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## Case Study: Amorepacific Headquarters, Seoul

# From Object to Place: A New, Highly Public Home for a Venerable Company



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**Christoph Felger** studied architecture at the Architectural Association School of Architecture as well as product and furniture design at Central St. Martins School of Art and Design in London, after completing an education in cabinet-making. He has worked for David Chipperfield Architects since 1999, initially in London, since 2000 in Berlin. In 2006 he became director of the Berlin office. Since 2011, he has been a partner and managing director, responsible for the design and concept development of numerous projects and competitions worldwide. Currently these include the Kunsthaut Zürich, the Elbtower in Hamburg and the Nobel Center in Stockholm.

### Abstract

*The new headquarters for Amorepacific, South Korea's largest beauty company, is located in the center of Seoul, on a site which has been occupied by the company since 1956. It is situated next to a former US military zone that is being transformed into the spacious public Yongsan Park and a business district. This was part of a master plan representing the largest high-rise development in South Korea, which substantially altered the urban fabric of the Yongsan district. With its courtyards visible to the exterior, Amorepacific's openings give scale and allow nature to extend from the adjacent park into all parts of the building. Further, the private office building plays substantial public roles through diverse ground-floor programming.*

**Keywords:** Seoul, Urban Habitat, Office Buildings, Workplace Design, Public Realm

### Introduction

By the time the 74-year-old Amorepacific Corporation launched a design competition for a new headquarters in 2009, the company offices were scattered throughout several separate buildings around Seoul. They were too small and no longer viable, and the surrounding neighborhood was undergoing rapid change. The site is located on Hangang-ro, which is an important route

leading from the historic city center to the Han River, and is to this day one of the main axes in Seoul. The surrounding Yongsan District is relatively new. Due to its proximity to the river, it had long been reserved for industry and the military, including one of the largest US Army bases in Asia. Current plans stipulate that this base be transformed into a large public park (see Figure 1). When the architects were invited to participate in the competition, their analysis determined that the building would be in immediate vicinity of this new landscaped park, and had the potential to become a gateway to this extensive new inner-city natural space.

### A Private Building with Public Functions

Buildings of a scale and function like Amorepacific, in the view of the architect, always carry a public responsibility beyond form, function or the enhancement of a skyline (see Figure 2). Architecture becomes meaningful if it connects and engages with broader issues of the city and the society beyond its specific task, regardless of whether it is a private, commercial or public commission.

Therefore, an essential question to be asked at the beginning of this project was:

