

# WINGSPAN



Korean Living  
**THE HOUSE OF CHOI**

Once Upon a Farm  
**HIGH-TECH AGRICULTURE**

The Occasional Tourist  
**SYDNEY BY SEA**





**T**he drive from Kimpo Airport to Seoul is a journey back through modern times, and then a leap into history. The Olympic highways speed past serried rows of modern high-rise apartment blocks. The mountains at the city's northern perimeter come into clearer view. The road narrows and slowly passes the granite, steel, and glass towers of downtown offices, hotels and stores.

Pause for a moment, listen to the bustle of the modern world. Let its noise envelop you. Then walk slowly away from it towards the craggy mountains. Here Seoul was born as home for the Kings of Korea.

In the foothills of Pukaksan Mountain, about 15 minutes' walk from the Lotte Hotel, stands Kyongbokgung Palace, built originally in 1394. The palace lies in a gentle valley, a site chosen because cosmic forces, and those of the earth are in harmony with man. The mountain views are imposing, and the landscape helps defense.

Rising up the foothills next to the palace is a sprawling cluster of one-story houses roofed in heavy black-tiles. This is Kahoi Dong. The name means "the district where beauty gathers." And so it is. A maze of narrow roads, steps, and footpaths branch in all directions, climbing hills and along ridges, leading to houses big and small, jostled together. These are *hanok*, or traditional Korean houses. All told, there are about 200 of them left in Kahoi Dong, now a protected area.

Here, in 1987, my wife, Keum Ok, whose family name is Choi, decided we would make our Korean home, and my own interest in Korean architecture was born.

"Even to people who have lived in Seoul all their lives, this district is a surprise. Just being here is a relaxation," she says. Words I can only echo in agreement.

### Bamboo Pins and a Sense of Balance

Despite their traditional look, most of the houses in Kahoi Dong were built in the 1930s, though a few are much older. Their styles are those perfected through the five centuries of the Chosun Dynasty to 1897, plus a few modern embellishments such as electricity. The techniques used to build them are also traditional. Concrete, steel beams, brushed aluminum, nails and screws had all yet to make their full impact on the way a home was built. Dry mortice joints, wooden and bamboo pins, plus a sense of balance give great strength and solidity.

The residences of Yangban, the Confucian scholar-aristocrats of royal Korea are the inspiration for Kahoi Dong. The styles of decoration, size of beams, roof pitch, and numbers of rooms allowed once depended on social rank. By the 1930s, the regulations had disappeared, while the urge to enjoy ancient symbols of rank had not.

From the street the houses are tantalizing and mysterious. Nearly all are single story and completely hidden by high walls. Eaves and gables peep above them. Roses and ivy hang over them. Laughter and music escape

## THE HOUSE OF CHOI

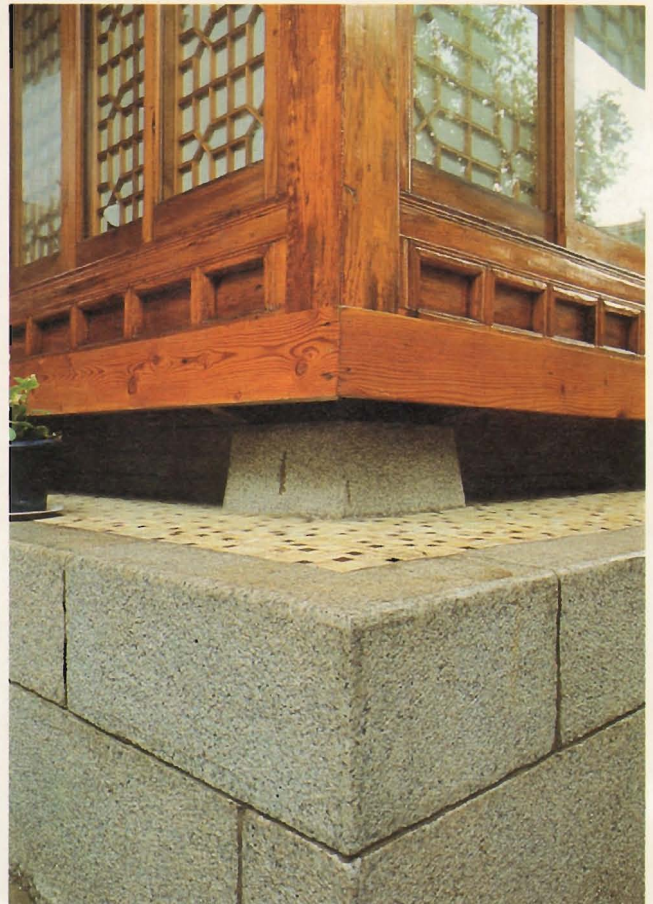
A traditional Korean house has very beautiful lines.

