

## Car Heaven

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UN Studio has transformed what could have been a mundane visit to the gigantic Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart into a magical experience; you can wander around for hours on end without losing your way.

The automobile industry has been a pillar of the German economy for many decades. But it's also a branch of industry that is marked by cutthroat competition. Cars are manufactured worldwide, and although significant qualitative differences once existed, the exchangeability of the cars produced today is remarkably high. With fewer unique selling points at their disposal, auto makers are being forced to direct more and more of their attention to image. A brand should project a recognizable identity. To achieve this goal, manufacturers are employing a new resource: by adding an aura of culture to the conventional showroom, they can transform the space into a genuine museum.

The largest and boldest step in this developing trend was taken recently by Mercedes-Benz, the self-proclaimed inventor of the automobile and the owner of a 16,500-m<sup>2</sup> museum in Stuttgart in which 120 years of motorized history has been brought to life. Officially, the immense building – designed by Amsterdam firm UN Studio – is said to have cost €150 million, including the interiors, which are the work of HG Merz.

As a rule, profit-making organizations and museums are not a great match. Earning money and dispersing culture are different objectives, even though a notably increasing overlap of the two is a hallmark of our time. After reading the information provided, the individual visitor must rely on his own ability to put things into perspective where necessary. Consider, for example, that the Mercedes Museum has absolutely nothing to say about innovations in the car industry that are attributable to other brands. On the other hand, the company museum has a huge advantage over its independent cousin: the collection is phenomenal, inexhaustible and free. What makes the museum in Stuttgart such a successful attraction is its display of 160 vehicles and countless other exhibits.

And the architecture. The building itself is an attraction. At first glance, you're struck by something strange – something that causes you to underestimate the scale of the building. From a distance, what looks like an alternating sequence of parapets and windows turns out to be, as you approach the museum, a succession of full-fledged storeys, one completely closed and the next completely open. On reaching the museum, you're facing a building that's two times bigger than what you'd expected.

The initial surprise continues inside. After passing through a rather unsensational entrance hall, you step into a 42-m-high atrium. What comes next is a matchless moment: the journey in one of three purpose-designed lifts to the top floor, the so-called 'cloud' at the apex of the atrium. These two spaces seem to have been inspired by vintage cinema: the atrium, with its streamlined lifts, calls to mind the Ministry of Information from Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil* (or older sci-fi films that undoubtedly had an impact on Gilliam); the top storey, with its aluminium floors and white canvases, evokes images of the spacecraft aesthetic of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Although Ben van Berkel of UN Studio is a tad secretive when it comes to precise sources of inspiration, he is willing to reveal that any formal references to cars got an immediate thumbs down from his client. It's obvious that real specialists would have found such symbolism far too banal.

The ascent in the lift does the job it's meant to do, and consummately so: like a time machine, it sweeps you into another moment in history. You leave your everyday life far below and forgotten. Exiting the lift and entering the first exhibition hall, you find yourself in a pleasantly illuminated, brass-clad space that features the birth of the automobile. (Wall coverings in the rooms that follow become more and more 'modern': wood, leather and the plastic used to make airbags.) From there,

the tour spirals down through the building. Two options are available: you can walk through a series of five rooms finished in light-blue concrete and lined with uninterrupted glazed walls that offer a view of the outdoors; or you can visit a series of seven dimly lit, double-high rooms with theatrically illuminated thematic displays, floors of crosscut oak and a view of the atrium. (Both routes follow a clockwise direction.) Officially, one spiral shows 'the Collection' and the other focuses on 'Legends', but because both are organized thematically and present similar things – namely, lots of cars – the difference is not very clear. In architectonic terms, the routes are much more explicit: natural light versus artificial light.

Everything in the building exhales an air of professionalism. You feel the presence of an architect with a mission, as well as of a client who took the project very seriously. (Van Berkel: 'Never before have we been given such a clear brief.') This commitment to the project can also be seen in the long 'optimization process' (March 2002 to September 2003) that separated the invitational-competition phase from the implementation phase, an 18-month period slotted into the schedule even though all parties involved were working against the clock. (The museum had to open before this year's FIFA World Cup tournament.) *Reculer pour mieux sauter*. Not only did they meet the planning requirements; they also had time for a six-week trial run and for a series of preview visits that included some 600 media people. No small achievement, and the PR and marketing departments can take their share of credit for the success of this run-up to the grand opening.

