CEO Seoul: Exploring Industry and Culture at SAMOO Architects

Photos/Reflections by Isabel Narea,
“In the beginner’s mind, there are many possibilities. In the expert’s mind, there are few.”
1 A Beginner in Seoul:

In a talk given by Dean Valentini, called the “Beginner’s Mind”, he mentioned the famous quote: “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities...in the expert’s mind there are few”. The quote addresses the importance of practicing a beginner’s mind, despite our every urge to attempt to be experts. Over the summer in Seoul, I was forced to be a beginner in every possible sense. The feeling of not knowing what to do soon evolved into a willingness to ask questions, challenge myself, and most importantly maintain an open mind.

Upon arriving in Seoul, I felt like a true beginner in every possible sense. Things like purchasing groceries, finding a pharmacy, or even taking the subway were new and challenging tasks in a foreign city.

As the other Columbia students and I began to explore our neighborhood of Jamsil, which is a lively and crowded area with many restaurants near the Seoul Olympic Stadium, I started feeling more at ease. The support network of having Columbia students nearby was important in the adjustment process. The Sunday before work started, we each practiced arriving to our work destinations on the subway, learning our commutes in preparation for the first day of work.
Post 2: Cultural Experience

These photographs above were taken at Gyeonbokgung Palace, which is referred to as the Northern Palace. It is the largest of the 5 Grand Palaces of Seoul and was the main royal palace of the Joseon dynasty. I read something beautiful about Gyeonbokgung, where it was described as a “phoenix” which has risen from the ashes multiple times. Most of the palace was destroyed by the Japanese twice, and the beautiful masterpiece that is visible today are mostly accurate reconstructions.

Originally built by King Taejo, the founder of the Joseon dynasty, Gyeonbokgung served as the principal palace until 1592, when it was burnt down during the Japanese invasions. It lay in ruins for nearly 300 years until Heungseon Daewongun, regent and father of King Gojong, started to rebuild it in 1865. King Gojong moved in during 1868, but the expensive rebuilding project virtually bankrupted the government. Altogether the palace consisted of 330 buildings and had up to 3000 staff, including 140 eunuchs, all serving the royal family. During Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945), most of the palace was again destroyed – much of what one can see today are accurate recent reconstructions. Despite the tremendous cost, the Korean government remains determined to preserve their culture.

Upon first approach, the large gate to the palace, the Main Gate (Gwanghwamun) is truly awe-inspiring. Given the large scale of the gates in the middle of a modern city, I was really stunned by the seamless integration of a cultural landmark within a city that is full of modern skyscrapers. In an almost paradoxical way, I felt that I was going back in time when I stepped into the gates and entered the massive palace grounds with serene gardens, ponds, and temples. The photographs I took at the palace are of Koreans dressed in traditional garments (hanbok) which can be rented at a low cost from several stores near the palace. Wearing these traditional garments allows visitors to gain free admission into the palace and also contributes to the palace’s beautiful environment of feeling frozen in time. The young Korean women are also full of pride to wear their hanbok and take photographs with friends around the palace grounds.
Post 3: Architectural Case Studies at SAMOO Architects

It has been an exciting first two weeks working at SAMOO Architects at their Seoul HQ. I have been assigned to Studio 3, a team of around 80 architects which is subdivided into smaller teams for specific projects. More specifically, I have been assigned to the Naver project, one of SAMOO’s core projects where I have around 15 immediate team members. Naver (NHN Corporation) is a tech giant of South Korea. NAVER corporation is Korea’s premier internet company, operating the nation’s top search portal, Korea’s first online children’s portal ‘Jr. Naver’, and the nation’s first online donation portal (Happybean.com). With search as the company’s core business, NAVER is pioneering the digital way of life by continuously rolling out innovative and convenient services. It has grown into Korea’s largest internet company in terms of net profit. They also started the company of the messaging application LINE which includes the famous cartoon characters LINE friends which has grown to be the most important messaging application in Asia. SAMOO designed Naver’s headquarters, the famous ‘Green Factory’ building in 2009 and has now been commissioned to design a second tower next to their initial headquarters to house their rapidly expanding company.

My first 4 weeks at SAMOO consisted of mostly architectural research into “architecture case studies”. This was my first time working on architecture case studies, but I learned that it is a crucial part of any architecture project. It involves finding several built and completed projects by other architecture firms which proved successful and embody certain important elements. The Naver project is still in the schematic design phase, meaning programmatic elements and the basic design have not been finalized. Which means we have been doing a lot of brainstorming and research into tech headquarters and their designs. I was first assigned to do research on “façade case studies”. I was given permission to use the large architecture and design library that is part of SAMOO’s office and check out and scan books. This was truly an exciting part of my task as I have always enjoyed research and looking through architecture books. I was asked to make a concise and organized powerpoint presentation on the façade strategy. Many of the scientific and technical terms of building façade proved to be challenging to me at first. At first I was a bit intimidated by the project, yet after discussing with my supervisors they guided me with more specific categories which allowed me to narrow down my research into a few core built projects which could serve as case studies.
Post 4: From Research to Design

After completing my research on façade strategy, I was given my next task of researching case studies of technology headquarters and their respective floor plans which illustrate the way the design of their offices reflects the company’s values and functions. I spent about two weeks on this aspect of my research, and did in-depth research on the offices of companies such as Google, Facebook, Pinterest, Soundcloud, AirbNn, etc. The way in which these companies approach their office design is truly inspiring, given that each company ensures that their office promotes collaboration and creativity through exciting, colorful and adaptable work spaces. I truly enjoyed this aspect of my research because I was able to learn about how architecture can impact the way in which people work and behave in a very concrete way.

