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Deep steps that serve as both seating and stairways slope gently from the redeveloped office complex to a forecourt at their base.

The square's moulded white concrete forms and basins were cast in place. Skatepark specialists Mind Work Ramps of neighbouring Latvia helped realize the features.

Slabs of light Portuguese granite surround the islands in V-Plaza, which covers 22,000 square metres and fronts a series of building facades both old and new (below).

Playing It Cool

A VIBRANT ARRAY OF AMENITIES DOTS V-PLAZA, DESIGNED AS A REFLECTION OF ITS MODERN BALTIC SETTING

WORDS _Danny Sinopoli
PHOTOS _Norbert Tukaj

During its long history as a nation-state, tiny Lithuania has been a much larger Baltic duchy, a short-lived 20th-century republic, a postwar Soviet satellite and — now independent again — a leader in the field of cybersecurity. It's a narrative that's reflected — cleverly and unusually — in a newly redesigned plaza in the city of Kaunas, where history and modernity come together in a space that stresses mobility.

V-Plaza, as the reimagined square is known, was realized by the German transdisciplinary design practice

3deluxe to evoke “the innovative spirit of a country considered a pioneer of digitization.” Part of a larger redevelopment that included the firm's linkage of disparate office buildings with a variety of new builds, the plaza fronts a collection of elegantly integrated facades with an architectural fluidity of its own.

While the design, which incorporates a skatepark, an interactive fountain and a large open court for hosting events and markets, takes “existing axes of vision and movement” into account, its defining features are a sprinkling of “natural islands” offering new spots for rest and play.

Nestled into moulded concrete forms, the islands are both wood-topped and greenery-filled, boasting stands of trees, swathes of insect-friendly shrubbery and clusters of benches. In the largest agglomeration, an artificial river cascades down a discreet incline, enticing waders during the warmer months.

The result, says 3deluxe, “is an organic, landscape-like arrangement” comprising staggered seating and steps, dynamic thoroughfares and gently sloping green spaces and water features that connect the square's multiple levels.

In the 1990s, the United Kingdom successfully recast itself as Cool Britannia, a turnabout achieved in part through a robust promotion of arts and culture. The creators of V-Plaza have similar ambitions. “This hybrid of skatepark, playground and urban living room,” 3deluxe says, “is the perfect venue for a young, dynamic society.” Cool Lithuania, anyone? **3deluxe.de**



Kiln Order

IN CHINA, A NEW MUSEUM PAYS HOMAGE
TO A CITY'S LONG HISTORY OF CERAMICS

WORDS _Tom Arnstein

PHOTOS _Schranimage

With evidence of kiln sites stretching back 1,700 years, the city of Jingdezhen, in China's southeastern Jiangxi province, is the de facto national capital of porcelain. And just as its cultural significance can't be overstated, neither can Studio Zhu-Pei's task of building a new home — the Jingdezhen Imperial Kiln Museum — to encapsulate the area's exquisite craft tradition.

Four years in the making and overseen by principal Zhu Pei, the museum compound's eight parallel kiln-like vaults stand in homage to the unique and pragmatic craftsmanship-driven history that continues to shape the city. The most obvious nod to this is the curved patchwork of new and repurposed kiln bricks that comprise the 10,370-square-metre facility's cocoon-like carapaces. Blackened and glazed through repeated firings, the rugged refractories stand in contrast to the razor-sharp steel features, monolithic concrete slabs and slick glass panels that have defined much of Zhu's previous work.

To leverage traditional kiln-building techniques and foster a more intimate connection to the site's past (the remains of a number of ancient complexes are nearby), Zhu and his studio conceived an innovative scaffolding system that could meet the needs of each vault's varying size and curvature. "A challenge among contemporary architects is that they tend to like buildings that are complicated in form but simple in experience," Zhu says. To instigate a deeper physical response, he "tried to create a relationship between person and space by maintaining a suitable scale, to give the impression that the observer is a product of the kiln."

The resulting effect is akin to standing in a cavern or cathedral. But rather than being disorienting, even at six metres below ground, the enveloping interiors are tempered by a constant interplay with the exterior. Whether it's the trickling of water from the adjoining pool, the rustling of bamboo in the offset gardens or ample illumination courtesy of skylights and arched gaps in the brickwork, natural elements are always on





After discovering Ming dynasty ruins during early phases of the project, Studio Zhu-Pei reworked its design to incorporate these historic kiln sites into the sprawling complex's sunken courtyards.



