

The Value of Transformation

Eungee CINN, Associate Curator

The urban framework of today's Seoul is rooted in rapid expansion. The standardization of housing design, necessitated by accelerated mass migration to the city, seemed to bring with it the promise of homogeneity to urban landscape. However when one walks the streets of Seoul, one finds more diversity than homogeneity. This diversity comes from the residents. For the purposes of securing an extra square meter or two, buildings keep getting equipped with new architectural strategies and ended up exhibiting designs different from the original. These differences were usually limited by laws, institutions and economic feasibility. This extension process, which could often cross the line between legal and illegal, might degrade the living environment, but at the same time could add qualitative value, bringing stories about people's efforts to find more space and freedom through quantitative frameworks.

The 36 architects' works embody this transformation, which is expressed in each architect's own design language. Because most of the exhibit models represent small sized multi-family houses and retail buildings, they are not so fancy or glamorous. But if we judge them on their efficiency and economic feasibility, we see that the extra spaces gained contain within them the stories of people's lives. Balconies, rooftops and attics which were reinterpreted by the residents of mass-produced housing units have been transformed and appear as more practical, aesthetic and integrated elements by the architects. Feeding on efforts to gain more living space within private premises, that extra space is helping to build residential communities and enrich urban streetscapes by giving more depth to the boundaries between architecture and city. They contain the DNA of existing mass-produced buildings in our cities, an abundant narrative of the lives of residents and, at the same time, an architect's obligations to city and society.

A city in which all sorts of people live together always shows different faces. And even when urban architecture is built purely upon economic valuations, we can still witness unique facets and faces in the sections and structures of the city as daily life reveals itself. The 36 works capture this diversity and reproduce it in refined form in the city. They are not meant to last forever. Indeed, these outcomes will be translated again into another form by the next wave of residents, and then architects will develop new solutions under those given circumstances. After all, architectural creativity comes out of such mutual interactions.

Analyzing Buildings Through the Lens of the FAR Game

Keehyun AHN, Associate Curator

Analyzing the design process of a building from a single perspective, in this case the FAR Game, is not an easy task. In any building design, many other variables can affect the process, including not only the intention of the architect but also ever changing requests from the client, limited budget and time, various regulations, and compromises in collaboration with contractors. Moreover, these variables don't just come in a given sequence, but occur spontaneously and repeatedly, making it seem almost impossible to explain a design through a single analytical lens.

Nevertheless, under the title of "The FAR Game", we analyzed and interpreted 36 buildings designed by architects. Constructed within the last 10 years in typical residential areas, these 36 buildings illustrate well the changes in the Korean construction market, with the decline of apartment construction and the current trend favoring diversity. The impact of new architects—especially young ones—stepping into a market which had traditionally been led by builders is also in evidence here.

What has drawn our attention is that the 36 buildings are not promoting themselves as a pieces of artwork but rather as very practical buildings with a focus on the lived experience. They are used as a medium to embody the desires of clients with meticulously calculated designs that considers both FAR and other extrinsic variables. Focusing on these aspects, we analyzed the 36 buildings and came to realize that these aspects were factors that have shaped all sorts of buildings in Korea into their current form.

As mentioned above, what we are attempting is difficult and vulnerable to errors, but it gives us a good opportunity to open a discussion about what is happening in the current Korean architectural scene, led by changes in market due to a period of austerity and the emergence of young architects, among other things. At the same time, because our work corresponds well to the theme of this year's Venice Biennale, 'Reporting from the Front', we believe that it will help to introduce the uniqueness and universal appeal of Korean architecture to both professionals and the general public coming together here from all around the world.

Data Mining for a Vein of Gold

Seungbum KIM, Associate Curator

Dealing with a huge collection of data is not an elegant job, especially if the data had been compiled by hand and was prone to human error. Correcting the numerous errors in such data in advance of a full-scale analysis is like a miner drilling down into endless layers of rock without knowing if there is any gold to be found.

The building account data used for this exhibition is a case in point. It is surely impressive that there is public data on six hundred thousand buildings in Seoul. But the raw data was not in the best condition for our analysis. First, 50% of the buildings didn't have information about FAR, and in many of them the entries for other items including site area, BCR and total floor area were heartlessly left blank like a leaf eaten away by devouring worms.

Some common errors could make for huge miscalculations. These include the misuse of commas and decimal points. In many cases, a wrongly placed decimal point or comma made figures 1,000 times or even 10,000 times larger than they were. One small apartment complex in Seoul seemed to have a 'secret underground city' disguised as a carpark, as its area was registered as 90 million square meters, a full one-sixth of the total floor area of all the buildings in Seoul.

