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revving up



text: judy fayard photography: jimmy cohrrsen

in the driver's seat

With a Paris showroom for Citroën, Manuelle Gautrand zooms ahead

CITROËN

Previous spread: At Citroën's Paris showroom by Manuelle Gautrand Architecte, the central feature of the five-story atrium is a stacked series of display platforms supported by a steel column. The platforms, 20 feet in diameter, rotate in tandem to show off the cars to best advantage.



to Toyota. Citroën already had a showroom in the building, which dated to the 1930's but luckily wasn't landmarked, so it could be torn down and replaced. Still, the zoning code's varying height restrictions were problematic, especially at the rear of the lot. Anomalies aside, the available space for new construction was 36 feet wide by 110 feet deep by 115 feet high.

Manuelle Gautrand Architecte developed a glittering solution that's vertical, even vertiginous. The faceted glass facade incorporates red chevrons, references not only to Citroën but also to Gautrand, who's made origami pleating effects a signature. Inside, clearly visible from the street, is a five-story atrium that centers on a full-height column she refers to as a "tree of cars."

In more specific terms, the column supports a stack of eight circular platforms 20 feet in diameter. (That's large enough to hold a shiny Citroën weighing more →

The French love affair with the

Citroën began in 1919, when the first Type A rolled off the assembly line, and continued through the 20th century with models that became legendary. The 1934 black Traction Avant front-wheel drive continued to be favored by both cops and gangsters in the postwar years. (That's a Traction chasing Cary Grant and Grace Kelly around the Riviera's corniche in *To Catch a Thief*.) The 1948 2CV, or Deux Chevaux—an everyman's sardine-can-on-wheels—went out of production in 1990 but remains dear to hearts everywhere. Last year, a 2CV and 1955's sleek DS, with its revolutionary hydro-pneumatic rear suspension, made cameos in the animated hit *Ratatouille*.

When the venerable company needed a marquee Paris showroom that could bridge the past and the future—celebrating the history embodied in the double-chevron insignia while projecting the brand forward—executives approached architect Manuelle Gautrand. "That idea was very clear and forcefully expressed," Gautrand says. "Beyond that, however, they left a maximum of room for interpretation. It's rare for an architect to have so few constraints."

Equally rare was the fact that Citroën owned property on the Champs-Élysées, an avenue that in recent years has become a prime location for car showrooms from Mercedes-Benz

Top: Between the entry and the atrium sits a built-in resin reception desk.

Center: Some of the boutique's custom resin display cases can roll on castors across the epoxy floor. **Bottom:** The shape of the rear wall, built primarily of blackened steel and heat-insulating glass, resulted from height restrictions on the lot.

Opposite: The topmost platform showcases a 1934 Traction Avant front-wheel drive. Just below is a Deux Chevaux, the legendary très petite voiture produced from 1948 to 1990. Current models are on the bottom platforms.







than 1 ½ tons, from vintage classics to unbuilt concept models.) The platforms all revolve slowly—Gautrand calls them *tournettes*. Since the underside of each is mirror-polished stainless steel, the car below is reflected in fragments, like a kaleidoscope.

Except for on the ground level, at the base of the column, visitors to this vertical showroom never get near a car. Instead, they climb a staircase wrapping the atrium's perimeter and pause at the narrow landings, which Gautrand considerably provided at the level of each display platform, to gaze across the void. Balustrades are clear glass, and the effect of this transparency—along with the kaleidoscope of Citroëns—is decidedly giddy. Visitors subject to vertigo would be well advised to avoid looking down and to stay focused on the cars or, on the upper levels, the splendid view of the Eiffel Tower.



Rather reminiscent of that Paris icon is the steel latticework of the rear window wall, which owes its swooping shape to the varying height restrictions on the lot. Gautrand likens the atrium to a "cathedral of blackened steel." The glass is heat-insulating, transparent in some places and increasingly cloudy on the upper levels, where it provides a dreamlike, almost milky light. Overall, the 13,000-square-foot building contains a total of 7,000 square feet of glass.

Gautrand says that her inspiration also came from old-fashioned carousels and children's toy garages, and a playful quality is evidenced everywhere. In the boutique at the back of the ground level, vitrines embedded in the walls hold tiny model cars. Small benches, stored in niches, can be rolled out. Conversely, display cases on castors roll away to make room for events and receptions. Walls, furniture, and fixtures are all shiny white. In fact, every inch of the interior that's not transparent glass is lacquered pure white or fire-engine red, the carmaker's logo colors.

On one wall near the entrance, a video camera that's hooked up to a computer lets visitors watch themselves on-screen as they receive further information about the company's cars. On stair landings, other interactive screens offer information about the car on the corresponding *tournette*. Miniature screens, →



Opposite: A Citroën DS, the revolutionary model launched in 1955, is reflected in the mirror-polished stainless-steel underside of the platform above. The supporting column, which is hollow, doubles as a housing for HVAC and electronic equipment.

Top: Enamel signage on stair landings indicates the corresponding display platform. **Center:** The top of each platform is white resin. **Bottom:** When the platform lift is raised to transfer the cars on show, a steel beam at the top of the atrium serves as an anchor.



these set into panels next to the elevator doors, display videos of the car to be seen on each level. And the elevator interior is entirely, startlingly red.

For visitors looking at a car on its perch, the first question is probably, "How do they get there?" The answer is a device borrowed from the stage: the kind of platform lift used to construct state-of-the-art sets. The lift measures approximately 10 by 18 feet, the size of an SUV. It takes 30 to 45 minutes to raise a single car and roll it onto its rotating stage.

The lift is invisible most of the time, concealed beneath the resin floor of the basement. Reached via an all-red stairway from the main floor, this red-lacquered space is used for multimedia presentations on wall-size screens. And in the center, on its very own *tourette*, sits a prototype for a new Citroën, the compact car of the future. 



PROJECT TEAM: ANNE FELDMANN.

CUSTOM SUPPORT COLUMN (ATRIUM): TMB. LIGHT FIXTURES: ERCO. CUSTOM CEILING SYSTEM (ATRIUM), CUSTOM DISPLAY CASES (BOUTIQUE): ZACHARIE. CUSTOM WINDOW FRAMING: GARTNER. FLOORING: RÉSINE 2000. PAINT: TROUVE. MILLWORK, METALWORK: MÉTALLERIE DE L'AUTHION.



Top left: On the glass enclosure of the stair to the basement, adhesive plastic letters refer to the building's street number on the Champs-Élysées. **Top right:** A balustrade contributes to the project's use of 7,000 square feet of glass. **Bottom:** A video monitor in the basement gives information about the company's latest prototype.

Opposite: Colored glass chevrons reference the Citroën logo.

