

Sung Hong Kim - First of all I'd like to thank you for giving up your time to talk to us here at arcspace.com and also congratulate you on being selected for what must be an incredibly interesting and important role as the curator of the Korean Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale 2016.

I'd like to start by asking what was the process for you being selected as curator?

When I first saw that Alejandro Aravena's theme for this year was "Reporting from the Front," I immediately thought that the play of the FAR (Floor Area Ratio) Game would be very *a propos* for the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale, since it is the fundamental battle being waged on Korea's architectural front lines. So I applied for the curatorship, commissioned by the Arts Council Korea (ARKO), with the proposed theme "The FAR Game." I was selected by the committee last November, and then I formed a team of six curators. Together we have worked not only as curators but also as researchers and exhibitors.

We've seen an abundance of biennales starting to pop up all over the world with the most recent being held in Chicago last year. What do you think is the specific role of the Venice Architecture Biennale in contemporary society?

I am not sure if I am in a position to talk about the role of the Venice Biennale as a whole. But, as I stated in the catalog of the Korean Pavilion, I think the Venice Biennale 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. Through the Korean Pavilion, I want to open a discussion with architectural professionals as well as the public about why our theme matters in Korea and to architecture in general.

I'm intrigued that the way the Korean Pavilion is presented in a similar way to the Baltic and Nordic Pavilion as a region instead of two nation states. Is there a reason for this? Are there similar challenges that the two countries face in contemporary architecture?

Are you referring to the 2014 Korean Pavilion exhibit with the theme 'the Korean Peninsula,' which covered the architecture of both South and North Korea? If you do, I would first say that the 2016 exhibit deals only with architecture in South Korea. Furthermore, while 'the Korean Peninsula' from 2014 moved from a grand narrative to the details, the 2016 exhibit 'the FAR Game' moves from micro-scale analysis to macro-scale interpretation. Ultimately we want to cast the FAR Game as a kind of self-portrait of South Korea.

The overall theme set by the biennale director and 2016 Pritzker Prize laureate, Alejandro Aravena, is "reporting from the front". From an international perspective, South Korea has one of the strongest economies in the world and is a well-functioning democracy. However, in a global context, we can see huge problems in other regions to do with mass migration, war, megacities, poverty, etc. In this context, why do you see the "front" is in Korea?

Well first, note that this 'front' is referring to architectural battles. In this regard, a megacity like Seoul is a true architectural battleground, as it has seen a population explosion in the last 50 years

that has brought on extreme densification and verticalization of the architecture in the city. Remember that Korea was one of the world's poorest nations a half century ago, and Korea's GDP per capita has since multiplied by about 300 times and land price growth exceeds this figure. These conditions have led to a constant and desperate search for living space in the city characterized by the FAR Game, which put Korean architects under tremendous pressure.

I've read in your exhibition text that you've analyzed over 600,000 buildings in preparation of your pavilion exhibition. What was the process of this and how long did this tremendous task take?

Seungbum KIM, one of our curators, had assembled a primary dataset from various public institutions and analyzed this data for years before I had asked him to join. We took this raw data and investigated the specific areas that impacted our study of the FAR Game. This required us to go through a laborious process of correcting, verifying, and compiling the data in order to draw our observations and conclusions from it. It may be the first time in Korea a huge collection of data was used for an architectural exhibition.

FAR is a direct measure of the density of urban environments. There are many who state that the future of sustainable living is through the densification of our urban environments. After your extensive research, are you able to comment on that issue?

I think it depends on the situation and context, although theoretically a compact urban environment would be more sustainable in the future. The issue is how to densify, in terms of the typologies of the urban architecture. The FAR Game is exactly about to how to reorganize and densify urban spaces in ways that not only capture more useable floor space, but also employ design elements that create better and more suitable living and working spaces, through the functionality of both the private and public areas.

Can you provide some examples of how Seoul architects are able to increase density while still providing a high quality of life?

It is hard to say that the 36 buildings showcased at the Korean Pavilion are the best examples. But I can say that the approach and attitude of today's emerging architects contrasts with that of the previous generation. Instead of blaming government indifference and disregard for architectural values leading to rigid urban and building rules, they have tried to use these constraints as imaginative and creative forces in their designs.

What are some of the negative impacts that come out of increased density in cities?

It also depends on the typologies of the urban architecture. Think about a tall building with a high FAR and a low BCR (Building Coverage Ratio) vs. a medium-rise building with the same FAR and a high BCR. The former has problems associated with the 'gated community,' while the latter makes for undesirable living spaces with narrow streets and insufficient parking areas. Density as such does not bring a negative impact as much as the particular way that density is handled and managed.

As a final question I'd just like to ask whether you had any ambition for what you wanted visitors to take away from your exhibition?

I do not want visitors have any preconceived notions, and I simply ask them to come, see and experience. The visitors are the ones that will put their particular perspectives on it.

Thank you Sung Hong Kim for giving up your time to answer these questions for arcspace.com today.