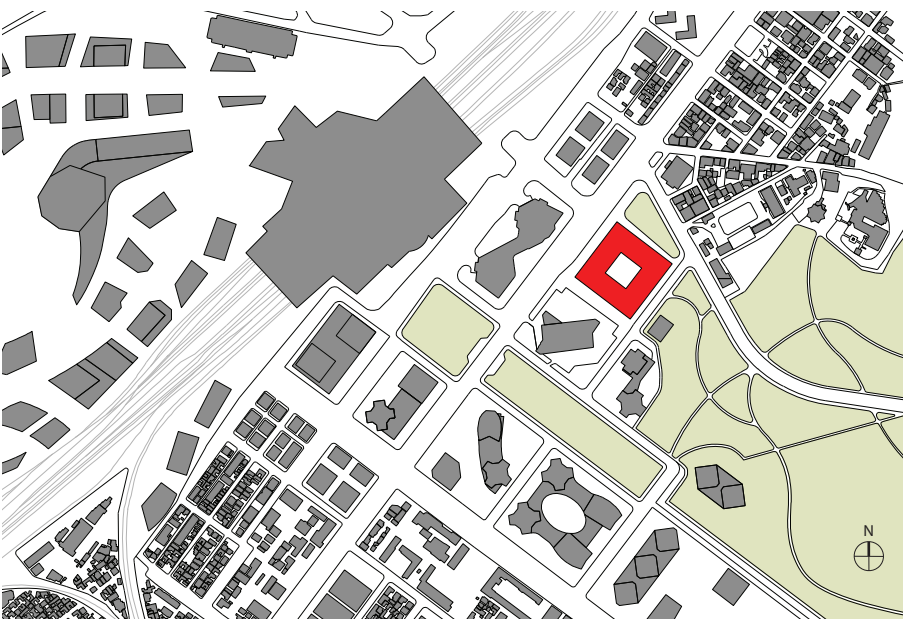


Figure 1. Site plan for the Amorepacific Headquarters building (highlighted). It is situated in a prominent location between Yongsan Railway Station (left) and Yongsan Park (right). © David Chipperfield Architects





Figure 2. The substantial presence of the new building is used to critical advantage, with the cut-out volumes forming a gateway to a newly green area of the city and its more intensive urban core, and the ground-floor elements given over to public functions. © Noshe

How could the new headquarters also engage with the urban energy of Seoul? With Amorepacific, the architect's and the owner's vision encompassed similar intentions. In addition to providing offices for 7,000 employees, the owner's chairman asked for the company's art collection to be at the heart of the building. His belief was that engagement with art can inspire people, open their minds and perhaps contribute to a better society. During the design process, he even gave up on his

initial idea for the ground floor to be completely commercial.

Instead, he proposed vitrine-type art galleries; a public library for art, design and architectural books; a flower shop; a childcare center; a space to exhibit the company's history; and a number of rooms to enjoy tea ceremonies. He wanted the new building to be more than just a company headquarters, and the commission already implied a public ambition. The intention for the new

headquarters was to be a place of connectivity and diversity, both for work and well-being. A local place for public activities, but with a sense of being part of something bigger. And, ultimately, a sustainable place.

### The Problem of Context

On the site, a struggle ensued between two opposing urban ideas about how a city should develop, and what type of cities we



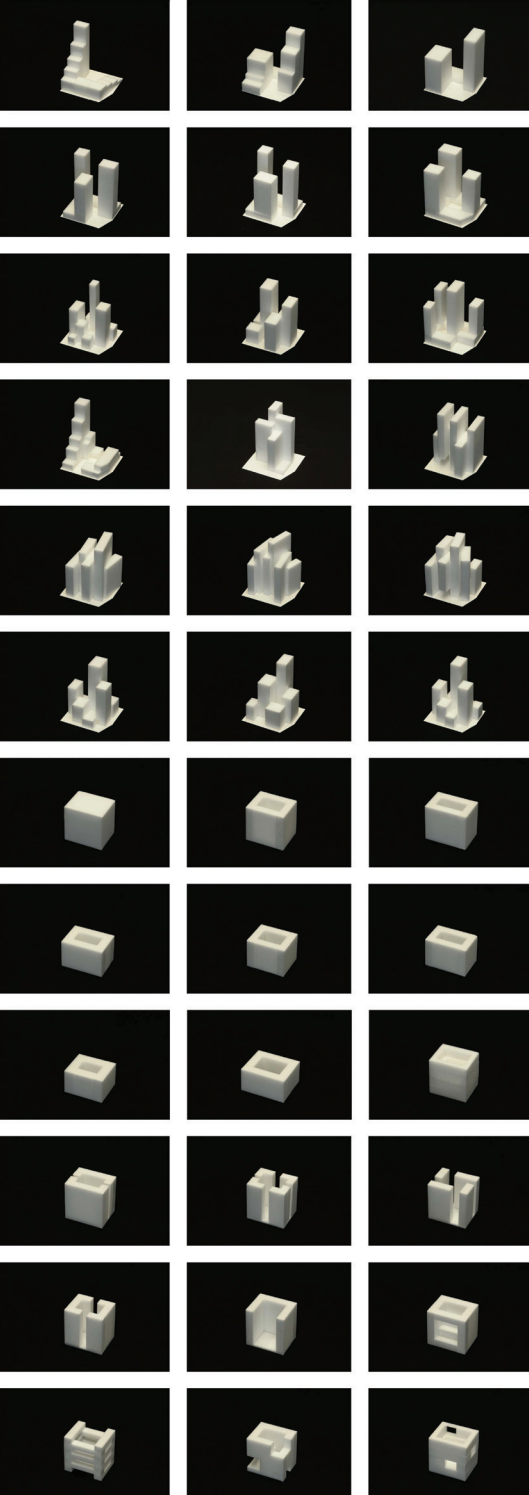


Figure 3. The design of the project transitioned from a singular tower, to a cluster, and eventually into the ultimate perforated-cube shape. © David Chipperfield Architects

