

The FAR Game: Constraints Sparking Creativity

Korean Pavilion

The front line of the architectural battles waged in Korea inexorably runs through its capital city of Seoul. Korean architects may think they have the vision of field generals, but when handling their missions in Seoul, they are often asked to operate more like foot soldiers.

The Korean urban architect works under the constant pressure of two opposing forces. One comes from Seoul's hyper-density; the greater Seoul metropolitan area, representing 12% of South Korea's land mass, is home to nearly half of the citizens of the entire country. Hence plot prices are at a premium, and the architect is always under strict orders to augment useable floor area in order to maximize a developer's and land owner's profits. The other is an urban building regulatory system where strict and unyielding rules give public officials little discretion for negotiation.

Korean architects must therefore always be prepared to perform a high-wire balancing act. Their endeavor to deal optimally with these opposing forces in the planning and execution of their buildings is known euphemistically as 'playing the FAR Game'.

Facing this tug-of-war between private profit and public regulation, how is the Korean architect truly to ply his trade, and infuse his work with some form of aesthetic or socio-cultural considerations? The answer from today's Korean architects, evidenced by the 36 buildings showcased in this exhibit, is to use the constraints brought on by the FAR game to spark their creativity rather than allowing those constraints to stifle it.

The global economic crisis of 2008, which brought an end to the financial viability of large-scale demolition and redevelopment projects, actually provided an opportunity for the new generation of Korean architects to go down into the trenches, and foster a slow process of urban regeneration, one building at a time. The target was often medium-scale multi-family houses or mixed-use buildings, which in earlier times would not have been on the radar of most architects. Yet, as this exhibit will show, these projects are now providing fertile grounds for creative responses to the intense high-stakes pressures of the FAR game.

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Layout of Exhibits

1. What are the Rules of the Game?

The FAR Game is predicated on the demand for precious floor space in hyper-dense urban conditions, where architects are challenged to balance the desires of consumers, controllers, and suppliers of which they are a part.

2. How is the FAR Game played?

The 36 buildings showcased illustrate how constraints can spark creativity, and turn a craving for quantity into a desire for quality.

3. What are the Forces at Play in the FAR Game?

A description of the background forces that govern the FAR Game, including hyper-density, land price, capital concentration, and characteristics of the urban fabric.

4. Artist Perspectives on the FAR Game

Images of everyday life from the urban landscape, signals of FAR Game battles won and lost, as captured and portrayed by artists.

5. Why does the FAR Game Matter?

The importance of the FAR Game to Korea and to architecture in general, as told from various perspectives including those of curators, architects, planners, researchers, developers, land owners, and nameless local builders.