

HUMANISE

Hanok to high-rise

What the people of Seoul really
think about buildings in their city

Research findings prepared for the Humanise campaign



서울대학교
SEOUL NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Thinks
Insight & Strategy

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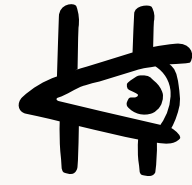
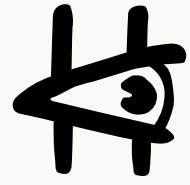


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Section 1.
Background
and approach.

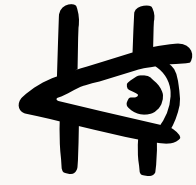




This research was commissioned as part of the Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism 2025 to help inform a public conversation about buildings and cities.

Conducted with residents of Seoul, the research aims to:

- 1 Understand their attitudes towards buildings in general
- 2 Understand the impact of buildings on how they feel
- 3 Explore how they would like new buildings to look in the future.



Methodology

1. Quantitative*

A 10-minute online survey was completed by 1,000 people living in Seoul.

Hard quotas were set for age and gender, with soft quotas monitoring neighbourhood, type of home and length of time living in Seoul.

The survey covered the following areas:

- Attitudes towards buildings in general and in their neighbourhood
- Responses to images of buildings in Seoul
- Openness to civic engagement on buildings
- Hopes for future buildings in Seoul.

2. Qualitative*

An online community was conducted with 11 people living in Seoul who completed a range of activities over a few days.

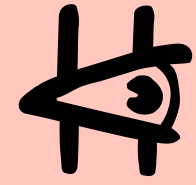
We spoke to residents from a range of neighbourhoods and ensured a mix of gender and age.

The activities in the online community covered the following areas:

- General sentiments towards how buildings look from the outside and how it makes them feel
- Responses to images of buildings in Seoul, including a projective task to imagine the buildings as humans
- Reflections on Thomas Heatherwick's TED Talk.

Section 2.
Key findings.



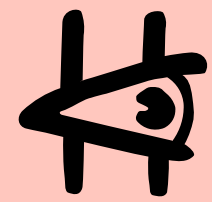


1. 90% of residents acknowledge the impact building design has on how they feel, and would like to see interesting buildings that make them feel good. The blend of traditional and modern is a much-loved feature of the city, but the traditional hanoks evoke the strongest emotional response, giving residents a sense of peace.



2.

Seoul residents can intuitively identify interesting and boring buildings. There is a clear dislike for the current design of apartment complexes which 97% describe negatively. They are seen to be boring and soulless, evoking strong negative reactions – residents say the monotonous style creates a suffocating feeling.

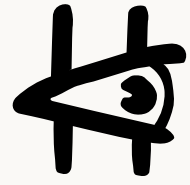


3. There is a gap between the current state of buildings in Seoul and what residents would like to see in the future. They want to see characterful and interesting buildings which make them feel something, and that also last a long time. Nearly half (48%) of residents are willing to get actively involved in deciding how buildings look in the local area.

Section 3.

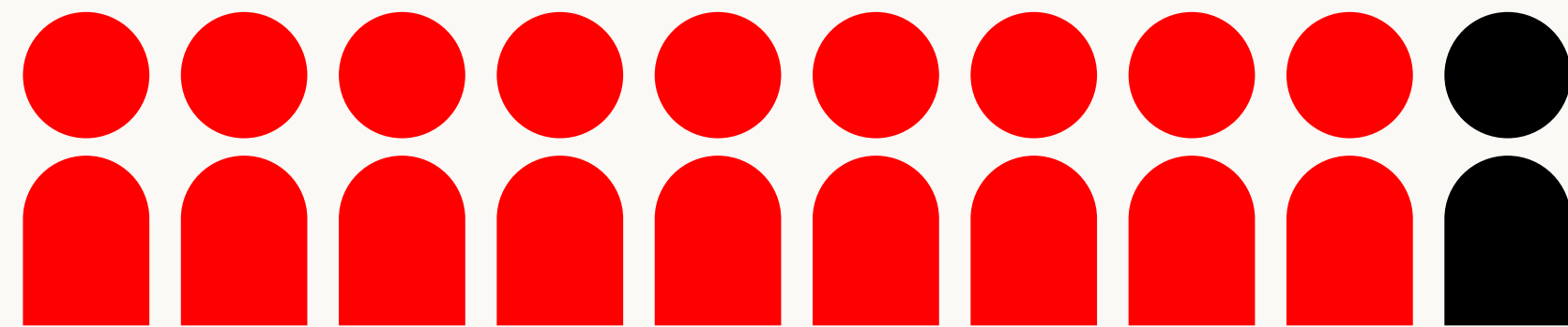
How do Seoul residents feel about how buildings look in their neighbourhood?



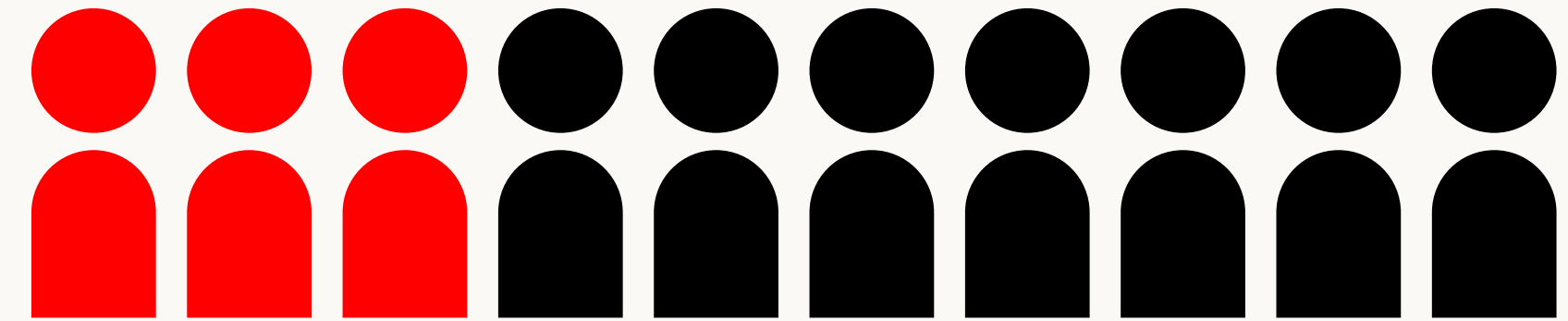


The majority of residents recognise that the way buildings look has an impact on how they feel

