

The big spectating gondola, the Korean Ferris Wheel, and its origins, past and future

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Abstract

Why do theme parks feature a Ferris wheel? It serves as a landmark with its humongous size which allows it to stand out from a far distance, but also serves as a vehicle for sightseeing allowing passengers to enjoy a bird's eye view from a safe and enclosed cabin. Ferris wheel is now familiar to the world today, much research and in-depth insight needs to be invested to gauge public interest and acceptance before embarking on the construction of such a landmark-making attraction. This article is going to focus on the main players among the manufacturing companies of the Ferris wheel to identify their strengths which may provide insights for theme park companies in Korea.

Keywords: Theme park, Amusement park, Ferri Wheel

1. Introduction

Among all the record-setting rides which feature the world's largest, tallest, and fastest, what can be said about the very first Ferris wheel created in the world? The first of its kind will always be remembered as a legend. These days, however, theme parks struggle with innovation, merely following the trends or chasing the interests of potential visitors. It is the truly revolutionary rides and attractions that draw the most attention to the public. Such trailblazing innovation may eventually serve as a landmark which even represents an entire city or country, like the Eiffel Tower. But building an expensive, untried, giant steel structure carries enormous risk, with no guarantee that the spectacle will attract enough people to recoup the costs of construction and operation. Even though the

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Ferris wheel is now familiar to the world today, much research and in-depth insight needs to be invested to gauge public interest and acceptance before embarking on the construction of such a landmark-making attraction.

2. How it began

The first Ferris wheel was originally not intended to be an amusement ride such as a carousel, but rather it was intended to bridge buildings. The first one was designed by George W. Ferris who founded G.W.G. Ferris Co., a firm that inspected steel for railroad and bridge builders. Here, we see the origins of the name “Ferris wheel.” Ferris was requested to build his Ferris Wheel for the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ landing in America. The organizer of the fair wanted something to rival the Eiffel Tower; therefore, the steel towers were connected by a 45-foot (13.7 meter) axle, the largest single piece of steel at that time. The diameter of the wheel was 250 feet (76 meters) with a circumference of 787 feet (240 meters). The circumference of the wheel featured 36 wooden cars, each holding up to 60 riders(Figure 1).

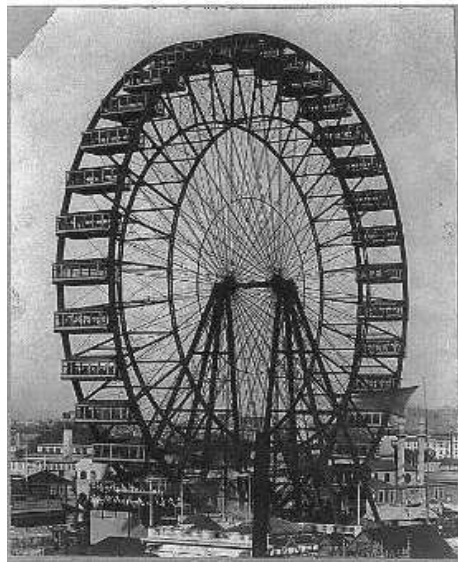


Figure 1. Geroge W. Ferris's Ferris wheel(Bellis, 2020)

After the closure of the Expo, the wheel remained operating for several years before finally demolished in 1906. Chicago's cultural contribution did not end with the first Ferris wheel but continued its legacy 110 years later with the construction of a new Ferris wheel at Navy Pier in 2016. The new vertical wheel measures 196 feet (60 meters) in height with 42 gondolas. While the Navy Pier wheel is not a contender for the world's tallest, it is a great commemoration of the Ferris' original creation, and the Ferris wheel continues to be enjoyed by millions throughout the world at major landmark attractions.

3. The first, the tallest and the highest Ferris Wheel in Korea

The Ferris wheel has also reached South Korea. Without straying too far from its original purpose, the Ferris wheel is now seen as fun and even romantic opportunity to leisure see your surroundings from a commanding height. A few Ferris wheels of the world are worth mentioning here. There are two types of Ferris wheel installation in Korea: at a theme park and as a stand-alone ride. The first theme park in Korea, Everland, used to feature a wheel called "Space Wheel"(Figure 2) which began operations in 1982. Since then, approximately 20 million people have ridden the wheel over the 28 years of its operation.



Figure 2 Ferris Wheel in Everland(Lee, 2010)

Korea's first Ferris wheel was 164 feet (50 meters) in height with 36 cabins. In August 2010, Space Wheel was converted into a VR Ferris Wheel; the renovated wheel did not spin anymore yet riders wear a VR device to enjoy a virtual ride for three minutes inside one of the four cabins that remain near the ground at all times. Therefore, this proved a chance of an amusement ride to be reborn through a new attempt with

ICT technologies(Lee, 2020). More than 30 wheels have been constructed in Korea since the introduction of the first Ferris wheel at Everland. And because of its continued popularity, more wheels may be appearing.



Figure 3 Ferris Wheel in Wolmi Theme Park
(source: Wolmi Theme Park website)

Another old Ferris Wheel constructed at a theme park is the “Wolmi Ferris Wheel.”(Figure 3). The theme park opened in 1992 and extended in size to 4,000g grounds in 2009. The Ferris wheel at the center of the park stood at 377 feet (115 meters), looking down at the waters of Incheon Sea. The wheel became renowned when it appeared in a television K-drama and was often known as the most romantic place for a couple to visit. The wheel reaches 131 feet (40 meters) in diameter with 26 cabins and was manufactured by a local company in Korea. The wheel is relatively small, with a distinctly Korean, rather than Western, appearance. Most of the world-class builders of Ferris wheels are found in Europe, so it is quite surprising that a local Korean company was commissioned to build wheel at the Wolmi Theme Park for an amount nearly equal to other, more established manufacturers from overseas.

