

여백의 미

[THE BEAUTY OF BLANK SPACE]

One of the challenges of art – and car design – is to create something simple and beautiful that also stands out. The key is to give your work the space to breathe. For South Koreans, and one Volvo Cars designer in particular, finding time and space helps reveal the beauty in a fast, busy world.

TEXT / PHOTO // KENNETH ANDERSON / MARCEL PABST





NAME: Jung-Hyun Lee

AGE: 38

BORN: Seoul, South Korea

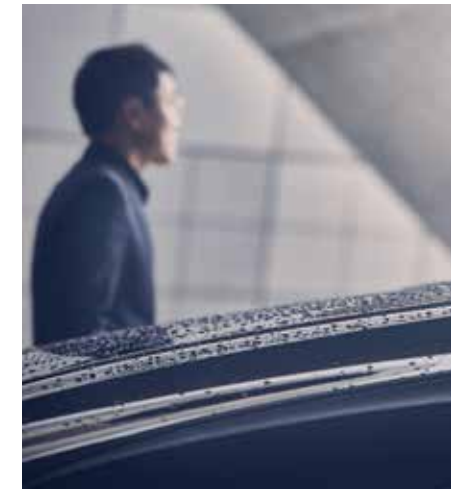
OCCUPATION: Senior Designer, Volvo Cars

Jung joined Volvo Cars in 2010. Most recently, he was lead designer of the award-winning Volvo XC60.

South Korea has undergone a remarkable transformation. What was once a struggling, agriculture-based economy is now one of the world's strongest. It has a thriving tech scene to rival Silicon Valley and was recently named the most innovative country in the world for the second year running by the Bloomberg Innovation Index. But with success comes sacrifices. And one of the biggest sacrifices made in the pursuit of prosperity has been time.

"To catch up with the world around us, we had to work harder and faster. This meant sacrificing time with family and friends. The result, though, was not just a stronger economy but the realisation that time, not money, is the true luxury."

These are the words of Jung-Hyun Lee, Senior Designer at Volvo Cars. Jung was responsible for the design of the award-winning all-new XC60 and is Volvo Cars first Korean designer. We met up with Jung in his hometown of Seoul to discuss growing up in the Korean capital, the similarities between South Korean and Swedish culture and how his unique appreciation of time inspires his designs.



Jung's passion for cars was inspired by his father, a retired university professor in mechanical engineering. "If anything stopped working around the house my father would fix it himself – this included the family car. We had a Korean car and I would sit right beside him as he worked to repair it, taking everything in."

If Jung's father inspired his interest in cars, his interest in design was awakened by an unlikely source beamed in from the other side of the world. "When I was 15, I was watching an American film with my brother. In the film was a black Porsche 964 and I just had to draw it. So, I got a pencil and a piece of paper my father used for his engineering drawings and set to work. At that point, I didn't even know there was such a thing as a car designer. I just liked cars and wanted to draw them for fun."

