HIGH FASHION FACTORIES

These three new plants do more than assemble vehicles. They also jazz up public image.

By Stuart F. Brown

ARCHITECTURAL BRIO SURE WORKS FOR INSTITUTIONS like New York City's Guggenheim Museum, which reaped heaps of attention for its wavy, titanium-clad outpost in Bilbao, Spain, designed by architect Frank Gehry. And companies like Transamerica in San Francisco have nurtured outsized reputations by commissioning distinctive buildings to house their offices.

With competition ferocious on a global scale, automakers—particularly luxury ones—are also eager to stand out. They're betting that the allure of architecture can work for them too. But this time the visual splurge isn't aimed at gleaming corporate headquarters or elaborate design centers. Instead, the companies are paying talented architects to lavish attention on the factories where the cars are actually made. The idea is to turn traditionally utilitarian buildings into eye-catchers that say something exciting about the automakers that built them. Three such projects, a pair in Germany and one in Michigan, embody the push by BMW, Volkswagen, and Ford Motor to use distinctive factory buildings to burnish their brands.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HENNING BOCK—BRANSCH

Volkswagen

DRESDEN, GERMANY

WHEN VOLKSWAGEN DECLARED its intent to build a world-class luxury performance car, it faced the challenge of convincing prospective customers that a car wearing the once-humble VW badge on its nose could be a credible alternative to, say, the prestigious Mercedes S-Class cars. VW chose to convey that message by building a $180 million factory like no other for final assembly of the $65,000 to $85,000 Phaeton. Shown here and on the previous two pages, the Glass Factory by architect Gunter Henn is the result.

Although the last stages of car assembly are indeed performed at the factory, the place is really a theater for the seduction of shoppers; it has become a tourist attraction in Dresden, where it stands in the middle of town. Components and subassemblies arrive via special trolleys on the city's transit-system tracks.

Inside, white-coated and -gloved workers trim the car bodies with interiors, seats, and so forth according to the customer's specification. The environment would fit a loft-dwelling yuppie's fantasy. The floors, including the slowly gliding conveyors that carry Phaetons through their birth process, are Canadian hardwood parquetry. An eerie quiet prevails, with none of the hissing and clanging one expects in factories. Engines and transmissions are staged for one of the industrial world's greatest moments—the "wedding" of the body to the chassis—where visitors can watch from a balcony with a brushed-aluminum railing.

Built from 4,500 panels of glass, this beautiful and unusual building says, "Look at the unhurried attention skilled workers are paying to your very special car." In spite of all this, the Phaeton has been a slow seller, and this summer the Glass Factory was running at one-fifth of capacity, assembling just 30 cars per day.

