

# Bright GM on 5th Showroom Takes Visitors on Fantastic Road Trip

by Charles Linn, AIA

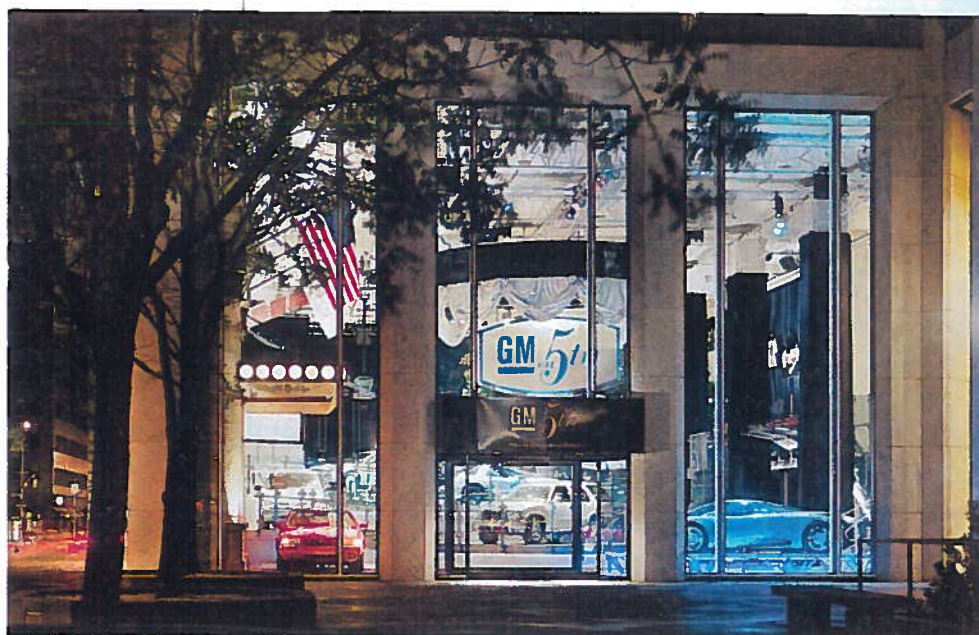


The General Motors Building, at 59th Street and Fifth Avenue in New York City, stands at the terminus of one of the greatest shopping streets in the world. Bergdorf Goodman and Tiffany's are a one's throw away; FAO Schwartz is on the building's first floor; and the Plaza and Pierre hotels are within a block of the main entrance. Because there are so many attractions vying for the attention of visitors, luring them into a showroom—even to see Detroit's latest and greatest—is no small challenge.

Architect Jay Haverson's recently opened showroom, called GM on 5th, occupies the northern third of the General Motors Building lobby, and has been pulling in passersby in droves to view the automaker's new models. "On weekends the showroom has been getting about 3,000 people per day," Haverson says.

Haverson's job demanded that he have an understanding of demographics, a familiarity with recent lifestyle trends, and a sense of what might attract customers to a particular GM brand. "Brand recognition is critical for automakers. Most people aren't even aware that GM makes eight different brands," he says. "What is the real difference between a Buick and an Oldsmobile? Which brand is targeted at whom? To help us with the design, we actually built a matrix that cross-referenced lifestyle types with different models and brands." That led to the design of a showroom that uses an imaginary coast-to-coast road trip, complete with cleverly lit, interactive automobile displays that are memorable and informative in addition to being loads of fun.

The starting point of the journey and the centerpiece of the showroom is a reveal, a special circular stage. The most recent models are



Using personal computers located in the main lobby (above left), visitors may "design" their own cars, choosing a brand, options, and colors. The original starburst light fixture still hangs here. The brightly lit showroom (above right) was once "invisible" after dark.

debuted for the automotive press here and then left on display for the public. A silver lamé curtain, which rises at the appointed moment, hides a car that rotates slowly on a turntable uplit by bright white neon. Footpads in the floor trigger informational messages, which emanate from Plexiglas domes overhead that keep the sound acoustically isolated from the rest of the room.

The road trip takes visitors over a rambling highway, which is really a set of connected ramps, on whose floor are backlit dividing stripes that flash in sequence to indicate the direction of travel. The highway takes viewers past a series of vignettes, each of which features a different vehicle. Each display is like a miniature stage set equipped with accent lighting appropriate to the theme.

Visitors are encouraged to sit in each car, where video displays may acquaint them with a given model's attributes. In some cases, the car

**Project:** GM on 5th Showroom, New York City

**Owner:** General Motors Corporation—Joe Meagher, project director

**Architect:** Haverson Architecture and Design—Jay Haverson, principal-in-charge; Carolyn Haverson; David Jablonka, project manager; David Jimenez, project architect; Lisa Bianco, interior designer

**Lighting Designer:** Joe Kaplan Architectural Lighting—Joe Kaplan, partner-in-charge; Christopher Coe, project manager

**Engineers:** MGJ Engineering (electrical); M. G. McLaren (structural)

**Scenic Fabricator:** Showman Fabricators

**Construction Manager:** Structure Tone



Itself may deliver a message, such as a reminder to children of the importance of seat belts. One car's display uses a hidden camera to put visitors in the middle of a wide-screen action movie—a slightly unsettling effect to the unprepared.

The first stop, directly inside the showroom entrance, features a likeness of the entry canopy of the Plaza Hotel, complete with the appropriate luxury car—a touring sedan or a sports utility vehicle. The canopy is backlit by a row of exposed lamps and has a period lamppost fitted with glass globes, not unlike the lights outside the real Plaza.

**GM ON 5TH ISN'T REALLY A SHOWROOM — IT'S MORE LIKE A ROAD TRIP.**

A display for a "ready to go" car is placed in front of a garage door, grazed with floor-recessed uplighting, and surrounded by sporting goods. A re-creation of the George Washington Bridge includes red warning lights at the tower and exposed blue incandescent lamps that outline the suspension cable, reminiscent of the mercury vapor "string of pearls" mounted on the real bridge. For a trip to the mountains, scenic designers built an artificial forest, whose leafy canopy is created by a theatrical projector backlighting a frosted-plastic panel mounted overhead.

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Most of the illumination on the cars comes from theatrical lighting mounted on overhead trusses; ambient light comes from existing architectural downlights recessed in the ceiling. Both systems are connected to the same central dimming system, which has 216 circuits and 14 preset levels.

All of the superstructure for GM on 5th "floats"—it's modular so that it can be reconfigured, and it isn't permanently attached to the building. "This is a good way of allowing different vignettes to be changed without having to shut the space down for a long time," says Haverson. "After all, market segments do change. And, obviously, car models change constantly." ■

**Beyond the rear deck of a new concept car (above) are vignettes of the Plaza Hotel entrance, the George Washington Bridge, and a forest overhead. A rotating reveal is in the center.**

- Sources**  
**Transom and guardrail lights:** Celestial  
**Uplights:** Hydrel  
**Red warning lights:** Hubbell  
**Backlit ceiling and floors:** Duratran

- Base reveal lighting:** Warm white and bromo-blue neon  
**Marquee downlights:** Halo  
**Floor lighting on ramp:** Bega  
**Flag lighting:** Lightolier  
**Dimming system:** Colortran