Nothing is perfectly straight, or square, or flat — more 'organic' than 'rational.' In certain parts of South Korea, even within the large cities, entire neighborhoods still exist where the houses reflect a happy blend of old traditions and modern sensibilities.

In this story, the author and his wife welcome you to such a house, their 'House of Choi' in Seoul's Kahoi Dong district.



Story by David Kilburn  
Photographs by Naoki Baba



from them. Children run out of the imposing wooden doorways, but the life within is hidden from view.

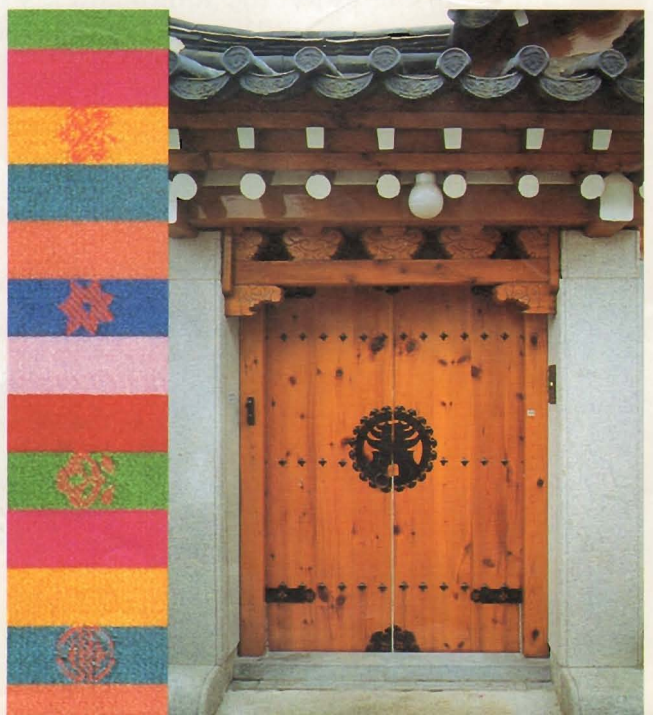
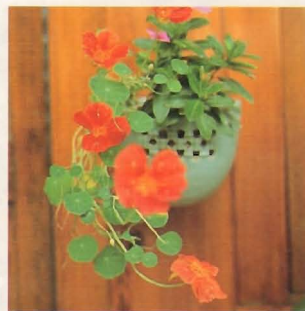
An Englishman's home may be his castle, but in comparison these Korean houses are fortresses. Korea's long history of wars and invasions can certainly justify a protective turn of mind but surely every home need not be planned to resist a long siege? The real enemy is more elemental, more bitter than man, it is winter. Throughout centuries, this foe returns without fail offering only a brief truce in the summer months.

### Beware of the Hot Spots

In the long winters, a dry, icy wind blows down Korea from Siberia. The temperature plummets to minus 10°C, minus 20, and even below minus 30. Monsoons from the Pacific drench the short hot summers as the temperature rises to the mid 30s. However, it is winter that predominates. Not surprisingly, the Korean house has evolved some ingenious strategies to keep warm.

