

Creative Communities at the Seoul Biennale

Case Study 2: Our Hagwon

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



서명
THE 5TH
SEOUL BIENNALE
OF ARCHITECTURE
AND URBANISM
2025

1. What's the project about?



“ There are over 100,000 Hagwons in Korea. Around 80% of all students attend them, paying a staggering KRW 26 trillion (USD 20 billion) each year.”

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.

Overlooked but formative

Many people spend a large part of their daily lives in spaces that are rarely discussed or critically examined. These places are familiar and repetitive, and quietly shape how people feel, move and organise their routines.

Some of the most intensively used spaces are commercially operated. Designed to function efficiently and accommodate large numbers of users, they are shaped primarily by operational logic – turnover, manageability, and speed. Over time, this logic becomes normalised and questions of experience, emotion and daily rhythm are not actively excluded, they are just gradually pushed aside.

In Korea, one of the clearest examples is the *Hagwon* – a privately operated after-school academy. Hagwons are deeply embedded in everyday urban life for tens of thousands of children and teenagers. Nationwide, there are over 100,000 Hagwons. Around 80% of all students attend them, paying a staggering KRW 26 trillion (approximately USD 20 billion) nationwide each year.

Users without a voice

For many young Koreans, Hagwon buildings are not occasional classrooms but spaces they move through almost every day, often from late afternoon until late at night. And yet they remain largely outside public discussion, treated as private interiors rather than as public spaces with a vast social impact.

Students, parents, and educators spend long hours inside them, moving through them day after day after day. But this experience is rarely reflected in any debate or design.

The gap is especially pronounced for children and teenagers. They are rarely asked how these environments make them feel, what they notice, or what they struggle with. Their experience remains personal, unrecorded, and invisible. Hagwons are spaces they occupy daily for years, often without choice or agency.

As one student put it, “the best moment at Hagwon was when the classes ended and I could go home.”

This project, *Our Hagwon*, began by listening to these users. It focused on collecting memories, emotions, and everyday observations from the people whose voices are usually absent from spatial discussions. Their experiences have been treated not as feedback but as knowledge and insight into how space is lived, endured, and remembered.

Why this matters

Many of the spaces that most strongly shape everyday life are not discussed in public. They are produced and maintained through market logic. Because they are framed as private, functional, or inevitable, they are rarely treated as concerns we all share or things that are open to common reflection.

Our Hagwon has sought to deliberately shift where architectural discussion begins.

- **Invisible users → Visible contributors**
- **Expert-led → Experience-led**
- **Private space → Public conversation**
- **Solution → Starting point**

The project has reframed an overlooked building type as a major civic issue. What emerges is not a single answer or model but a repositioning. It shows that spaces often treated as private or inevitable can be discussed, re-read, and questioned collectively.

In this sense, *Our Hagwon* is less about improving one type of building than about restoring a basic idea – that cities are made of everyday spaces, and that paying attention to how they are experienced is a first step toward a more human city.



2. Who took part?

Structure

The project was organised around four roles:

① Experience Contributors

These were people who had direct, repeated experience of Hagwon spaces: students, parents and educators. They contributed memories, observations, moments of discomfort, and familiar scenes. Their inputs were handled not as demands or representative views but as fragments to be read and positioned within a broader spatial framework.

② Translators and Curators

The second role shaped how these experiences entered the project. Contributions were collected and curated without being reduced to a single argument. This ensured that experiences remained open-ended, resisting premature translation into design.

③ Spatial Interpreters

A third group translated this material into spatial questions and interpretations. Working within a shared thematic framework, they helped participants explore how their experience could be read architecturally and how the space itself could be understood.

④ Public communicators

The fourth role led on exhibitions, discussions, and public presentations. Their job was to provide a structure through which different contributions could appear on equal terms, and bring together images, interpretations, and spatial ideas without merging them into a single narrative.



Composition

Participation in *Our Hagwon* took shape through a loose and open structure that allowed people to enter the project in different ways and at different moments.

More than 80 students from four international universities participated in design studios, discussions, and spatial interpretation workshops. In addition, the open call also drew participation from members of the public, particularly students who use Hagwons on a daily basis.

Some participants contributed a single image or observation. Others engaged more deeply. Levels of involvement varied across participants, and contributions were not engineered to achieve any particular kind of balance, representation, or consensus.

What connected them all was a shared experience of the same type of space. Each contribution reflected a different way of encountering and interpreting an after-school academy. These differences were not resolved or merged, but held in parallel within a common framework, and this allowed the space to be understood not as a single problem with a single solution, but as a layered condition shaped by overlapping uses and perceptions.



Watch the students and curators in action [here](#).

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3. How did it work?

The project was divided into five stages.

A common lens

The first stage focused on setting a shared frame for participation. People were asked to reflect on moments they noticed but rarely discussed: when the space felt most present or absent, when it offered comfort or constraint, and how time, movement, and pause were experienced within it.

This established a common lens through which all subsequent contributions were collected and read. It allowed personal impressions to surface without being directed toward evaluation or solution.

