

PressRelease



The Chicago Athenaeum  
Museum of Architecture and Design

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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## **UTOPIAN ARCHITECT, PHILOSOPHER, THEORIST AND SOCIAL ADVOCATE SANG DAE LEE NAMED AS THIS YEAR'S LAUREATE OF THE AMERICAN PRIZE FOR ARCHITECTURE**

*Internationally Recognized as Architecture's Highest Tribute in the United States, the Prize is Officially Presented to Sang Dae Lee of UnitedLAB Associates at a Gala Reception and Dinner during the 30th American Architecture Awards at The Arts Club of Chicago this December 5.*

**CHICAGO, ILLINOIS (December 1, 2024)** — Sang Dae Lee, the studio head of the New York and Seoul-based architecture office UnitedLAB Associates, has been selected for his extraordinary architecture as this year's Laureate of The American Prize for Architecture by both The Chicago Athenaeum: Museum of Architecture and Design and The European Centre for Architecture Art Design and Urban Studies.

The Prize, formerly named after the renowned Chicago architect and founder of modern architecture, Louis H. Sullivan, is internationally recognized as America's highest tribute to any one outstanding design practitioner or design office that has emblazoned a unique, singular path for design excellence in today's contemporary architecture.

Founded in 2006, UnitedLAB is a multi-disciplinary design studio providing a comprehensive suite of architecture, landscape, and urban design services.

"This is a formidable, one-of-a-kind design visionary who is pushing the envelope in today's architecture practice," states Christian Narkiewicz-Laine, architecture critic and President/CEO of The Chicago Athenaeum.

"Lee is an innovative architect, talented draftsman, visionary, theorist, and academic."

"Lee's multi-disciplined approach reflects the belief that diverse perspectives enable a broader view that guides the design process and enriches creative insight, emphasizing the integration of architecture with humanism and nature."

—MORE—

## SANG DAE LEE WINS THE PRESTIGIOUS 2024 AMERICAN PRIZE FOR ARCHITECTURE

Add One

“Through comprehensive social research and analysis, he explores the relationship between architecture, human behavior, social phenomena, context, and urbanism.”

“He focuses on ‘Play Architecture’ as a form of social intervention, aiming to provide comfort, solace, equity, and justice for the public, thereby uniquely contributing to a better understanding of world through the lens of architecture.”

“Lee pushes experimentation between theory and practice through these disciplines.”

“He is a thinker, and poet as much as an architect, designs as a reflection on the transience and permanence of human life.”

“Lee is interested in an architecture that combines with human beings to fit strongly in nature and society.”

For example, in his most recent project, *Lofted Ambitions: Revitalizing Salt Lake City's Founding Utopian Ideals* (2022), a re-envision of circulation spaces and passages between downtown Salt Lake City's blocks 69 and 70, Lee channeled many of his forward-thinking concepts.

His goal in this scheme was to activate spaces between arts, entertainment, and business programming, amplifying cultural amenities and promoting design-led growth, thereby resurrecting the city's utopian ideals to revive urban topography by utilizing interstitial spaces.

Endemic flora, fauna, and landscapes blend with built spaces, providing recreational areas. Functional needs like parking and city amenities are placed beneath the natural landscape. A public plinth connects to existing structures, offering sustainable farming, entertainment, and gathering spaces.

“The project,” continues Narkiewicz-Laine, “demonstrates Lee’s affinity for disrupting architectural language through profoundly emotional means. The floating utopia showcases designated ‘neighborhoods’ with orchards, gardens, plazas, and lakes, creating a captivating experience in the city's skyline.”

“The drawings illustrate a foreboding sensation. Overcoming obstacles of the existing urban layout with its large streets and blocks, Lee’s proposal serves as a pilot study to revitalize downtown Salt Lake City, block by block, enhancing the human experience while honoring nature.”

“Ultimately, Lee’s proposal aims to establish a multi-use complex in downtown Salt Lake City, revitalizing its founding utopian ideals. By utilizing interstitial spaces, the project seeks to revive a lost urban topography and foster positive human-scale development guided by natural phenomena,” continues Narkiewicz-Laine.

## SANG DAE LEE WINS THE PRESTIGIOUS 2024 AMERICAN PRIZE FOR ARCHITECTURE

Add Two

Established in 1994, The American Prize for Architecture is given to an outstanding office and/or practitioner in the United States that have emblazoned a new direction in the history of American Architecture with talent, vision, and commitment and has demonstrated consistent contributions to humanity through the built environment and through the art of architecture.

The Prize, organized jointly by two public institutions, The Chicago Athenaeum and The European Centre for Architecture Art Design and Urban Studies, honors American architects, as well as other global architects practicing on a multiple of continents, whose body of architectural work, over time, exemplifies superior design and humanist ideals.