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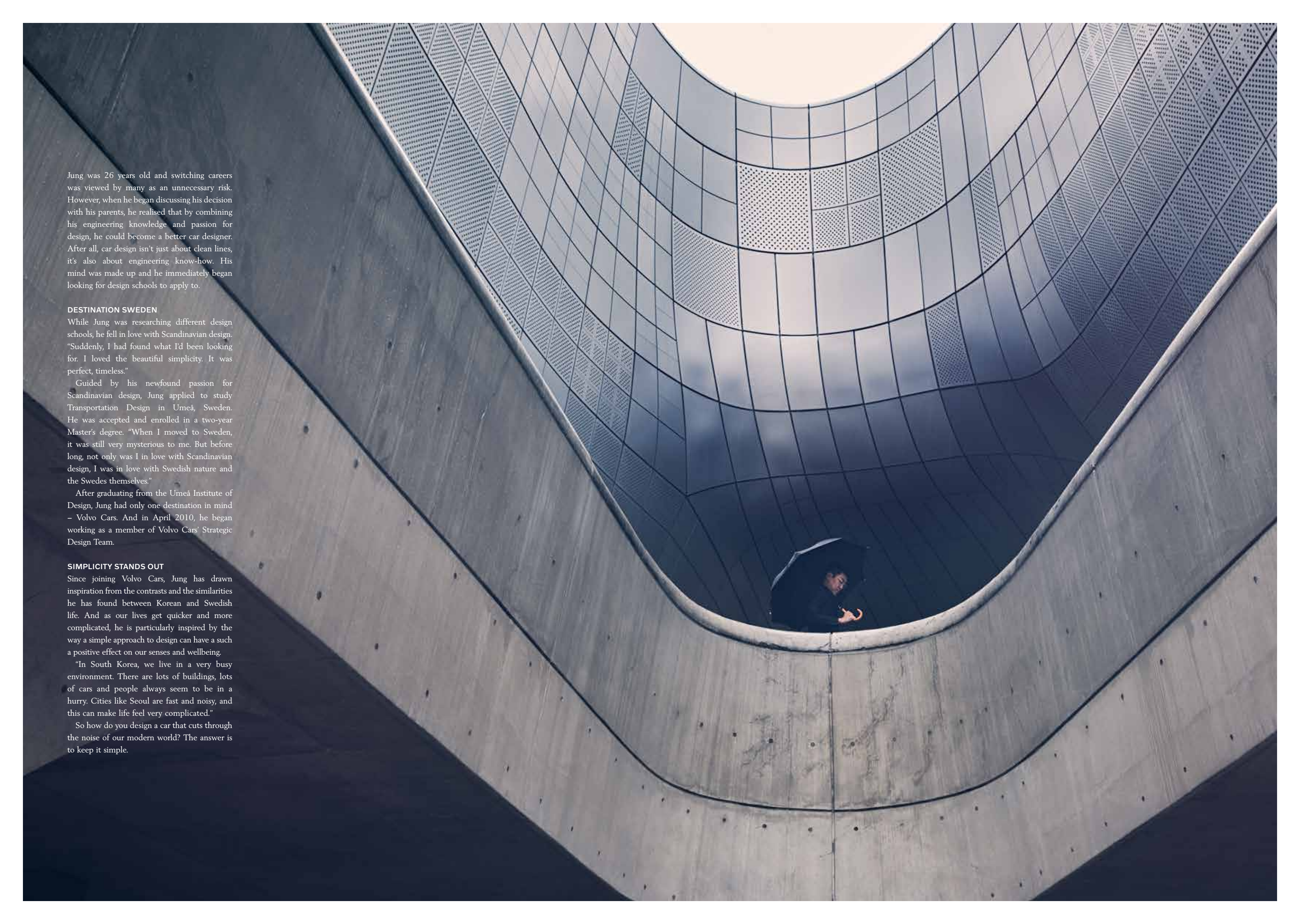
A PASSION FOR CARS

"When I was growing up, South Korea didn't really have a car culture. You could buy Korean-made cars but most people used public transport" explains Jung. "But even though you didn't see many imported cars, you saw plenty of enthusiasm for them. Fans of foreign cars would order motoring magazines from abroad to read about the latest models – and I was one of them!"

CHOOSING THE RIGHT PATH

When he graduated from high school, Jung was still unsure which career path to take. Finally, he decided to follow in his father's footsteps and study mechanical engineering. However, on completing his degree he began questioning his decision. Deep down, something didn't feel right.

"I enjoyed studying mechanical engineering, but something was missing. It didn't really touch me. I needed something more, something different. So, I started thinking back to what I loved when I was younger – cars, drawing and painting. When I put all these things together, I realised that what I really wanted to do with my life was design cars."



Jung was 26 years old and switching careers was viewed by many as an unnecessary risk. However, when he began discussing his decision with his parents, he realised that by combining his engineering knowledge and passion for design, he could become a better car designer. After all, car design isn't just about clean lines, it's also about engineering know-how. His mind was made up and he immediately began looking for design schools to apply to.

DESTINATION SWEDEN

While Jung was researching different design schools, he fell in love with Scandinavian design. "Suddenly, I had found what I'd been looking for. I loved the beautiful simplicity. It was perfect, timeless."

Guided by his newfound passion for Scandinavian design, Jung applied to study Transportation Design in Umeå, Sweden. He was accepted and enrolled in a two-year Master's degree. "When I moved to Sweden, it was still very mysterious to me. But before long, not only was I in love with Scandinavian design, I was in love with Swedish nature and the Swedes themselves."