Winter visitors will kneel and place their hands on the floor. This is not prayer, or a sign of respect to the household. The floor, not the hearth, is the source of life preserving warmth. This is the *ondol* (it means "warm stone"), the heart of a Korean home. Origins are unclear, but the idea may have come from Central Asia. In Korea, ondols have been around since the fifth century.

There is little to see. The ondol floor is completely bare, bar a few cushions and simple furniture. At first sight, it looks covered with old yellow linoleum turned up at the edges along the walls.



**THE FIRE DOWN BELOW** heats air flowed through ducts beneath the floor in the *ondol* system, a product of Korean ingenuity. Thick mats of paper cover the floors (far left), taking on pleasant patterns of coloration from the heat as they help to retain warmth. Other aspects of the traditional Korean house include thick-beamed, peaked ceilings and thick exterior walls enclosing spacious private courtyards.



In older houses, the floors are built from stone over a hypocaust. Heat from a kitchen fire or an outside furnace channels through the flues, heating the stone and the room.

In modern houses, concrete may replace stone. Today's *ondol* may be heated by gas, electricity, piping hot stem, or foul smelling coal briquettes. But the color is always yellow.

A practiced eye can soon tell the warmest spot in the room, and also the age and likely source of heat. Traditionally the stone floors are covered with a sealing of fine clay. Thin sheets of paper are pasted on top and then thicker, overlapping sheets of strong handmade mulberry-leaf paper. The paper is varnished with vegetable oil made by pounding soy beans and wild sesame seeds in a cloth bag. As the oil seeps out, it is painted across the floor, where it dries pale yellow in color. Later, when the *ondol* is heated, the color turns deeper. Hot spots betray themselves by turning shades of brown —

the darker, the hotter. If the heat comes from a fire, the *ondol* color is paler further from the source. Under-floor piping shows itself in faint brown patterns on the floor. As the years pass, yellow slowly subsides into a rich chestnut brown.

The warmest spot is for the guest. In crueler times unwelcome visitors or prisoners might be cooked alive on truly hot spots by stoking the furnace outside. Cooking is a good description. Ancient scrolls depict early *ondols* as a large hot stone plate on a wood burning stove. The stone would hold the heat for a long time and have been a comfortably warm spot to sit if the fire was not too fierce. How natural to make the plate bigger for all to warm themselves. There are still many old houses where the fire from the kitchen stove also heats the *ondol*.

Warm in winter, the traditional *ondol* is also pleasantly cool in summer, as air circulates through the flues.

### **The Richer the House, the Bigger the Wood**

Walls and roofs are also designed to keep the heat within. The frame of a *hanok*, or detached house, is a heavy, cube of wooden beams, resting on corner stones of granite. The cube supports tiers of wooden rafters which make the ceiling. The more tiers, the steeper is the slope of the roof and the loftier the status of the household. The rafters hold in place layers of corn stalks, mats of rice straw, and layers of clay and earth. A topping of heavy black tiles completes the insulation and weather proofing. Heat stays inside in winter and is kept outside in summer. Walls too are made of clay and corn stalks, finished with a wash of clay. A layer of handmade paper that also runs over the trellis frames of the windows and doors gives the final interior touch.

To support their heavy load, the pine beams are massive. Across the middle of the house runs the "Daedulpo," or "Big wood" — the main beam that in turn supports the roof. The richer the household, the bigger is the wood.

WITH HEAVY HEARTS, many modern South Koreans have abandoned all hope of living in houses as authentically "Korean" as those in the Kahoi Dong district of Seoul. It is not a particularly "high-class" district, but one in which many of the houses retain the basic form, and decorative detail, of an earlier age. Sliding window screens, fancifully carved balustrades and treasured antique furnishings lend a feeling of grandeur to even the humblest of homes here.



## The Cabinet Maker

**K**orean furniture evokes nature as does the house itself. While the design is often very simple, decoration on furniture is some times so elaborate that it borders on the baroque. In the finer pieces simplicity reigns with decoration that offsets but does not usurp the beauty of wood.