Another wheel installed in a theme park is Seorabeol Wheel(Figure 4) that stands at 164 feet (50 meters) high. Each cabin holds 4 people with a total of 88 people in 22 cabins. The wheel is located at Gyeongju World theme park, which boasts the dive coaster called Draken. This coaster was manufactured by Bolliger & Mabillard and features a vertical angle of 90 degrees from a height of 206 feet (63 meters). Such an adrenaline-pumping thrill ride complements the Seorabeol Wheel which allows riders to relax and enjoy a peaceful view of the fairy tale-like theme park. The view from the wheel is especially beautiful to behold at night with the bright lights of the park and the wheel itself on.



Figure 4. Seorbeool Wheel (source: Gyeongju World website)

Other Ferris wheels in Korea were built as stand-alone structures, with the first installed on top of one of the buildings at the Lotte Shopping Mall in Ulsan, Korea(Figure 5). That Ferris wheel was manufactured by PAZ Company from Russia. It was built in 2001 to coincide with the opening of the shopping mall, and has since become a landmark of the city. At the time of its construction, it was the tallest wheel in Asia reaching 246 feet (75 meters) in diameter with 56 cabins. Also, the wheel's stand-alone location was quite innovative at the time and sat in the center of the city. However, the wheel is now being removed since the operator, Lotte, decided to transition the building the wheel was located into another business.



Figure 5 Ulsan Ferris Wheel(Jeon, 2020)

The view from the cabin was amazing, but the wheel itself created an “Instagram-able” photo due to the wheel being captured in the frame of the window of Lotte Hotel. Nonetheless, the costs of operating and maintain the wheel was costly and the wheel itself sustained severe

typhoon damage in recent years. Other factors which may have factored into the decision for its removal include location, interference with the operation of the shopping mall, and potential safety issues. However, the demise of the Lotte wheel does not portend the end of the Ferris wheel industry in Korea, but rather signs that more modern and innovative wheels are on the horizon.

Returning to 2021, let us turn to the major industry players of these spinning rides. Two companies that are recently active in Korea are Juma Rides from China and Fabbri from Italy. Juma Rides opened its most recent Ferris wheel on top of a building in Daegu. The rooftop features a miniature theme park with a carousel, twister tower and gyro drop—an environment where a Ferris wheel would naturally be at home in. The wheel stands on the 7th floor at a height of 144 feet (44 meters) with 27 cabins. The capacity of the cabin is quite small compared to more well-known wheels, and it does not have accommodations for wheelchair access. While the wheel itself does not compete with other wheels around the world, its innovative location in the midst of a miniature theme park make it a unique attraction.

4. Ferris wheel or big spectating gondola to be named

One potentially new wheel in Korea would be three times taller than the one in Daegu, which would make it 460 feet (140 meters) tall if constructed as planned. The Yeongdeok Eye, which recalls the more famous one in London, aspires to be the world's fifth tallest Ferris wheel. If built, the Yeongdeok Eye will boast up to 48 cars with a capacity of 15 people each.



Figure 6 Yeongdeok Eye Plan (Kim, 2021)

In Korea, Ferris wheels are known as “*dae-gwal-lam-cha*,” which literally translates to “big spectating gondola.” Therefore most Ferris wheels found in Korean theme parks are usually named after the park, followed by “big spectating gondola,” in Korean. This, at least, makes naming a new Ferris wheel an easy task in Korea. On the other hand, the Yeongdeok Eye (Figure 6) stands as a bold exception to this rule, clearly desiring to be identified more with the world-famous London Eye. The “eye” of the London Eye evokes the idea that riders enjoy a panoramic view of London—reportedly 25 kilometers in all directions. Similarly, the Yeongdeok Eye strives to provide a similar commanding view of the city of Yeongdeok.

One other noteworthy aspect of the London Eye name is that it is identified with the city itself, rather than a mere theme park; some other world-class wheels such as the High Roller in Las Vegas and the Singapore Flyer have been named after the city itself, implying that the wheel is a select landmark of the city.

5. Go for a spin

Another new wheel in Korea would be the one in Siheung. The wheel-owning company announced bidding between manufacturers and the final decision has not yet been revealed. Much speculation is on whether the new wheel will be a typical European-built Ferris wheel or a significant cost-saving Chinese one. As for location, one possibility is that the wheel would be placed on top of a building-like the one in Daegu—so that riders can look down the West Sea. However, another possibility that should be strongly considered is at Wave Park, Korea’s first man-made surf park, which debuted in 2020. Such a wheel built at Turtle Island at Wave Park would provide a view of the crystal clear waters of the surf park and be easily become one of the main attractions of the park. Nonetheless, the wheel itself would likely not be enough of an attraction alone, since Siheung is a small coastal city, unlike the city of Daegu which is the third largest in Korea.

So the name of this new Ferris wheel has not been decided. If the name of the wheel is to be associated to a theme park, it likely will not catch anyone’s interest. If however the wheel were to debut with a more bold name, it might bring an entirely different perspective to potential visitors. The surrounding buildings and parks at Wave Park are already appropriating the word, “Wave,” such as Wave Square.



Figure 7 Ferris Wheel's plan in Siheung (source: Wave Park)

If companies decided to build a Ferris wheel, they should think of the purpose of the structure. Regardless of whether builders want to break a world record, provide an amusement ride that offers experience with a view from the above, to commemorate a historical event, or simply to be a money-making endeavor profit from the entry tickets, safety should never be compromised. Whatever the purpose, people of all generations can enjoy both the ride and the romance provided by the view.

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