want to live in. On the one hand, there was the historically grown urban fabric, in which individual buildings were less important to the quality of the urban space. The spatial quality of such places in such conditions is defined by a hierarchy of differently-sized streets, alleys and squares, and the human scale of built structures. On the other hand, there was the modern approach with large, sculptural, solitary buildings ignoring each other and the human scale. The spaces in between such conditions are most often neglected and do not contribute to the quality of urban life. The intention was to create a building somewhere in between those two opposing ideas.

The site was to be adjacent to one of the largest urban developments in Seoul, a new financial high-rise district, based on a master plan by Daniel Libeskind, which called for a spiral archipelago with a 600-meter-high tower at its core (the tower was ultimately canceled). What could be done in such a context, when the project is limited to 150 meters and outmatched by a tower four times its height? How could an identity or even visibility be established for a building that would stand in the shadow of such a giant?

The design team decided not to compete with the giant. Instead, a journey “from object to place” was pursued. In the design process, the team started with rather expressive sculptural shapes, aiming to establish groups of buildings, thereby creating the building’s own urban context. None of those studies were convincing, although they implied ideas of scale, organization, the exploitation of daylight and views, and the question of what

happens when the tower meets the ground. At one point, the team decided to retreat from these ambitions and propose a very simple and clear cubic volume, occupying almost the entire plot of land on which the company had grown over the past 74 years. This simple volume started to look more relaxed, and seemed to offer the opportunity to explore ideas beyond form and shape, in order to find the distinct identity of the final build (see Figure 3).

### The Plinth, and the Carved Volume

The large and simple volume allowed the architects to free the center of the building by introducing a courtyard over the entire height of the building (see Figure 4). The open space at the center could eventually be offered for public occupation, especially on the lower levels. To increase daylight and views, the team inserted three large openings at various heights. This intervention not only gave scale to the building, it also allowed for the introduction of several elevated gardens—an idea generated at the beginning of the project in relation to the new adjacent landscape park—to bring the notion of nature deep into the building as part of its atmosphere and identity. Further steps included questions of how to meet the ground in a way that establishes urban and spatial qualities at this level, and how to circulate and distribute people into and throughout the building.

The design introduced a plinth to mediate the given topography—a historic feature

“The intention was to create a project whose character was somewhere in between that of the historically grown urban fabric, with its hierarchy of streets and relation to the human scale, and that of a large, sculptural, solitary building.”



that Koreans are still familiar with, since almost every historic building made of timber had granite plinths to support the house and mediate the ground. The plinth sits between the building and the city, and establishes, in a subtle way, the territory between the city and the company by means of a cultural memory.

In order to achieve total permeability, the main façade was raised entirely above the ground level. In a non-hierarchical manner, people can access the building from all four sides, arriving in the central atrium, a three-story, day-lit lobby below the courtyard (see Figure 5). This space is publicly accessible. There is no security; the building is open to everyone. Security gates are only located in the four corners for employees. Freeing the center allowed the implementation of a decentralized vertical circulation scheme. These four cores are located in the floor plate zones that receive

