

# Creative Communities at the Seoul Biennale

## Case Study 3: Soft Edges

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



서울  
THE 5TH  
SEOUL BIENNALE  
OF ARCHITECTURE  
AND URBANISM  
2025

# 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.

## **Where edges emerge**

Cities are constantly changing. As they expand and transform, different kinds of places meet: new housing beside older landscapes, redevelopment beside long-established neighbourhoods, different communities sharing the same territory.

These moments of encounter often produce what we might recognise as an urban edge.

This project began from one such condition along the western outskirts of Seoul, where recently built apartment complexes stand directly beside long-established agricultural land. Two landscapes shaped by very different rhythms of life occupy the same place but rarely intersect.



## Living on an edge

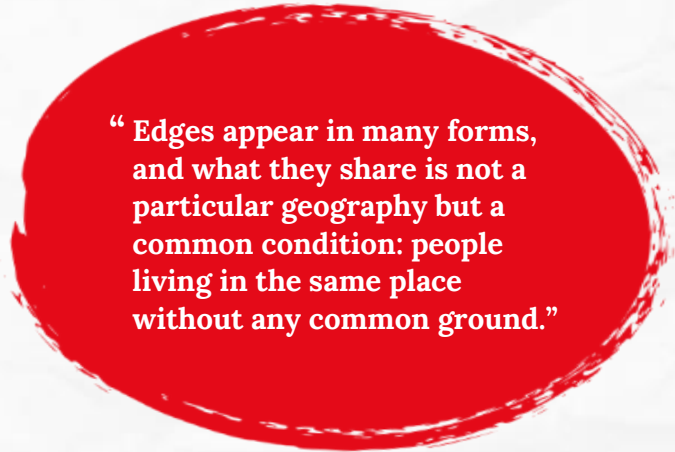
In edge conditions, everyday life becomes divided. People may occupy the same building or neighbourhood but their routes, rhythms, and routines rarely intersect, even when the physical distance is minimal.

Spaces that appear shared are often used differently - entered from different directions, occupied at different times. People pass through without stopping. Familiar faces remain unrecognised, not deliberately, but because your routine creates few moments for encounter. Over time, these parallel patterns become habitual. The edge becomes not only spatial but embedded in how your everyday life is organised and experienced.

## Edges as an urban condition

Conditions like this are becoming increasingly common. In South Korea, rapid urban expansion has repeatedly placed newly built apartments beside long-established neighbourhoods and older urban landscapes. Apartments now account for more than 60% of the country's housing stock, much of it built within the past three decades.

This project focused on the meeting point between new apartment complex buildings and long-established neighbourhoods. But similar edges appear in many other forms. They can emerge between affluent districts and less privileged neighbourhoods, between long-established communities and new arrivals, and between groups divided by culture, class, or migration. What all these situations share is not a particular geography but a common condition: people living in the same place without any common ground.



**“Edges appear in many forms, and what they share is not a particular geography but a common condition: people living in the same place without any common ground.”**

## Why this matters

This might sound like a spatial problem. The boundary between farmland and apartment blocks reads as a physical edge between two ways of living. But the distance is social and generational, as well as spatial. Shared space does not necessarily create human connection. Benches, paths, or small public areas can easily be used quite separately. They don't automatically create togetherness.

*Soft Edges* starts from this insight. Rather than relying on space alone, the project explores how to specifically encourage human connection. In this case, children and older residents were invited to participate in a series of workshops where they could observe, draw, and talk about the neighbourhood together. Through these shared activities, fragments of memory, knowledge, and everyday experience began to circulate between generations, opening up new ways of seeing and imagining the spaces people share.

## 2. Who took part?

### Structure

The project took place in an area where multiple communities already exist but rarely encounter one another. Long-term residents who had farmed the land for decades and families who had recently moved into nearby apartment complexes lived within minutes of each other but had very little everyday contact. Even when occupying the same neighbourhood, or looking out onto the same fields, their lives often unfold in parallel.

Participation was carefully structured so that people could come together without requiring prior relationships or shared identities; and delivery was organised around four roles, each enabling participation in a different way and keeping the process open and flexible.

### ① Contributors

Participants whose everyday lives were already shaped by the place formed the first group. Older residents carrying long-term memories of cultivating the land and witnessing its gradual transformation over decades, alongside children from nearby apartment complexes who understand the same landscape from a very different position. The children were treated as active contributors whose drawings, observations, and gestures were

equally valid as the histories of labour, land use, and life brought by older people.

### ② Connectors

Community figures, including village leaders and local cooperative organisers, played an important mediating role. They introduced the project to residents and helped frame it as a space for listening and exchange. Their presence made it easier for participants, particularly the older residents, to enter the process without being apprehensive.