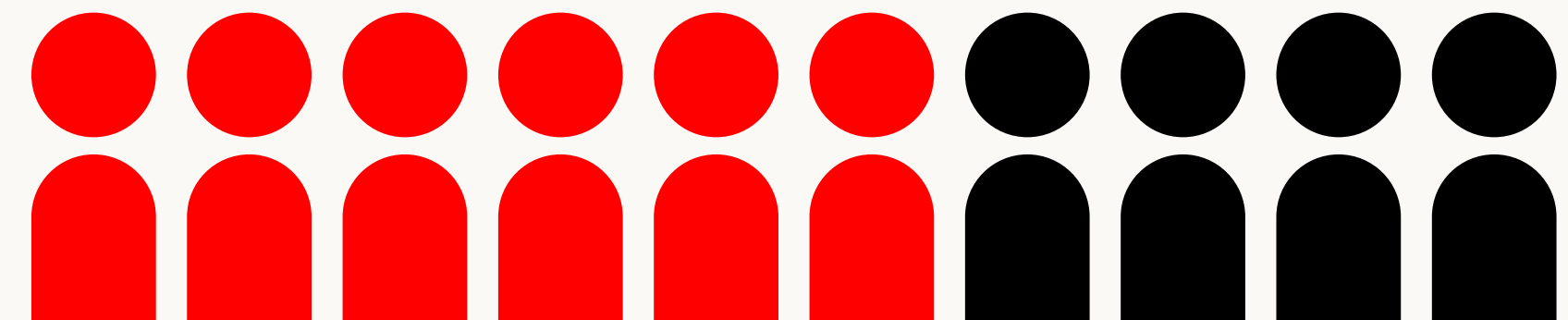
90% of residents think that the way buildings look has an impact on how they feel

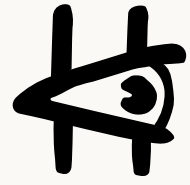


28% of residents think it has a big impact



63% of residents think it has a small impact





Residents want new buildings to look interesting but lack the confidence to articulate these opinions or influence decisions

How far do you agree or disagree with the following?

(% selecting strongly agree or agree)

It is important people are consulted about how new buildings being built in their local area will look

63%

I have some control over how buildings being built in my local area look

37%

It is important that new buildings look interesting on the outside

60%

I feel confident talking about the design of a building

33%

As a society, we should invest more in buildings that make people feel good when they look at them

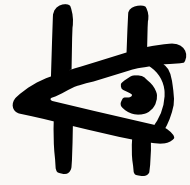
57%

I feel knowledgeable about the design of buildings

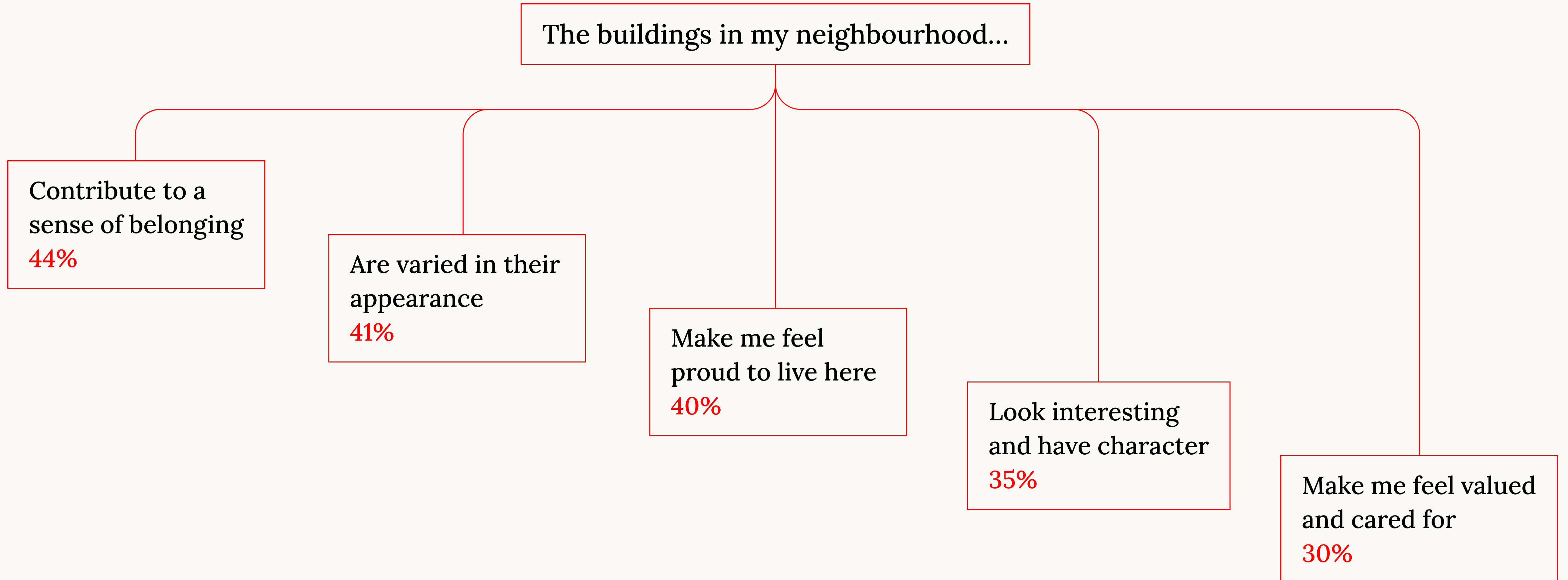
23%

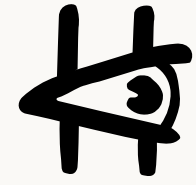
Walking around an area with boring buildings affects how I feel

