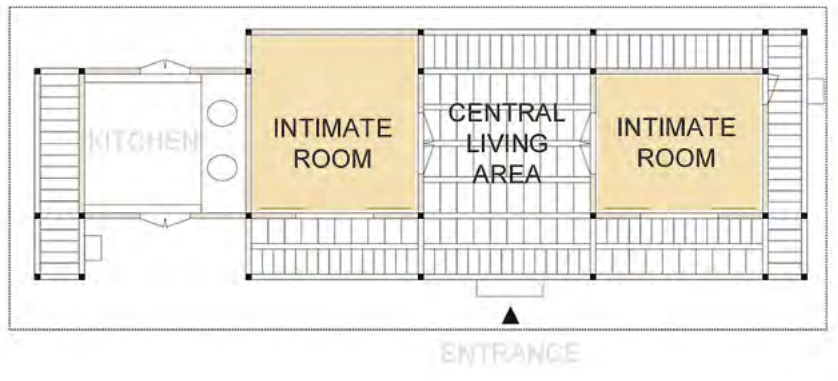

Fig. 2: Schematized floor plan of a typical *hanok*: two intimate rooms on both sides of the living area, and photos showing the exterior and the “hall with wooden floor” (Images by the author, 2021).

The Apartments Republic

The rebuilding of the capital, once destroyed in the Korean War, was followed by a period of rapid urban extension. Since 1970, one type of serial mass housing predominates: elongated in form and 15 to 20 stories high.[3] From conversations with residents and Korean architects,[4] I understood that there are many reasons for the ongoing popularity of the mass housing blocks. The government provides excellent schools and stores nearby, and even suburbs located far from the city center are conveniently accessible by (public) transport. Following the successful regeneration of the Cheonggyecheon

Fig. 4: Versatile use of space: one of the private rooms in a contemporary flat is used for serving a tea ceremony (Image by the author, 2019).

River in downtown Seoul, each new housing development has a lively park area, where people can stroll, play, and exercise. Unlike similar building types in Europe, these developments are not neighborhoods for marginalized populations, but for the well-to-do middle class. Other researchers, too, have wondered why the now-prosperous South Korea clings to the construction of repetitive ugliness. In 2007, geographer Valérie Gelézeau published *The Republic of Apartments*[5] about Koreans' astonishing love for their standardized apartment blocks. Gelézeau concluded: the force behind the mass construction of standardized flats is a cleverly forged alliance between government, influential family conglomerates who control the big construction companies, and the middle class. In other words, standardization is not seen as an inevitable consequence of mass production, but as a strength which guarantees a predictable product of generally accepted value. However, there are even more reasons for the flats' popularity.

Living in a three-bay condo

"My home is rather ordinary. I guess it's not interesting to you," says Heeja An (44), one of my interviewees as we sit in a trendy café. At that time, I had just moved to my second home-stay. My 'research-by-dwelling' is expanded by critical analysis of floor plan typologies, literature study, and conversations. When my interviewee – an associate research fellow at the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism – sketches her home, the typical so-called "three-bay condo"[6] emerges: a room with bathroom, the centrally located living area, and a second cluster of rooms with bathroom [Fig. 3]. My interviewee lives there with her brother and sister. The way they co-inhabit the place does surprise me: the sisters share a room, the brother has one for himself, and the third room is a studio.

Family size is currently changing in South Korea: statistically, a couple now has an average of less than one child.[7] "Another remarkable trend is that young families often settle with their aging parents," explains one of my hosts. "The grandparents then move to the space next to the entrance, the young family inhabits the other rooms." The central living area is used jointly and simultaneously acts as a buffer between the private spaces of the old and young family members. While sharing a household, a certain degree of privacy is maintained. Certainly, this trend is partly due to high housing prices, but additionally it shows that this apartment type is very suitable as a multi-generational home. The room near the entrance is also the ideal accommodation for a guest – this was also "my" room in two of my home stays – or a home office. The location of this room ensures both a connection with the other residents *and* privacy. Of course, the three, nearly equally large rooms can also serve as three independent private spaces.