### ③ Facilitators

Facilitators designed the activities, tools, and workshop formats. Their role was to create situations in which people from different generations could engage comfortably with one another. Instead of directing discussion toward predetermined outcomes, facilitators focused on maintaining conditions where conversation, curiosity, and observation could emerge naturally.

### ④ Interpreters

This final role translated people's experiences generated through the workshops into spatial interpretations and public presentations. Drawings, conversations, and gestures produced during the sessions were documented and translated into visual outputs – objects, colours, spatial elements, and scenes drawn from everyday life.

### Composition

Around twenty participants joined the first sessions. They were people who rarely met each other. This allowed the workshops to remain informal and closely facilitated by a small organising team. While the numbers sometimes expanded, with children bringing friends, the workshops remained deliberately small scale. This made it possible for participants to see each other's contributions, respond to one another's ideas, and engage easily in conversation.



Watch the Soft Edges project team in action [here](#).



### 3. How did it work?

Two indoor workshops were held, each lasting approximately three hours. The initial sessions involved around twenty participants. Later workshops were intentionally reduced to around fifteen to allow for more focused interaction. All the sessions were facilitated by a team of three.

#### **Designing the conditions for interaction**

The workshops began by bringing together participants whose everyday lives rarely intersected despite sharing the same neighbourhood. The team designed and built a set of modular furniture that functioned simultaneously as seating, spatial organiser, and social device.

The furniture was intentionally bright and reconfigurable. Its arrangement encouraged participants to move, shift positions, and sit alongside unfamiliar people, gradually mixing generations.

Each session opened with a fun, game-based activity. But the main ice-breaker was spatial rather than verbal. Through the furniture layout, children and elderly participants gathered around shared tables, their bodies oriented inward rather than facing each other across a table, so that interactions began naturally even before the activities were introduced.

#### **Starting from the familiar**

The workshops began with a familiar scale shared by all participants: the interior of the home. Participants were asked to focus on their living rooms and the window facing outside. Each person was given a window-frame template and a set of stickers, patterns, and coloured materials. They then designed the interior by placing and layering the elements within the template. Having a very clear structure like this allowed people of different ages to work comfortably together with the same tools regardless of their drawing skills.

By focusing on what could be seen from inside the home—objects, colours, plants, and light—participants began to share personal memories and everyday experiences. And when the individual windows were laid out together, a clear issue emerged: while their interior lives were very diverse and expressive, the exterior appearance of the apartment buildings remained largely uniform.

Participants then applied the same template to windows, balconies and building façades, and began to discuss how their individual lives might become more visible on the collective surface of the outsides of buildings.



### Shifting scale

The workshops then gradually expanded from the home to the scale of the neighbourhood. Urban agriculture was introduced as a theme, providing a shared lens through which participants could discuss places within the neighbourhood. Farming was very familiar to many of the older people and offered a new and interesting subject for children.

Participants worked in mixed-age teams around a large modular map of the neighbourhood. Using small plant pots, they discussed where elements might belong, why they should be placed there, and what kinds of spaces were missing from daily routines. As plants were placed, older people often shared agricultural knowledge informally, such as planting seasons, care and maintenance, and traditional uses.

Around the map, participants began identifying familiar landmarks such as apartment blocks, shops, academies (hagwon), clinics, and their daily walking routes before the conversation moved toward more speculative ideas.

“The entrance should feel like a smile, not a warning. Kids today are already under a lot of pressure. Buildings should be brighter, not colder.”

As these conversations progressed, the participants began sharing opinions about the neighbourhood spaces they encountered in everyday life. Attention gradually shifted toward shared spaces, particularly the *sang-ga* (commercial complex). Participants began imagining how furniture, greenery, and resting points could be integrated into these environments, gradually expanding the discussion from individual buildings to the everyday landscape of the neighbourhood.



## Creating visual outputs

The workshops generated all sorts of materials, from window compositions, façade studies, annotated maps, and observations about how furniture shaped interaction. As the sessions progressed, participants began recognising how different ways of living - between generations, homes, and landscapes - coexisted within the same place. The process allowed participants to become aware of these everyday edges and to explore, through small spatial ideas and gestures, how hard edges might begin to soften.

The project team translated these observations into a coherent visual and spatial language, identifying recurring patterns, shared questions, and points of overlap between generations. And the resulting work was then turned into a single image that could be used on the Humanise Wall during the Seoul Biennale at a scale of 8.25m × 4.8m.

The work shared with hundreds of thousands of people a way of reimagining how the buildings and spaces in a neighbourhood can evolve to encourage human connection and softer forms of coexistence.

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## 4. What were the outcomes?

### **Spatial awareness**

Before the workshops, children and elderly residents shared the same neighbourhood but rarely noticed one another. Through this project, they began to recognise that the same neighbourhood could be experienced differently by different people.

This did not immediately produce new social relationships. Instead, it changed how participants perceived the spaces they encounter in their daily routines, and sparked a significant shift in spatial awareness.

