

No. 473

ST International HQ and SONGEUN Art Space Seoul, Korea Project 2016 – 2018, realization 2018 – 2021

A new home for SONGEUN and the people of Seoul

The new ST SONGEUN Building houses art spaces for the SONGEUN Art and Cultural Foundation – a non-profit organization established in 1989 – together with headquarter offices for ST International. Our experience designing contemporary museums increasingly focuses on how we can bring art and people together. How can we make a space that works for the art and the artist, for the curator and the public? When Herzog & de Meuron was commissioned to design the new SONGEUN Art Space in 2016, the ambition was clear: to create a cultural anchor that invites the public and broadens the exposure of Korean artists to the international contemporary art scene. By offering non-commercial art spaces within one of the most commercial areas of Seoul, the project aims to strengthen SONGEUN's presence and significantly contribute to the city's cultural topography and diversity.

A precise geometry in the heart of Cheongdam Dong

The site is located on the highest point of Dosan Daero, a thoroughfare located in Cheongdam Dong in southern Seoul, renowned for its international flagship stores, restaurants and bars. While the neighborhood mainly consists of low-rise buildings, the zoning allows for higher density towards the main street. Catalyzed by the area's rapid transformation and densification, a myriad of volumetric strategies responding to various plot regulations sit along the street front.

A sharp triangular volume distinguishes the ST SONGEUN Building. Resulting from the envelope specified for the site, the building's unified form maximizes the allotted floor area while exploring the sculptural potential of the zoning law. A tall front facade faces the main street and hosts the building's core, and a low back facade faces the garden where a more intimate scale defines the surrounding neighborhood. With 11 stories aboveground and 5 floors underground, the completed building comprises over 8000 square meters.

A cultural anchor open to the city

The building expresses difference and openness despite, or rather because of, its hermetic street side. A covered pedestrian passage on the east side invites visitors from the street to the main lobby and an intimate garden,

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open to the public at all times. A small opening in the garden wall at the back of the site creates a pedestrian shortcut, connecting the main street to the small-scale neighborhood behind. At the entrance, a column wrapped in a seamless LED screen acts as an attractive lantern announcing current shows and a further place to present artistic content.

On the west side of the building, the car ramp is treated as a sculptural volume. The curve of the descending ramp carves an opening in the ceiling of the underground exhibition space, connecting this sunken gallery to the activity, sound, and light at street-level. With its concrete walls, this cave-like space contrasts with the reflective finishes of silver leaf lining the ramp's interior and parking space beneath. The ramp spirals around a triple-height void and defines the geometry of the grand staircase which acts of both a threshold and auditorium space for screenings and lectures, leading to the second-floor galleries. A material transition from exposed concrete to white gallery walls, and from dark stone to warm oak floors, contribute to a variety of considered internal atmospheres designed for a diverse set of activities and art displays. An experimental and unexpected mix of art spaces, offices, and public areas unfolds above and below ground, creating a new urban complex that invites the public to engage with contemporary art in Seoul.

“Hidden Pine Tree”: a face for SONGEUN

Enhancing the facade's continuous surface, the building is cut by only a few defining apertures. Two tall vertical windows puncture the south facade and create framed views of the city. A triangular opening spans between levels 3 to 8 on the east, while the rear is almost completely glazed behind a layer of balconies which bring light and air into the offices.

The concrete mass not only carries the entire structure but also defines all space and ornamental surfaces. Using larch plywood boards rotated in a 1-by-1 meter grid, the concrete facade is imprinted with wood grain patterns and expresses the meaning behind the name SONGEUN: “Hidden Pine Tree”. This unique texture invites the eye and hand to explore its different qualities, bringing the building's urban presence down to a tactile human scale.

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