An open call

The second stage involved an open call for photography. People were invited to capture in images how they had experienced a Hagwon. Photography works well as a medium for registering fleeting moments, atmospheres, and relationships that are difficult to explain in words. This was particularly important here given that many contributors were children and teenagers, for whom verbal critique or written explanation can be a barrier. Images lowered the threshold for participation and allowed emotions and everyday reactions to surface without being formalised as arguments.

The open call generated 22 submissions and produced a first body of visual material which could be collectively read and discussed.

Grounded in reality

The third stage connected the project to everyday use. Field-based research, including interviews, surveys, and direct observation, focused on areas where this type of building and use appeared with particular intensity. This ensured that the material reflected how after-school academies in Seoul are actually used, keeping the project grounded in reality rather than abstract critique.



Spatial interpretation

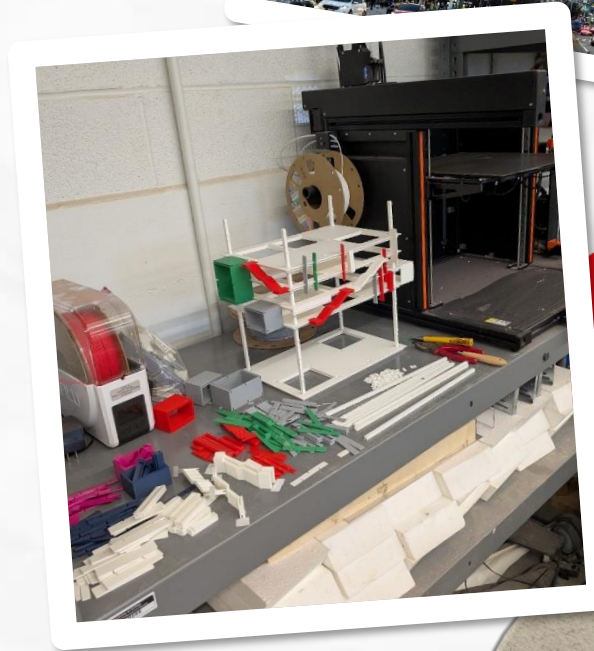
In the fourth stage, design studios from different countries worked around a shared theme, using their accumulated experience as the basis for architectural inquiry. Rather than producing a single proposal, this stage explored how the same body of experience could generate multiple spatial interpretations, allowing the differences to remain visible rather than resolved.

A public conversation

In this final stage, all the material and interpretations were shared with the public. First through a symposium, then an exhibition.

Prior to the Biennale, students, architects, researchers, and educators gathered to examine the project and its process in depth at a university symposium. Then, during the Biennale, the work was shared with a mass public audience through an exhibition, using visual material, spatial interpretations, and recorded experience, as well as on the Humanise Wall in a public park.

By moving like this between academic discussion and public exhibition, *Our Hagwon* demonstrated how experiential material can circulate across different contexts while remaining open to reinterpretation and further use.



4. What were the outcomes?

Refusing to accept the inevitable

For many young Koreans, Hagwons represent a very stressful rite of passage: a difficult experience made worse by a bad physical environment. As one student described it, “When I’m inside the Hagwon, I can’t tell if it’s day or night.”

A key outcome of this project was a shift in how these after-school academies are understood and discussed. Experiences that had previously remained personal or unspoken were brought into public discussion. They moved from being treated as private and inevitable to a subject you could debate.

Through exhibitions and public programmes, people could encounter the same material side by side. This reframed the Hagwon not simply as an individual concern but as a common experience that you are allowed to examine, question, and reimagine.

There’s no need to agree

This project transformed memories and emotions into material that could be read and interpreted together. And by preserving difference rather than resolving it, the project established shared reference points without flattening individual perspectives. Interpretation emerged through comparison and proximity, rather than agreement.

A robust basis for action

The project has also produced a body of evidence that can influence a central part of the Korean educational experience. Images, spatial interpretations and accumulated insights have established a basis for continued discussion in academic, professional, and civic contexts. Seoul now has a starting point for further inquiry into how these everyday commercial buildings intersect with questions of urban environment, public responsibility, and everyday experience.



