

Creative Communities at the Seoul Biennale

Case Study 4: If you love Seoul, you can wear it!

Practical tips for anyone who commissions or runs programmes
which get people involved in the design of buildings and cities



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서울도시건축
비엔날레
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THE 5TH
SEOUL BIENNALE
OF ARCHITECTURE
AND URBANISM
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1. What's the project about?

Creative Communities

This project formed part of a 'Creative Communities programme' which ran during the Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism 2025. It brought the voice of citizens directly into the Biennale and enabled communities to explore how the buildings in Seoul make them feel and how they could be made more joyful and engaging.

The aim was to generate original creative content and turn the Biennale into a city-wide conversation that belonged to everyone, not just the professionals. It began with an open call that generated 83 applications, submitted by 148 creators and 1,214 community members. Of these, 10 were selected and 9 projects delivered, directly involving over 1000 people over the next 7 months.

Each of the projects delivered 2D artwork (8.25m × 4.8m) that was showcased on the Humanise Wall in a park in the centre of Seoul and contributed to an exhibition beside the Hall of Urbanism and Architecture, as well as being presented at a global conference in Seoul City Hall.

Places people notice

People respond to architecture every day. They might not talk about it in those terms. But they do.

A café, a façade, a sign, a shopfront, or an unusual street corner catches their attention. They photograph it, post it, remember it, and return to it. They also form feelings about it, whether that's curiosity, comfort, excitement or dislike. Sometimes that attachment shows up in everyday things, like a postcard, a tote bag, or a t-shirt. Through these small acts of noticing, feeling and sharing, people affect how neighbourhoods become known, recognised and loved.

In Seoul, this is especially visible in places like Seongsu, where cafés, studios, exhibitions and pop-up spaces circulate quickly through social media. Places become familiar not only because they are designed, but because people notice them, talk about them, and keep them in the public conversation.



The architecture gap

Yet while people actively notice and share the city, they rarely have any real role in the design of buildings. Buildings are usually understood as the work of developers, architects and planners. For most citizens, architecture appears only after the big decisions have already been made.

Public participation often takes the form of surveys, consultations or feedback sessions. But these rarely allow people to engage directly with the visual and spatial character of buildings, or to contribute to how architecture might look, feel or be experienced. There is still a gap between experiencing architecture and shaping it.

A playful way to start

This project began with that gap. It asked a simple question: could architecture become easier for people to engage with? Not through their expertise but through observation, emotion and play?

The work took place in Seongsu, a neighbourhood where these patterns of noticing and sharing are especially visible. It offered a strong setting for testing how public participation in architecture might begin through everyday observation.

Instead of asking people to discuss plans or evaluate design proposals, it started with something much more familiar: how people feel when they encounter buildings in their everyday life. Participants were invited to look closely at façades, notice details, record impressions, and respond to textures, colours and atmospheres.

By starting with these ordinary acts of noticing, it lowered the threshold for getting involved. Architecture became something



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people could approach with simple curiosity, not something reserved for the experts.

Why this matters

This matters because people already carry rich and specific feelings about their city but those feelings are rarely treated as part of architectural thinking. This project tested what might happen if everyday impressions could become the starting point for collective form-making.

It created a way for people to take part through what they already do naturally: look, react, compare, remember and share. In that sense, the project was not only about Seongsu. It was about opening a more accessible route into architecture itself.

In any city where people photograph places, talk about them, and build attachment through repeated encounters, the same methods could help connect everyday experience with the design of buildings.

2. Who took part?

The project brought together participants through an online architecture community and organised their contributions around four roles.

① Contributors

Recruited through an architecture communicator on social media who regularly introduces buildings and urban spaces to a broad public audience.

Most were not architects, and the group was intentionally shaped to reflect a wider civic perspective rather than a professional one. It included students, office workers, photographers and people who simply enjoyed exploring cities and observing the built environment closely.

Their role was to explore the neighbourhood and record emotional responses to what they encountered. Participants documented how different façades, textures and architectural details made them feel; and this made a collection of impressions gathered directly from people moving through the city.

② Facilitators

A second group guided participants through the process. Their role was to help participants look more closely at the built environment and notice details. Through prompts, discussions and simple tools, they encouraged people to observe façades, components and textures from a different perspective.



③ Translators

The third role focused on translating participants' emotional responses into material that could be organised and analysed collectively. Using digital tools, the translators mapped and processed the emotions that people reported, allowing patterns and relationships to emerge without imposing a single narrative. This turned individual impressions into a shared visual language.

④ Public sharers

The final role focused on bringing the project back into public life. Participants in this role helped translate the outcomes into forms that could circulate more widely. They turned them into installations, exhibitions and wearable objects, like clothing and badges. By making the work wearable and shareable, they extended it beyond the workshops and back into everyday urban life.

