

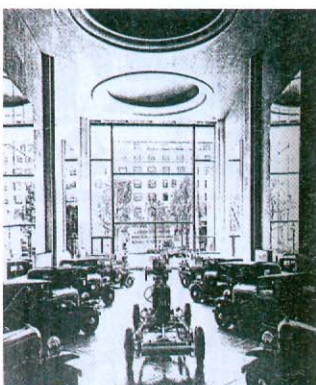


February 2008

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PARIS
Architecture is fused
with advertising in
Manuelle Gautrand's
Citroën experience.
Report: Chris Foges.



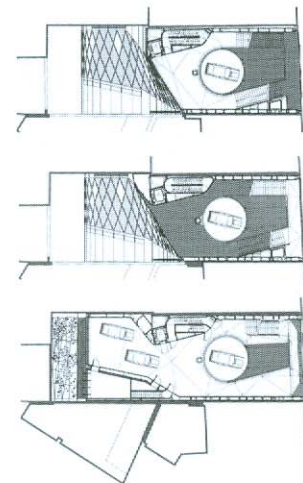
What is C42, Citroën's slick new home on the Champs-Élysées? It isn't a showroom or a shop; although there are products on display – seven cars on revolving turntables cantilevered from a jewelled totem pole that runs up through the building – you can't



buy any of them. And it isn't a conventional museum: the presentation of exhibits lacks the requisite detached objectivity. Its ambience is something like that of a church, where the visitor is invited simply to commune with the relics, worship at the shrine, 'share the values of a modern, innovative and daring brand,' as Citroën md Gilles Michel puts it. The ecclesiastical implication is more overt in the giddy hyperbole of the marketing department: 'The upward flight of the building,' it gushes, reflects the marque's soul and its spirit of creativity and innovation.'

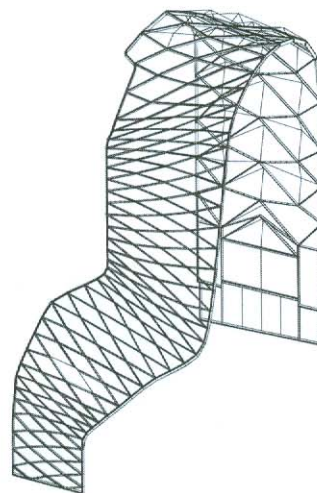
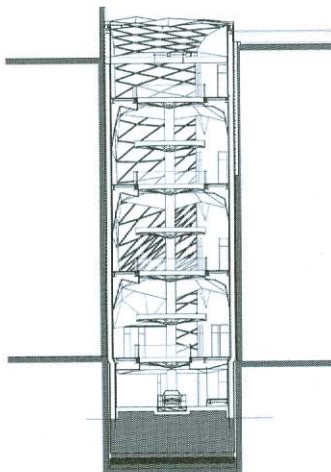
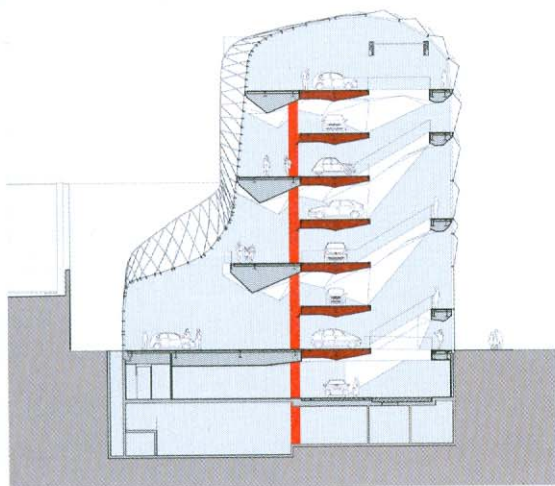
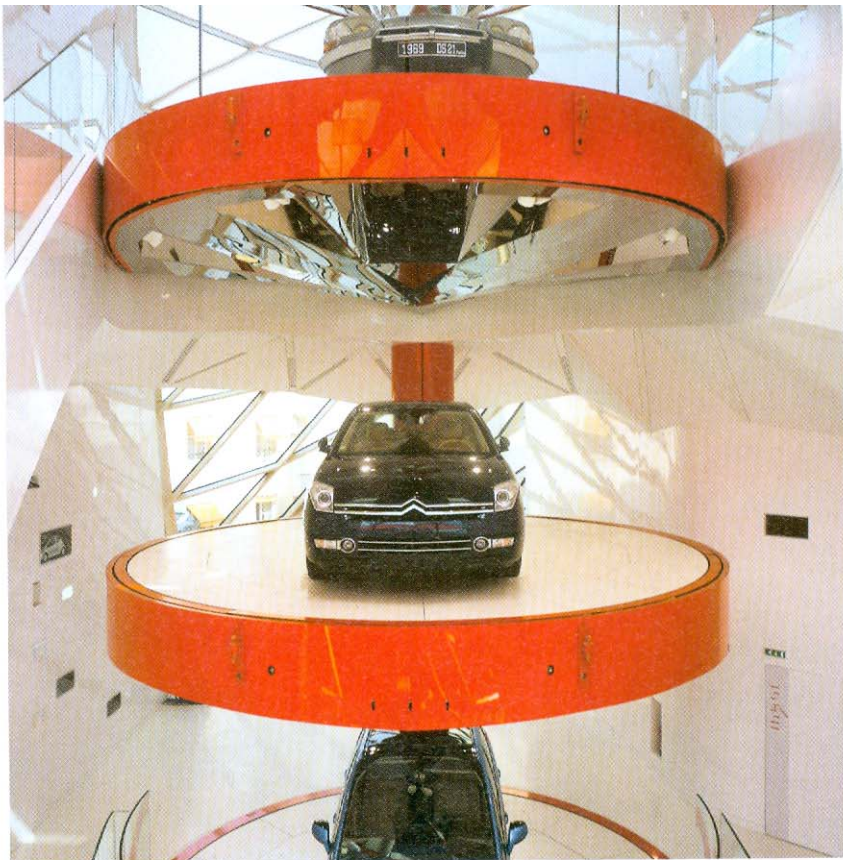
Writing 50 years ago about the new Citroën DS (beloved conveyance of Alison Smithson and Gio Ponti), Roland Barthes mischievously suggested that 'cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great gothic cathedrals': magical objects conceived to delight. The genetic code of the classic Citroëns – especially the DS, whose name is a play on *deesse*, French for goddess – is present in every aspect of C42, from the language of materials to its folded, glazed envelope. So much so that Barthes could almost have been writing about C42 when he suggested that the car was 'obviously the exaltation of glass, and pressed metal is only a support for it. Here, the glass surfaces are not windows, openings pierced in a dark shell; they are vast walls of air and space, with the curvature, the spread and the brilliance of soap bubbles, the hard thinness of a substance more entomological than mineral'.