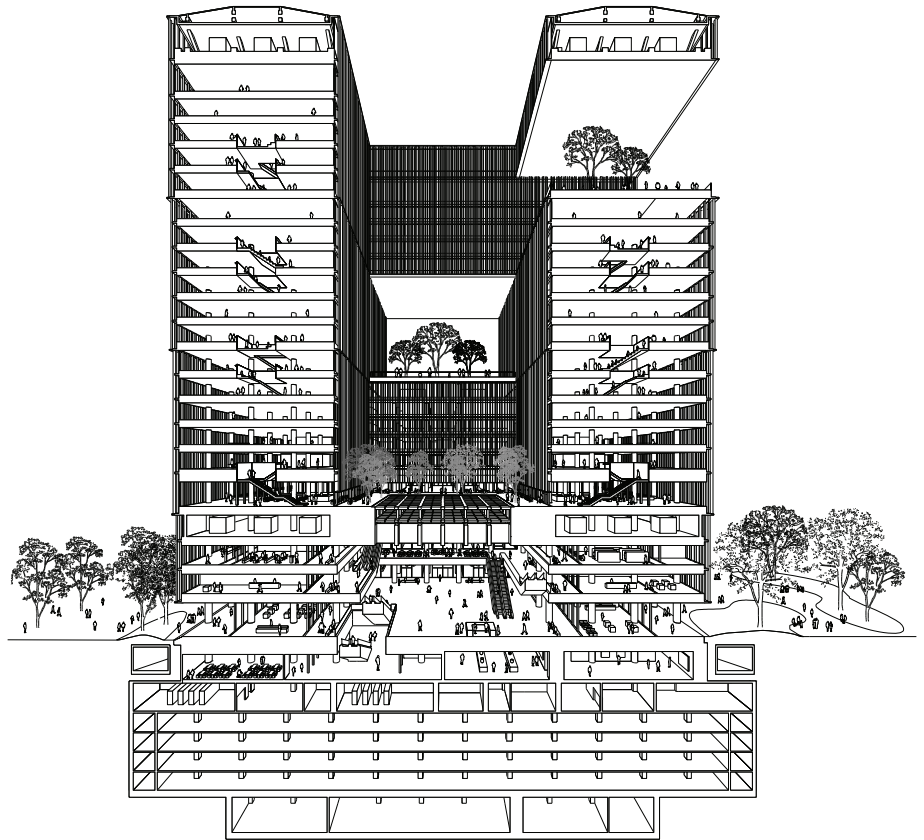
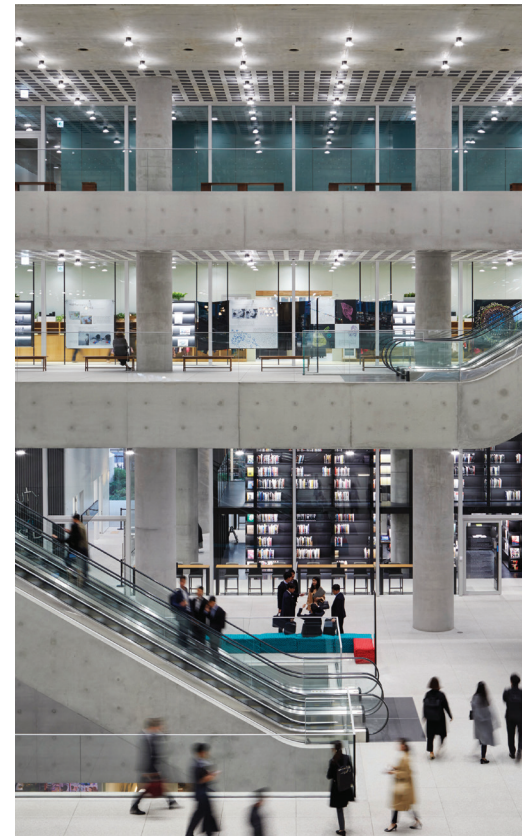


Figure 4. A section perspective of the building illustrates the interlocking system of cut-outs, courtyards and interfloor connections. © David Chipperfield Architects



Figure 5. A multi-story atrium greets visitors and employees at the entrance. The library is visible in the background of the photo to the right. © Noshe



