



Plan and section of Martine Sitbon shop.



# SURREAL ESTATE

Text by Andrew Yang. Photographs by Woo Il Kim

*Crafted by Cho Slade and Ga.A Architects, the new Martine Sitbon boutique in Seoul frames fashion between seamless surfaces.*

As though enhanced by a Botox injection, the new Martine Sitbon boutique in the South Korean capital of Seoul glistens like a revitalised version of its former self. Previously the garage of a French-style house built in the 1970s, this commercial unit – currently part of the Cheongdam-dong shopping district – cuts a dash on the same street that flaunts the likes of Prada and Louis Vuitton. Inside, the retail environment that Cho Slade Architects of New York and Ga.A Architects of Seoul crafted for French fashion designer Martine Sitbon is an essay in smooth surfaces that seamlessly connect spaces of different heights.

The tactile world created by architects from East and West complements the elegance and vintage chic of Sitbon's fashions. But more than simply another shiny new boutique for high fashion, they were after something timeless and personal. 'We wanted it to look like a giant liquid bubble,' says architect Minsuk Cho, who also points out the need for continuity, a quality hard to achieve in a field as unpredictable as fashion. Wrapping the space in a coherent envelope is a uniform surface of yellow epoxy compound, which covers floor, walls and ceiling. This inner skin gives the impression of a space carved out of a solid mass of buttery material.

The architects avoided the temptation to comment on one particular aspect of Sitbon's designs, which change from season to season. Instead they concentrated on reflecting the modern yet classic essence of the couturier's creations. Their interior can be described as a blank canvas, albeit a luxurious one. Sparsely distributed throughout the space are objects as bizarre as surrealist sculptures in a gallery setting. A black pebble, large and flat, invites visitors

to sit on its gleaming surface. Equally intriguing is the simple block of mounded silicone used as a sales counter. Clothes are displayed inside objects that look like oddly shaped, upended bathtubs. The collective gloss of the interior is decidedly flashy, but it provides a neutral backdrop for each new Sitbon collection.

More than just a showroom for clothing, the boutique is a vital player in the bustling street life of Cheongdam-dong. 'We're interested in the temporal relationship between time and distance,' says James Slade, 'and particularly in how a space changes over time.' During the day, when Cheongdam-dong fulfils the role of a dynamic shopping district, the display window is invitingly transparent. After dark, when the many clubs and bars in the vicinity transform the neighbourhood into a steamy cauldron of nightlife, the glazed façade becomes a reflective surface that hints of mystery and enchantment.

Working at breakneck speed, Slade and partner Cho have designed and completed a series of projects in South Korea that range from a media centre in a subway station to a store built into the landscape. The Sitbon boutique took just two months to complete. According to Slade, building in South Korea has little in common with building in the United States. South Koreans not only make decisions more quickly; they are also less concerned about creating work that endures. 'Korean clients are more interested in capturing the spirit of the moment,' says Slade, 'and the quick pace is helped by the fact that construction costs are relatively low.'

Like many burgeoning Asian cities, Seoul is experiencing a rapid evolution. Ten years ago, the Cheongdam-dong district was an upmarket residential neighbourhood. Today the area is completely commercialised. 'Such a transformation is typical of the city,' says Moongyu Choi of Ga.A Architects. Districts continually adapt to shifts in real-estate values, and buildings are torn down and rebuilt in response to new situations. Though the Sitbon boutique has enjoyed an initial burst of commercial success, Choi remains sceptical. 'Even I'm not sure how long this store can survive.'



During the day, the 7-metre-tall glazed façade reflects its Cheongdam surroundings and the sky above; at night the interior glows like a lantern.



Wrapped in a continuous surface, the sparse interior acts as a foil for highly sculptural pieces of furniture.