Like many of the building's public spaces, the stepped auditorium is enveloped within a brick enclosure. It is illuminated by a series of circular voids in the curving roofline that take inspiration from the smoke holes of traditional kilns.



Jingdezhen's porcelain output was deemed so integral to China's ascendancy that it was placed under the direct control of Ming and Qing emperors. The museum's eight barrelled spaces borrow from ancient methods of kiln-building to celebrate this tradition.



Composed of new and reclaimed bricks, the vaulted exhibition halls are naturally ventilated courtesy of operable windows at either end.

PHOTO BY TIAN FANGFANG (TOP)

the periphery, complementing the two-storey complex's exhibition halls, auditorium, amphitheatre and additional public spaces.

Meanwhile, five sunken courtyards and Mondrianesque retractable wooden windows at opposing ends of each edifice create a microclimate and wind tunnels respectively, fending off southern China's scorching summers and negating the need for centralized air conditioning. Both were inspired by the narrow and shaded alleyways still found in ancient portions of the city.

However, it was two unforeseen setbacks bookending the project that indelibly shaped the museum. First, excavation of Ming dynasty ruins almost immediately halted construction. But rather than relocate them (as antsy local officials had suggested), Zhu's team meticulously reworked the dig into the blueprints, preserving the ruins and presenting them intact as an original courtyard. Then, weeks before opening, COVID-19 struck. While delaying the unveiling by months, the pandemic also vindicated Zhu's emphasis on sustainability. "This building is entirely naturally ventilated," he says. "Rather than trying to insulate, we wanted to bring air in, to exchange with nature." It's for these reasons that the Jingdezhen Imperial Kiln Museum has already assumed its rightful place in the city's rich urban fabric — and may also serve as a paradigm for the inevitable shift of architectural standards in a post-COVID world. studiozhupei.com



In a compositional nod to Ettore Sottsass, VSHD Design layered geometric elements — a circular mirror, a linear vanity and diagonal detailing on the lockers — in the change rooms of the UAE's Springs Warehouse Gym.

Memphis Revival

IN A DUBAI GYM, GRAPHIC LINES AND WOOD ACCENTS GIVE SOTTASS-INSPIRED CHANGE ROOMS A VINTAGE EDGE

WORDS _Evan Pavka
PHOTOS _Oculus Project

With designers, everyday life has a habit of finding its way into their work. For VSHD Design's Rania Hamed, it was a trip to the Canadian Centre for Architecture that, in part, inspired her recent facility for Dubai's Warehouse Gym. In Hamed's third location for the chain, the Montreal- and Dubai-based interior architect took the vivid lines and primary hues favoured by Italian legend Ettore Sottsass (whose work had been on view at the CCA) as a starting point for the airy

change rooms in the 1,230-square-metre Springs Warehouse Gym.

"We always try to design the changing room with an element of surprise," says Hamed. In a departure from the subterranean ambiance of the exercise area, white on the upper portion of the walls and ceilings and a dado of high-gloss burgundy ceramic tile with graphic grout wrap the space, while custom natural oak benches and details bring a sense of warmth





High-gloss burgundy tiles with contrasting grout on the lower portions of the walls provide visual and textural contrast. Pale wood benches add a touch of warmth.



ABOVE: Trimmed in a red slightly paler than the surrounding tiles, full-height frosted glass doors give privacy to the separate shower stalls.

to the interior.

To meet the significant locker requirements, the designer stacked the units (each composed of two cubbies) in uniform configurations near the entrances to both the men's and women's facilities, then clad the built-ins with striking diagonal lines as a nod to the Memphis founder's prints. Though numerous strategies were attempted to execute the optical illusion, in the end Hamed used a form of marquetry to insert black veneer within the laminate fronts and achieve the desired effect.

Each change room also contains five private showers fitted with frosted glass doors and partitions with deep red trim; individual bathroom stalls are nearby. Across from the latter, three circular mirrors along the linear single vanity recall illuminated features in the main gym, while brass accents provided by Italy's Fima and pendants by Cedar & Moss enhance the vintage feel. "Everything is going back in time," Hamed adds of the subtle references to not only Sottsass but the brutalist-inspired scheme of the main floor as well.