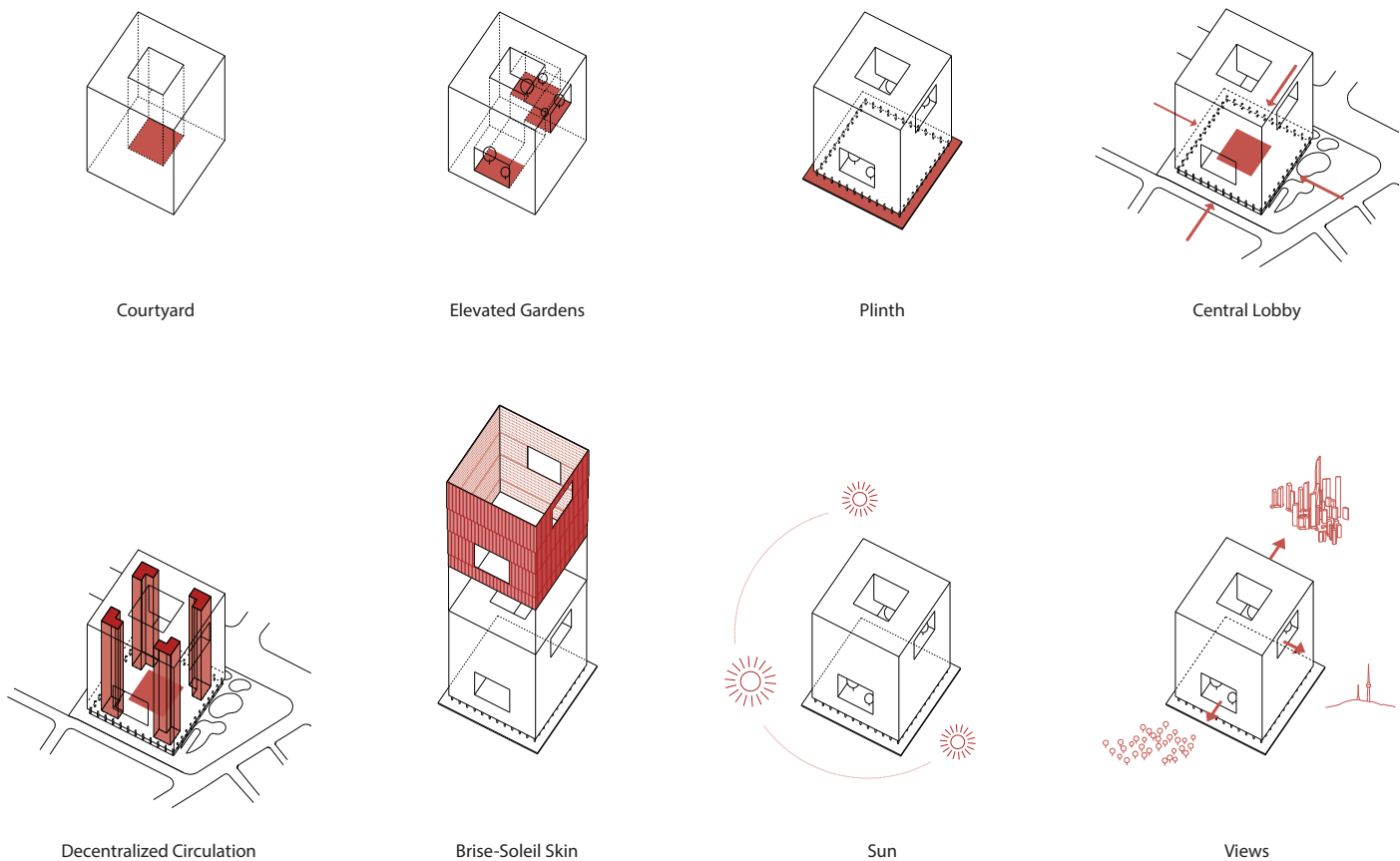


Figure 6. The deconstructed-cube design of the Amorepacific Headquarters serves multiple goals, from admitting light and air circulation to upper levels, to facilitating a large public space at ground level. © David Chipperfield Architects

