
THE FAR GAME

CONSTRAINTS SPARKING CREATIVITY



la Biennale di Venezia

15. Mostra
Internazionale
di Architettura

Partecipazioni Nazionali

The Korean Pavilion Biennale Architettura 2016



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Why Does the FAR Game Matter?

“The FAR Game is a powerful lens into the current frontiers of Korean society as expressed by the scale of buildings in the cities and the urban fabric.”

“Korean architects creatively absorb hyper-density by crossing over from quantity to quality, and turn the motivation of short-term individual profit into the realization of long term public benefits.”

“The FAR Game in Korea has gone through changes with the decline of large-scale demolition and reconstruction projects. It fosters a slow but resilient form of urban regeneration on a smaller scale within sub-blocks.”

By Sung Hong KIM,
Eungee CINN, Keehyun AHN,
Seungbum KIM, Isak CHUNG,
Da Eun JEONG, Richard Enos

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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 analyzed 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.

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EXHIBITORS / CURATORS



❶ **Sung Hong KIM** is a professor of architecture and urbanism at the University of Seoul. Between 2007 and 2010 he organized an exhibition entitled “Megacity Network: Contemporary Korean Architecture” and brought it to Frankfurt, Berlin, Tallinn, Barcelona and Gwacheon, Korea. He has authored books, papers and essays about contemporary Korean architecture and urbanism including ‘Future Asian Space’ (2012), ‘Street Corner Architecture’ (2011), ‘On Asian Streets and Public Space’ (2010), ‘New Imagination of Urban Architecture’ (2009), and ‘Megacity Network’ (2007). Kim was a Field Editor for the Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering (JAABE) from 2010 to 2012, and is currently Chief Editor for SPACE Academia.

❷ **Eungee CINN** is an assistant professor at Incheon National University. She studied architectural design and theory at Seoul National University (Seoul, Korea) and the University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, US). She has written several papers, including her Ph.D thesis which focuses on the standardization of architectural designs under given social conditions and its transformation by users and architects.

❸ **Keehyun AHN** is an assistant professor at the School of Architecture in Hanyang University. He founded AnLstudio in 2009 which has gained global recognition for its digital design research and architectural practice. He was selected as the Best of the Best at the 2010 Red Dot Award held in Germany. Through AnLstudio he has completed built projects and held exhibitions in Korea (Seoul, Gwangju, and Jeju), China (Guangzhou), and Australia (Brisbane). Engaged in projects of all scales, his work specializes in the integration of architecture, art installations and public space.

❹ **Seungbum KIM** is a Director of the VW LAB in Seoul. He explores human desire and behaviors by analyzing spatial data and related text language and visualizing them. He received his Ph.D in Architecture with a research paper on the impact of public discourse on the production process of public buildings. In 2014, he was a curator for the exhibition “Seoul: Towards a Meta City” held in Berlin’s AEDS Gallery.

❺ **Isak CHUNG** started the a.co.lab in 2013, and has conducted social architecture works such as “Artist Residency at Propaganda Village”, “Yeonpyeong Island Library”, “Hello Museum”, “Dongducheon Rehabilitation Center Renovation”, and many others. He has done public research for “The Master Plan of DMZ Peace Park” and “On-Site Museum Master Plan of Seoul City Wall”. He participated in the “Real DMZ Project” as Chief Coordinator (2013), and he was co-curator for the urban art project “Seoul Seoul Seoul” (2015). He received the Korea Public Design Award from the Ministry of Culture, Sports & Tourism (2015), and the “It-Award” from the Ministry of Trade, Industry & Energy (2015).

❻ **Da Eun JEONG** is an activist of urban and architectural culture. She worked at Studio Asylum and Mass Studies and is currently engaged in research projects about urban archiving and monitoring at the University of Seoul. She participated in the exhibition ‘memoryscape’ (2010), a photo retrospective of unheralded buildings in Seoul over 30 years old. She lead a series of architectural tours called ‘Encountering Early Apartments of Seoul’ via Open House Seoul (2014) and the Seoul Architecture Festival (2015). She also curated the SNS-based social platform ‘#citythru’.