One of Korea's finest traditional woodworkers is Mrs. Kang In Soon, a 72-year old grandmother and self-taught cabinet maker. Single-handedly she has rescued many crafts skills from oblivion. She makes a handful of large pieces each year and many smaller chests and boxes, all eagerly sought after.

"Traditional Korean furniture is proportioned like the human body. The balance between the legs, body and head help to project a warm, safe, intimate feeling," she explains.

"I only use Korean wood. Our climate has very distinct seasons and the extremes of temperature are very pronounced. This means trees grow more slowly here than in S.E. Asia or Africa. Slow growth in turn makes the wood very strong and helps develop a richness and beauty in the patterns of the grain."

"Personally, I feel furniture made by men often has a roughness to it, especially in those parts the eye doesn't see. I don't like this. In my own work, I pay the same attention to every detail. I feel this is truer to the spirit of the wood. The heart can always feel what the eye cannot see."

Flowers, insects, and animals are common in the decorative designs of the metal fittings Mrs. Kang uses on her creations. These are traditions from the Chosun period. Flowers protect from evil, the carp brings success in business, the bat and turtle long life, while butterflies alight with blessings for the home.

Even the wood can be magical. Mrs. Kang's "Butterfly Chest" is made from an Oriental date tree that had been struck by lightning. "Burak," or lightning wood, is especially treasured. It stores heavenly forces that can protect the home from all kinds of evil.

Although the courtyard trees may look accidental, there is ancient lore to guide their choice. My mother-in-law, Mrs. Oh Sea Soon is a repository of this knowledge:

*"Never plant a peach tree near the home. It drives away ghosts and spirits. It will even prevent the spirits of our ancestors returning to bless us."*

*"A juniper tree is good to plant near the well. Its leaves never fall into the water, its wood protects from insects, and the roots keep the earth clean."*

*"Do not plant a large tree in the middle of the courtyard. It blocks the light and warmth of the sun we need for our very existence. Its roots can undermine the foundations of a building. It can only bring trouble."*

### Flanked by the Spirits

While many Kahoi Dong residents would prefer to live in a modern apartment block, many, such as our neighbor Mrs. Chung Seok Man would live nowhere else. Mrs. Chung and her family moved from the countryside to Kahoi Dong over 20 years ago to be near good schools for the children.

"I love the feeling of my house," she says. "My son lives

in a modern apartment building. When I visit him and his family the concrete building makes my heart feel a little heavy. Modern buildings lack the character and individuality of the old. In Kahoi Dong, every house is different. They are all handmade by craftsmen from wood, stone, paper, earth, and straw. These are living houses, very warm, very friendly."

Old traditions co-exist happily with the modern world in Korea. Both oriental herbal medicine and the modern Western variety are practiced and valued. Shamans still commune with a world of spirits to fend off evil or bring blessings for those who visit them. The vitality of folk arts and crafts reveals a world in which mountains, forests, and man share in a communal life just beyond the realm of modern sensibilities.

Our own valley is flanked by the spirits of the Blue Dragon and the White Tiger. Living in a house of wood, earth, paper, and stone it is easy to feel a rapport with natural forces. But there's no need to resort to geomancy or animism.

As Mrs. Oh explains, "I grew up in a hanok and later I lived in an apartment. Now I feel very comfortable to be in a hanok again, to water the plants, feed the fish and enjoy the sound of the birds once more." ●

