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Mass Studies
Seoul Commune 2026: "Rethinking Towers in the Park"
Illustration: Mass Studies

Living In The Future

Art Center College of Design presents an international exhibition of 'Architecture and Technology for Intelligent Living.'

By Brenda Rees

For centuries, the dreamers of the world have pondered what the future may hold. How will work be different? What will we wear? How will we eat? And probably the most fundamental of all: Where and how will we live?

Indeed, prototypes of "smart houses" have been on many a modern-day artist and architect's drawing boards since the 1920s, when mankind realized how — especially with the dawn of electricity — technology could transform our daily lives.

Today, with a growing population living in increasingly complex urban societies, envisioning the homes of the future is not just for science fiction writers, it's also a major topic for thoughtful designers who are imagining a brighter reality for the global community.

This month, Art Center College of Design is unveiling an exhibit revealing how a number of well-respected architects and designers from around the world envision the nature of personal dwelling spaces in the not-so-distant future. "Open House: Architecture and Technology for Intelligent Living" opens April 14 and will present a series of 10 research projects submitted by emerging architects and designers from the United States, Europe, Australia, Asia and Mexico. In addition, the exhibition will feature a historical retrospective of past "houses of the future" — such as the 1957 Monsanto House of the Future at Disneyland — as well as previous concepts of future living.

Jointly organized by Art Center and the Vitra Design Museum in Germany, the main body of the show offers diverse and captivating glimpses into possible homes of the future. Using cutting-edge technologies and materials, the projects explore spatial experiences, sensory enhancement and sustainability — a particularly hot topic in these days of dwindling resources and global warming. Project ideas are presented through room installations, models, photos, a show catalogue and films.

But the exhibition does more than just showcase lofty ideas and Jetson-like environments that seem economically unattainable to ordinary humans here in 2007. Through public workshops, lectures and the exhibition itself, organizers pose a question to viewers: “Here is an example of how we can live in the future. Do we want to do this?”

“These research projects will be presented to the public to gauge response,” says Art Center President Richard Koshalek. “These are projects in progress and exposing them to the public contributes immensely to the overall and continued discussion.”

Koshalek points to one particular design project, Thinking Ahead, from Rojkind Arquitectos of Mexico, that focuses on how medical advances in technology could change an important room. “The bathroom of the future could be the place where we get a complete physical every day,” he says. “Mirrors can read our eyes and diagnose up to 150 different diseases. Urine samples can be taken daily and the results delivered directly to your doctor.”

Indeed, setting up those kinds of infrastructures —including floors that adjust to changing postures and medicine chests that monitor prescription use — would give many people the option of living in their own homes longer, says Gloria Gerace, the exhibition's curator.

Still, Gerace contends the goal of the designers was not to create autonomous buildings that isolate humans, but rather to invite connectedness as well as create a place of refuge. She points to the Seoul Commune 2026 project, “Rethinking Towers in the Park,” from South Korea's Mass Studies team.

“They have taken the 1960s modern idea of tall towers and offer a greater sense of community with a high level of sustainability,” she says, describing the pineapple-shaped honeycomb structures created in a green-space park. Residents of such environments would have private rooms as well as many shared spaces — all within the framework of lush foliage.

In contrast, the Jellyfish House is designed to be situated on a formerly polluted area (specifically Treasure Island in the Bay Area), and uses a clever water-filtration system built into the skin of the building. Lisa Iwamoto, part of San Francisco–based IwamotoScott Architecture, which worked with Proces2 on this project, says this concept reflects a growing trend of having “ambient technology” or “ubiquitous computing” integrated into finished products. “We're seeing technology not as interactive as we normally think of it, like computers, cell phones or PDAs,” she says. “[This kind of technology] would be in the peripheral view, yet part of our lives — much like electricity.”

A video of Jellyfish House shows the walls alternating between opaque and clear —as if the house were actually breathing. “We have the outer environments being pulled into the interior of the house so that that interior space is transformed,” explains Craig Scott, Iwamoto's team partner.

Likewise, filtering in or out the natural world is the central focus of Mix House, submitted by Ben Rubin, Joel Sanders and Karen van Lengen, a New York–based team. This example explores soundscaping and how technology can filter out unwanted noises such as airplanes and traffic, while bringing more pleasing sounds to the forefront. In fact, the team envisions mixing recorded sound with actual sound so that, for example, parents could listen to the voices of children playing outside mixed with Mussorgsky's “Pictures at an Exhibition.”

Some of the projects don't really involve buildings, but are technological structures that can transform people's lives. Presented by Escher GuneWardena Architecture of Los Angeles, Living Kit is a Web-based information system that is geared to provide ideas and services to the economically disenfranchised of the world. At its heart is a Web site giving access to many simple techniques that people, especially those living in rural areas, can use to satisfy basic needs such as sanitation, energy, communication and shelter.

“It took months of research to find these specific solutions,” says Ravi GuneWardena, who notes the simplicity and sustainability of these ingenious methods used around the world. For example, a workable water-filtration system could be as easy as filling up clear plastic bottles with water and setting them in the sun.

Many of these ideas are being practiced in other parts of the world, and, according to team member Frank Escher, the goal of the project is to “share these solutions with all developing countries. A large part of our population has no access to certain technologies, but they still need to satisfy their basic needs. This is a way for technology — like the Internet, which is becoming more accessible in even remote areas — to really make a difference in all people's lives.”

“Open House: Architecture and Technology for Intelligent Living” runs from noon to 9 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays and noon to 6 p.m. Saturdays April 14 through July 1 at Art Center College of Design, South Campus Wind Tunnel, 550 S. Raymond Ave., Pasadena. For more information about this exhibit and related events, call (626) 396-2319, or visit www.artcenter.edu .

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