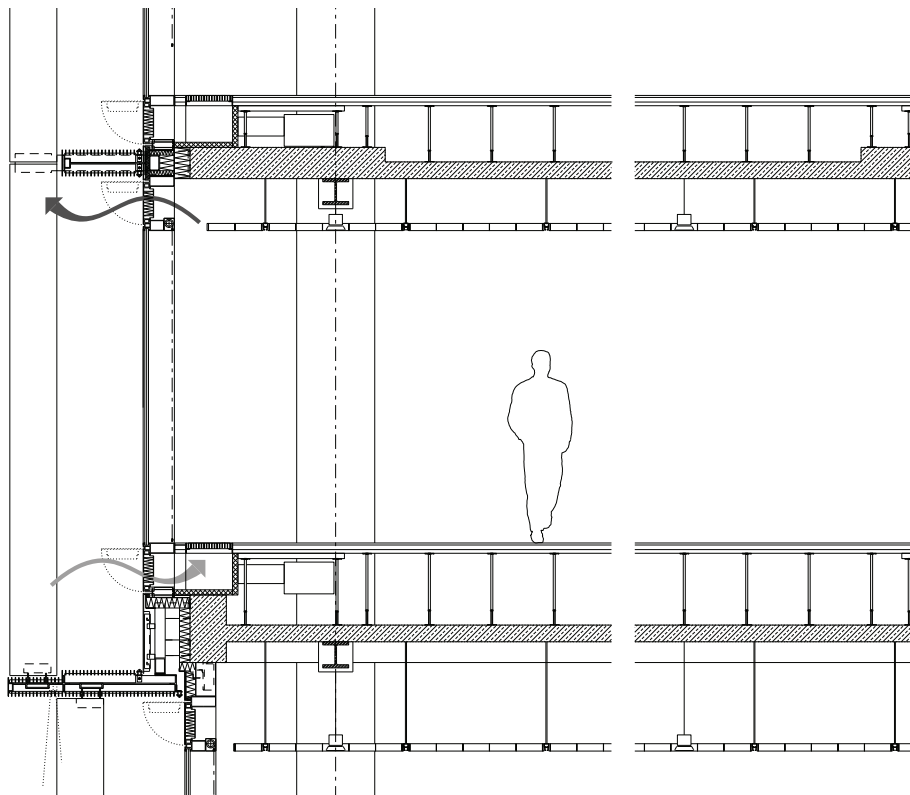


Figure 7. A detailed section of the façade at Amorepacific Headquarters demonstrates the strategy for naturally ventilating the office floors. © David Chipperfield Architects

the least daylight (see Figure 6). In addition to providing lateral stability and support against earthquakes, they also allow the scheme to achieve a floor efficiency of 82% across the entire building.

### Climatic Strategies and Views

The intention was always to make use of local climate conditions, with common-sense approaches to achieving simple, low-tech solutions for technical and environmental aims. Analyzing seasonal weather data, as well as studying the wind performance of the building, it was determined that the courtyard and the elevated gardens could be used to exploit the local climate for natural ventilation in the spring and autumn seasons, raising the standard of the building's environmental performance. The orientation of the building towards the cardinal directions in relation to the elevated gardens and the courtyard helped to balance direct solar gains against daylight benefits (as seen in Figure 6). On each floor, daylight and view





Figure 8. The interplay of the brise-soleil and the interior courtyards refers to Korea's traditional building culture, framing views and providing a sense of shelter and prospect.  
© Left: Noshe; Right: David Chipperfield Architects

areas were maximized on all sides, looking toward both the internal courtyard and external city, increasing the well-being factor for employees.

In order to exploit maximum daylight along with panoramic views, the building was bound to become a “glass” building, although the design team did not set out to build a “glass” building. It is an unfortunate yet common misconception that glass buildings are transparent, when actually, during the day, glass buildings appear mostly dark and opaque. On a sunny day, when all blinds are down, they even transform into completely sealed buildings. Glass buildings rarely fulfill what they promise: transparency. They only do so at night, when the lights are on.