Standardized homes lead to standardized living, or so goes the lesson taken from European postwar mass housing.[8] But the South Korean standard flat actually allows residents to live in *different* ways [Fig. 4]. Given the surprised reactions of my interlocutors to this conclusion, this versatile use may be an unintended, but nonetheless extremely valuable, by-product. One and the same floor plan consisting of equivalent private spaces and a common living area is suitable for multiple adults, multi-generational housing, and families. This conclusion is significant for (Western) countries, where one mainly builds hierarchically configured floor plans: a large living room, a master bedroom, and some small bedrooms.

Housing in Europe: built immobility

Instead of the one- or two-room accommodations that were common some 150 years ago, the northwestern European middle class of the 19th century invented homes with distinct chambers.[9] This idea of rooms tailored to *one* function (e.g., "living room," "master bedroom," or "bedroom") was not broadly questioned during modern movements.[10] Consequently, until today, most floor plans are designed according to this functional idea. Furthermore, they exclusively fit the concept of living as a nuclear family, while today more and more people live together differently. Of course, Korean housing cannot be applied one-to-one to other countries. And I do not want to advocate a massiveness, which does not pay any attention to urbane or rural surroundings. Yet, the floor plan of the three-bay condo is an example of affordable housing in which people can live together in different and changing ways. The use of rooms is not fixed, but can easily be adapted: homes as "free space" rather than built immobility.

Fig. 3: Floor plan of a typical three-bay condo: the clustered private rooms – highlighted yellow – and the centrally located living area. The interior photo shows one of "my" rooms, which has the potential to be a *pied-à-terre*, a bedroom, a study, or a temporary home of a guest, grandparent, or recently divorced friend (Images by the author, 2021).

Andrea Prins is a Rotterdam-based architect and researcher. She has written extensively on homes and housing. Her previous publications on South Korea include the series "Learning from Seoul" at *ArchiNed* and a chapter in her book *Wonen. De fascinerende gelaagdheid van een alledaagse bezigheid* (WalburgPers, 2021).
Email: andrea@andreaprins.com

Notes

1 Peter Blundell Jones, "Living with the Elements: the Korean House," *The Architectural Review*, September 2004: 80-85.
2 Nani Park and Robert J. Fouser, Hanok. *The Korean House* (Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), 6-10.
3 Byungchan Kim (Korea National University of Arts), lecture material on the history of Korean housing, 2017.
4 Interviews with Youn-Ok Nam, Sungjung Chough (Ilkun Architects), Daniel Tändler (urban detail) and Byungchan Kim, 2017 and 2019.
5 Valérie Gelézeau, *The Republic of Apartments* (Seoul: Humanitas, 2007).
6 The term "three-bay apartment" was obtained from Hyunjoon Yoo Architects, "Hanok 3.0." *ArchDaily*, accessed February 20, 2022, https://www.archdaily.com/791345/hanok-hyunjoon-yoo-architects/
7 Se-Woong Koo, "The Incredibly Shrinking Nation of South-Korea," Korea Exposé, accessed February 20, 2022, https://koreaexpose.com/korea-birthrate-drop-caused-by-financial-burden/
8 Aldo van Eyck, "Statement Against Rationalism", in: Aldo van Eyck, *Writings* (Amsterdam: Sun, 2008). Originally, the text was written for the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) VI in 1947.
9 Highly accessible books on the history of housing include: Witold Rybczynski, *Home. A Short History of an Idea*, (London: Penguin Books, 1987) and Bill Bryson: *At Home. A short History of Private Life* (London: Doubleday, 2010). In Dutch: Maarten Jan Hoekstra, *Huis, tuin en keuken. Wonen in woorden door de eeuwen heen* (Amsterdam: Atlas, 2009).
10 "The house, intended for the vast majority of the population, is in fact the derivative of the bourgeois townhouse." Enrico Hartsuyker-Curjel, "Op zoek naar ànders wonen". *Reflex, tijdschrift over meningen. Retort, tijdschrift over visies. Traverse, tijdschrift over kennismakingen*, 05-1967: 22-32.