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How significant can the ripple effect be when city infrastructure is reconsidered with networked thinking? MVRDV and Ben Kuipers demonstrate by transforming an abandoned Seoul highway into a potent urban regenerator.

A Garden Catalyst

Seoullo 7017 Skygarden, by MVRDV, Ben Kuipers, DMP and KECC
Words Neo Disheng Photography © Ossip van Duivenbode (courtesy of MVRDV)

Opposite: Snaking through the heart of Seoul some 16 metres above ground level, Seoullo 7017 Skygarden is a pedestrianised viaduct that was constructed for vehicles back in 1970.



Seoul has a history of breathing new life into abandoned sites in the city, marked famously by the successful restoration of Cheonggyecheon into an urban park in 2005. Hence, when the Seoul Station overpass was slated for demolition in 2006, it seemed only natural that the city and its people would decide to regenerate the abandoned infrastructure by transforming it into a pedestrianised urban connector and public space.

An international design competition was subsequently held in 2015, and the winning proposal came from Dutch architects MVRDV in collaboration with Dutch landscape architect Ben Kuipers. They worked with Korean firms DMP (architecture) and KECC (landscape).

There are several key agendas at the heart of the design intervention, namely green, urban and social considerations. For example, the intent is that the Skygarden will serve as a catalyst for the reintroduction of nature back into the urban centre. Kuipers points out that one of the ideas at the heart of the project was to offer a new perspective on plants in an urban context. "Instead of using plants and trees only as decoration... each species is exhibited like a piece of art. This fosters awareness of the beauty of different plants that can grow here, while also increasing biodiversity in the city."

The scheme also facilitates opportunities for social interactions in an otherwise mono-programmatic urban setting. As MVRDV describes, "There are 16 small pavilions accommodating programmes such as cafes, shops, exhibition spaces, a children's theatre, et cetera. These features create ideal conditions for the Skygarden to provide an active, vibrant public space 24 hours a day, all year long."

Vitality, there is an organic element in the Skygarden's design that differentiates it from typical pedestrian bridges. Over time, the bridge will extend its 'roots' with additional links between the Skygarden and its neighbours. Besides increasing the number of pedestrian-friendly connections, this will activate green and public spaces further afield. MVRDV explains: "The green strategy includes increasing the number of pedestrian streets and green squares, giving more space for pocket gardens, green alleys, roofs, parking and terrace projects to grow and expand, as part of this satellite expansion around the bridge."

Growing with the Skygarden is its impressive display of 24,000 plants. These are organised according to the Korean alphabet, and grow from circular pots of different sizes. Accommodating such an extensive diversity of flora posed major challenges during the project. The Dutch team worked closely with its Korean partners, undergoing an exhaustive exercise in which they identified and procured the species of flora that can thrive in Seoul's climatic condition as well as in the extreme urban conditions on the bridge.

The fact that the team was working with an existing structure also influenced the design. As Kuipers describes, "The load-bearing capability of the existing bridge varied from point to point, and this factor largely informed the quantity, size and location of the heavy tree pots."

