

Changing Skyline By Inga Saffron
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Auto dealership lends some flair to a roadside of dreary sameness

The automobile created its own genre of architecture, that gaudy, glitzy eye-candy celebrated by everyone from Nat “King” Cole to Venturi, Scott Brown and known by the shorthand of “roadside”. But not much roadside architecture these days is worthy of the name.

Our local highways have become a repeating loop of prototype chain-store-boxes – bland, boring and banal. Something is seriously wrong when our junk culture can’t even be appropriately junky. Where’s the flash? Where’s the fun?

More important, where are the enormous display windows through which the pride of Detroit once caused us to hit the brakes and gape?



The entrance canopy resembles the prow of a ship at the Mercedes-Benz dealership in Chester County.

On Route 202, of all places, among the former hill farms of Chester County.

OK, it may be going a little far to call the interlocking ellipses that form the new Mercedes-Benz dealership flashy. But the Birmingham Township showroom does rise up from its perfect lawn like Siamese-twin Starship Enterprises, ready to boldly go where few car dealers dare to go anymore.

Designed by Dever Architects of Glen Mills, the 115,000 square-foot building is a welcome return to exuberance in a landscape that is all too quickly run through the cultural homogenizer.

Architect Thomas J. Dever says the building’s swooping curves were not inspired by anything as showy as a 50s tail fin, but by the gentle byways of pre-subdivision Chester County. Whatever.

Swoop they do. The larger of the two ovals swings out like a ship’s prow, creating a dramatic tilted entrance canopy. Just as striking are the 14-foot high clear-glass windows. You can actually see the irresistible shimmer of Mercedes chrome and metal inside the showroom as you cruise the highway, even though the building is set back quite a way from Route 202.

Contrast that curb appeal with the dealerships across the road. The windows on those featureless, mansarded, white boxes are so small and dark, you’d almost take the showrooms for doctor’s offices. Is that any way to sell a car, even when the world is going 55 miles per hour?



The interior of the Mercedes-Benz showroom, with its boutique, coffee bar and customer lounge, is reminiscent of a suburban hotel lobby. It's done up in tasteful cherry veneer and earthtone tiles.

It's not clear when America's roadside architecture started to go bad. Early car showrooms vied to stand out from the crowd with windows that displayed their wares at night like glowing jewels. But corporate issue prototypes have produced a creeping standardization, sullyng our highways with sequences of *TheHomeDepotTacoBellWal-MartMcDonald's*. So, as you move from town to town, there is the opposite of a sense of movement. Nothing changes.

The usual explanation is that people now drive so fast they don't have time to see what's inside the stores. Television is today's shop window.

The owners of the Mercedes-Benz dealership didn't believe that explanation. When they decided to move their showroom from a nearby auto mall, they selected a prominent 11-acre site near West Chester because 50,000 cars drive by daily. They wanted people to notice and remember their building. "We wanted a fresh look," explained Donald L. Besecker Jr., who owns three local Mercedes-Benz showrooms with partner George E. Marucci Jr.

But, being Mercedes-Benz dealers, Besecker and Marucci made it clear to Dever that they didn't seek distinctiveness at the price of propriety. The brand has carefully cultivated a reputation for quiet elegance. So while the front curves may hearken back to the gas guzzling 50's and 60's, the materials are very much of the Bush-administration, 2003-tax-cut moment.

That is, the exterior is sheathed in a fake fieldstone of such high quality that it looks real. The material, which was chosen because it compliments Chester County's stone buildings, was once derided as "diner rock", but has come a long way. Inside, it's all tasteful cherry veneer and glazed earthtone tiles. The showroom features a lounge with a fireplace (and more fake stone), a Starbucks-supplied coffee bar, and a plasma-screen TV featuring CNBC. The atmosphere resembles a corporate boardroom or a suburban hotel lobby, except for the circular, translucent

light reflectors decorated with the Mercedes emblem and the racy chrome door-handles that Dever managed to slip in.

The owners stress that their first priority was function. The facility includes underground storage for 90 cars and an immaculate, 44-bay service area that looks more like a pharmaceutical production line than a grease-monkey's haven.

Their penchant for function didn't keep the owners from infusing some drama in the pick-up area. When it's time for customers to take delivery, they descend a staircase from the main showroom to a glass-enclosed room. There, the new Mercedes waits as if on stage, draped in a silk blanket.



Clear-glass windows 14 feet high invite the gaze of passing drivers. Other dealerships in the area have small, dark windows.

Nothing in Dever's previous work prepares you for the stylishness of the building's forms. He's spent much of his career turning out one-story strip malls, although he did a fine renovation of an old Bryn Mawr car dealership on Lancaster Avenue – converting it into a gourmet food store for Clemens Markets.

You do wish that some parts of the Mercedes showroom, such as the lounge and children's play area, had more of the exterior's stylistic bounce and were more fully realized and detailed. (Mitchell Associates of Wilmington did the interior design.)

Flaws aside, it's worth taking an old-style Saturday drive out to Chester County to see the showroom. Drive slowly along Route 202, stop in the showroom to kick the tires and, if you dare, take a Mercedes out for a test drive. While heading for the highway, remember to turn around to admire the showroom's curves. That, at least, is free.

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