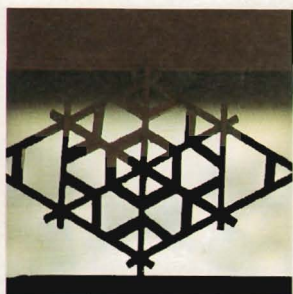
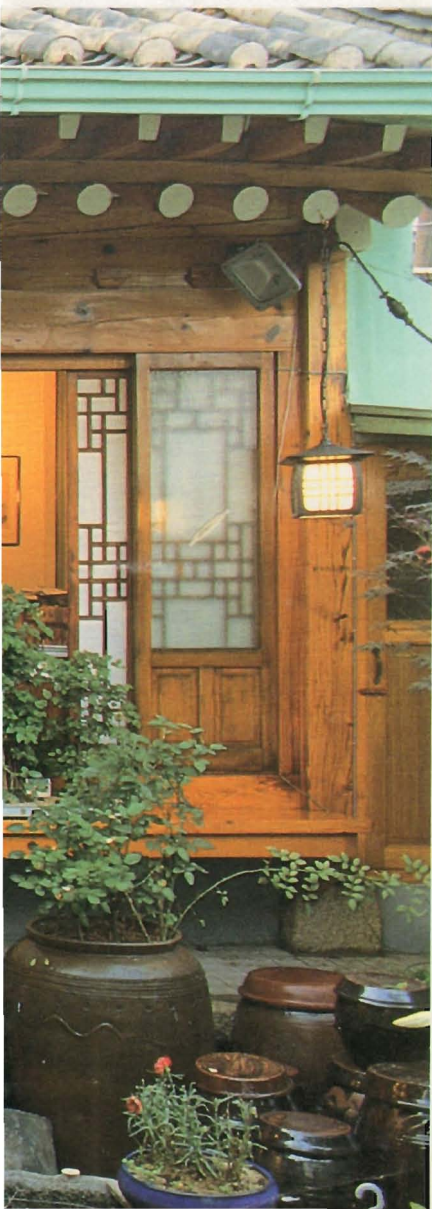




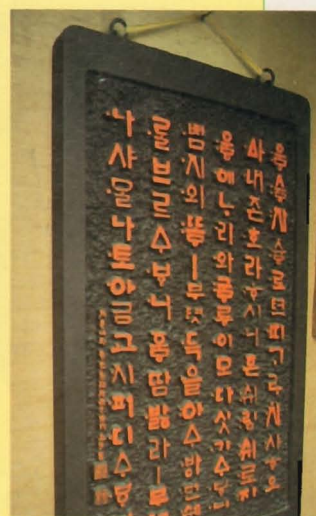
## The Carver of Calligraphy

There are only about 200 craft-builders left in Korea who can build a house using traditional materials and techniques. Mainly they work to restore buildings preserved as “national treasures” dotted throughout the country. While new houses are no longer built Chosun-style, the crafts that have decorated Korean houses for centuries are still in demand.

Mr. Han Wan Shik carves poems, mottoes, and signs in wood in various calligraphic styles. Chinese poems, Buddhist scriptures, flowers, landscapes, and birds are all traditional motifs. Some are carved using Chinese characters, while others use Korea's *hangul* alphabet. These are used decoratively inside and outside the house. Some frighten away evil spirits. Others invoke blessings or remind people of Buddhist or Confucian teachings. Still others simply indicate who lives there. Horizontal signs may be hung from the main wooden beams inside the house, or while vertical ones are often fastened to the door pillars.



**CONFUCIUS DIDN'T SAY** exactly how it was to be done, but did decree that males and females shouldn't “sit close” to one another after the age of seven. In ancient Korea, this resulted in houses divided into two separate parts, linked by courtyards such as the one pictured at the left.



“No-one taught me how to do this,” says Mr. Han. “I simply started about 12 years ago. I was drawn by my love of wood and carving. I particularly enjoy carving poems, but most of all I love doing things that are totally non-commercial. When ideas and images flow, and the wood is right, then carving words and images is a magical experience.”

“I like pear tree wood very much. It is especially good for very detailed carvings. I also like ginkgo and juniper wood. Ginkgo is easy to carve, and stains very beautifully. Juniper has a very rich warm color that is lovely to see on large signs.”

Mr. Han also carves calligraphy into boxes, brush pots, and furniture. Typically, a wall chest in unadorned wood might be carved with a Chinese poem praising the beauty of nature. Sometimes the carvings are filled with black or green ink, and look just like as if they were painted on paper with the calligrapher's brush.