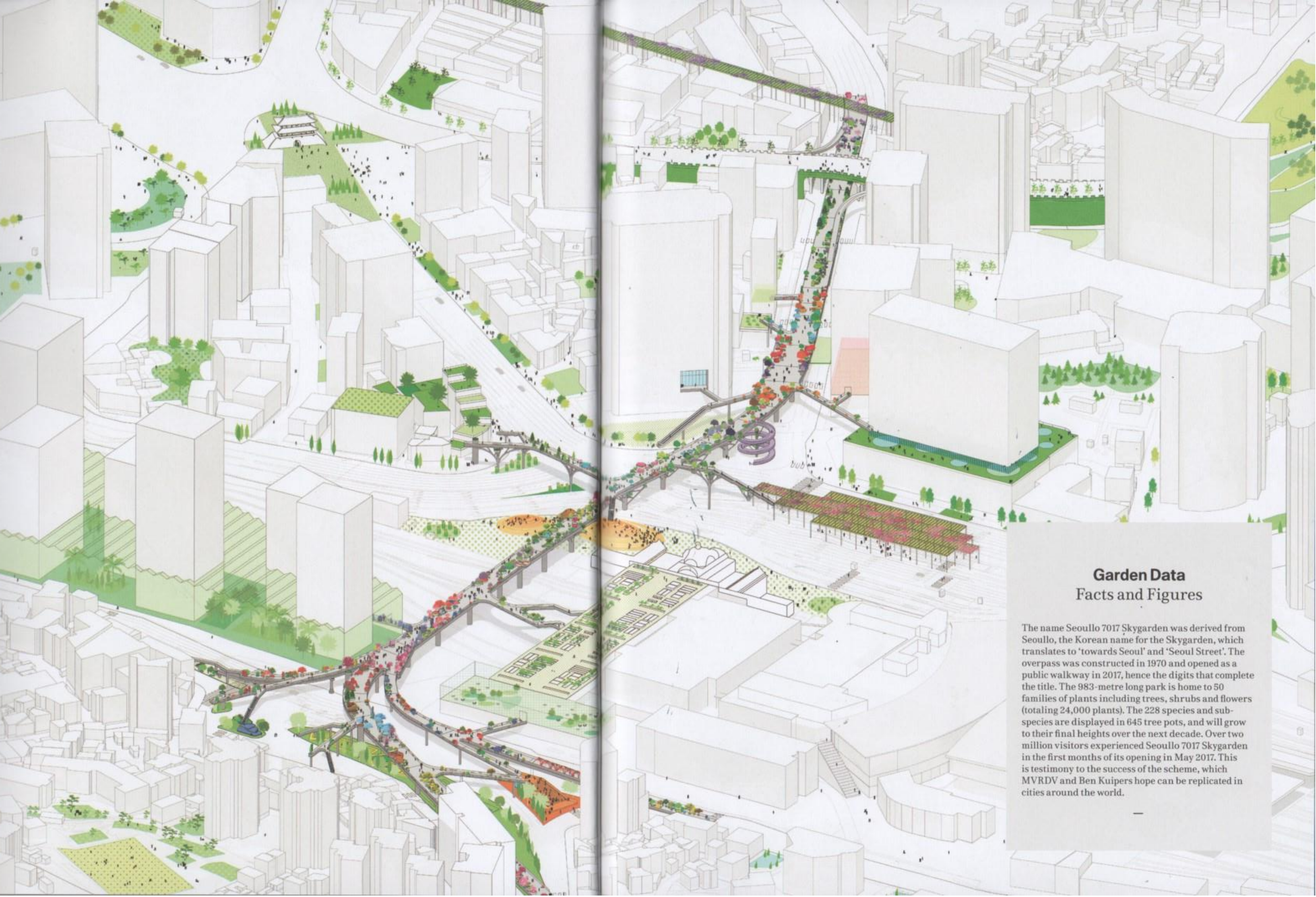
Seoul's Skygarden provides an interesting case study for reclaiming public space and fostering urban transformation as it demonstrates one possible solution to the problem of disappearing natural landscapes in growing cities. The intervention also sets off a chain reaction. According to Kuipers, "As the surrounding public space improves and becomes more pedestrianised, the area will attract tourists. The immense rise in the value of real estate around the project, especially for those buildings that can hook up to the bridge, speaks for itself... The Skygarden demonstrates what bringing nature into the city instead of cars can do to make cities more liveable."

The project highlights the importance of an integrated design approach from conception to completion. As Kuipers explains, "This may be the Dutch approach, for in the Netherlands we have a long tradition of designing our landscape and cityscape in a comprehensive plan... Good [landscape] design is making integrated proposals instead of furnishing and decorating the space in between the different spatial components. It's about composing [urban] space itself."

mrvd.nl
benkuipers.nl
dmppartners.com
kecc.co.kr



Opposite, top: In addition to the circular plant pots of varying sizes, a series of customisable activators such as tea cafes, flower shops, street markets, libraries and greenhouses form a catalogue of elements that enliven the Skygarden. Opposite, bottom: A section of glass flooring reveals the original structure and offers a unique glimpse of the city life below. Pages 84-85: The plants – all Korean species – were arranged according to the Korean alphabet to provide a layer of information with which to navigate the Skygardens.



Garden Data Facts and Figures

The name Seoullo 7017 Skygarden was derived from Seoullo, the Korean name for the Skygarden, which translates to 'towards Seoul' and 'Seoul Street'. The overpass was constructed in 1970 and opened as a public walkway in 2017, hence the digits that complete the title. The 983-metre long park is home to 50 families of plants including trees, shrubs and flowers (totaling 24,000 plants). The 228 species and sub-species are displayed in 645 tree pots, and will grow to their final heights over the next decade. Over two million visitors experienced Seoullo 7017 Skygarden in the first months of its opening in May 2017. This is testimony to the success of the scheme, which MVRDV and Ben Kuipers hope can be replicated in cities around the world.



Opposite, top: A cafe pod, topped by a planter, creates a vibrant node and brings amenity to the users of the neighbouring buildings. Opposite, bottom: New bridges and stairs connect the viaduct with hotels, shops and gardens. Above: A library pod provides a gentle respite from the external environment.

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Above: It is envisioned that in the future, the overpass will evolve with new plants and new activators so as to become an 'urban nursery', rearing trees for the surrounding districts. Opposite: Coloured lighting preserves the character of the Skygarden as an animated destination at night – a public artery with a significant place in the city's identity.

