



GR8 entrance...

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THE RECENT entrance of the New York City Audi Forum onto the Manhattan social scene was a heady mix of impressive photo opportunities and – first and foremost – the rich, famous, fashionable and obscenely beautiful, with one or two laying claim to all four.

First of all, there's the location of the Forum itself at 250 Park Avenue. There are a few auto forums in the city, but this one has by far the most prestigious location, right on the corner of 47th Street in the heart of Manhattan's Midtown business district and within a few metres of Grand Central Station. The largest of Audi's international forums is endowed with passing traffic with a spending power that must surely enter well into the millions – per hour.

Then there was the arrival of Mayor Michael Bloomberg in the new R8 sports coupé chauffeured along a closed off Park Avenue by Audi AG Sales and Marketing Director Ralph Weyler, and accompanied by the Le Mans-winning R10 TDI driven by Marco Werner. Audi managing to attract the endorsement of the City's top guy is a stunning achievement in itself; wangling the closure of a 5-block section of Park Avenue on a Wednesday morning is close to unbelievable. Do they have compromising photos stashed somewhere perhaps?

The cavalcade which took the short trip down Park Avenue should actually have included a 1939 Auto Union Type-D Silver Arrow. But the elder statesman of the affair clearly had no intention of sharing the limelight with these two Johnny-come-latelys, and opted not to start; instead staying firmly put at the set-off point on 52nd Street. A few minutes later, though, after the Mayor and Mr Weyler had finished their photo op and disappeared inside for the formal opening ceremony, leaving the crowd to ogle the R8, the R10 and a mysteriously empty podium, the Auto Union picked its moment to join the party, and arrived in a thundering roar of glory which echoed off the towering walls of the pricey local real estate, with four-times Le Mans winner Emanuele Pirro behind the wheel and flanked by the flashing lights of two police motorcycle outriders.

Although clearly not part of the day's planning, the entrance certainly had impact.

On the inside of the Forum, the Mayor, accompanied by Ralph Weyler and Audi of America Chief Johan de Nysschen, performed the formal opening ceremony, while the crowd milling on the sidewalks grew ever larger to have a good old gawp at the automotive power assembled outside. I took a few moments to move among the sea of suits around the R8 and heard numerous breathy exclamations of "cool" not to mention an "isn't that, like, the hottest thing ever?" and even an "I've got to get me one of these". While the linguistic value of these comments may be questionable, their sentiment is crystal clear.

The crowd didn't diminish until Audi personnel removed the vehicles in preparation for round two of the day's festivities. The R10 was carted off for shipping to Laguna Seca, California for its final race outing of the American Le Mans season, while the R8 and the Auto Union were placed on display inside the Forum, where they will remain for two weeks.

The Forum actually has space for 5 display vehicles, but for the evening celebration the rest of the vehicles were cleared out – presumably in order to maximise the space allowed for beautiful people, which I reckoned at around one per sq. metre.

Heaven knows where they found them all, but by the time I arrived shortly after 8.00pm, the place was buzzing with a melange of stuffed suits and dedicated followers of fashion.

Next to the R8, a jazz band was wooing the assembled throng, while cameras at the door were trained on a 6-ft African American whose name I didn't catch, but whom all the young dudes appeared to recognize – a basketball player I can only assume.

But, wait a minute, the clarinet player in that jazz band. He looks awfully familiar – getting on a bit perhaps, but that skinny frame, hang-dog look and the heavy-framed glasses are trademarks that simply can't be overlooked – it's Woody Allen. I double-check with the organizers, and he's not a look-alike (who would actually want to be a Woody Allen look-alike anyway), he's the real deal.

Hard to believe that Woody Allen was the warm-up act, but there you have it. Once he had sloped off for a hot cocoa and an early night, the stage was turned over to funny man and political satirist Steve Colbert, who was then followed by the main musical attraction, Wyclef Jean, former lead rapper of hip-hop band the Fugees, who opened with 'No Woman No Cry' and had the whole room grooving within 30 seconds flat.

A number of 'B-list' faces could be seen mingling in the crowd, including Austin Powers actress Heather Graham, Mira Sorvino carrying her very sleepy three-year-old and comedienne and actress Molly Shannon. I have to confess that all of these ladies had to be pointed out to me, as I'm not much of a celeb spotter, and there were surely many more that I simply am not clued up on.

As far as Audi is concerned, this is exactly the sort of crowd they want to pull. Part of the *raison d'être* for the New York City Audi Forum is to be an 'in' venue for all manner of brand-appropriate events in order to spread the word of Audi amongst the ludicrous number of young, affluent, fashionable people squeezed into this tiny corner of the universe.

All I can say is that I would hate to be the one to have to follow this one. But could you put me on the guest list anyway?