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Trading Up

Haikou International Duty Free Reception Center
Haikou, Hainan, China
aoe



This sizeable facility to promote duty-free trade in the Haikou Binhai New Area is a statement building meant to announce its modern character and functional purpose. Appearing as a piece of cultural architecture - large, vaguely abstract, non-contextual - the centre is essentially a square footprint sub-organised into an L-shaped plan and a large corner courtyard. Aggressive delineations of major external walls as freestanding planes extending beyond the internal enclosures help establish the scheme's formal language. Oversized openings are cut into these planes, and contrasting components in dark grey titanium-zinc are framed or break through these. The tonality is fresh and bold; an indirect nod to traditional Chinese ink paintings. The composition of the freestanding or cantilevered white walls is central to the readings of the volumes, and helps make the oblique views more complex. The white and grey surfaces work very well together, thanks in part to a strict rationing of the latter, as giant panels pushing out diagonally or as a feature 'drum' element near the midpoint of the principal facade.

The courtyard is a carefully composed landscape dominated by a lovely reflecting pool that allows a narrow causeway to an entrance at the sharp angle of the building's plan. The water body is echoed at the external corner of the site, at the intersection of the access roads, providing an inference that the whole centre floats on a water pool. In fact, the large-scale composition of the centre is controlled and well-evolved. It is praiseworthy that aoe has eschewed louder expressions of formal gesturing, which has become so prevalent in much architecture in China. This one is restrained and handsome.

The two arms of the plan handily organise the paired main functions of the centre: marketing and investment promotion. And it allows a subtle differentiation of the two, one acting more publicly, the other more introverted. The project isn't flawless - the landscape design gets a bit fussy in places, and the fenestration lacks finesse - but those are noticeable precisely because much of it is done so well. Ironical, perhaps, that a building of this caliber is used for duty-free trade... or perhaps evidence of modern economic society. One hopes it inspires other projects devoted to the arts.

