



[Back to front page »](#)

SEPTEMBER 28, 2007, 6:17 PM

Citroën's Funky New Addition to Paris

By NICK KURCZEWSKI

TAGS: ARCHITECTURE, C42, CITROËN, DESIGN, PARIS

Citroën opened its new showroom in Paris, known simply as C42, to the world's automotive press earlier this week. Chatting in the futuristic display space, which is named for its location at number 42 on the Champs-Élysées, Gilles Michel, executive vice president of Citroën, admitted that he loves how some people hate the company's C-Cactus concept car. The C-Cactus was introduced at the Frankfurt Motor Show this month.

"That's great! That's what we want," he said, exuberantly.

If you're waiting for a punchline, then you don't know Citroën. The company hopes to use its new spiritual home to showcase its return to cutting-edge technology and controversial design. C42 opens to the public this weekend.

During the press conference, where journalists were offered a heady cocktail of Champagne and rich French sweets, Manuelle Gautrand, the architect of C42, colorfully referred to the previous Citroën-themed building as a "hollow tooth" on the Champs-Élysées.

When it was built in 1927, the original Citroën dealership at this location was a marvel of style and elegance, with a large glass entrance perfectly framing the cars inside. But by the 1980s the original showroom was gone, replaced by a chain restaurant with a half-hearted section devoted to Citroën. It was shorter than the surrounding buildings, and was overshadowed by Citroën's long history of innovative marketing.

"It was a very long experience," said Ms. Gautrand, referring to the construction project. City regulations meant that the Metro station directly in front of C42 could not be closed, and the sidewalk had to remain



Citroën opened its new showroom, known simply as C42, to the world's automotive press earlier this week.



accessible to pedestrians at all times.

The glass latticework — each section weighing four to six tons — had to be trucked in at 1:00 a.m. Since heavy equipment and trucks had to be cleared from the busy street in time for the morning rush hour, that left only five hours to unload the glass each day. Ms. Gautrand smiled wearily when describing the slow progress.

“To build on the Champs-Élysées is any architect’s dream,” she said. She added that it was strange to begin work as people were leaving nightclubs, and to finish as the city awoke and early-risers went past on their morning jog.



Inside C42, visitors will find concept cars from Citroën’s past like the C-AirPlay, which was shown at the 2005 Bologna Auto Show.

The interior of the C42 is dominated by glass, an imposing red tower, and walls and staircases done in bright white. Imagine a mix of “A Clockwork Orange” and Eero Saarinen’s terminal for T.W.A. at Kennedy airport. Stretching nearly 100 feet skyward, the central tower supports eight turntables, each with a car from Citroën’s past, present or future.

The upper levels feature vehicles from Citroën’s past: A Traction Avant, one of the first front-wheel drive cars, is on the top floor. A 2CV, a sort of French equivalent of the VW Beetle, is next, followed by the wonderfully chic DS21 sedan, a car that still looks modern a half-century after its introduction. Touch-screen computers allow visitors to learn more about each car’s features and history.

The next three levels are devoted to Citroën’s current lineup. Unlike the classics, the modern cars are unlocked and visitors are free to step inside. Arriving back where we started, the ground floor and basement house recent concept cars like the C-AirPlay and C-Métisse, a diesel hybrid that looks like a 21st century Calliope muscle car.

LOOKS LIKE A 21ST CENTURY GAMBUSIE CAR.

And it wouldn't be a Citroën showroom without a dose of the avant-garde: Every 15 minutes, a full-size model of a DS sedan transforms into [what Citroën calls its Totem Mobile](#), which was introduced at the Paris Motor Show last year. Designed by the American artist Chico MacMurtrie, the Totem Mobile splits open and expands skyward, stretching 60 feet at full height.

You can't buy cars at C42, though a Citroën representative can inform interested visitors of the dealership closest to their home. Mr. Michel said that C42 lets the brand reach out to people in a warm and modern environment. If the cars inspire debate, then so much the better. "We do not want to mimic or replicate the past," Mr. Michel said. "It's always worse than the original."

Will Citroën use C42 as a barometer for a possible re-entry into the United States market?

Mr. Michel chuckled and admitted that he had sensed the question was coming: "We're not returning in the short term. But no car company can ignore it forever." With the imaginative C42 showroom, Citroën is also becoming much harder to ignore.

 [LINK](#)  [E-MAIL THIS](#)