### **Everyday life**

When participants proposed changes to the neighbourhood, these were rarely large-scale interventions. They reflected small and practical needs: places to sit, objects to gather around, or points where people can stop and talk. These ideas reflected how people live rather than abstract opinions about how the neighbourhood should change.

Placement of the workshop furniture itself demonstrated how a well-positioned object can act as a social catalyst without any

formal programming. Similarly, the introduction of plant pots and urban farming elements showed how modest spatial devices can support repeat encounters and exchange. Through a series of small spatial adjustments, the project has shown how to gradually reshape everyday neighbourhood life.

### **Generational difference**

The differences between children and older people were positive and productive, not an obstacle to progress. Children often responded quickly and intuitively, placing elements and testing ideas without hesitation, while older residents paused longer and drew on their knowledge of seasons, materials, and long-term changes in the landscape.

Their different perspectives complemented one another. Children introduced curiosity and experimentation, while older people brought context and lived memory. The workshops showed how generational difference can be a valuable resource for understanding and reimagining any neighbourhood.



**“The project changed how participants perceived the spaces they encounter in their daily routines, and sparked a significant shift in spatial awareness”**

## Farmland and housing

By moving and comparing elements on maps during the workshops, participants explored how the boundaries between farmland and housing, and between different generations, could become more permeable.

In particular, the placement of plant pots and urban farming elements revealed how small interventions could create shared points of care and interaction between residents. Workshop furniture was also positioned along these boundary areas, turning the edge between the apartment neighbourhood and the agricultural landscape into a place of encounter. Even if farmland and housing remained distinct, introducing greenery, seating, or small gathering points could make these edges feel shared and permeable.



## 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 funding supported the design and delivery of the workshops, fabrication of the workshop furniture, and documentation of materials generated during the process. It also enabled the work developed through the workshops to be shared publicly as a major visual artwork.

The funding delivered:

- 1) a structured workshop process that brought together residents from different generations who shared the same neighbourhood but rarely encountered one another
- 2) a set of workshop activities – drawings, maps, and spatial placements – that allowed participants to explore how everyday routines shape neighbourhood space, and
- 3) a participatory process that translated these shared spatial explorations into a visual outcome presented over 54 days at the Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism.



## 6. What did we learn?

*Soft Edges* shows how to open up new ways of changing neighbourhood relationships. It offers four lessons for anyone working in municipal authorities, community organisations, or participatory design.

### 1. Bringing people together is not enough

The hard truth is, simply bringing people together does not achieve very much. Participation requires carefully designed conditions that allow people to feel comfortable, curious, and engaged. In this project, the workshops were structured as a sequence of activities that gradually moved from individual experiences toward a shared understanding of the neighbourhood. Over time, interactions became more relaxed and participants began exchanging memories and observations. Some of them even travelled together from the edge of the city right to the centre to visit the Humanise Wall and exhibition together and see the results of their work. What this shows is the importance of investing in well-designed participatory process.

### 2. Generational differences are an asset, not a problem

Children and older people brought different ways of understanding the neighbourhood. Children often responded quickly and intuitively, placing elements and testing ideas without hesitation,

while older residents drew on long-term memories of farming, seasonal change, and the gradual transformation of the landscape. Through shared activities these perspectives began to complement one another. Generational diversity is often framed as a challenge but it should be seen as a valuable way of understanding neighbourhoods and building community.

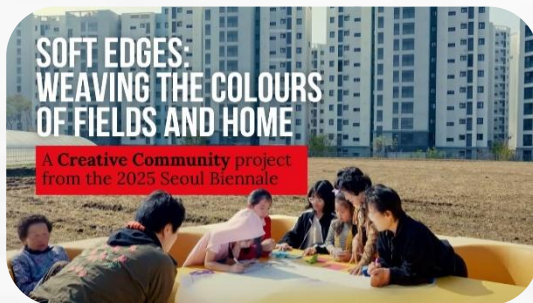
### 3. Small devices can trigger big social impacts

Large design interventions are not always necessary. During the workshops, small spatial devices played a significant role in shaping social dynamics. Modular furniture brought participants into close proximity, encouraging conversation and collaboration around shared surfaces. Plant pots and simple working tools also became focal points where participants gathered, discussed ideas, and exchanged experiences. It demonstrated how small devices can work without formal programming, and act as catalysts for social exchange.



#### 4. Designers as facilitators

This project is a reminder that creative participation does not depend on constant direction from designers. Once the structure of the activities was in place, conversations and relationships began to develop naturally. The project team focused on creating the conditions where people could reflect on their surroundings and share their ideas and experience. Participants then began seeing familiar boundaries in the neighbourhood in new ways and understanding how small spaces can unlock human interaction - an idea central to the whole concept of Soft Edges.



Watch the Soft Edges 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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