After graduating from the Umeå Institute of Design, Jung had only one destination in mind – Volvo Cars. And in April 2010, he began working as a member of Volvo Cars' Strategic Design Team.

SIMPLICITY STANDS OUT

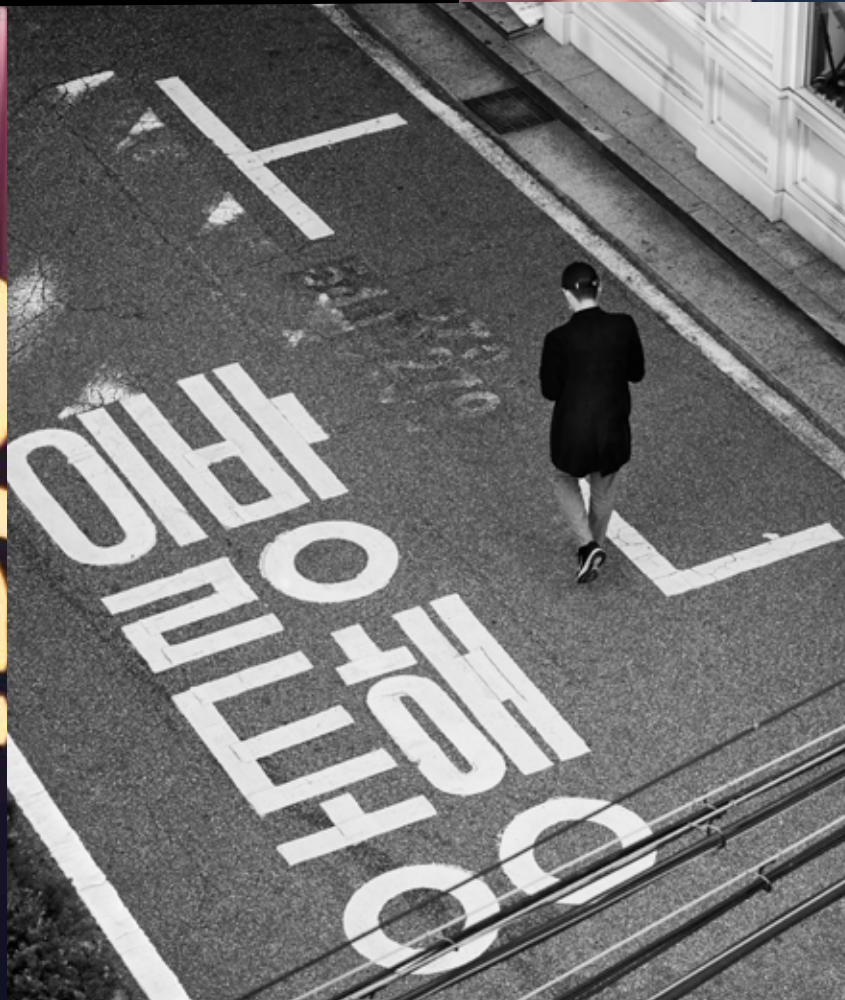
Since joining Volvo Cars, Jung has drawn inspiration from the contrasts and the similarities he has found between Korean and Swedish life. And as our lives get quicker and more complicated, he is particularly inspired by the way a simple approach to design can have a such a positive effect on our senses and wellbeing.

"In South Korea, we live in a very busy environment. There are lots of buildings, lots of cars and people always seem to be in a hurry. Cities like Seoul are fast and noisy, and this can make life feel very complicated."

So how do you design a car that cuts through the noise of our modern world? The answer is to keep it simple.



“The Hangeul alphabet was designed to make life simpler and better. It’s my favourite example of Korean design and still inspires me.”



“If something is too busy, it’s no longer beautiful. You need room for imagination. That’s the beauty of blank space.”

“The easiest way to ensure your design stands out is to keep adding more and more details,” explains Jung. “But people get tired of designs that are too complicated. The real challenge is coming up with designs that are simple AND stand out. I believe that, today, simple designs actually draw people’s attention. They stand out against the busy surroundings. Not only that, when people see a simple design, they feel more comfortable and relax more.”