51%



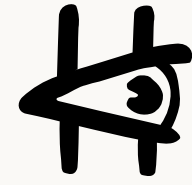
Current buildings fail to make a positive impact, with their designs also lacking in interest and variety





Online community

Seoul residents recognise and appreciate the blend of tradition and modernity in the buildings making up their city



Online community

Walking along the Han river, visiting Yongsan, passing a traditional family home converted into a café...

These are moments when Seoul residents become aware of the blend of traditional styles with more modern elements.

Residents enjoy this blend of tradition and modernity, as when it is done well, it brings a sense of harmony to the city.

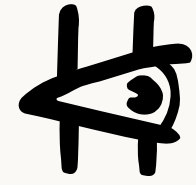
“So even though these buildings coexist with completely different styles, I think they are harmonious in their own way.”

Female, 35-44



“The distinctive forms of old Yangok (Korean western-style) houses – their low roofs and layouts where the yard is slightly visible – still remain, and when modern metal frame windows or exposed concrete exterior textures are added, they create a somewhat curious harmony of time.”

Male, 18-34



Online community

Residents feel most positive about buildings that are unique and feel different



Online community

Buildings that make residents feel positive:

Residents like the curved design which creates a futuristic feel to the building and the opaque skin of the building makes people curious.



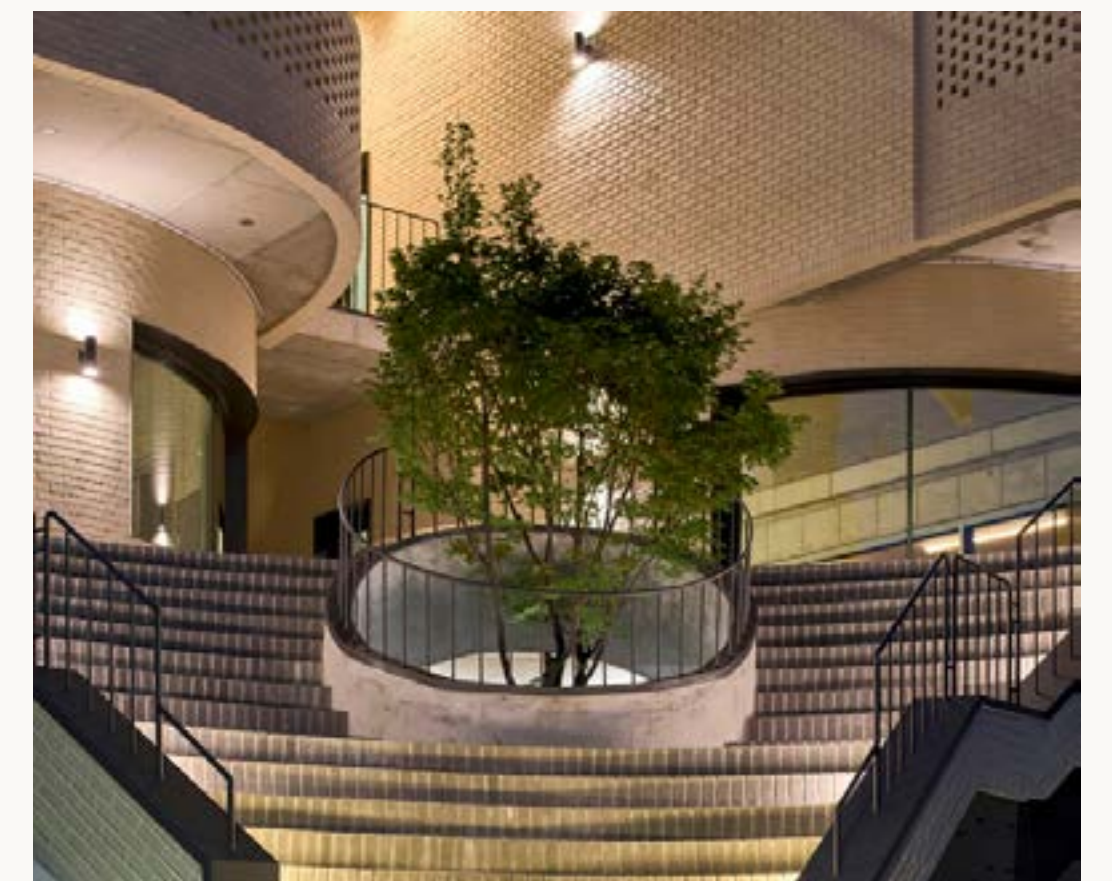
The strong shape of this building and the way it lights up at night are seen as positive features by residents. They think it creates a warm, tranquil vibe to the area.

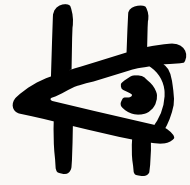


This store is described as a 'large sculpture', given it looks so different to other buildings. This building is visually stimulating, especially with the use of geometric shapes in the design.



Residents commented on the juxtaposition of curves and straight lines in this building which they felt contrasted well with the standard blocks on so many streets in Seoul.





Online community

“The building had a new curved shape that looked very different from usual designs. It reminded me of a spaceship, and the modern colours on the outside made people curious from the moment construction began.”

Female, 55+



“What I particularly like is that although the outer wall is finished with glass, it is not highly reflective, giving it a soft and warm feel.”