Ford Motor

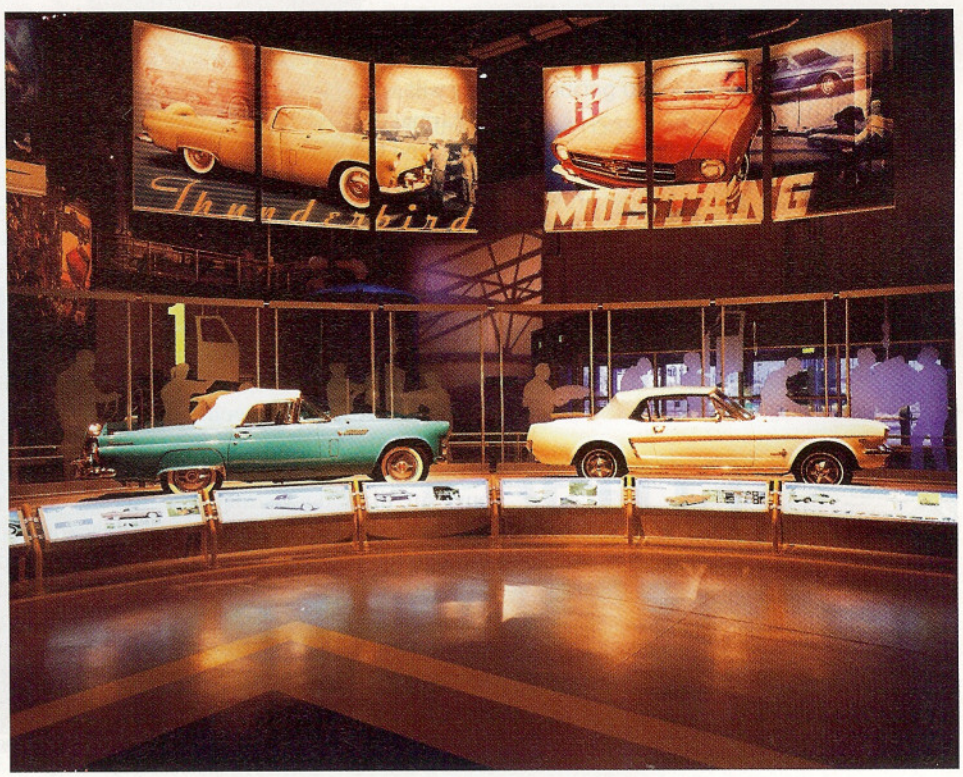
DEARBORN, MICHIGAN

FORD MOTOR CEO BILL FORD IS KNOWN AS AN AUTO MOGUL WHO'S GENUINELY sensitive to environmental concerns. But he also has failures to atone for, like an unfulfilled promise to reduce the fuel consumption of his company's SUV fleet 25% by 2005. Perhaps the new Dearborn Truck Plant at Ford's revitalized Rouge Center is making him feel better. It has more than ten acres of "living roof" atop the final-assembly building, which recently began producing hot-selling F-150 pickups at the rate of 280,000 per year. The trucks may not be fuel sippers, but the roof, sown with a mix of rugged sedum plants, gives off oxygen and reduces the building's heating and cooling demands, saving energy. The vegetation is said to require little maintenance and is predicted to last twice as long as a conventional roof. So both literally and figuratively, this roof is green.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS MUELLER—REDUX

On the grounds around the plant can be found other wholesome technologies, including solar arrays for producing electricity and hot water, and wetland areas fed by rainwater runoff. Ford's advisor on these features is William McDonough, whose eponymous firm is a leader in the sustainable-design movement in architecture. The green features at the Rouge, as it's long been known, are intended to be practical as well as environmentally correct. "Bill Ford announced that the revitalized Rouge would have green elements, but he didn't give us any extra time or budget to accomplish them. They have to pay their own way," says Timothy O'Brien, vice president of corporate relations.

The Ford Rouge Center occupies part of the original grounds of what is probably the most storied industrial site in the world: the leviathan River Rouge complex, where founder Henry Ford in the 1920s began bringing iron ore and other raw materials in one end and rolling finished vehicles out the other, and where by 1928 more than 100,000 workers were employed. For decades, literally millions of pilgrims from around the world took tours of the complex, Ford canceled the tours in 1980 as a cost-cutting measure and has only now revived them. Visitors can watch the drama of F-150 assembly from long overhead walkways. There's also a snazzy visitor center with exhibits and a theater-in-the-round showing an excellent multiscreen film called *The Art of Manufacturing*, which vividly presents things like steelmaking that Ford no longer does at the complex. This place says: Come and watch us build trucks. Oh, and we're trying to be green at the Rouge. At least on the roof.



BMW

LEIPZIG, GERMANY

AT A HUGE GREENFIELD SITE OUTSIDE LEIPZIG IN THE FORMER EAST GERMANY, construction crews are putting the final touches on a $1.5 billion BMW plant complex that will assemble about 650 next-generation 3-Series cars a day next year. The nature of carmaking lends itself to rectangular structures that can house serpentine assembly lines, and the BMW complex is no different in that respect. Sprawling boxy buildings house the bodymaking, painting, and final-assembly operations.

The visual excitement at BMW Leipzig resides in its somberly named Central Building, designed by Iraqi-born London architect Zaha Hadid. This year's winner of the Pritzker Prize—architecture's big one—Hadid is hotter than hot now. The 280,000-square-foot building she penned is a wild zigzagging structure connecting the three adjacent factory buildings. It serves as a portal to the complex for visitors and for the 5,500 employees who will work there. In addition to wowing anybody who walks through its entranceway, the Central Building will house the plant's administrative offices, quality-control labs, and the cafeteria where employees wearing both blue and white collars will eat.

In June, when construction of the Central Building was about 75% complete, the busy site dizzied a visitor trying to fully grasp what was taking shape. One of the building's signature features was readily apparent: the vehicle conveyors that transit through the boomerang-shaped edifice Hadid conceived. Emerging from and disappearing back into the production buildings, these overhead rivers of BMWs-in-progress will make it crystal clear what the Leipzig complex is all about. To anyone entering the Central Building, the message will be: We build cars. Our self-esteem is healthy. Like this sharp building, we are on the cutting edge. F

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