After working on research for the initial four weeks, and receiving frequent feedback from my supervisors on areas to zoom in on, I was assigned a new project: designing. A tradition of my team is to allow the newest person to come up with their own design for the project after the research phase, and then present the design to the team in a formal presentation. I am now busy sketching, modelling, and preparing my own design to be presented before the end of the internship. Designing a tower seemed very daunting at first, so I am constantly meeting with my supervisors to ask questions when I am stuck and need direction. I am truly pleased with the transition from research to design as I believe the several weeks of research really helped in allowing me to think more clearly about the design phase.
5: Intern Fieldtrip to Dongdaemun Design Plaza Designed by SAMOO Architects and Zaha Hadid
5: SAMOO Field Trips: 
I have been reflecting on my time at a large corporate firm and discovered that I really appreciate the resources and state of the art technology that is available to SAMOO employees. SAMOO's headquarters in Seoul has a design library and almost an entire office tower devoted to employees with facilities such as laser cutters, design studios, classrooms, and multiple presentation auditoriums for seminars. I feel very privileged to work at such an inspiring office. In addition to the incredible design resources available, SAMOO hosts special educational programs for its workers and interns in the form of field trips to important built projects. During my time at SAMOO, I was fortunate to participate in three of these fieldtrips. The first fieldtrip was to the Dongdaemun Design Plaza, designed by Zaha Hadid and SAMOO Architects. We were given a private lecture on Korean Traditional painting by a curator who was organizing the exhibition held at the Design Plaza. Along with 40 other interns, we were given an inside look at the importance of the cultural center to the city of Seoul. Our second fieldtrip was to the Daelim Museum to visit the exhibition on architecture firm Heatherwick Studio. This fieldtrip was fascinating as I was able to meet and bond with my teammates and learn more about their architectural interests and past work experiences.
Post 6:
One of the thing I have enjoyed very much this summer in terms of the internship is my team and the strong team environment I can feel at the office. Although everyone works at their own computer, in the center of everyone’s desk is a large work table where people are always meeting to discuss, look at drawings, and sketch out ideas together. We enjoy lunch together everyday, and I have become good friends with one of the newest employees on the team who works beside me. Another exciting aspect is that SAMOO has fieldtrips and seminars which you can sign up for. We’ve also had seminars on carpet design, interior design, and traditional Korean painting. This week, we had a SAMOO soccer tournament where Studio 1 and Studio 3 played matches against each other at a soccer field in Gangnam. It has really been a fun and exciting way to experience the office environment.

In terms of my goals for individual development, I have really felt that my communication skills and software skills are improving with my latest design assignment. I have been working with a new program, SketchUP and am definitely feeling like I’ve improved with Photoshop and Illustrator. These are important tools that are crucial for communicating design ideas, and I am happy to be working on them in this assignment. Furthermore, one of my goals was to ask a lot of questions about my peers’ architecture career choices. I have been pleased to learn that my coworkers love talking about their work experiences in architecture, frequently comparing their time working at small firms (ateliers) and large corporate firms such as SAMOO.
Visiting Naver’s Green Factory
After working on research for the initial four weeks and receiving frequent feedback from my supervisors, I was assigned a new project: creating my own schematic design for the building. After researching on every aspect for the project, my supervisors wanted to give me the challenge of designing my own version of the building. Proposing my own ideas to the team through a formal presentation was an empowering and rewarding way to end my internship. I not only improved my architectural representation skills through the use of software but also became more confident in my presentation skills as I presented my design to a group of 20 experienced architects at SAMOO. I was pleased to learn about the transition from research to design as I believe the several weeks of research really helped in allowing me to think more clearly about the design phase.

Another exciting aspect of my internship was having the chance to sit in on meetings with our clients, Naver. I was able to visit Naver’s current headquarters, the Green Factory for two conferences with clients, contractors, sustainability consultants, and Naver designers. I observed as my coworkers presented their design progress at weekly meetings and was able to better understand the formal communication that must take place between client and architect. This aspect of attending meetings and listening in on the crucial communication phase really demonstrated a new aspect of the industry that I am curious to explore: consulting. Due to the complexity of the building site, and the client’s requests, consultants on sustainability and licensing were brought in. After spending my initial weeks on research, I realized that I really enjoyed the research phase and am interested in careers that approach design projects from this analytical stance.
It is a custom in Korea to handwrite poems or important sayings on fans as a gift or token of friendship. The fan below was a gift from a coworker which has the Japanese poem “Be Not Defeated by the Rain” handwritten by my friend. It is a present I will cherish forever as a memory of the great friendships I made in Seoul.
Thanks to the CEO program, I was able to learn about the multiple phases of the design process, the business and communication aspect of architecture, and the rising technology sector in Korea. By gaining exposure to these various different aspects of the architecture profession, I was able to better understand my own goals and interests within the field of architecture. Having work experience abroad in Seoul and adapting to a new culture and workplace will serve as an important preparation in any work setting. It also furthered my desire to explore the research and consulting aspect of the architecture industry. I am grateful for this wonderful experience which allowed me to experience the beauty of Seoul at one of its leading architecture firms.