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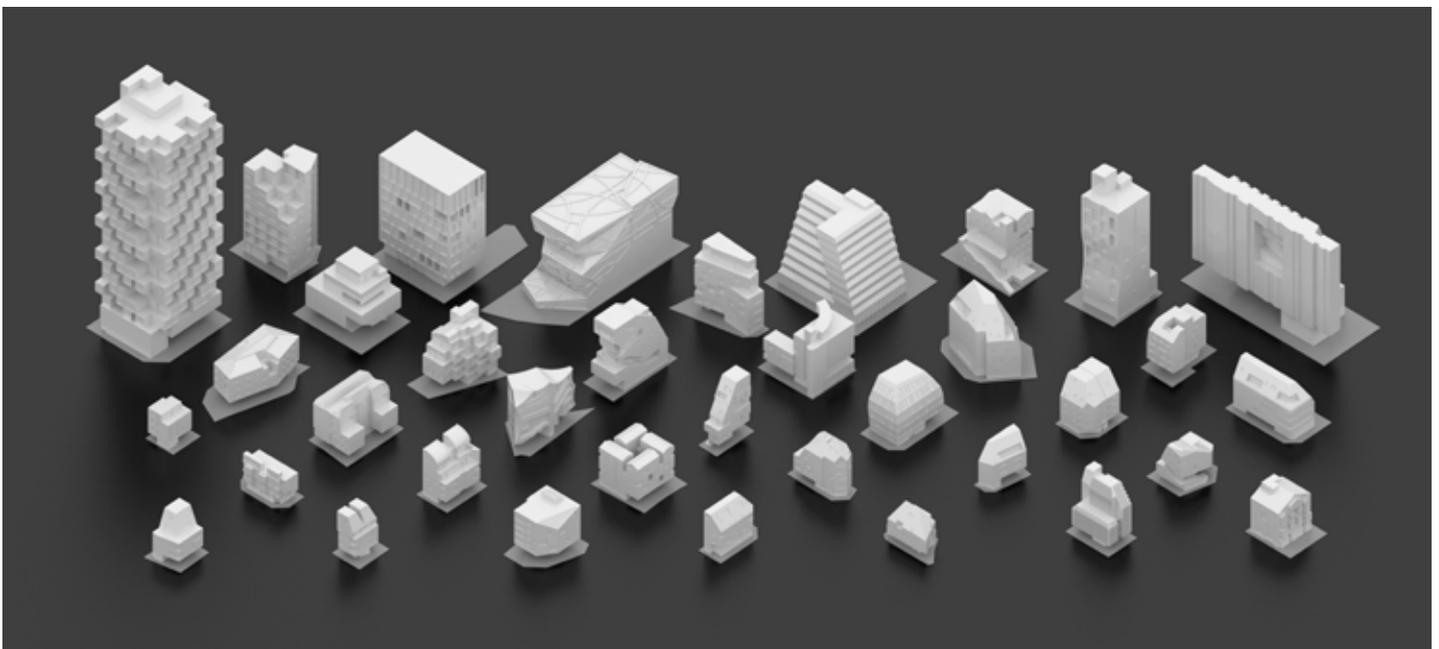
SELECTED IMAGES



The FAR Game in Seoul, 2016

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Original Photo by Kyungsub SHIN, 'Scrutable
Landscape Series No.017, 2015, Pigment Print'

The FAR Game works across all building types and scales from miniature houses to super tall buildings and vast apartment complexes. Building sections in red indicate how building volume and spaces are extended outward within the city.



