

## Curatorial Foreword

### Why the FAR (Floor Area Ratio) Game?

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Of the few dozen articles on architecture and urbanism I have contributed to the Korea Joongang Daily, it was the one entitled “The FAR Game” that received the biggest response from readers. While FAR (Floor Area Ratio) appears to be technical jargon for professionals, it seems that almost every Korean either knows what it is, or has heard about it. If you type *yong-jeong-nyul* (용적률, the Korean word for FAR) on Korean search engines, an endless stream of news, articles, and commentary pops up. The word speaks to the hunger for living space in a hyper-dense environment, as well as the desire to satisfy that hunger by any means possible, whether by proper planning and tactics or through trickery and obfuscation. It touches both the rich and the poor, the white-collar and the blue-collar, as they navigate their lives together in and around the urban fabric. Upon reading my comment in that article that without a doubt it is FAR that drives the architectural character of Korean cities, a renowned urban researcher told me I had hit the nail right on the head.

On seeing that Alejandro Aravena proposed the theme “Reporting from the Front” for this year’s Venice Biennale, my immediate thought was that the play of the FAR Game was the real battle being waged on Korea’s architectural front lines. The fact is that 99% of Korean architects must play the game in order to survive. An architect rarely gets a commission unless they can convince clients that their design proposal has larger rentable floor areas than their competitor’s.

In Korea, most clients and land owners are paying for the invisible quantity of the building, not the visible quality of the architecture. Buildings themselves are often not valued in the real estate market. The average lifespan of a building is shorter than that of a human being. This is because the value is in the land, and the building is seen as a vertical stacking of land. If a new building can stack that land better, leading to an increase in FAR, then demolition and reconstruction are sought. It is not uncommon to see celebratory banners when a building fails its structural stability test, because it means the demolition will be approved.

The FAR Game is particularly relevant to South Korea due to its recent history of unprecedented economic growth. In 1962, when the first Building Act and Urban Planning Act were established, South Korea’s GDP per capita was [less than \\$100 USD](#). Over the next 50 years it grew more than

300 times while land prices multiplied more than 600 times. This led to “compressed growth” and hyper-density in the country’s urban industrial hubs, with the Greater Seoul Metropolitan Area being the prime example as it went from about 5 million to over 23 million people, close to half of the country’s total population. Combined with plot-based building regulations and an irregular and heterogeneous urban grain, Korean urban architecture has not been able to escape from the desperate and complex drive to augment living space that characterizes the FAR Game.

It is true that a clear identity for Korean architecture has been blurred amid the struggle between conflicting agendas: demolition vs. regeneration, privatization vs. nationalization, aesthetics vs. practicality. But underneath all of these considerations, the FAR Game always rages. It is easy to dismiss the FAR Game as a symptom of unscrupulous greed, and perhaps this is why theorists and critics rarely talk about it openly. However the reality is that, rather than resisting it, architects in Korea must welcome the tension between the desire for maximum floor area and the building rules that restrict it, and use that tension to spark creativity and innovation.

~~The game began to change after the global economic crisis of 2008. Large-scale demolition and reconstruction became much less feasible, and has given way to micro-scale regeneration. This has given an opportunity for smaller development agencies and young Korean architects to enter into the urban architectural battle and begin to reshape it. Lower-quality multi-family housing units and rentable retail spaces are often the target of this regeneration. These buildings were originally erected without any input from architectural professionals. But today, it has become clear to land owners that these professionals are worth paying a commission to since they are not only able to play the FAR Game, but they can also create functional designs that support better living conditions, making the existing floor area more valuable. It is hard to say as of yet if there is a cohesive theory behind this phenomenon, but the FAR Game seems to be crossing over from quantity to quality, from short-term profit to long term benefit. (moved to Section 5)~~

The FAR Game Exhibit at the Korean Pavilion is designed to track the changes in the game after the global economic crisis of 2008 and highlight the best examples of creative responses to the demands of FAR. Our team of six curators have analyzed the data and have worked to enroll participants and select materials that will illustrate not only the harsh realities facing Korean

architecture and cities, but also the ways that our industry is making small changes for a better life as Aravena proposes.

Before I applied for this curatorship I spoke with a close friend, who encouraged me to go ahead if I could enjoy the process and not get caught up with trying to impress people. This made me think of Paulo Coelho's modern vanity fair satire "The Winner Stands Alone," set at the Cannes Film Festival. The Venice Biennale itself could be perceived as a vanity fair for closed circles of people increasingly detached from the reality of everyday life. However, I choose to see it as a platform for different perspectives from otherwise unheard voices. I represent my country here not to seek recognition, but to open a discussion with architectural professionals as well as the interested public about why the FAR Game matters in Korea and to architecture in general.

The FAR Game is a kind of self-portrait of Korea. Rooted in our past, it will continue to exert itself on the development of architecture in Korea well into the future. A *far game*, indeed.