

Will strawberry field of dreams come true?

New 'Dalki Theme Park' seeks success through art, commercialism

By Its Moon

When you first enter the spaceship-like site of the newly opened Dalki Theme Park in the Heyri Art Valley in Paju, Gyeonggi Province, it's difficult to discern whether it's a playground, a store, or indeed a UFO that's just landed. As soon as you head up to the building's grassy rooftop and glimpse the surroundings, it all becomes clear: a mecca of culture and commercialism wedged between a sprawling cemetery and the demilitarized zone, the most heavily fortified border in the world.

Ssamzie's newly minted theme park and art warehouse suggest that with just the right dose of art and profits, an area better known for its war monuments can be transformed into a harmonious, culturally rich community.

It's a bit of an overstatement to suggest that Heyri Art Valley, located in Unification Park, aims to be a panacea for Korea's war-scarred past and economic slump. But judging from the Dalki Theme Park and Art Warehouse completed last week, Ssamzie, a clothing and accessories company and art sponsor, certainly seems intent on putting a colorful and commercial stamp on the region's future.

The Dalki Theme Park or "I Like Dalki" space is actually a simple, oddly shaped retail store-entertainment space designed by architects Cho Min-uk, James Slade and Choi Moon-gyu. The building is dedicated to Ssamzie's popular Dalki (Strawberry) character, a Korean Strawberry Shortcake offspring with a coterie of fruity friends such as Watermelon, Lemon and Banana. A colossal version of Watermelon serves as a column on the building's first floor.

Covered with grass, the alternately angular and bulbous building doesn't have any clearly demarcated floors. Ramps lead down from the second floor where the Dalki shop and "Ddong-chi Museum" are located to the first floor, which holds the grass-carpeted Dalki's Room and a doll shop selling eerie Blythe Dolls.

The building was selected to participate in the prestigious Venice International Architecture Biennale, which opens this



Dalki's Room, inside the Dalki Theme Park building



Gwon O-sang's "220 Pages of Testimony" at the new Ssamzie Space Art Warehouse in Heyri Art Valley, Paju

Photos are courtesy Charles Kim

September.

Although it is aimed at children, the basic idea of "I Like Dalki" seems to be creating an informal setting where adults can be immersed in the pleasures of a child-like fantasy world, as evidenced by the adults drawing with crayons at the building's opening event.

Yet it's a physically confusing space where the central message is: "The only way you can enjoy your childhood is by buying our products." There's little that kids or adults can do other than buy a couple of items stamped with Dalki's face. One popular brand character doesn't seem to be enough to hold

up the entire building's raison d'être.

On the other hand, the neighboring Ssamzie Art Warehouse, also designed by the same team of architects, is a much more successful building with a clearer sense of purpose. The narrow building is a space for storing and exhibiting Ssamzie Space's art holdings, a

function that fits beautifully with the art space's ad-hoc, informal character. Its current inaugural exhibit, "Packed/Unpacked," pushes the concept of store-and-display in a fun, stylish way.

A narrow, three-story building with a partially exposed ground floor, the warehouse has large show windows from which the works can be glimpsed. Choi Jeong-hwa's enormous, kitschy flower, "Touch Me" (1998), fills the glass lobby with a brazenous presence.

Ssamzie Space seems to be a better character for the company to market than Dalki. Since it opened five years ago, the space has allowed artists to explore the more informal possibilities in art (instead of the usually monumental, heavy-handed works produced by Korean artists).

The compact warehouse makes a natural habitat for Ssamzie's permanent collection. The works are displayed in a hodgepodge manner, preferable to the boring white cubes of museums and galleries.

Throughout the plywood-walled space, works remain half-packed in bubble wrap, placed in storage crates and stacked on shelves.

Gwon O-sang's "220 Pages of Testimony" (1999-2001), a sculpture assembled from snapshots, is nestled comfortably on a shelf next to stacked cardboard boxes. The bowing figures from Chang Young-hae's "So Sorry to Bother You" (1998) beseech viewers to drop a couple of coins in their baskets before mounting the narrow stairs.

It's clear that Ssamzie has invested in a venturesome project that combines its cultural and commercial wings. The theme park and art warehouse and the other developments currently under way in Heyri Art Valley may help create a new name for the border town, drawing visitors with cultural attractions instead of war tourism.

Although the Unification Observation Platform will probably draw more crowds than Dalki and her friends for now, Ssamzie, in any case, has built it. Now the company must wait for visitors to come.

"I Like Dalki" and Ssamzie Space Art Warehouse are located near Daehwa Station, Subway Line No. 3, Exits 1 and 3. Take the Heyri shuttle bus. For more information, visit www.ilikedalki.com or call (031) 957-0636.

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