Considering the local harsh climate, with its very cold and dry winters, very hot and humid summers, and the “yellow” seasons—when for weeks, yellow dust is blown all over the country, the design team proposed a very low-tech two-layered façade (see Figure 7). There is an inner thermal layer—a very straightforward, floor-to-ceiling elemented

glass and steel façade, a catwalk surrounding every floor level for easy maintenance, and an outer brise-soleil layer made of elliptically-shaped vertical aluminum fins of different sizes. The shapes of the fins resolve wind, sun and daylight issues in one solution. The outer layer also provides a psychological feeling of security when standing at the edge of a floor plate.

The brise-soleil layer can, by design, be read as part of a transformed cultural knowledge still present in Korea's collective memory, as it refers to the traditional paper-covered semi-transparent window systems for the control of daylight and wind. Hence, by means of a very simple façade construction, a wide range of diverse and lively expressions of the building could be achieved. Depending on the time of year, but also the time of day and the position of the beholder, the building oscillates between openness and closure, lightness and heaviness, transparency and opacity, and thereby enters into a dialogue with the city and the people who work there (see Figure 8).

“Moving the cores to the perimeter not only provides lateral stability; it also allows the scheme to achieve a floor efficiency of 82% across the entire building.”



## Program

The program, as outlined previously, fulfills various functions in relation to the architectural decisions. Together, the assembled functions form a building that not only connects with the city but also connects internally. The three-story atrium is a place of diverse public activities. It contains the central lobby, the Amorepacific Museum of Art, the museum's public library, a conference center, the company history space, a day-care, and a customer testing area, as well as shops, cafés and tea rooms (as previously seen in Figure 5). The main auditorium has 550 seats and overlooks the new adjacent park.

Between the public and more private functions of the building, namely the atrium and the offices, a semi-public level

intermediates. It is entirely dedicated to employees, and houses a canteen for around 1,000 people, a coffee and tea bar, fitness and health clubs, as well as informal meeting areas and event spaces.

All those functions open up towards the first elevated garden, around a central water pond, which, on top of the atrium, reflects the sky and enhances the daylight condition (see Figure 9). It is a place that Amorepacific has also made available to the public, facilitating both dynamic and tranquil activities. These gardens intensify the experience of the building with a generous spirit that serves employees and citizens alike.

The upper part of the building is completely dedicated to offices. It is a zone where company privacy is required. As the design team was also appointed to develop the

interiors of Amorepacific's new offices, the same strategy was applied to the interiors as to the core and shell of the building—finding a middle ground to balance the need for connectivity and openness with the desire for privacy and comfort. Contrary to the completely open-plan offices in the former building, which was inadequate, the architects proposed the semi-open concept—an “office of opportunities”. A furniture system was developed that allows people to choose from several work and meeting options, ranging from formal to very informal, from protected to very open, and from concentrated to very loose environments. The large floor plates of 5,000 square meters each are horizontally organized and connected by additional internal open staircases for maximum flexibility (see Figure 10). In addition to the central courtyard and large openings, all



Figure 9. A courtyard with water feature occupies the cut-out on the fourth floor. © Noshe



floors are visually connected to provide a sense of orientation and belonging from multiple angles. Each of the three elevated gardens serves a cluster of six office floors and extends the more informal parts of the offices into the city and the nature of the nearby park.

## Conclusion

Now that the building has been in use for about a year, it is satisfying to see the vision fulfilled—Amorepacific Headquarters has become a real place of engagement and connectivity. It is more than a company workplace, it is a public destination for all, bridging the past with the present, and thereby establishing an identity that is rooted in its time, place and history. ■