The American Prize for Architecture pays tribute to the spirit of the founder of modernism, Louis Sullivan, and the subsequent generations of Chicago practitioners as Frank Lloyd Wright, Daniel H. Burnham, and Holabird & Root. It also broadcasts globally the significant contributions of America's rich and inspiring architecture practice and its living legacy to the world at large.

Previous Laureates include: Sir Norman Foster, Michael Graves, the General Services Administration, Richard Meier, Adrian Smith + Gordon Gill Architecture, Form4Architecture, Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates PC., Bernardo Fort-Brescia and Laurinda Spear of the Miami-based firm of Arquitectonica, Eric Owen Moss, Victor F. "Trey" Trahan of Trahan Architects APAC., and SHoP Architects.

In 2023, the Prize was awarded to Chad Oppenheim.

Sang Dae Lee was educated at Kookmin University in Seoul, Korea earning a Bachelor of Engineering degree and graduating Summa Cum Laude. He then earned a a Master of Architecture degree from the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc).

During his early career, he accumulated 17 years of experience at renowned firms in Los Angeles, Boston, and New York, including those led by notable architects such as Charles Moore, Arthur Gensler, Moshe Safdie, and I.M. Pei. During this time, he contributed to diverse, award-winning projects across various typologies and scales, with expertise spanning architecture, urban design, and landscape architecture.

Currently, he teaches design studio at Kennesaw State University's Department of Architecture as an adjunct assistant professor and previously served as a Visiting Assistant Professor at Auburn University's School of Architecture, Planning, and Landscape Architecture.

He has won numerous global awards, including The International Architecture Awards and The American

## SANG DAE LEE WINS THE PRESTIGIOUS 2024 AMERICAN PRIZE FOR ARCHITECTURE Add Three

Architecture Awards from The Chicago Athenaeum: Museum of Architecture and Design and The European Centre for Architecture Art Design and Urban Studies.

According to Lee, “When architecture meets the dimension of time, it becomes sublime.”

“When a person stands up, the boundary of one’s space is defined. Once the existence of our space is established, so is that of our relationship with others and the dimension of time. When architecture doesn’t possess sublime layers of time, it doesn’t have an objective for its inhabitants, and its concept of dwelling is deformed.”

This idea is demonstrated in an early masterplan for Magok Waterfront (2008) in Seoul, Korea where Lee combines the natural and topographical richness of the city into an architectural park that will be a comfortable living space, a meeting and focus point for the citizens of Seoul.

Hence, without altering the capacity of the green areas, the whole plot is filled with water to create ponds and by forming islands the green has been drawn to the third dimension.

The green promenades rise like “the Hanging Gardens of Babylon” on each island. The islands and the artificial pond offer visual feasts to the city of Seoul, to its nature and topography. The addition of the moving and natural promenades strengthen those existing values.

Lee’s philosophical idea is also convincingly developed in the Hadohilljo Townhouse Project (2019), Hado-ri, Jeju Island, Korea by UnitedLABB and Gajung Architects—a village composed of a community center, 48 single residences, parks, and amenities and orchestrated according to their distance from the sea.

Landscaping elements accentuate the hard architectural boundaries by nurturing interaction. By layering and sequencing zones, pocket parks connect shared units, and the main corridor connects the individual homes.

Lee’s idea of clustering simply shaped individual homes into a village is based on Korean Minimalism.

Respectfully positioned in the landscape, the project’s simple geometries and lightness define the domicile. An array of apertures introduce daylight into the structure while framing select views. The vertically stacked structure efficiently minimizes the occupied footprint while allowing more units to enjoy the ocean vista.

In The Round Retreat Spa House (2017) in Kurzeme, Latvia, Lee’s project takes advantage of this natural resource by providing 600 m<sup>2</sup> for a single-family residence, as well as a comfortable therapy area for the spa and sauna.

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### Add Four

The building is anchored to the site by its relationship to natural elements with four trees and a pond presenting a natural matrix from which the design arises.

The formal strategy begins by encircling one existing tree totally and allowing the other trees to erode the perimeter, forming concave spaces in the donut-shaped form.

In this way, trees and architecture form a figure-ground relationship. To reinforce the effect of a pure geometry, the “donut” is populated by circular spaces that are excavated from the whole, while creating free-flowing circulation spaces around the programed areas.

Cloud Forests, Pavilion for Children’s Play (2017), designed for a site in Hwaseong, South Korea, is a 6-month, \$4,000 project to awaken the children's senses and create new play spaces for them to play together.

The idea was to provide an installation work that children can play with their body in the outdoor exhibition spaces provided by the client Space of Design and Architecture.

The project is composed of three materials: pink flexible height bars, white balloons, and aluminum wires.