Composition

If You Love Seoul, You Can Wear It! combined online engagement with small in-person workshops.

At the start, around 350 members of an online community contributed memories and experiences related to Seongsu. Their responses helped build an initial emotional map of the neighbourhood, showing how different people encountered and remembered the same urban environment.

The first in-person workshop then brought together around 30 participants. A second workshop continued the process with a smaller group of 12.

The number of participants was gradually reduced as the project moved from broad emotional input towards more focused and hands-on forms of engagement.



Watch the If you love Seoul project team in action [here](#).



3. How did it work?

Across four stages, participants first recorded their emotional responses to the city, then translated those responses into visual form, built a façade together, and finally engaged with architecture through wearable objects.

Observing the city through emotions

The process began with a photographic exploration of Seongsu. Participants were asked to go and photograph buildings they found meaningful or memorable, paying attention to the details.

For each building, they recorded three kinds of images: the overall façade, specific elements such as windows, doors or signage, and close-up textures. This encouraged people to observe the city at multiple scales. Participants spent around two hours walking through the neighbourhood with minimal guidance, following whatever drew their attention.

After the walk, the group gathered for a two-hour reflection. They were asked one question: how did these buildings and their details make you feel? Participants recorded their responses in two ways: by placing emotion stickers onto printed photographs and by marking feelings such as calm, joyful, tense or melancholic on a simplified version of [Russell's circumplex model](#).

In this way, personal reactions to buildings became material that could be compared and explored collectively. Participants were not only observing Seongsu but actively selecting from the it and reframing it. As one contributor said:

“Walkers in Seongsu aren’t visitors, they’re editors – re-cutting the street scene live.”



Translating emotions into bricks

The next stage translated participants' responses into a visual system for the installation. The photographs and urban elements collected during the workshops were processed digitally and broken down into 6,685 small image fragments, or "emotional bricks". Each brick combined a fragment of the city with a colour linked to the emotional response it had triggered.

Using tools such as UMAP and RasterFairy, the team arranged these bricks so that similar emotional responses could cluster together while still forming a visually coherent composition. This became one section of the Humanise Wall at the Seoul Biennale, bringing together fragments of the city and colours linked to people's emotions.

Selected elements that participants had identified as especially distinctive, such as windows, signage or vents, were then added onto the surface like accessories, introducing a second layer of interpretation to the wall.

Building façades together

A second workshop shifted from recording buildings to composing them. This session involved a smaller group of around twelve participants who had taken part in the first workshop and wanted to continue.

Participants were given a simple white model façade and invited to build it together using common architectural elements found in Seongsu. Windows, doors, signage, vents and other details were printed, cut out and used almost like stickers, keeping the exercise accessible to non-experts.

Participants did not design the façade individually. Instead, they took part in a sequential passing exercise. Each person placed one

element onto the model before passing it to the next participant, who responded to what was already there. What mattered here was that people made the façade together. As the exercise continued, the composition became increasingly layered and unpredictable, reflecting the incremental and collective character of the neighbourhood's built environment.



Wearing the city

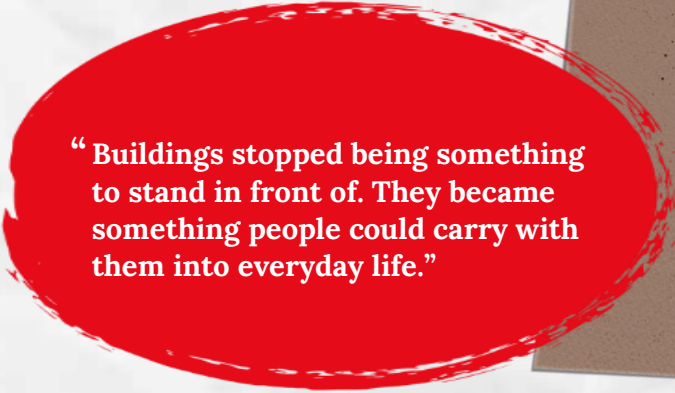
The final stage made architecture playful by changing its scale and bringing it into everyday life. Earlier workshops had already identified the small elements that shape the character of the neighbourhood, including signs, windows, textures and façade fragments. This led to a simple idea: what if these pieces of the city could be worn?

Participants selected memorable façade elements from the city and turned them into small design pieces. These were printed in sticker-like form and attached directly onto simple costume bases designed to resemble the outsides of buildings. By choosing, arranging and combining them, people could create wearable fragments of the city.

The ideas developed through these workshops later informed a final set of costumes for public presentation. The costumes were originally intended for a runway-style performance beneath the Humanise Wall installation. The weather and scheduling constraints killed this idea! But the finished costumes were later shown in the exhibition space during the Biennale.