Female, 35-44



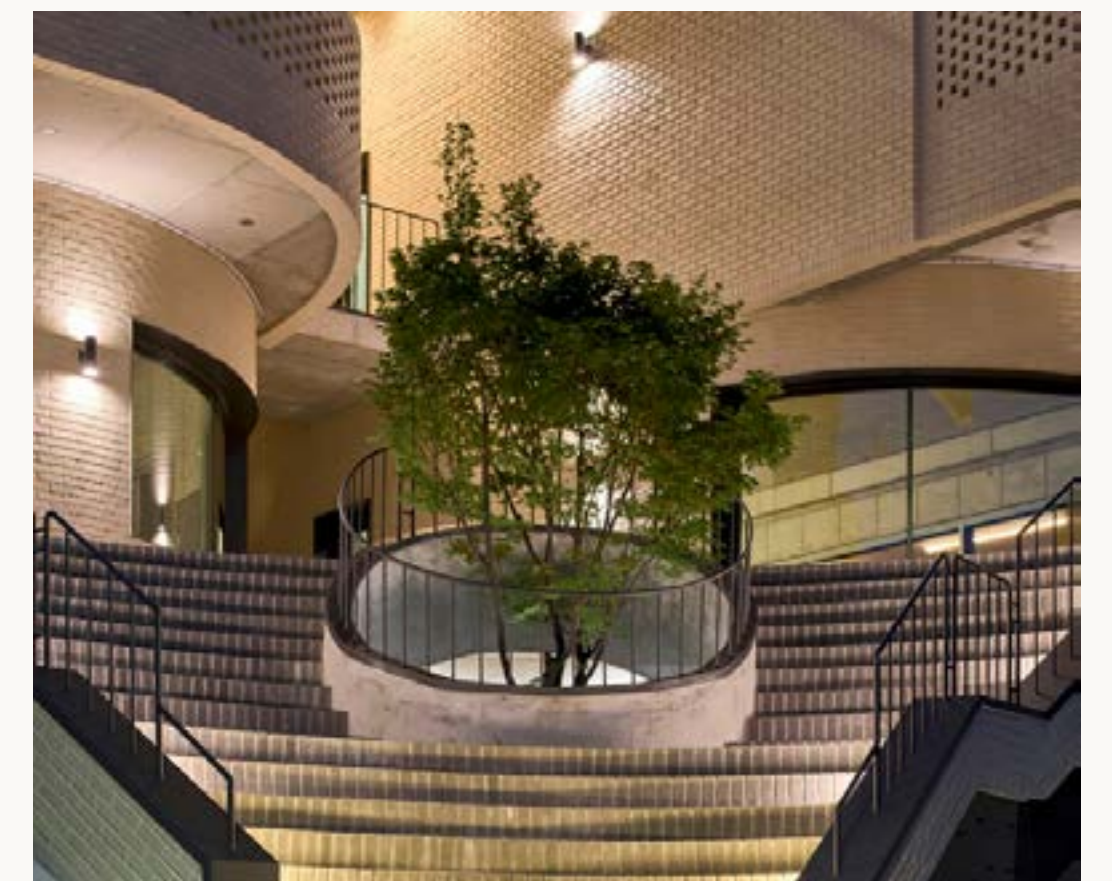
“I felt a mix of tension and curiosity when I saw the building. It looked like a huge piece of sculpture, and from a distance, it reminded me of a dark mountain.”

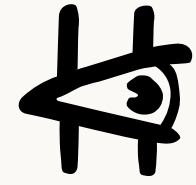
Female, 35-44



“The curves and straight lines harmonise, and the comfortable lighting provides a different feel from the typical urban environment of Seoul.”

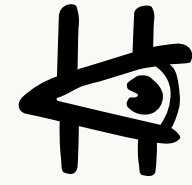
Male, 18-34





Online community

However, unique features can go too far when they clash with the surrounding area, creating feelings of discomfort



Online community

Buildings that make residents feel negative:

“The circle in front and the red sculpture give a bizarre feeling and do not fit with the surrounding scenery, making me feel uncomfortable.”

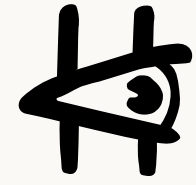
Male, 18-34



“It feels a bit too big and out of place. It doesn’t really blend in with the surroundings, so it’s hard to say it looks nice. I’m not an expert, but the proportions seem a bit off, and to me, it feels rather random — like something that doesn’t quite belong. That gives me a kind of emotional distance from it.”

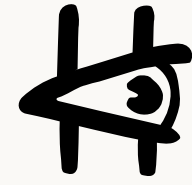
Female, 18-34





Online community

There is a strong response to repetitive and monotonous buildings. These create a “sense of suffocation”



Online community

Buildings that make residents feel negative:

“The five-storey building stretching hundreds of metres feels like a wall of the city. Every time you pass by, it can feel suffocating.”

Female, 18-34



“The outside feels heavy and closed in, almost like a massive wall of concrete. The long rectangular sections are packed tightly together, making it look very plain and repetitive.”

Male, 18-34



“Some may feel it's good because various infrastructures are concentrated there, but from a viewer's perspective, it feels overwhelming and suffocating. It somewhat resembles a prison, hardly a building that seems to have been built with human living in mind.”

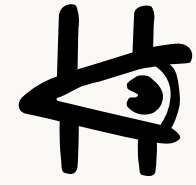
Male, 18-34



Section 4.

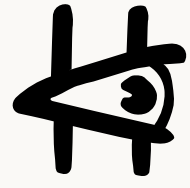
How do Seoul residents
react to other buildings
in Seoul?