Currently at work on a large community sports club, the designer is keenly aware of the need for such spaces to adapt to a shifting post-pandemic reality. "We are designing in a way that has flexibility whenever required, but where social distancing does not seem like something imposed on the space," she says. "Our approach is going to be as contactless as possible, so the doors, the hardware, everything is controlled by sensors." **vshd.net**

Ceramic

1 Extra Grip

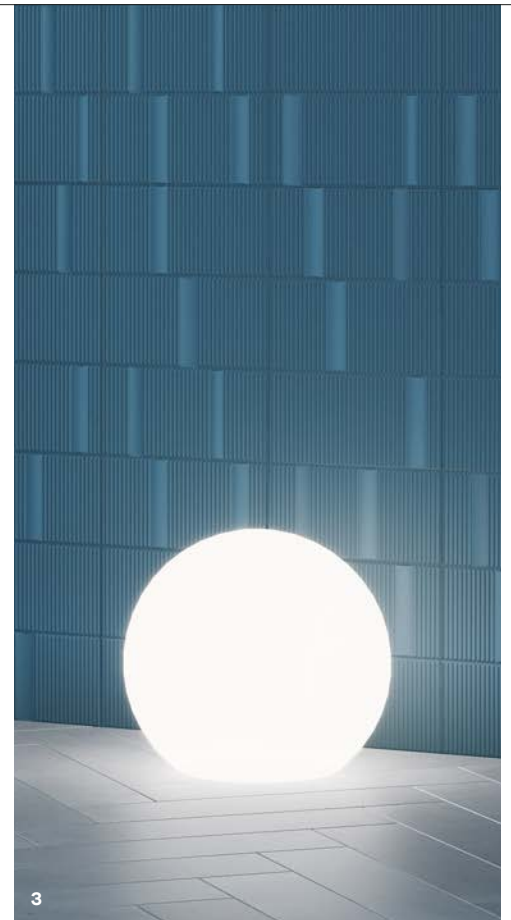
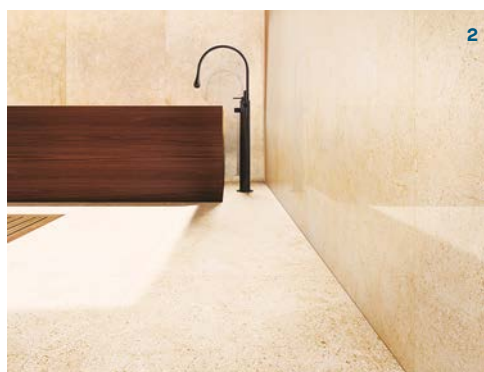
Designed for wet, high-traffic spaces, Sebastian Herkner's Area Pro line for Agrob Buchtal is not only slip-resistant but coated in Hytect to ensure easy cleaning and increased antibacterial properties. The 20-by-20- and 60-by-60-centimetre indoor floor tiles are available in 12 neutral tones. agrob-buchtal.de

2 Versatile Veins

With nine surface options that recall quarried marble and three finishes (polished, honed and natural), Marmosmart is a diverse suite of stone-look ceramics for vertical or horizontal use. Various installation methods for the product's six sizes ensure lasting performance in damp or dry areas. casalgrandepadana.com

3 Rhythm Nation

Beat combines two key trends in contemporary ceramics: small format sizes and dimensional textures. The rounded reliefs on each 20-by-40-centimetre wall tile appear as individual segments, enhanced by six graphic colourways: white, silver, anthracite, clay, green and blue (shown). harmonyinspire.com



Outdoor

1 New Neutrals

Matteo Thun's Sensi line of exterior porcelain tiles for walls and floors evokes the muted textures of natural stone. With 20 colourways comprising 60 per cent recycled material, the surfaces are available in large-format square and rectangular modules up to 120 by 280 centimetres in three thicknesses. florim.com

2 Building Blocks

Made of extruded terracotta, the 13-by-22-centimetre Brac modules by French artist and designer Nathalie Du Pasquier for Mutina are conceived to playfully link together for vertical or horizontal applications indoors and out. Four glazed colours (Bianco, Salvia, Marrone and Nero) and a matte option are offered. mutina.it

3 Mineral Inspiration

Moonstone, Ciot's latest collection of indoor and outdoor ceramics, mimics the irregularities of Brazilian quartzite. The two designs — Vein (shown) and Stone — come in five neutral tones and three sizes (30 by 60, 60 by 60 and 75 by 149.7 centimetres) for commercial and residential spaces. ciot.com