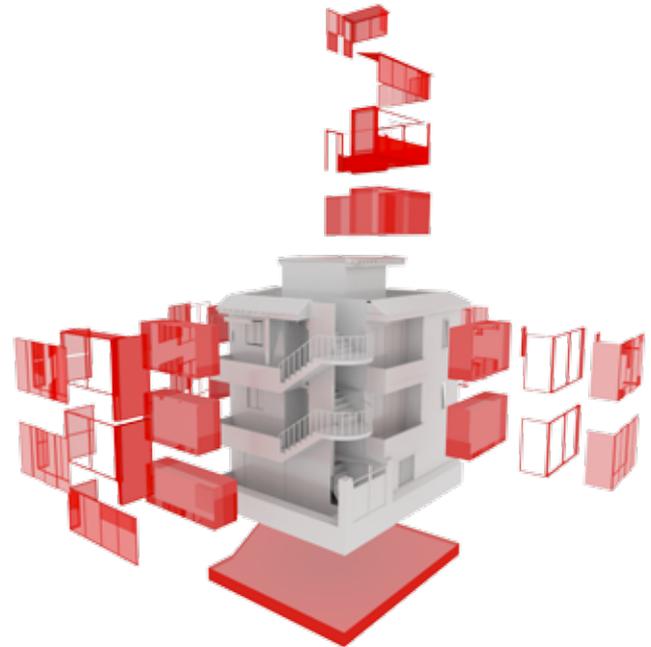
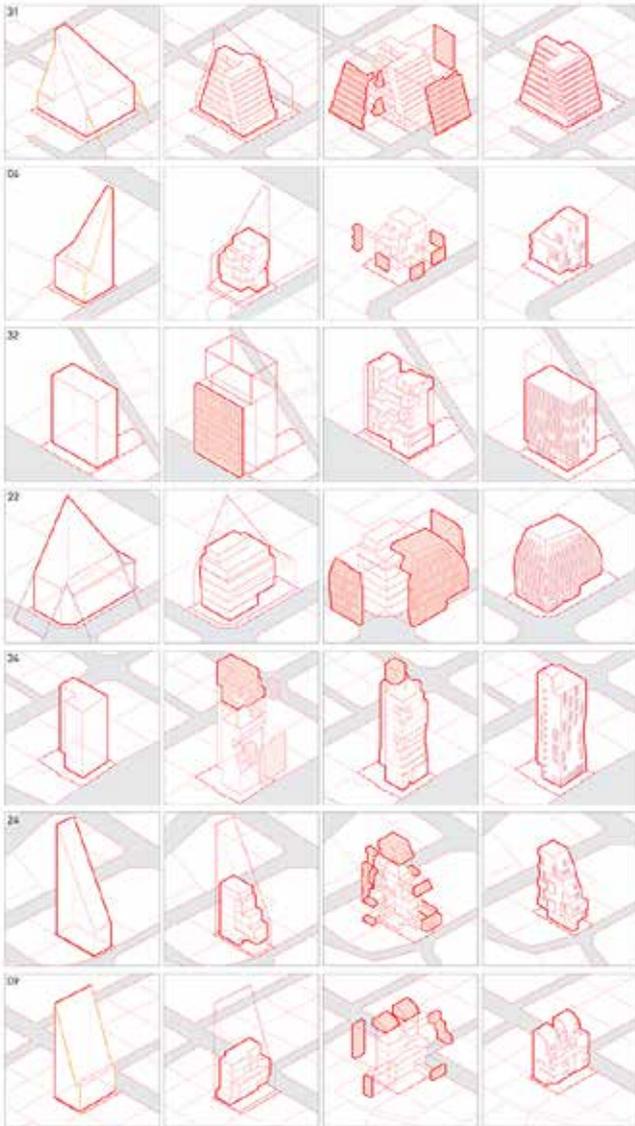
36 Buildings Showcased for the FAR Game, 2016

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The models for the 36 buildings showcased in this exhibit exemplify the unique vision of Korean architects seeking to maximize FAR while providing a sense of spaciousness and freedom. The geometrical and compositional inventiveness gives a distinct identity to an ever-densifying city.

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Stereotypical Medium Multifamily House, Korea, 2016

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Traditionally, these structures were designed on purely pragmatic grounds by local builders and developers without any professional design training. The Korean Pavilion demonstrates how young architects play the FAR Game in a way that differs from the purely pragmatic focus of local builders and developers.