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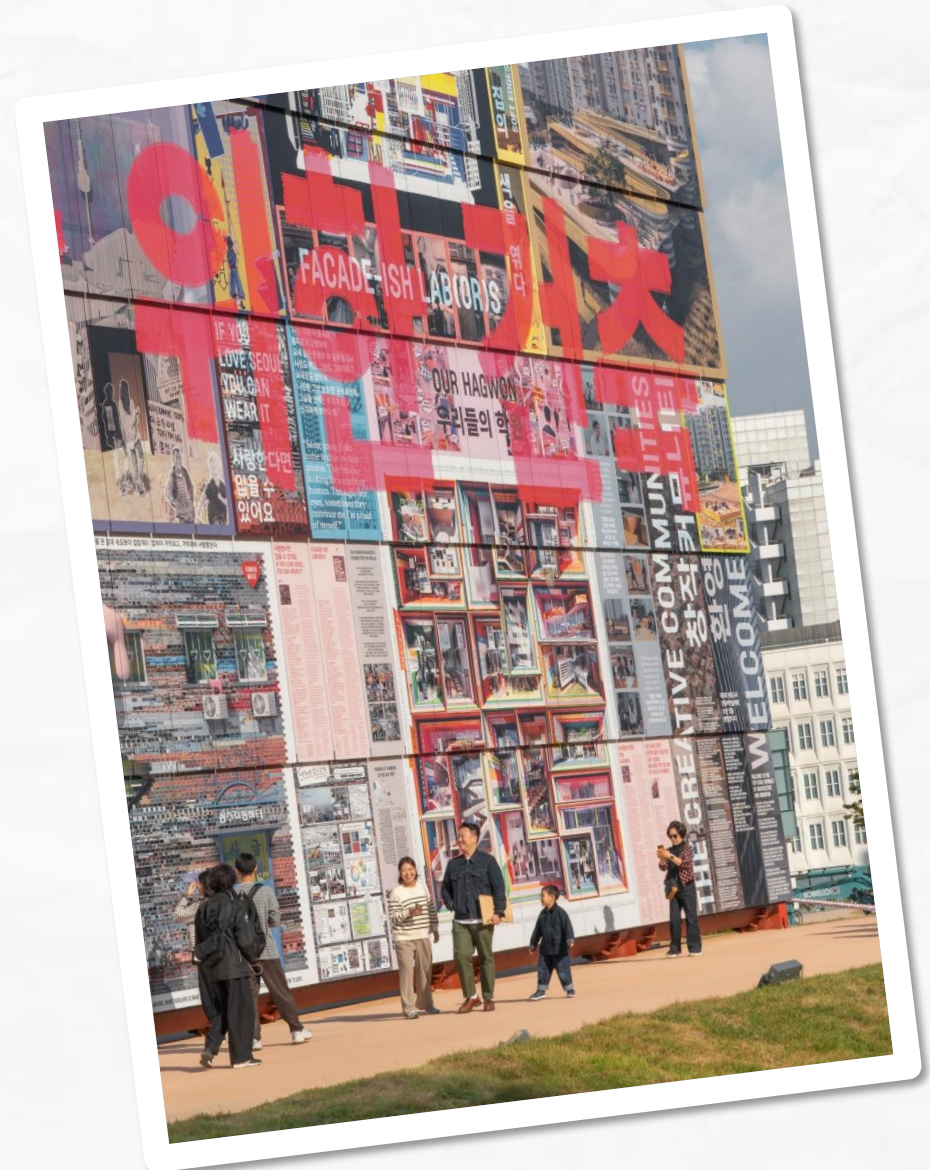
5. How much did it cost?

This 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 was invested in an open call, field-based research, academic exchange, and public dissemination. It also made it possible to document and organise material so that it could be revisited beyond the immediate delivery of the work.

The funding delivered:

- 1) a structured process for generating participation around a big social issue without an existing community
- 2) a body of experiential and spatial material that could be interpreted collectively, and
- 3) a multi-stage, research-led project that combined engagement, documentation, and public debate.



6. What did we learn?

Our Hagwon shows how to shed light on buildings that quietly, profoundly, shape everyday life. It offers six lessons for anyone working in a municipal authority or community organisation:

1. Participation can be generated, even where no community exists

We tend to assume that you need a clear shared agenda or collective identity at the start of a project. But this work shows that by carefully structuring how people enter, contribute, and encounter each other's experience, engagement can emerge around issues that had previously remained unspoken. Participation is not a precondition. It can be designed in.

2. Discomfort is often sensed but rarely spoken

People are often already very attuned to discomfort in familiar environments, even when it remains unspoken. An overwhelming sense of fatigue and disconnection are frequently normalised in our lives through repetition. When this happens, participation can begin by creating the conditions in which people notice, recognise, and express what they have long felt about aspects of a city.

3. Bad commercial buildings are everyone's concern

Buildings shaped by market logic and efficiency are often treated as private or inevitable. *Our Hagwon* shows that these kinds of spaces are not just a category of planning policy that can only be changed by experts or the market. They can be reframed as a key part of the shared urban condition and publicly debated, instead of being left to individual concerns.



4. Difference can be more useful than consensus

Rather than resolving everyone's experience into a single narrative, *Our Hagwon* held multiple perspectives in parallel. This allowed interpretation to emerge through comparison and proximity, expanding how a space could be understood without trying to force agreement.

5. The power of visual frameworks

Using images and spatial interpretation is a powerful way to make people's memories and impressions readable for others. Visual frameworks made it possible to discuss a building collectively without reducing people's different experiences to a single story. They enable a shared reading without flattening everyone's experience. Representation itself can act as a mediator between individual experience and a shared understanding.

6. Less like an answer, more like an invitation

Our Hagwon has not delivered a solution for the redesign of after-school academies. Instead, it establishes a starting point. It has made an overlooked, highly influential building type visible and discussable in civic, academic, and professional contexts. The project has functioned less as an answer and more like an invitation - to continue questioning how everyday commercial buildings shape our urban life.



Watch a video about the *Our Hagwon* project [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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