The idea of integrating two parallel routes into the museum – and the possibility of switching from one to the other – was part of the brief drawn up by curator and exhibition designer HG Merz, a company hired to work on the project even before the competition had been organized. In a remarkable decision, Mercedes determined that only one architecture firm was capable of handling this relatively elementary task: 'Only one proposal met these apparently irreconcilable needs.' Exit Asymptote, Alberto Campo Baeza, Beucker Maschlanka und Partner, Hans Kollhoff, Djordjevic-Müller, Schneider-Schumacher, Kazuyo Sejima-Ryue Nishizawa, Angélil Graham Pfenninger Scholl, and Lederer-Ragnarsdottir-Oei, the other architects invited to compete. UN Studio presented a concept that featured a double helix, the molecular structure of our DNA.

Although both helical routes in UN Studio's original design continued all the way to the entrance level, it was decided during the optimization process that the two would meet on Level 3 in a vast space devoted to Mercedes' success in the sport of car racing, evidently an achievement that is meant to be the ultimate highlight of the museum. It's safe to say that this decision was accepted by all concerned only after a great deal of discussion, for it severely muddled the spatial concept. Taking the daylight circuit down means touring five rooms and then suddenly losing the logical continuation of your chosen route.

A bit of logistic confusion does nothing to spoil the fun, however. The museum has borrowed a trademark of Disney parks: because it is slightly too large for a one-day visit, it leaves the visitor feeling as though he's missed something – as if the whole is even richer than the sum of those parts that he's experienced. The Mercedes Museum is so big and has so many fascinating facets that you don't get tired of looking around, even when you've seen certain areas more than once, which you cannot avoid doing. Actually, you should walk down via one route, take the lift to the top again, and follow the other route to the bottom. You will have visited the start and the finish of the exhibition twice, but the repetition feels more like a reward than a punishment. The spatial spectacle, together with the quality of the exhibits, makes this a museum that is well worth exploring for that extra hour or so. 'The building keeps unfolding, keeps surprising you. But you cannot lose your way,' says Ben van Berkel. He's right. And it's this experience that constitutes the magic of the museum.

Wandering through the building, you begin to notice the absence of doors. You're moving within one fluid space. Ramps, column-free exhibition spaces with up to 33-m spans, a colossal atrium: everything is openly interconnected. We all know that current fire-safety regulations have relegated to utopia the modernist ideal of continuous space in public buildings. Every design project of this

sort has to comply with rules on fire exits and smoke compartments. But where there's a will – and a well-filled purse, even one reserved primarily for research – there's a way, and this museum proves the point. If fire were to break out, a gigantic suction pump at the pinnacle of the atrium would create an enormous underpressure and, in so doing, suck smoke from the building via the atrium. The nickname of this installation is 'the Tornado'. Tested and approved in the presence of fire-safety officials, the system, along with the name of the museum, is earmarked for publication in the *Guinness Book of Records*, an honour that pleases museum officials and everyone at Mercedes-Benz. Hence, the 'single surface approach' without 'dead ends' was protected from interfering elements.

Max von Pein, managing director of the museum, calls the double helix 'a metaphor for the genes of the brand', but more than anything else, of course, the helix is a spatial model, related to concepts such as the Möbius strip, a one-sided geometric surface that UN Studio has been tinkering with for years. UN Studio has its own agenda, is fascinated by a particular architectonic construct and gears specific projects to this construct – and not the other way round. It's a way of working that occurs more and more often in the globalized whirligig of contemporary prestige architecture. The architect commissioned to design a cultural centre in Seoul today, a museum in San Francisco next month, and a concert hall in Shanghai a month or so later is all but forced to rely on a personal agenda as the point of departure for such projects. 'Yes,' agrees van Berkel. 'I guess one has to be serial in a way nowadays.' One of the first architects of the current world-traveller generation to openly acknowledge this practice was Rem Koolhaas, who transformed the design of a villa that was going nowhere into a music centre in Porto. Elsewhere in this issue of *Mark*, you'll find an opera house designed by Toyo Ito that was first submitted to a competition in Ghent and that is now scheduled for construction in Taiwan. Those who make an effort to follow international competitions note that quite a few ideas are constantly recycled. The results are often grotesque, but once in a while everything falls into place, as exemplified by the helixes in Stuttgart. It just so happens that uninterrupted space and doubly folded concrete surfaces can be happily wed to aerodynamic design and race courses. What UN Studio has made for Mercedes is a three-dimensional work of art whose exterior looks like a designer object shaped by a wind tunnel and whose interior looks like a garage straight out of car heaven.

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