Isak Chung

It's a story when I was offered an renovation work for a multi-family house in Yeonnam-dong, Seoul. The client asked to me while explaining about his purchased site and house. "Anyhow, you do take this kind of job too?"

The offered building to design was a red brick multi-family house built by house sellers in 1991. Such multi-family houses were constructed upon a very similar style in every residential area all around Seoul during the 1990s. But on stepping into the 2000s, part of this multi-family residential area was turned into so-called 'hip place'. House owners rapidly transformed their red brick houses or constructed new buildings corresponding to the changing demands. House sellers and interior workers helped this transformation at the request of the building owners, following the taste of market. As they didn't receive a proper architectural education, they drilled, demolished and added a new skin upon their own safety standards and construction methods learned from experience. The result was a reckless development. Witnessing the situation, architects criticized about it, but didn't see that particular area as their work field.

I accepted the job. I wanted to treat it as a heritage of our housing culture of a specific era. As if I were working on a restoration project, I tried to understand everything about the building including the original intention of design as well as its changes in use and alterations in form. And taking that understanding as grounds, I wanted to examine its inherent capacity on structural modification and the feasibility of new program. I made every part of the building into a record. Not only the room sizes, ceiling heights but also the detail of window frames or moldings under the eaves, I studied every inch of the building.

Structurally weak points or excessively modified parts were turned back into their original status or amended into more stable forms. Existing claddings such as the floor of staircase and exterior red bricks were cleansed to have them recover their original colors. The illegally extended balcony was legalized by writing it into the official floor area, and the space itself was reformed as a shop window. Existing equipment were reused as much as possible to minimize damage to the building. Then, to fill a lacked floor area ratio, I added a new mass which satisfies construction regulations.

At the right front of the Korean pavilion, as a reference for the medium-sized housing type of Korea, this Yeannam-dong building model will be exhibited in a original form before the renovation. Our team wants it to be used as a sort of index introducing the target of this exhibition. In Korea, there are young architects who have just begun to reach out to the ordinary living environment which was originally in the hands of house sellers, construction companies and the government. I hope this banal building in Yeannam-dong can report about such a moment of Korean architecture toward a new front of that changing territory.