Survey

Residents respond positively to visually interesting buildings with a mixture of happiness and excitement



Survey

97%

view this building positively*

37%

31%



92%

view this building positively*

42%

25%



93%

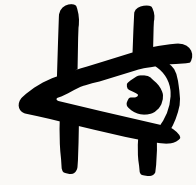
view this building positively*

43%

28%

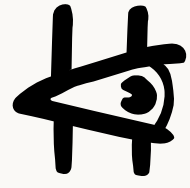


Base description: Q8-10. Looking at the building below, please select how would you most likely describe it. You can select up to three options. Base: All respondents (n=1,000). Q15-17. What reaction, if any, best sums up how you personally feel looking at each of the below. Base: All respondents (n=1,000). *A NET: Positive score was created which means that at least one of the following words were selected; Interesting, Characterful, Joyful, Pleasant.



Survey

Beyond interesting, these buildings are 'characterful', with residents intrigued by the unique exteriors and the traditional elements



Survey

78% “characterful”
63% “interesting”
31% “pleasant”

“The exterior is not a simple, basic structure, but has unique characteristics that make you look twice.”



76% “characterful”
56% “interesting”
23% “pleasant”

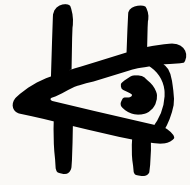
“The exterior is not monotonous and has a stylish feel with its semi-circular shapes and glass elements.”



60% “characterful”
56% “interesting”
31% “pleasant”

“The main gate retains the traditional Korean house style, while the annex and main building inside the courtyard guide the gaze, creating a traditional structure.”





Online community

Residents appreciate unique building design, but they connect deeply with the traditional hanok, creating a sense of peace

Overall, residents recognise the unique and newer design style of these buildings, especially with the use of the three-dimensional element on the left, and the blend of traditional and modern on the right.

Residents are positive about these unique building designs as they injects freshness into the area and stimulate visual intrigue. However, this positivity does not translate into an emotional connection, with residents choosing to focus on descriptions of the buildings, rather than how it makes them feel.

This traditional hanok is viewed positively by residents who find the use of natural materials, such as wood, creates a sense of stability and warmth. Residents connect deeply with the traditional building design as it creates a peaceful and relaxing vibe.





Online community

“The harmony of grey and white of the exterior blends beautifully, and the shape is not a commonly seen architectural style, which feels refreshing.”

Female, 18-34



“The bold curved design stands out from the usual boxy shapes. I feel a sense of refined beauty from both the materials and the structure.”

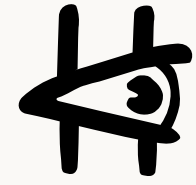
Male, 18-34



“Because the harmony between the trees, nature, the fence and open gate allows one to feel traditional stability and warmth.”

Female, 45-54





Survey

Other buildings are viewed negatively by residents, with the associated emojis reflecting indifference and worry



Survey

92%

view this building negatively*

35%

28%



95%

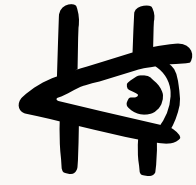
view this building negatively*

52%

18%

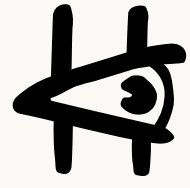


Base description: Q11-12. Looking at the building below, please select how would you most likely describe it. You can select up to three options. Base: All respondents (n=1,000). Q18-19. What reaction, if any, best sums up how you personally feel looking at each of the below. Base: All respondents (n=1,000). *A NET: Negative score was created which means that at least one of the following words were selected; Boring, Soulless, Dull, Depressing.



Survey

Residents think these buildings are 'soulless', with the rigidity and lack of individuality reflective of buildings they typically see



Survey

54% “soulless”

53% “boring”

44% “dull”

“Everything is made of straight lines, giving it a somewhat rigid and intimidating feel.”



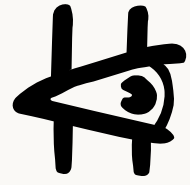
60% “soulless”

50% “boring”

48% “dull”

“Everything about the building—from its size, window and balcony structures, to its colour scheme—is boring.”





Online community

Buildings that have a primary focus on function and have uniform features can feel overwhelming and lacking in personality

The uniformity and repetitive arrangement of the windows on this building make it feel very monotonous and suffocating to residents. The building is likened to a 'chicken coop' and a 'birdcage'.

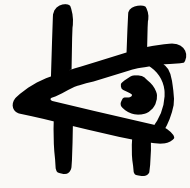
The main purpose of this building is functionality, rather than design, which leaves it devoid of warmth and depressing to look at.



Similarly, this hotel also has a monotonous and suffocating vibe with the scale of repetition in its design making it feel overwhelming and intimidating to residents.

Residents feel like this building is a 'prison', lacking in personality and warmth.





Online community

“The building looks cramped and repetitive, a bit like a chicken coop. It doesn’t blend well with the surroundings and doesn’t give residents much sense of space or peace of mind.”

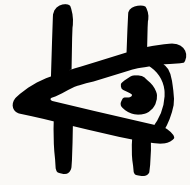
Female, 45-54



“I don't like it. The overly uniform, repetitive elements don't convey any emotion or character.”

Female, 35-44





Online community

This building received mixed opinions, with some residents finding it uninspiring whilst others are positive about the glass look

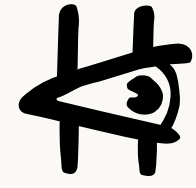


Online community

In the online community, residents agree that the building lacks special features. The full glass façade creates a cold feeling which restricts how interesting residents find the building.

“It's bland and feels like a typical office building I often see in the city. Honestly, I don't like the exterior of this building.”

Male, 18-34



Survey



28%
“interesting”

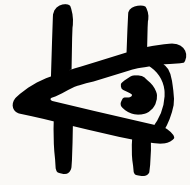
27%
“characterful”

13%
“pleasant”

50%
view this building
positively*

Other residents see the use of glass on the exterior positively.

“The entire front is made of glass,
and the shape is square and neat.”