This glazed envelope is literally the building's signature. At ground level on the Champs-Élysées the composition of the facade makes direct reference to André Citroën's first showroom on the site, built in 1927. Seven metres up is the double chevron of the Citroën logo, abstracted and rendered three-dimensional in the faceted glazing above. The continuous lattice loops over the top of the totem pole and descends sharply to form the rear elevation, double curved to take account of the misalignment of neighbouring buildings and height restrictions in the rear courtyard. The secondary structure is separate from the primary frame, and rests on bearings allowing sideways movement of up to 60mm. This engineering feat – like the high-level cranes that lift



cars onto their shelves – is downplayed by Gautrand, who aims instead for a kind of jointless perfection. Again, Barthes comes to mind; in the DS he found 'the beginnings of a new phenomenology of assembling', a seamless smoothness that hints at the divine, in contrast to the coarse tectonics of worldly things.

Barthes' essay was published in *Mythologies*, whose central concern is the way in which the technocratic icons of modernity, such as the DS, and the growing cultural power of advertising are used to shape a society in which you are what you consume. Both are brought together in C42, where the specific qualities of the architectural experience have been carefully calibrated against the



'values' of the Citroën brand, in the same way as the choice of typeface on the AV screens or the insipid background music. The use of architecture as marketing material is not new, of course: Peter Behrens' work for AEG nearly a century ago, taking in

everything from stationery to factories, is often described as the first corporate identity programme. And Citroën itself has long exploited the communicative potential of its buildings: its in-house architect, Maurice-Jacques Ravazé, ensured consistency in

showrooms built across Europe and north Africa in the 1920s and 30s, when the company's flagship premises on the Place de l'Europe doubled as a venue for exhibitions and concerts. Since 1984 the Champs Elysées site has been occupied by a hybrid restaurant/

Opposite Front facade (top); Citroën's 1927 showroom and aerial view (below).
Plans Ground and two upper levels.
Top Views across the central void.
Above Long and short sections and projection of the envelope.
Below Entrance; interior and exterior views of the double-curved rear facade; construction of the rear elevation.





Above Platforms cantilever from a single column into the central void.

Below right Views to front and rear from the top floor.

Below left A small counter at the rear of the ground floor sells merchandise.

Project Team

Architect: Manuelle Gautrand; structural engineer: Khephren; client: Automobiles Citroën; photos: Philippe Ruault.

showroom run in partnership with the grill chain Hippo. What is different here is that there is no sales function and no secondary entertainment offer. The brand – that ineffable, immaterial thing – is what is being presented in the store and represented in the architecture. Nearly 8000 visitors a day

come not just to see the cars, but to experience what Citroën feels like as a building.

The central column dominates the space enclosed by the envelope; there is not much else there. For the planning authority the important precedent was the area, rather than the height of the site's

last occupant, which sat like a broken tooth between two taller neighbours. Gautrand wanted height, so the area allowance is distributed carefully between the platforms, landings and the stairs that turn around the central void and the exhibits. Visitors can walk to the top or take a glass-fronted lift. From the upper levels, where the glass inclines outwards, there is a great view across the roofs of Paris, and directly down twenty-odd metres to the street: a real, visceral thrill. Sensitivity to vertigo sufferers apparently demanded greater restraint at the rear of the building, where the upper floors butt up against the twisting veil of glass. This is a pity, as a view up or down the height of the building, following the curve of the envelope, could have been the main attraction. Instead, only the residents opposite get the full benefit.

There is a soporific stillness to the interior; while ten lanes of traffic belt past outside, the cars inside make such gradual revolutions that even the most slow-footed visitor can step on and off the turntables, bathed in a soft light filtered through an acrylic honeycomb within the double glazing.

Although Gautrand was selected unanimously by a competition jury who felt she had the best understanding of the brand's nebulous qualities (finalists included Hadid, de Portzamparc and Libeskind), this is not her usual territory. Over 13 years the practice has built housing, cultural, educational and light industrial buildings, most of which show a strong interest in colour, materiality and pattern underpinned by an easy confidence in construction. At C42 the former is a distraction from the latter; it is most successful where the guiding light appears to be the work of Flaminio Bertoni, Citroën's great automotive designer, and least when the reference point is the work of its ad agency.