First, the pink flexible bars are planted into the ground varying in levels of density. The super-dense areas allow only small children to fit through and play in.

Whereas, the less dense areas are wide enough for parents to walk through and supervise their children.

Next, the specially designed white balloons are placed on top of the pink flexible bars.

These balloons are not directly connected to the bars, but each one moves independently.

Between the balloon and the bar, there is a layer of wire so that the balloons do not fall onto the floor, but the movement of children and the touching of the bar will be transmitted to the balloon, causing it to move.

The idea was to create a structure that embraces both space and generation. Parents can walk around while children can run. Thanks to the pole’s varying density, the installation provides children with a circulation path for a run, walk, or stand. There are spaces for play as well as social gathering even in a small place.

One of Lee’s most recent projects is 416 Memorial Park Memorial Garden and Walkway (2022) in Ansan, South Korea, designed with the Spanish architect Valentin Trillo Martinez of Vtrilloarquitectos S.L., which was submitted for an international competition to create a cultural space commemorating the victims of the Sewol ferry disaster

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### Add Five

and which claimed over three hundred lives in 2014.

Designed as a complex of exhibition and educational facilities along with a columbarium, the park serves as a touching reminder of the tragedy and a space for collective remembrance.

The design aims to encapsulate the moment of the Sewol ferry sinking, presenting several challenges:

Lee states that his scheme is “a place of sublimation rather than a simple memorial space.”

Here, he sought to encapsulate the profound sorrow and loss experienced by those affected by the disaster while offering a space for healing and reflection.

The roof garden, featuring 250 birch trees planted to commemorate the victims, symbolizes “the conception of new life and is a sustainable design element.”

The project received a 2023 American Architecture Award and attracted attention from various architectural publications.

“Although Lee’s highly theoretical and at times lyrical investigations into the nature of architecture have been realized mostly on paper,” states Narkiewicz-Laine, “like the great American architect John Heyduk before him, this architect’s relatively handful of built works, and many of his unbuilt plans and drawings, will go on to inspire other projects and other architects around the world.”

“In addition, his drawings, writings, and teachings will go on to shape the meeting of modernist influences in tomorrow’s contemporary architecture and help bring emotional, psychological, and sociological approaches to the forefront of design.”

“That’s not to say Lee is a practical architect as well as a theoretical one.”

“Many of his drawings are detailed, buildable architectural plans, such as the Korean 416 Memorial in Ansan, where he uses walls to divide spaces in hopes of investing it with emotions like the division that make waves,” Narkiewicz-Laine concludes.

“The work of architectural practitioners such as Lee maybe too radical to implement, yet too relevant to ignore.”

The official ceremony for The American Prize for Architecture takes place at a Gala Reception/Dinner also honors the recipients of the 2024 American Architecture Awards on Thursday, December 5 at The Arts Club of Chicago

## SANG DAE LEE WINS THE PRESTIGIOUS 2024 AMERICAN PRIZE FOR ARCHITECTURE

Add Six

(201 East Ontario Street, Chicago, Illinois). Tickets are available by calling The Chicago Athenaeum at +815/777-4444 or by email at [jennifer@chicagoathenaeum.org](mailto:jennifer@chicagoathenaeum.org).

Sang Dae Lee's recent work and over 220 winning projects from the 2024 American Architecture Awards are published in *Global Design + Urbanism XXIV* ("New American Architecture 2024") edited by Christian Narkiewicz-Laine for Metropolitan Arts Press Ltd.

For more information, contact Jennifer Nyholm, Director of Communications, The Chicago Athenaeum at +815/777-4444 or by email at [jennifer@chicagoathenaeum.org](mailto:jennifer@chicagoathenaeum.org).



Lofted Ambitions- Revitalizing Salt Lake City's Founding Utopian Ideals by UnitedLAB Associates, 2022-ongoing.

**NOTE TO REPORTERS AND EDITORS:** Photographs of Sang Dae Lee's buildings are available for download. For more details on the award and previous winners, visit The Chicago Athenaeum's website at [www.chi-athenaeum.org](http://www.chi-athenaeum.org).

**About The Chicago Athenaeum** ([www.chi-athenaeum.org](http://www.chi-athenaeum.org)) is a global nonprofit education and research institute supported by its members. Its mission is to provide public education about the significance of architecture and design and how those disciplines can have a positive effect on the human environment.

**About The European Centre for Architecture Art Design and Urban Studies** ([www.europeanarch.eu](http://www.europeanarch.eu)) is dedicated to public education concerning all aspects of the built environment—from entire cities to individual buildings—including the philosophical issues of arts and culture that ultimately give the final shape to design. A high emphasis exists on contemporary values and aesthetics, conservation and sustainability, and the theoretical exploration and advancement of art and design as the highest expression of culture and urbanism.

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