Survey



38%
“soulless”

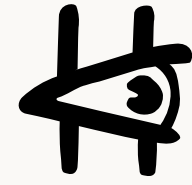
20%
“boring”

25%
“dull”

58%
view this building
negatively*

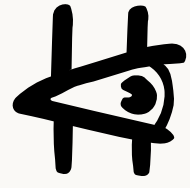
Some residents feel that the design of the building is common, lacking any special features or distinctiveness.

“There are many buildings of the same shape, and it seems like height was the only consideration.”



Survey

Residents prefer characterful buildings and would most like to see these in their local area




Survey

Which building would you most like to see in your local area?

(% selecting the score of 1 – most like to see in their local area)

Unsurprisingly, the building that was viewed the most positively is the building residents would most like to see in their local area (97% viewed this building positively).

42%




Base description: Q21. Which building would you most like to see in your local area? 1 is building you would most like to see and 6 is buildings you would least like to see. Base: All respondents (n=1,000).



Online community

When thinking of these buildings as people, residents describe them as stylish and artistic as well as those invested in tradition

“I imagine a freelancer who might have studied abroad once (perhaps in Europe), or an employee in a foreign country. They seem relaxed and fun, and like someone with unique hobbies or tastes of their own. I think they would wear unique outfits that reflect their established personal styles.”

Male, 18-34

“This person feels like a young architect working in a design studio. His sharp facial features and mix of contrasting styles make him stand out. He’s dressed in a crisp white shirt, techwear trousers and practical shoes — a smart, modern look. He seems like someone who’s into architecture, art and philosophy, and probably lives in a small, well-designed house that reflects his taste.”

Male, 18-34



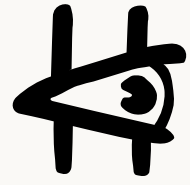
“I think of my mom. She has a comfortable impression, wears an apron, and is a housewife. She likes neat and comfortable things and loves nature. She lives in a cozy and traditional place and seems to have a harmonious family.”

Female, 18-34

“They are likely a man or woman in their late 20s to early 30s who loves tradition but knows how to interpret it in a trendy way. They’re probably wearing a beige linen shirt. Their Instagram is filled with film camera aesthetic photos that match traditional architecture. They seem to be a lifestyle brand designer who reinterprets traditional culture in a modern way.”

Male, 18-34





Online community

With this building most disliked, residents see it as an anti-social person, who prioritises functionality and rule-following



“A large and clumsy person, dressed entirely in grey-coloured clothes, seems to have a boring job that involves repeating simple tasks. They don’t seem to leave their house and rather than having a social life, seem to have a solitary lifestyle. They look like a recluse living in their own world.”

Female, 55+

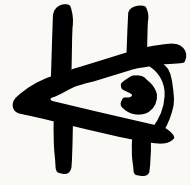
“This person appears to be a middle-aged manager working in a public institution. They are neat but lack individuality, adhering strictly to established rules and standards. Dressed in a dark grey shirt, black dress pants, and practical shoes, they offer convenience and stability but lack flexibility. Their interests seem to revolve around efficiency, safety, and rules, and they likely reside in a large complex filled with identical apartments. Their relationship with family seems ordinary, but there appears to be no special interaction, prioritising function over emotion. I wouldn’t want to become close with them. The reason is that the relationship with that person would likely be one-sided, with little room for sharing emotions.”

Male, 18-34

Section 5.

What kind of building design do Seoul residents want to see in future?





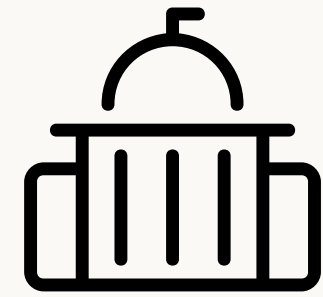
Survey

Given a choice on development, there is a clear preference for adaptation in Seoul, with apartment buildings the only exception

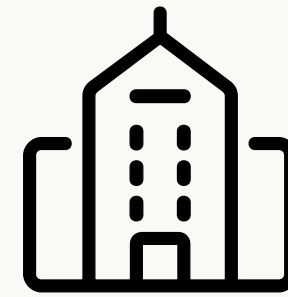
Would you rather building developers adapt and repair these buildings, or demolish and rebuild them?



