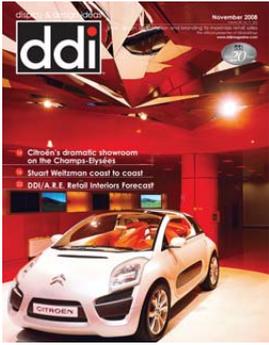


Back to the future

Citroën returns to the Champs-Élysées in Paris with an eye-popping contemporary space

By Mark Faithfull, London Editor
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Courtesy of Citroën Communication -
Philippe Ruault

The opening of "C42" was an important and symbolic event for French automobile manufacturer Citroën. By returning to its legendary street address—42 Champs-Élysées in Paris—Citroën was determined to celebrate not only its historic roots, but to also highlight its extensive vehicle range.

Citroën first opened on the Champs-Élysées back in 1927, with a gothic-inspired building. But within five years, founder André Citroën had replaced it with a 4,000-sq.-ft. showroom that was an ode to contemporary avant-garde industrial design, with a large metal frame façade supporting an immense rectangular plate-glass window.

In 1984, Citroën collaborated with the Flo Group on a restaurant bar concept in the location. That lasted until 2002, when Citroën decided to reclaim its showroom and make it a "prestigious showcase, an opportunity for the public to discover or rediscover the past, present and future of Citroën."

Architect Manuelle Gautrand won a competition to design the building, and the project went on site in March 2004, finally opening in the fall of 2007. Featuring a transparent façade that stands 75 ft. high, the new site aims to link the past—illustrated by the flat surface of the original building—with the future, represented by the soaring chevrons of the company's logo. The project is a retake on the historic façade designed by André Citroën in the 1930s, a design Gautrand describes as "beautiful."

In the center of the building, a series of vehicles are displayed in a rotating spiral—an animated vertical tier of cars—made up of eight superimposed turntables attached to a central mast and presenting the car maker's most iconic and innovative vehicles. Each of the turntables is topped by mirrors, extending the visual aesthetic of this "moving sculpture" that rises up to the glass dome at the top of the building. The cars have been placed on display stands using an equipment hoist that disappears into the basement when the cars are in place. Commenting on the highly vertical aesthetic, Gautrand says: "The interior presents the cars, the exterior tells the story of the brand. Every detail of the façade talks about Citroën—its roots in the past, its existence in the present and its vision of the decades to come."

One of Citroën's latest concept cars is displayed on the ground floor. A panoramic lift carries visitors from the atrium to the top floor, under the glass dome, for panoramic views over the French capital before arriving back on the ground floor at the end of the tour, where a retail shop is laid out around furniture designed by the architect. Dedicated to C42 products, the shop sells original objects based on the design of the premises.

"We were trying to create something like a museum or a cultural building, a space that would encourage people to spend time there," Gautrand reflects.

But the architect did have concerns as to how the building could create the necessary visual impact without jarring against neighboring structures. "We originally conceived the use of red, the brand's signature color, in the glass panels, but we decided it would be too bright from the outside," she concedes. "There were some concerns about the building not harmonizing with its neighbors, so we've created a filter that, on first sight, masks the red color from the exterior. This also minimizes the heat of the sun passing through, and also creates a pearly white atmosphere inside the building. The red can still be seen from the inside of the building, reflecting the brand's signature colors."

Gautrand has made maximum use of every inch of available space—what she describes as her "scenography"—filling an area nearly 40 ft. wide and 100 ft. deep. A latticework of glass and steel, weighing in at 95 tons, literally wraps around the building. The glazed area hugs the building's contours, from the visible façade on the avenue through to the back. Each pane is different, organized into 19 glass pyramids of varying dimensions, with overhangs of 20 in. to 28 in. jutting out halfway up. The two symbolic chevrons are infinitely multiplied through a flight of glass triangles.

This freestanding structure is independent of its neighboring sites and—at the same time—the glass latticework is independent of the metal frame. The envelope is placed on the framework using bearings designed to move up to 2.3 in. sideways to allow for temperature variations. The glass latticework thus floats free from the building structure.

"On street level, the glass façade is minimalist and demonstrates a certain rigor with its flatness and use of large rectangles, but the introduction of the chevron signals the start of some much more original design, with lozenge shapes, triangles and chevrons," Gautrand says. "The higher up the building one looks, the more three-dimensional it becomes. Finally, the top section of the new building is like a great glass sculpture, recalling origami in its complexity. The chevron becomes less defined and more suggested in the overall form, almost subliminal."

For Gautrand, C42 is also an allegory of automotive design. "The main role of the building is as a place to show cars, and we wanted to express this primary aim in the form of the space itself," she says. "The shape of the building itself is inspired by the shape of a car, it's not an object with a front, a roof and a rear, but something moulded with curves and fluidity."

Since opening, the C42 interior has been kept fresh by employing an events concept. Regular themed exhibitions give visitors an opportunity to discover eight vehicles and their corresponding "worlds," supported by design and audiovisual reinforcement, meaning there is always something new to see—more reinventions of this reinvented space.