## Project Data

**Completion Date:** 2017

**Height:** 110 meters

**Stories:** 22 above grade, 7 below grade

**Area:** 216,000 square meters

**Use:** Office, Mixed-use

**Owner/Developer:** Amorepacific Corporation

**Architects:** David Chipperfield Architects (design); HaeAhn (architect of record); KESSON (architect of record)

**Structural Engineers:** Arup (design); CSSE (engineer of record)

**MEP Engineers:** Arup (design); Himec (engineer of record); Sukwoo Engineering (engineer of record)

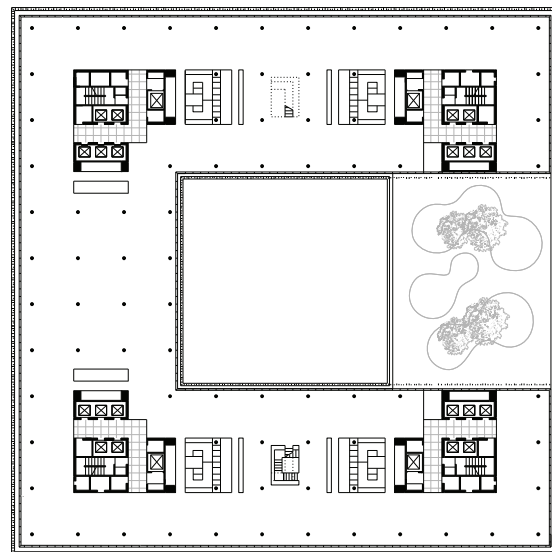
**Site Supervisor:** Kunwon Engineering

**Main Contractor:** Hyundai Engineering & Construction

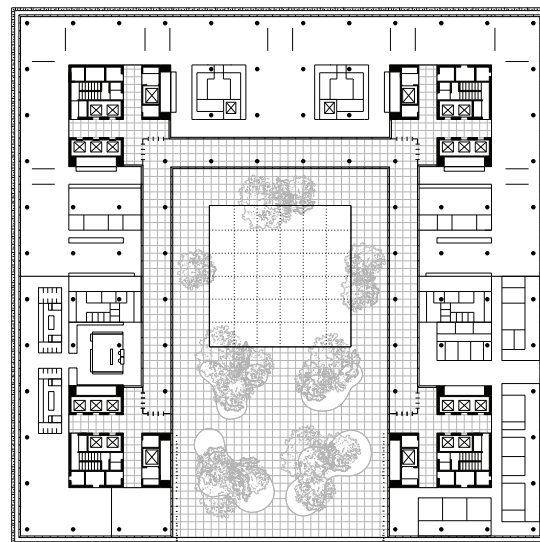
**Landscape Architect:** SeoAhn

**Other CTBUH Member Consultants:** Arup (acoustics, façade, fire, LEED, lighting, security, sustainability, vertical transportation, wind); Cosentini Associates (LEED); Daewoo E&C (wind); David Chipperfield Architects (interiors)

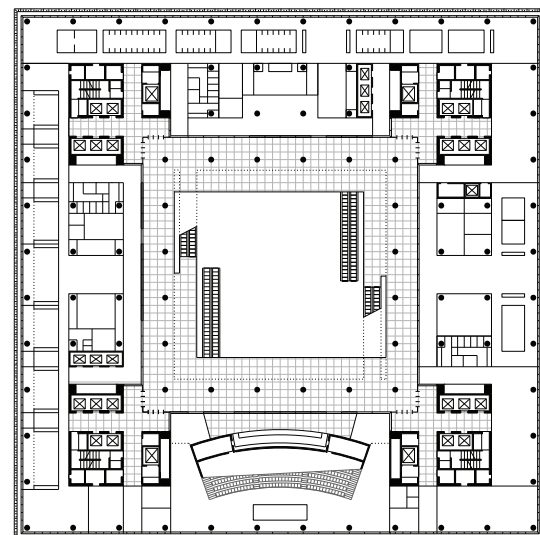
**Other CTBUH Member Suppliers:** Schüco (interior partition); thyssenkrupp (elevator)



Floor 16



Floor 4



Floor 1



Figure 10. The perimeter-core plan allows for generous floor plates and multiple outdoor common areas, as well as public functions on the ground floor. © David Chipperfield Architects