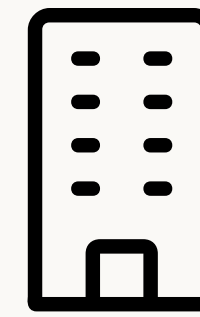
Museums



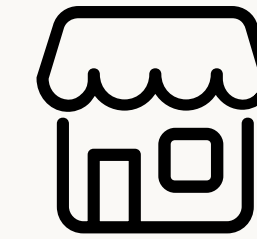
Public buildings



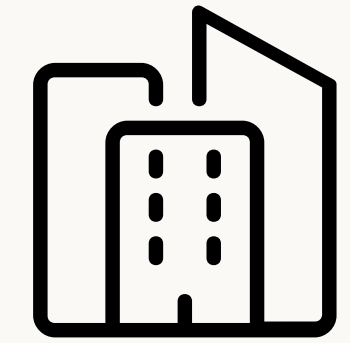
Schools



Office blocks

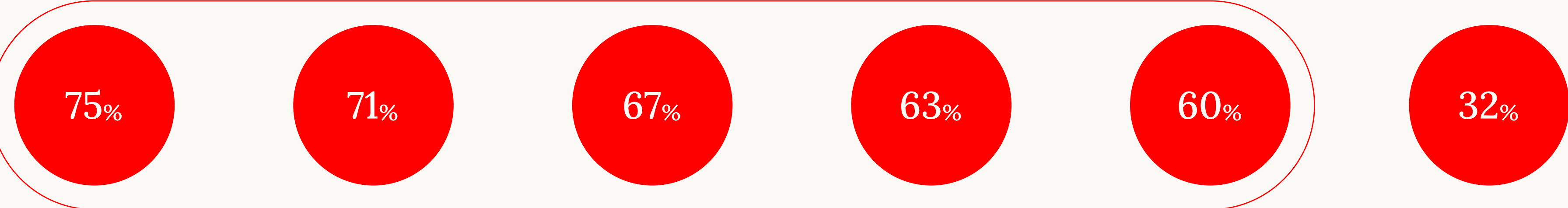


Shops/stores



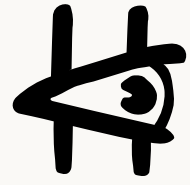
Apartment complexes

Adapt & Repair

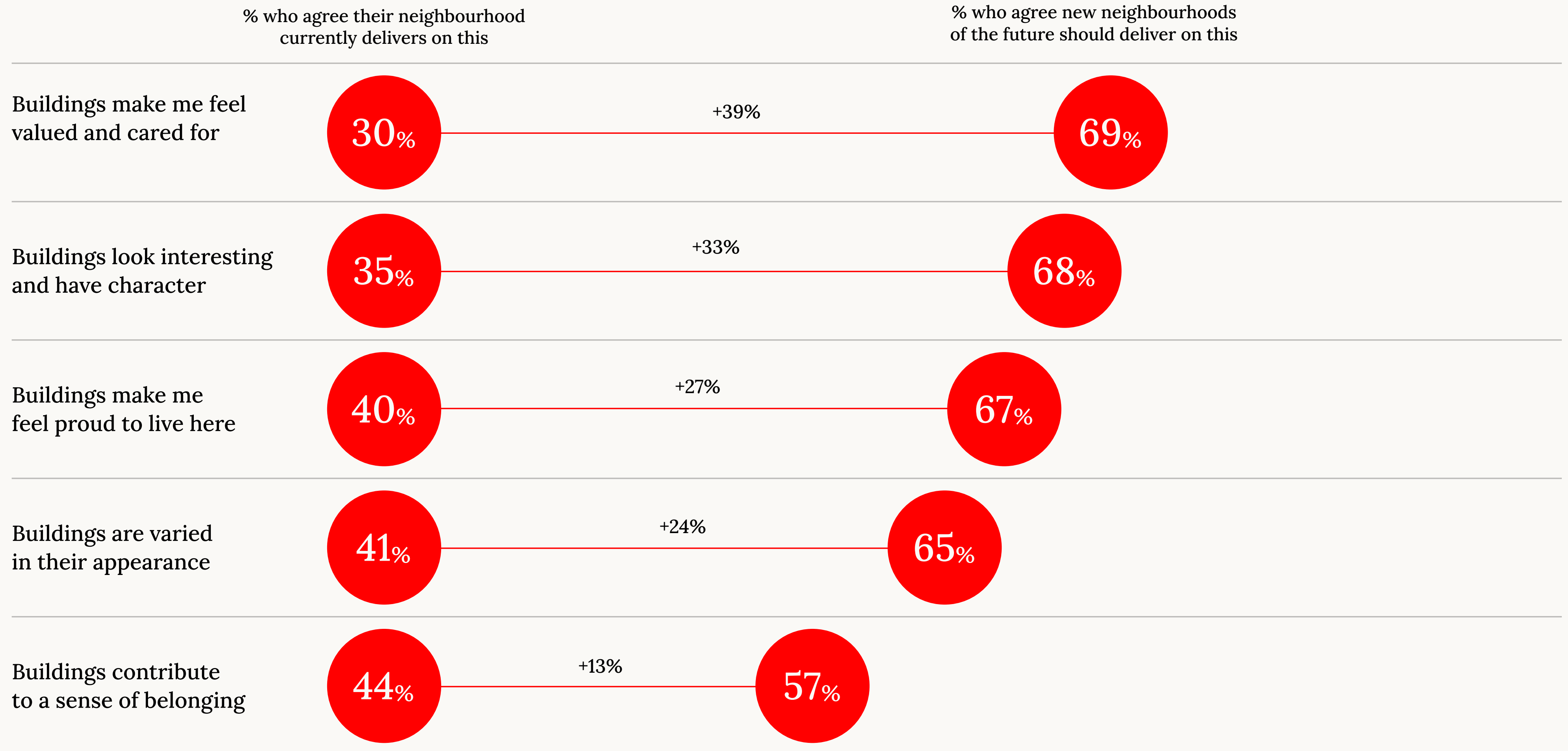


Demolish & rebuild

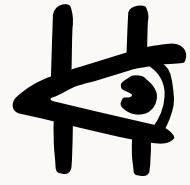




In the future, residents would like interesting and characterful buildings which make them feel something



Base description: Q5. Thinking about your neighbourhood specifically, please tell us the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement. Base: All respondents (n=1,000). Q24. How much do you agree or disagree with each of these? Base: All respondents (n=1,000).