Diagrams Demonstrating how the FAR Game is played, 2016

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Each set of 4 diagrams demonstrates how the FAR game is played:
1) a hypothetical building envelope regulated by the limits of urban and building regulations
2) a hypothetical building mass accommodating the specific functions required by clients without losing floor area or volume within the envelope
3) extended volumes or surfaces with formal and configurational innovations
4) the realized building

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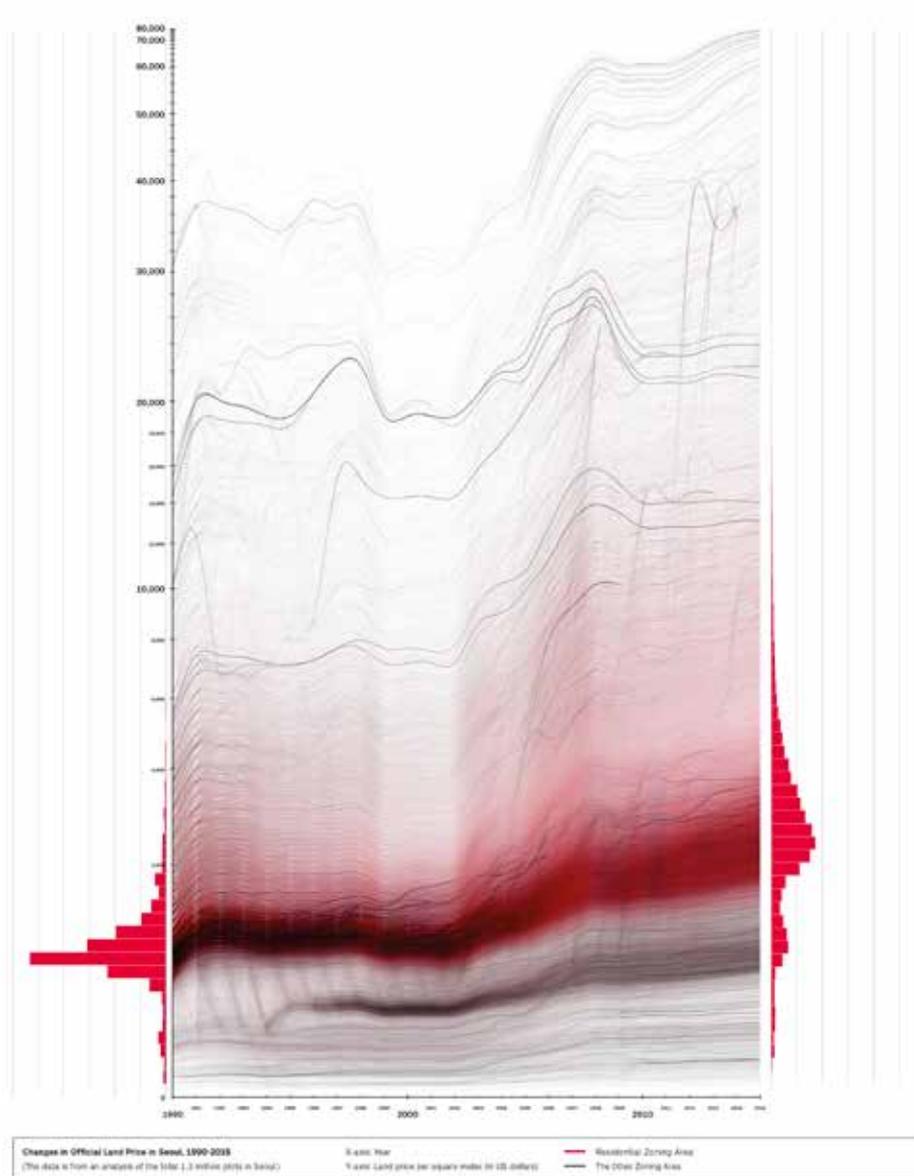
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Changes in Official Land Price in Seoul, 1990-2015. The data is from an analysis of the total 1.3 million plots in Seoul, 2016

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Seoul's land prices continued to grow between 1990 and 2015, most dramatically between 2002 and 2008. The real transaction prices of land are higher than the official prices, sometimes double in Seoul. It is no wonder that developers and clients pursue the maximum FAR relentlessly to compensate for the rising land acquisition prices.