

CHANGE AGENT

Herzog & de Meuron's mutable M+ museum sees the light in Hong Kong

PHOTOGRAPHY: TILCO CHENG
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The new M+ building's deceptively simple, inverted T-shape shows that visual art museums don't always have to be extravagant, dramatic edifices as expressive as the artwork inside them. The Hong Kong structure's refreshingly nuanced, material-led and site-specific austerity belies the museum's content – which is dedicated to 20th- and 21st-century visual culture – and ambition.

The museum is the work of the Pritzker Prize-winning Herzog & de Meuron, the Swiss architects known for London's Tate Modern, New York's Parrish Art Museum and the recent transformation of Hong Kong's Tai Kwan historic quarter. The practice has collaborated with locals: TFP Farrells and Atup HK on the project, which is located on reclaimed land in the new, 40-hectare West Kowloon Cultural District.

Graphic and contemporary, the museum also manages to reference traditional Chinese vernacular: its facade is clad in sinuous green-black ceramic glazed tiles, similar to those often used on religious and cultural buildings in China. The tiles reflect outdoor conditions, so on a grey day the building will appear charcoal, yet at sunset it will be a gleaming gold. They are robust and practical and look very good thanks to their brilliance and the ever-changing appearance of their surface, says the studio's co-founder Jacques Herzog. The tiles are attached to concrete sun-shading panels featuring an integrated, removable system of programmable LED lights in an unusually wide colour range. They create a gigantic screen that will be visible from across the water on Hong Kong Island, and will be used to display art.

The project comprises three buildings linked by two integrated basement levels. The podium of the main M+ building contains exhibition spaces, a learning centre, two museum shops and cafes, while its room vertical tower includes curatorial and staff offices, a research centre, a members' lounge and three levels of restaurants. At the rear of the site, separated by a pedestrian boulevard,

are a 100m-tall retail, dining, entertainment and office tower, and a 70m-tall warehouse for art storage and conservation.

Up close, M+ is an exhilarating concrete monolith that appears to float above the ground. It cantilevers into the public space, and invites people in. 'It is not just about the art and contents. It is also about engaging and collaborating with the public. This is one of the great design challenges architects face today,' Herzog says. The 7m-tall entrance provides public access, as well as for monumental and experimental forms of art.

Inside, visitors can peer down from a central atrium into an unexpected, cavernous installation area. This theatrical 'found space' is the architects' inspired response to the existing, 30m-wide train tunnel that traverses the site. Presented as an archaeological dig, the space offers a creative meditation on the city's extensive underground infrastructure. 'The project is rooted, literally, in the ground above the train tunnel that we discovered was there during the competition phase,' Herzog explains. 'What first appeared like an obstacle turned out to be a great asset, allowing for a dramatic underground space and galleries with enormous potential for curatorial and artistic experiments.' The museum also reflects the diverse practice of contemporary artists, with new types of galleries, including a variety of display areas in the underground space, the podium and the tower.

'It is very empowering to have flexibility embedded in the design of the building. It mirrors the potential of the museum's own ethos,' explains Suhayna Raffel, head of M+, 'The building offers a full experience of visual culture today, and with its programmable, interactive LED facade, it is also an artwork.'

Though it is not due to open its doors before the end of 2020, M+ is already running a programme of exhibitions in the nearby M+ Pavilion, and has helped organise the Hong Kong pavilion at the Venice Biennale, a solo exhibition of site-specific works by Hong Kong-born, LA-based artist Shirley Tse. ★

westkowloon.hk; herzogandmeuron.com



Under Construction

THE 60,000 SQ M MUSEUM WILL FORM THE CENTREPIECE OF HONG KONG'S WEST KOWLOON CULTURAL DISTRICT. THE BUILDING WILL FEATURE CERAMIC TILES, SEE DETAIL THAT REFLECT THE OUTDOOR CONDITIONS, AS WELL AS AN INTEGRATED LED LIGHT SYSTEM

