

Model Houses and Show Flats

or

How to Buy an Apartment in Korea

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The first high-rise apartment complex in Korea was built between 1962 and 1964 and contained only 642 units. Today, more than 50% of the population, equaling 24 Million people, lives in apartments, and the market for buying these is divided in two: the open market which deals with all *second hand* units, no matter how recently built, and Bunyang, meaning literally *sale by the drawing of lots*, a unique system through which all new units are sold in Korea. Each Bunyang sale is held prior to construction of the apartments – roughly two to three years before move-in date. Though pre-built sales have become standard in housing markets around the world, due to the extreme discrepancy between the desire to own a home and the capacity to (ful)-fill this wish in Korea Bunyang is not merely a market, but a Lottery. Participants in Bunyang don't simply purchase an apartment they enter a competition in which the prize is the *right to buy*.

Depending on timing, quality and location, the chances of winning this right vary from 1:100 to 1:2000 in areas around Seoul and newly built cities. (Those who do not win at Bunyang must either enter another round, or move to the open market where the less desirable older units are sold at much higher prices.) The extreme demand for new apartments has led to fierce competition among Korean developers who have created their own unique genre of marketing in which apartments are branded and sold like soft drinks, jeans and other consumer items. Along with television, radio and print ads, the marketing of Korean apartments involves a whole sub-culture of *temporary* architectures that function like catalogs. Both the *Show Flats*, mocked up prototypes of the would-be apartment interiors, and the marketing complexes or *Model Houses*, in which these are displayed, have become architectural phenomena in their own right. At any time, literally hundreds of Model Houses dot Seoul alone, each filled with potentially dozens of different apartment designs ready for aspirants to inspect.

The Model House

As most new apartments built in Korea are sold prior to construction, pre-built prototypes must be constructed for potential buyers to view. Because of the large number and high turn-over of apartments, buyers have many different designs to choose from. To facilitate this process, along with the usual print and TV ads, Korean developers display mock-ups of their wares in large showrooms called Model Houses. A Model House is both a marketing center and a warehouse. Inside it will contain several mock-ups of the interior of apartments (Show Flats), along with site models displaying the contexts, sales desks, financial kiosks (where loans can be negotiated) etc. Competition has now become so fierce for these coveted, though not-yet-existent spaces, that the most desirable are open for only a single day. Aspirants have just a few hours to visit a Model House, examine the Show Flats contained therein, scrutinize the extensive catalogues for all relevant details – size, cost, financing plans etc. – and make their choice, i.e., purchase a *ticket* for the right to compete for a specific apartment. These *Open Days* are like fairs, complete with cheerleaders, Dowoomi,¹ slipper helpers, who look after everyone's shoes (in Korea wearing shoes indoors is the height of incivility, even in temporary buildings), and celebrity guests. They even include lotteries within lotteries in which aspirants distract themselves by entering raffles for furniture and other accessories for the homes they have only a slim chance of buying. Due to the fact that success often occurs only after many tries, lottery-home buying requires much time. It is not surprising therefore that the largest group of participants are female homemakers. With demand being so high, another Model House appears with a completely new set of designs as soon as one lot of apartments is sold. It takes just 4-6 weeks to build a Model House and the Show Flats it contains, both being destined for demolition as soon as their *tickets* are sold.

Model House Architecture: Permanently Temporary

Because Model Houses are categorized as *Temporary Buildings*, they are exempt from conformity to standard building-codes. Though the interiors of the Show Flats erected inside a Model House are precise simulations of the real units, the exteriors of these buildings bear no relation to the apartment complex facades. There is only one opening in the external skin of a Model House – the entrance. Model Houses are located for the convenience of shoppers, not where the actual apartments will be built. They are like three-dimensional billboards presenting full-scale images of what potential buyers might think the exterior of a stylish building should look like. Since most real facades of apartment buildings in Korea are quasi-indistinguishable – all presenting the same un-designed *housing-block* appearance – Model House facades are actually illusions; projections of a desire to how life could be, not true simulations of what they will actually be. These curious structures form the zone of the *as if*, the

¹ A Dowoomi is a sales lady, who specializes in assisting customers in the process of buying an apartment. They actually resemble sales ladies in a department store who promote a product.