

The FAR Game: Constraints Sparking Creativity

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 main target is 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?

- 1.1 The FAR Game Defined
- 1.2 The Players
- 1.3 Playing the Game in Korea

2. How is the FAR Game played?

- 2.1 Stereotypical Medium Multifamily House
- 2.2 The FAR Game in 36 Buildings
- 2.3 Design Tactics
- 2.4 Tetris House: Prime Example
- 2.5 Urban Contexts of the 36 Buildings

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

- 3.1 Hyper-density
- 3.2 Land Price
- 3.3 Compressed Growth
- 3.4 Building Scales and Typologies
- 3.5 The FAR Game in Statistics
- 3.6 Characteristics of the Urban Fabric

4. Artist Perspectives on the FAR Game

Artists' drawings, photographs, and videos span the cityscape and bring its built structures into view, individually and collectively, to expose the scars of FAR Game battles won and lost.

5. Why Does the FAR Game Matter?

- The Impact of Architecture on Society
- Innovative Design Tactics Inside and Out
- An Alternative Model for Urban Regeneration

Curatorial Foreword

Why the FAR (Floor Area Ratio) Game?

Sung Hong KIM, Curator

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 that article, where I had stated 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. If a new building can provide 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. 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 FAR Game Exhibit at the Korean Pavilion is designed to track 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 analyze 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.