

Dubai's First Non-Car Car Showroom

In a heavily regulated and legislated industry, conformity is king; streamlining suppliers saves money, and the commonality of parts is the way to go. When things are so alike it's hard to stand out. You couldn't have missed Lexus' new design language. And then there's this novel idea—a car showroom without any cars in it.

What exactly is going on? Well, Toyota launched Lexus as its luxury brand back in 1989 and the first car, the LS 400, was a momentous effort to rival the Mercedes-Benz halo model, the S-Class, and BMW's 7 Series. Toyota put 1,000 engineers to the task, and spent \$1 billion making sure its Lexus was ready to hit a fickle, conservative luxury market. Keep in mind that in the S-Class' natural 1980's environment, Beverly Hills, Japanese luxury was a concept as understood as dark matter.

But Lexus pressed on and surprised doubters with success from day one—today the manufacturer is Japan's leading luxury brand and sells over 600,000 vehicles a year. But it's just beginning—Lexus is going through that precocious post-teen age, really finding its place in the world, hence the in-your-face styling and showrooms without any cars in them.

This concept store was first opened in Tokyo's impossibly expensive and trendy Aoyama district a couple of years ago. The Intersect by Lexus store is described as the brand's flagship store that doesn't actually sell any cars. It's neither a dealership nor a retail space, but rather simply a multi functional social space where visitors get to experience Lexus' vision of art, design, fashion, culture, film, music and technology. For a traditionally conservative company, Lexus is being pretty bold here, like glamping at Burning Man.

The Aoyama Intersect location wasn't a marketing fluke either—the success of its first showroom spurred Lexus to open its second Intersect store, and where else but here in the VVIP-loving Middle East.

Lexus' plans for an Intersect in New York will have to wait, because the first space outside of Japan has recently opened in Dubai where visitors can experience Lexus without ever getting behind the wheel. And the way they get to experience it is through all the artsy and cultural bits we mentioned (one display was actually designed in the factory by Nobuaki Katayama, Lexus' chief performance engineer) as well as by having coffee and snacks.

Located in the heart of the Dubai International Financial Center—Lexus certainly knows its customers—the Intersect store in Dubai will additionally host workshops, exhibitions and events surrounding the Lexus brand. And all in the pursuit of brand image to get the target market to associate Lexus cars with a premium lifestyle.

Takayuki Yoshitsugu, chief representative at Toyota Motor Corporation Middle East and North Africa says: "At Lexus we share a tremendous passion for luxury, quality craftsmanship and innovative design. This manifests itself in every corner of Intersect by Lexus to give visitors a sense of the lifestyle associated with a Lexus."

The lifestyle they want to associate is one of way less conservatism than before, of advanced technologies and design that looks like nothing else on the road. Take the new LC 500 as an example.

First revealed by Toyota boss Akio Toyoda at the Detroit auto show in January 2016, the styling and craftsmanship of the new LC 500 position the car as Lexus' halo model to spread its influence on down the product line. As the company's flagship coupe, inspired by the even wilder looking LF-LC concept that premiered in 2012, the LC 500 marks the beginning of Lexus' next phase of brand development.

Curiously though, the LC 500 hit the show stand powered by a naturally aspirated V-8 motor while the car's competition from BMW, Audi, Jaguar, Mercedes Et al all use force-fed, usually turbocharged power plants.

To rectify that Lexus has more recently prepared a more avant-garde LC 500h to better represent the company's engineering progression in tandem with its forward-looking design. The LC 500, emphasis on the little 'h', is most significantly advanced from the Detroit car, by inclusion of a smaller 3.5-liter V-6 engine combined with a multi-stage hybrid system, a lithium-ion battery pack and a four-speed automatic transmission.

Total system output from the petrol motor and electricity combined, is 354hp for a 0-100km/h sprint time of less than five seconds. Underpinned by an all-new platform, the LC 500h sits on this architecture, which is part of Lexus' new rear-wheel drive model expansion plan. The new platform, internally dubbed GA-L, puts emphasis on a low centre of gravity and ideal front to rear weight balance, locating the engine well behind the front axle for a performance-minded front-mid-engined layout. Aluminum panels and a carbon fiber roof lower weight and strategically-used high-tensile steel increases rigidity.

The new GA-L-based Lexus models will begin to arrive on the market this year just in time to aid Lexus' continuous double-digit growth. Last year the Japanese brand sold 625,000 vehicles globally, which represents a 12% increase year-on-year. North America accounts for about half the company's sales, and Lexus is second in the U.S. only to BMW in terms of volume, beating its original rival Mercedes by less than 1,000 sales.

As for this year, Lexus is forecasting closer to 700,000 sales. The company's new RC and NX will help drive sales, and the introductions of redesigned ES, RX and LX models keeps interest going before the all-new platform is introduced.

Mark Templin, Executive Vice President at Lexus says: "Our entire vehicle line-up design has evolved to be bolder and more emotional, and our brand initiatives are resonating as an extension of the Lexus ownership experience. We appreciate luxury consumers taking notice and honoring us with a fourth straight year of double digit percentage growth."

The Middle East alone accounts for 44,400 vehicles a year for Lexus at the moment, giving it significant importance for the brand—last year Al-Futtaim Motors, exclusive distributor of Lexus in the U.A.E., inaugurated a facility in Ras Al Khaimah, making it the brand's first ever 3S Centre (sales, service and spare parts) in the country. The brand's new NX 200t crossover even rounded off the year with an award for 'Best Compact Premium SUV' at the 2015 Middle East Car of the Year Awards.

Judging by the last year or so, it shows that Lexus has finally found a way to stand out.

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