4. What were the outcomes?



“Buildings stopped being something to stand in front of. They became something people could carry with them into everyday life.”

Feelings can be collected

People experience cities emotionally all the time but those feelings usually remain private and disappear quickly. This project showed that feelings can be collected, structured and made visible. By asking participants to record how buildings made them feel, and by organising those responses in a common framework, the project turned scattered individual reactions and attachments into a collective response to a specific neighbourhood:

“Red brick isn’t a neutral tone; it’s the neighbourhood’s skin colour.”

This did more than just produce a striking visual output. It shows what happens when building design starts with the observations and feelings of citizens. And the Humanise Wall itself became a public surface where many different responses sat together without being reduced to one artificial story.

Seeing yourself in the city

When the Humanise Wall was unveiled, participants in this project could locate their own bricks and see their own specific contribution. Many people searched for them, took photographs in front of them, and shared the moment with others.

Recognising their own contribution changed the wall. It no longer felt like an abstract installation but a shared civic surface.

This was the moment when a sense of ownership became visible. Finding their own bricks changed the relationship. The wall no longer felt like a distant installation. It had become something that held people’s own memories and reactions. And this made it easier to feel connected.

Opening architecture up

From the beginning, this project looked for ways to make architecture easier to engage with. It started with things people already do in their everyday life: noticing places, photographing them, sharing reactions, and paying attention to small details that stay in your memory.

As the project developed, the participants recorded emotions, combined fragments, built façades together, and eventually translated parts of the city into things that could be worn. It opened architecture up through acts of looking, choosing, rearranging, carrying and sharing.

Bricks, costumes and badges

The project also deliberately produced assets that could keep circulating beyond the workshops. Bricks were shared online, costumes were shown in the exhibition space, and architectural fragments reappeared as things people could wear.

Buildings stopped being something to stand in front of. They became something people could carry with them into everyday life.

“Seoul-ness isn’t about speed. It’s about layers. What overlaps is what stays in memory – and what’s remembered is what we grow to love.”



5. How much did it cost?

The project was one of nine initiatives funded through the Creative Communities programme of the Seoul Biennale 2025. Each project received KRW 20,000,000 (approximately USD 13,000) of public funding.

This funding supported a multi-stage process that combined field observation, participatory workshops, digital processing, and the public presentation of work developed during the project. It also made it possible to move from individual responses to a shared public installation.

As a result, the funding paid for:

- 1) a participatory process for collecting emotional responses to the city
- 2) the translation of those responses into a shared visual installation, and
- 3) the public display of the resulting wall section and costumes at the Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism, where they remained on view for 54 days.



6. What did we learn?

If you love Seoul, you can wear it! shows how architecture can become much more open to people when you focus on feelings. It offers four lessons for anyone working in real estate and regeneration, cultural commissioning, or community development.

1. Emotions help us understand the city

People do not need specialist language to say something meaningful about buildings. Feelings like comfort, excitement, irritation or nostalgia can reveal how places are actually experienced, and create a powerful starting point for understanding a city. This project showed that emotional responses are not vague or secondary. They can be a clear and accessible way of understanding how urban space is perceived, remembered and valued.

2. Don't try to find one answer

Participation is much more difficult when many contributions have to be combined into one outcome. This project showed that a common framework can hold many different impressions all at once, without trying to collapse them into a single answer. That is important because public participation often assumes that success means reaching consensus. In practice, cities are experienced differently by different people, and those differences do not always need to be resolved. What you need is a system that allows multiple

perspectives to sit side by side while still producing something that people can read, recognise and share.

3. Make people's contribution visible

People engage more deeply when they can literally see their own contribution. This does more than acknowledge participation. It changes the relationship. What had seemed distant or separate begins to feel closer and more personal. When people can see their own part in something larger, a street, building or neighbourhood can start to feel more familiar, more memorable, – and more theirs.



4. Everyday acts can open architecture to more people

Designing buildings becomes easier to engage with when it connects to familiar actions such as wearing and sharing. Start with habits people already have. Architecture and the city often feel distant because they are introduced through drawings, plans or professional language before people have any intuitive way in to the debate. Everyday acts lower this threshold. They allow people to engage first through curiosity and recognition, and then only later through interpretation and decision-making.



Watch the If you love Seoul project team in action [here](#).



Creative Communities was a key project of the Thematic Exhibition of the 5th Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism, hosted by the Seoul Metropolitan Government. Conceived as a participatory programme, it brought citizens and creative practitioners together to explore urbanism and architecture and to experiment with new ideas.

This case study was produced to document the development and implementation of Creative Communities, the experiences of its participants, and its key outcomes, and to share these with audiences in Korea and internationally. The research and writing were undertaken by Heatherwick Studio and Hyelim Jang, in collaboration with the participating project teams.



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