In Korean culture, there is a saying “the beauty of blank space”. It doesn’t mean empty, it means only adding what is needed. “If you look at a traditional Korean painting, you will always find an empty, white area. This empty area allows the painting to breathe. If something is too busy, it is no longer beautiful. You have to leave room for imagination. That is the beauty of blank space,” explains Jung.

DESIGNS THAT MAKE LIFE BETTER

Throughout Korean history, you can find examples of people using simplicity as a way of making life better for people. And there is no finer example of this than Hangeul – the traditional Korean alphabet.

“The Korean language is not the easiest language to learn. In the past, we borrowed characters from the Chinese alphabet. Then, in the 15th Century, the king personally created the Hangeul. This new alphabet was very easy to learn and the king’s aim was that every Korean would have the chance to learn how to read, write and express themselves. Today, South Korea has a literacy rate of almost 100%. The Hangeul was designed to make our lives simpler and better and it succeeded. It is my favourite example of Korean design and it continues to inspire me.”

Today, Volvo cars are designed with a similar purpose: to make people’s lives simpler, better – and, of course, safer. And this is what Jung and his team of designers had in mind when creating the award winning all-new Volvo XC60.

RE-DESIGNING A DESIGN ICON

The Volvo XC60 is a modern-day icon, and Volvo Cars’ biggest selling model to date. So, the task of redesigning it for a new generation came with great expectations.

“The first-generation XC60 had a unique character,” explains Jung. “We wanted to keep the same character but evolve it to make it even more dynamic and elegant. We wanted to design a car that not only made people’s lives easier and more enjoyable, we wanted to design a car that people could fall in love with. And I’m very proud our design team achieved it.”

From the latest connectivity features and state-of-the-art technology, to high seating and handy storage, the new Volvo XC60 is packed with innovative new ways to make life simpler. But it's the seemingly simple design features that really make the difference.

MAKING UP FOR LOST TIME

"Growing up in Seoul, I learned that time is luxury. Most Korean people, including myself, are always busy, always on the move. We walk fast, eat fast and live fast. Time is very important to us. We always seem to be in a hurry so that we can have more time with family, friends – and for ourselves. At Volvo Cars, one of our main priorities today is helping people reclaim time. So, I use my own appreciation of time as inspiration to create designs that can help others enjoy and appreciate more free time of their own."

A good example of Jung's time-saving design is the XC60's under-wrap doors. Under-wrap doors are uniquely designed to extend all the way down to the car's body and overlap with the sills. Not only does this mean that the sills remain clean, it also means that climbing into the car is more comfortable and takes less time and effort. Now, this may sound like a minor detail, but it all adds up and shows just how much effort and attention to detail Volvo Cars' design teams put into every aspect of their work.

WHAT'S KOREAN FOR 'LAGOM'?

It may have been Jung's love of Scandinavian design that first drew him to Sweden, but after a while he began to discover other similarities between Korean and Swedish culture. One term in particular resonated with him as not only did it sum up his approach to design, it also described the Korean attitude to life he had been taught growing up in Seoul.

"When I first moved to Sweden, I kept hearing the word 'lagom'. When I learned what it meant, I realised it was similar to the Korean saying 'Jung-Do', which literally translates as 'the middle path'. 'Jung-Do' is very important to Korean people as it means doing things in moderation. When you're a child, you are told that it is best to not be the part of the rock that sticks out, as that is the part that is more likely to be hit. So, we are taught that it is best to be humble and not stick out – less is more, less is better. So, when I heard the phrase 'lagom' I recognised the significance straight away.

FREE TIME AND THE FUTURE

Through a love of Scandinavian design and a combination of 'lagom' and 'Jung-Do', Jung and his team help Volvo drivers not only enjoy timeless designs but also make the most of time they never knew they had. But how does the designer who helps others reclaim time spend his own free time?

"I like to be in a quiet place, like in nature or by a river or on a mountain. I find inspiration in everything around me – other designers, furniture, architecture – but I find time spent in nature to be the most inspiring thing of all. Whenever I start a new project, I go out in nature to relax and regain spiritual energy that makes me more passionate, creative and emotional. This is how I like to spend my extra time," explains Jung.

"And as for the future," he continues, "I just want to keep designing cars that people long for and fall in love with." ■

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