Somehow, after many twists and turns, all the verification of the data for our analysis work had been done. And that was the very moment we saw a vein of gold. In the individual lines of data, we saw how each building reflected the diverse desires of individual people. As these desires are combined together they reveal the macroscopic flow of society. It was interesting to see that some strict regulations actually worked as a stimulus for construction—before their implementation. In 1990 alone, 13% of existing detached houses in Seoul were built, as a new regulation mandating the construction of parking lots for detached houses with a total floor area of 200 m² or over was due to come into effect in 1991.

This is just one small example of meaning extracted from the data. Let's search together to uncover meaning of large and small significance alike within the information and ideas presented in this exhibit.

A Signal of Change

Isak CHUNG, Associate Curator

I was once offered renovation work for a red brick multi-family house in Yeonnam-dong, Seoul. It had been built by house sellers in 1991, in a style similar to most residential areas developed in Seoul during the 1990s. Like many other rebuilt or renovated houses in the neighborhood, this house was transformed in the 2000s into a so-called 'hip place' corresponding to changing demands and trends in the market. House sellers and interior workers contributed to this transformation at the request of the building owners. However, as they didn't have a proper architectural education, they drilled, demolished and added new skin haphazardly, employing construction methods and safety standards learned from informal experience. The result was reckless development. Architects criticized this kind of development, but at the time they didn't see themselves working in this particular area.

Perhaps knowing this, the client had asked me, "Anyhow, do you take this kind of job too?" Ordinarily the answer would have been no, but in this case I accepted the job. I wanted to treat it as a heritage project for housing from a specific era. As if I were working on a true historical restoration project, I tried to understand everything about the building including the original intention of the design as well as changes in its use and alterations in its form. Based on this, I examined its inherent capacity for structural modification and the feasibility of a new program. I studied every inch of the building and made detailed records, not only of room sizes and ceiling heights, but also details of the window frames or moldings under the eaves.

Structurally weak points or excessively modified parts were returned to their original state or reinforced into more stable forms. Existing cladding such as the staircase floor and exterior red bricks were cleaned to have them recover their original colors. The illegally extended balcony was legalized by writing it into the official floor area, and the space itself was reformed as a shop window. Existing equipment was reused as much as possible to minimize damage to the building. Then, to fill a gap in floor area ratio, I added a new mass which satisfied construction regulations.

In the front right section of the Korean pavilion, this Yeonnam-dong building model will be exhibited in its original form before the renovation. Our team wants it to be used as a sort of index that represents the target of this exhibition. In Korea, young architects are just beginning to delve into the everyday living environment, which was originally in the hands of house sellers, construction companies and the government. I hope this banal building in Yeonnam-dong can help to signal a moment of profound change towards a new front in Korean architecture.

The 'Elbow' of a Building

Da Eun JEONG, Assistant Curator

Sash frames can be found in many buildings all around Seoul. There is a sash frame in most apartment balconies. In fact, a house with no sash frame on its balcony is what can make us look a second time. There are other installations including sandwich panels, polycarbonate panels and tarpaulin, but the sash frame is the most popular one. A sash frame is systematic, solid, openable and transparent thanks to its glass pane, so it is a very versatile form.

Considering a changing climate that delivers yellow dust, a rainy season and heavy snow, it's hard to deny that sash frames are very useful. And a sash frame not only deals with ever changing weather, it also affords a 'sashed space' to store important and necessary things that are not being used at the moment.

As this 'sashed space' doesn't belong to the living space according to building codes, it's hard to call it a private space. And since the 'sashed space' is positioned close to the outside of a building, local landscapes take up a large part of it. But this temporal and flexible space shows many different faces based on residents' personal preferences. This can be said both for residential housings and for general buildings seen within neighborhoods. A space defined by a sash frame can be renovated into many forms affecting user, function, trend, relationship with commercial areas, rent and land value. You can even get rid of the structure itself and build it again.

Most of this flexible space doesn't count towards the taxable area. Nor does it belong to the floor area ratio recorded in building account data, even though it creates a physical volume. Depending on how we use it, spaces between building masses can be changed.

I have nicknamed this space the 'elbow'. The 'elbow' of a building enables us to adjust the space between surrounding buildings according to its use. Elbows can be stretched or bent (opened or closed) by moving the inner joint. So if this space allowed us to choose our own attitudes towards our surroundings on the inner/outer border of the building, it justifies its nickname.

Let's give elbows to buildings so that they can wriggle and interact. The elbow doesn't always have to be an extended balcony space. It can be a space that directly responds to changes or defends itself with a poker face. It seems important for buildings to have some form of external expression relevant to changes in the city. In this way it might become regarded as a somewhat useful space.