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PERSPECTIVE

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DARK MATTER

BY DANIELLE DE WOLFE

British architect Asif Khan's Hyundai Pavilion – dubbed the blackest building in the world – drew much attention during this year's Winter Olympics in South Korea. With high-tech interiors by Seoul-based Creative Works, the collaboration has brought experimental and interactive architecture to the design forefront.

Photo: Kyungsob Shin

Much has been said about the pavilion deemed the 'darkest building on Earth'. Taking centre-stage at the 2018 Winter Olympic Games in Pyeongchang, South Korea, the concept was brought to life by visionary London-born architect Asif Khan and Hyundai's newly formed design team, Creative Works. The result? The world's first hyper-black building: a dynamic spectacle that captured the public's imagination. With it, the Hyundai Creative Works team was thrust into the global spotlight more or less instantaneously.

Forming part of Hyundai's 'global mobility initiative', the design coincided with the brand's intrepid adventure into the world of hydrogen fuel cell vehicles. It's a technology that signals change for the automotive industry. A seemingly futuristic concept, it emphasises the importance of sustainable, clean automation, and the pavilion's three major elements each took a component as their theme. The blackened exterior focused on the expansive universe around us – the birthplace of hydrogen; the interior centred around water – the seed of hydrogen energy and new life; and four smaller rooms showcased hydrogen as a future energy source.

At 10m high, the temporary structure's exterior captured an illusion of the staggering darkness of space. Featuring 1,946 light-tipped rods protruding from all four parabolic sides, Khan's design harnessed the innovative power of Vantablack VBx2 – a sprayable pigment (not to be confused with the Vantablack controversially licensed by sculptor Anish Kapoor in 2016).

Absorbing 99 per cent of all light, the finish lacks the luminescence required for the human eye to interpret perspective. This unique characteristic renders 3D objects flat, even in broad daylight, turning an otherwise unremarkable pavilion into an experience that baffles the senses. "On entering the building, it feels as though you are being absorbed into a cloud of blackness," Khan explained of his second major Olympic project.

Hidden within the 1,197sqm (12,900sqf) structure, the brightness of the 'water room' stood in marked contrast to the pavilion's darkened exterior. Playing host to a multi-sensory hydrophobic water installation, the space used haptic technology – an interactive concept that relies on human touch to trigger changes in the environment. Releasing 25,000 individual water droplets per minute, the material ensured each droplet held its spherical, seed-like shape. "A water droplet is a size every visitor is familiar with," said Khan of the project. "I wanted to move from the scale of the cosmos to the scale of water droplets in a few steps."

The project's third element, the 'showcase', was the Instagram-friendly space where the Hyundai Creative Works team truly came into its own. Creating four interconnecting sub-rooms, each environment represented a different step in the use of hydrogen as a renewable energy source. The first, a solar room, employed solar panels and climate control to represent the sun's energy. The second, an electrolysis room, featured floor-to-ceiling chrome bubbles, illustrating the extraction of hydrogen from water using electricity. And with the third room containing LED rods representing fuel cells and a final 'water room' depicting the technology's environmentally friendly emissions, the pavilion's design fully embraced the concept of abstraction.

Utilising creative architecture as a raw and captivating marketing tool was a smart move by Hyundai. Having constructed what was fundamentally a conceptually immersive showroom, the Creative Works team assisted the brand in selling a vision of the future without displaying a single vehicle. "We did not want to exhibit our cars at the pavilion because we wanted the visitors to experience the brand's future vision through art and architecture," notes Sungwon Jee, Director of Creative Works. "Rather than sticking to the traditional exhibition protocol, we used varying tones, materials, temperatures, sounds and ceiling heights to induce higher engagement."



Photo: Kyungsub Shin

The water room is designed to be bright, clean and tranquil, in alignment with Hyundai's focus on hydrogen fuel cell vehicles



ABOVE Represented as seeds, water droplets – a primary source of energy – flow along channels to converge in a central pool
 OPPOSITE The electrolysis room is filled with reflective orbs representing hydrogen atoms that are split from water molecules

And despite the Winter Olympics being little more than a distant memory, the pavilion’s design continues to live on. “What Hyundai Motor Company wanted to say during the Olympics was ‘equality,’” says Jee. “Because this was such a vital and effective brand message, we decided to extend the pavilion display.” Relocated to Seoul’s Songwon Art Center as a smaller scale display, this creative feat of architecture is set to be easily accessible to all. “The exhibition will go on for half a year starting from July and we, like the Olympics, will emotionally conceptualise the universe, water, and hydrogen, while adding exciting experiential elements that all visitors can partake in.”

Yet, the Olympic pavilion was but a small ripple in the ocean that is Hyundai’s revamped creative branding strategy. Embodying a work ethic of ‘Be Genuine, Be Brave’, the in-house creative team embarked in 2015 on a comprehensive 18-month mission to relaunch the brand

globally. Setting out to prove its focus lay beyond the confines of the automotive industry, the Seoul-based company vied for consumers’ attention by redefining itself as a lifestyle brand. Hyundai had officially set out to become what they described as ‘Modern Premium’.

The Creative Works team was soon positioned at the helm for what looked to be an innovative, long-term mission. “Creative Works first started with just five members three years ago. Now, the team consists of 45 members,” notes Jee. Drawing inspiration from its Korean heritage, Hyundai set its sights on simplicity. Using the raw elements depicted in the South Korean flag – earth, water, wind and fire – as a starting point, sleek, textured materials inspired the ambient imagery seen across the company’s graphics. Add to that Hyundai’s bespoke, award-winning typeface – Hyundai Sans – and the result is a visual feast featuring impressive attention to detail.

Photos: Kyungsub Shin





Inviting visitors to both observe and interact, the LED display embodies the concept of how fuel cells are the way forward for clean energy for vehicles and other applications

“One of my most memorable projects was the Hyundai Motor Brand Image Creation project – our first project as well as the reason why the team was inaugurated in the first place,” states Jee. “After deciding which creative direction we wanted to go in, we perfected our identity by determining five critical aspects of the brand: logo, typography, colour, image style and graphic systems.”

It’s a diversification that has forged a new creative avenue for the brand. Endeavours such as the new Hyundai Motorstudio Goyang is but one example. Taking more than six years to complete, the brand experience, opened in 2017, was a collaboration between Creative Works and world-renowned creatives Austrian-based DMAA, New York-

Photo. Above: Kyungsub Shin.

based 2X4 and Thom Browne. A permanent brand-experience space, visitors can choose to journey through the world of car manufacturing, book their cars in for servicing or even undertake a fine-gourmet dining experience courtesy of the Haevichi hotel group.

Housed within a striking, geometric shell, the building’s glass walls allow for unrestricted, panoramic views. Unleashing the potential power that architecture has to further showcase brands and elevate immersive experiences, this bold aesthetic – and the team behind it – represents an exciting new creative era for Hyundai. ■

asif-khan.com

hyundai.com, creativeworks.kr



Creative Works’ mood board for Hyundai’s new brand identity