

Interview with Winy Maas

Sung Hong KIM, March 10, 2016

1. The idea of density seems to be prevalent throughout your work and publications since you published “FARMAX” in 1998. How did this idea come to you? Is it still a focus of your practice?

The idea that density is an essential tool emerged from the Club of Rome’s warning about the end of the resources. It struck me that the continuous sprawl that mostly takes place on fertile agricultural land has a negative impact on our global well-being and sustainability, densification is part of the solution. I never believed in negative solutions so in that way in my work I am always looking for compelling, seductive solutions to densification. There are many ways to densify and to do it well, a basic motive is the ideal of a suburban lifestyle in the city centre, having your own apple tree or swimming pool on the 22nd floor or a public park on the 35th floor... Now we are 40 years further and the issue is bigger than ever, so yes, it is still in the DNA of our office, very much so.

2. In what sense is the issue of scale important in contemporary architecture and urbanism? In other words, how does the problem of quantity relate to the quality of design today?

Despite its decline in the Western world the rise of the middle classes is a phenomenon all over the developing countries. This huge demand for housing has led to a never ending mass production of architecture, all architecture that the so-called *signature architects* do together does not even come close to a meaningful contribution to this specific issue. The one positive thing one might say about these developments is their density, the fact that most is collective housing, the problem could be much bigger if the model of the space consuming American suburb would prevail. But I do worry about the quality and the durability. What will happen in let’s say 40 years with all these mind killingly boring housing blocks? You know, the ones that need large numbers to be kept apart.

3. When you worked on projects in different cities and countries, did you observe a relationship between density and the collective urban landscape? For example, what were the major differences between Dutch cities and denser Asian cities?

The acceptance of collective housing is an important difference and this tiny, very personal scale leads to larger planning issues. Of course there are many exceptions in European and American cities of people living in collective housing. But there is a yearning for suburbia which is basically bad for the planet. If this Western ideal of a bungalow surrounded by

gardens is one man's dream it is all right. If it becomes a general ideal to strive for it becomes a global problem. The Dutch metropolitan area Randstad is despite our great planning tradition, and despite our cute old towns in terms of sprawl and density, comparable to places such as Greater Paris or Los Angeles. An endless field of suburbs and double carriage ways. In Asian cities the density is indeed often better but there is a general lack of open and public space. Singapore with its parks is a good exception, in this sense, if you mix both worlds you can get astonishing results. The large influx of Asian students has totally transformed almost abandoned down town areas in places such as Melbourne or Canadian cities.

4. The Korean Pavilion proposed the theme “The FAR Game” in response to the 2016 Venice Biennale theme “Reporting from the Front”, as 99% of Korean architects must wage a battle to maximise a building’s Floor Area Ratio in order to survive. How do you view this phenomenon?

You call it a battle but what if you would see it as a chance? And by the way why do you maximise the FAR? What would happen if you stop doing that, while having by laws on shadow and views? Would that lead to sincere innovative solutions and an increase of the density?

5. ~~How do you mean?~~ The FAR game in Korea is the interplay of a triad of variables: land, law, and building. In your practice, how do specific building and urban regulations affect your strategies and tactics?

It totally depends on the project. Generally speaking we are in the great position that we work for more ambitious clients, we hardly get the chance to participate in the hard core mass production. Even though in India we try. We see the regulations as part of the many parameters that influence the project; also the brief, the ambition, the context, budget and the green component are important. All together they shape the building. Quite often commercial buildings are realised within the volume set by the city, developers have a financial interest to realise as much surface as possible on their land, but there are more variables. In the quest for profit also the quality is of importance, or the remarkability, certainly in competitive markets the apartments and offices need to offer more than the competitors work. In addition, city governments in Europe often demand quality, they realise that buildings last for half a century or longer and influence an increasing part of the design through regulations. That is fine, I like this puzzle to find solutions outside the box but inside and on the edge of the regulations.

6. We analysed 36 buildings and discovered the logic behind their shape and form. The constraints of FAR function as a driving force for innovation. What was your first

impression of the models and diagrams of these buildings?

Let me first say that I love your method, I think this kind of design research is important for our discipline, I do a lot of that myself in Delft at The Why Factory. Well done!