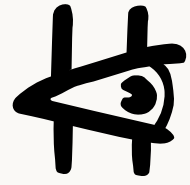


Dataset

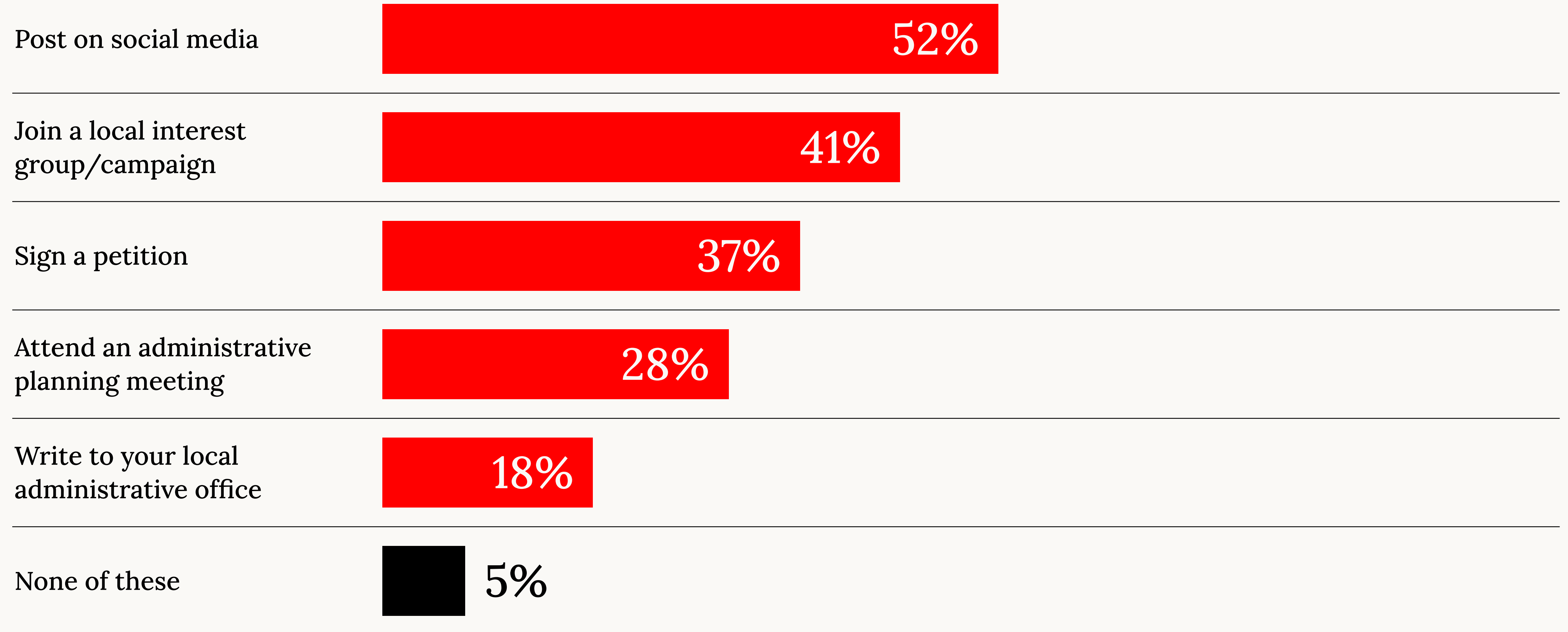
There is some willingness to get involved in influencing building design. Social media should be leveraged to boost participation.

Nearly half (48%) of residents are willing to actively get involved in deciding how buildings look in the local area, with most of these being somewhat willing (40%).

48%



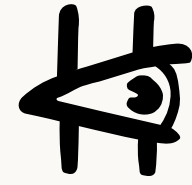
Survey **Which, if any, of the following actions would you take?**



Base description: Q6. How willing are you to actively get involved in deciding how buildings look in your local area? Base: All respondents (n=1,000). Q7. Which, if any, of the following actions would you take? Base: All who are willing to get involved (n=478).

Section 6.
Appendix.





Survey

Quantitative sample

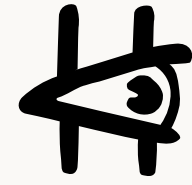
Total sample: 1,000

Age

	N
18-24	114
25-34	197
35-44	195
45-54	167
55-64	158
65+	169

Gender

	N
Male	494
Female	504
Prefer not to say	2



Survey

Quantitative: further sample breakdown

Total sample: 1,000

Neighbourhood

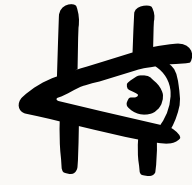
	N		N
Gangnam	164	Gwanghwamun/City Hall	14
Dongdaemun	114	Itaewon	14
Jamsil	103	Euljiro	8
Yeouido	68	Garosu-gil	7
Noryangjin	59	Insadong	6
Konkuk/Konda	44	Bukchon	4
Seongsu-dong	38	Apgujeong/Cheongdam	4
Sinchon/Ewha	32	Myeongdong	3
Hapjeong/Sangsu	31	Samcheong-dong	1
Hongdae	27	Prefer not to answer	242
Yeonnam-dong	17		

Type of home

	N
An apartment	618
Villa	189
Dagagu Jutak	119
Officetel	54
Hanok	5
Other	15

Length of time in Seoul

	N
All my life	282
over 20 years	358
10-20 years	153
5-10 years	112
less than 5 years	95



Online community

Qualitative sample

Total sample: 11

Age

	N
18-34	6
35-44	2
45-54	2
55+	1

Gender

	N
Male	5
Female	6

Neighbourhood

	N
Gangnam Gu, Dogok dong	1
Gangnam Gu, Daechi dong	1
Central Seoul, Jung Gu	1
Yongsan Gu	1
Seodaemun Yeonheedong	1
Seodaemun Namgaja Dong	1
Gwanak Gu, Sillim dong	1
Sungbuk Gu, Samsun dong	1
Dongdaemun	1
Geumchongu Doksandong	1
Sungdong Gu Geumho Dong	1

Length of time in Seoul

	N
All my life	
over 20 years	1
10-20 years	3
5-10 years	7
less than 5 years	

Type of home

	N
An apartment	4
Dagagu Juteak	4
Officetel	2
House	1

About Humanise

The Humanise campaign is sparking a global movement calling for more joyful, engaging and human buildings and cities. Inspired by Thomas Heatherwick's book *Humanise: a maker's guide to building our world*, the campaign shines a light on how dull, soulless buildings are bad for our brains, our economy, and the planet – and how what surrounds us can shape us, connect us, and bring us joy. Because human beings need human buildings.

Find out more and join the movement at:
humanise.org

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Seoul National University

The logo for Humanise, featuring a stylized white icon of a hand holding a pencil, followed by the word "HUMANISE" in a bold, white, sans-serif font.