To answer your question, indeed, regulations and constraints can be a thriving force in terms of innovation. If we had no man-made constraints dealing with quality for the greater good we might end up with nothing more than efficient boxes and that is in a way this large mass production. In Bordeaux I am the master planner for a new neighbourhood with 3500 dwellings, Bastide Niel, and we created a set of regulations that will result –by coincidence so to say– in a fascinating urban landscape with spires and weird shapes. This we developed to create on the base of the traces of history, an intimate city, that is combined with a city that loves daylight. This very combination leads to a remarkable city. The architects that will have to work within these constraints are put in front of an incredible task, innovation will take place because this has not been done before. Also the FAR Game is a man-made constraint that is difficult to live with but leads to fabulous innovative solutions. The endless stream of cute Tokyo homes on Dezeen is part of that as much as the vulgar iceberg homes in London, without those strict urban regulations no-one would bother to design in such difficult conditions.

7. We see the FAR game is played through the interaction of three teams: consumers desiring optimal volume, suppliers attempting to achieve it, and controllers restricting it. Architectural professions in Korea remain at the bottom of the supplier side. What would you like to say about this?

Why is this the bottom? The consumer asks you for a creative solution and you provide it. I want to mention Didden Village, the blue roof top extension in a historic district in Rotterdam. We have been asked to design what became our smallest architecture project so far and it made a big difference. In terms of planning it became a tool for further city densification, we even proposed it as a method for Grand Paris. It became a financial tool for the city to maintain an urban middle class. And it became a fantastic home for a family that is beyond proud to live there, it changed their lives. I don't see providing a home and developing a planning tool as a side effect as a position at the bottom of the supply chain. Be proud of your work, make it fantastic, let people realise their dreams.

8. If you agree on the relevance of our theme and premise, do you see any social or cultural value in the FAR game beyond its short-term economic motives?

For Grand Paris we just calculated what it would do to the city inside the Peripherique ring road if there would be a law allowing one or two story extensions on all the roofs. The result was spectacular. The new space would be occupied and generate less sprawl outside the

city, its inhabitants would keep more local restaurants, shops and services alive, the extra tax and value would lead to the pay-off for new infrastructures. The FAR Game can have incredible long term social and economic effects on the urban fabric.

9. In architectural practice today, global "star architects" continue to be chosen over local architects for large-scale, symbolic projects in important places in cities worldwide. This gives rise to criticism that these projects often neglect fundamental issues that deal with cultural identity of nation and place. What is your position on this?

For a part you are right and this system certainly exists, during the nineties - the age of the icon - a lot of that happened. Then the icon was declared death. I think this is wrong. We need projects that rise above the masses and that inspire, argue and give direction. A place with a strong cultural identity maybe wants an escape sometimes, and a place with a weak cultural identity might need a strong symbol for this lost identity. In Beijing I'm working on a Hutong regeneration project not far from the Forbidden City. We try to look on an urban scale into the character of the existing neighbourhood but also on a very precise and detailed level. We designed a series of interventions that glorify the Hutong, that make it precious, that make it artistic, that monumentalise it and that make it more accessible. As an outsider we might see qualities that local architects take for granted. I welcome a project by a Chinese architect in Rotterdam. I think cultural exchange can be exciting and mutually beneficial.

When Korean cars started to flood the European market suddenly the European car makers started to worry about the great price and quality they offer. This led to more dynamics, some European car makers started to invest in style, others tried to beat the Koreans in terms of technology, others went green. So you see, the competition is inspiring and in the long term a benefit. If some Korean experts now criticise the Skygarden this can be seen as a welcome discussion, I challenge them to do the next project better than we did. The winners of this competition are the people of Seoul, being able to use all these great new public spaces.

10. There is some controversy surrounding Skygarden, your current project in Seoul. Aside from its political and social aspects, what would you like to say about your project to the general public in Korea?

To the general public I would like to say: Trust me, it will be a fantastic place, a green urban oasis in a concrete and infrastructure desert. It is a contextual project, we introduce a living dictionary of the Korean fauna into this urban environment. You will be able to enjoy your natural heritage, you will be able to learn about it. It gives a new energy to a place that is important for your democracy, and not in a monumental way, but community based and

small scale. Besides the actual Skygarden the project is also the start of further ambitions, to make more connections, to add more green and open public space to the area around it, to make roofs and lost urban space accessible.

11. From the perspective of urban researcher and architect, what kind of broad agenda needs to be adopted for Seoul and Korean cities in general? What would be the potential of this agenda?

Having an agenda is already actually a great step forward. If you start to plan, develop a goal and give direction, you can make use of the ongoing development of a city to reach this higher level, the city can become better, more diverse and more competitive.

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