

CLASSIC DRIVER



Exploring the abandoned Bugatti Automobili dream factory

18 October 2019 | Alex Easthope

Once a hive of automotive innovation and insatiable Italian enthusiasm, the former Bugatti Automobili factory in Campogalliano now stands as a derelict reminder of one of the most exciting and significant chapters in the marque's storied history. We spoke to its architect Giampaolo Benedini...

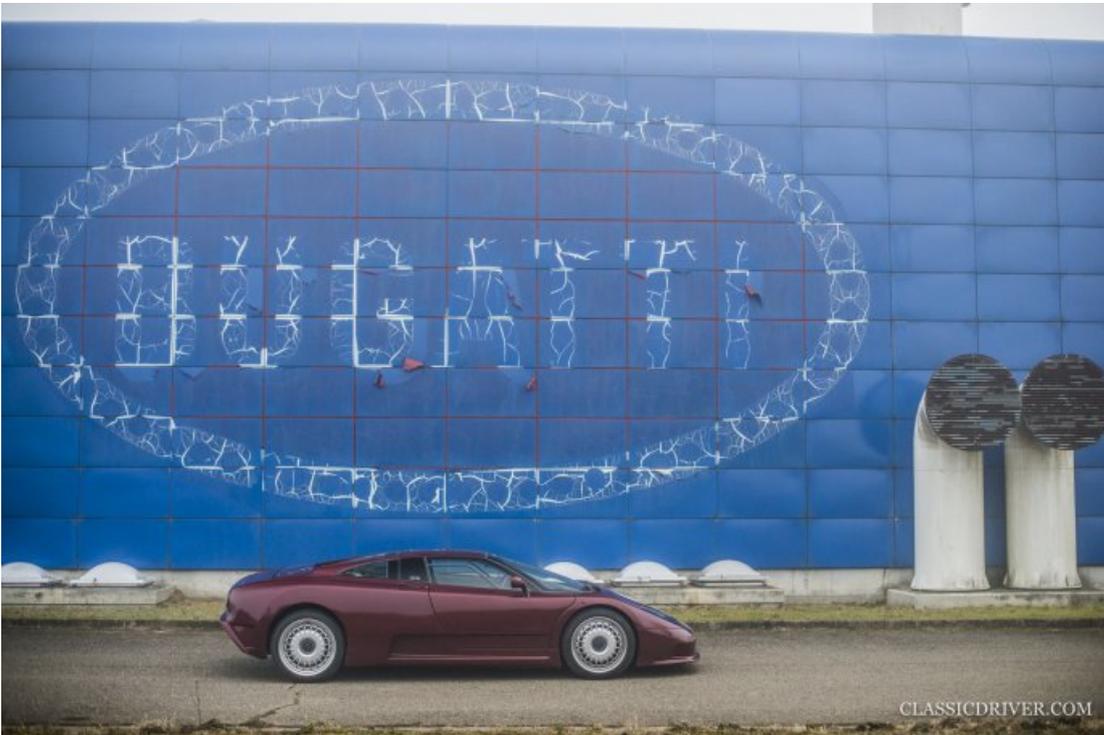
On 15 September 1990, Ettore Bugatti's 109th birthday, a convoy of 77 pre-War Bugattis travelled from the marque's birthplace in Molsheim, France, to the sleepy industrial town of Campogalliano in Modena, Italy. The occasion was the inauguration of *La Fabbrica Blu* - the dream factory in which the first new Bugatti in decades, the technologically ground-breaking EB110 GT, was due to be built.





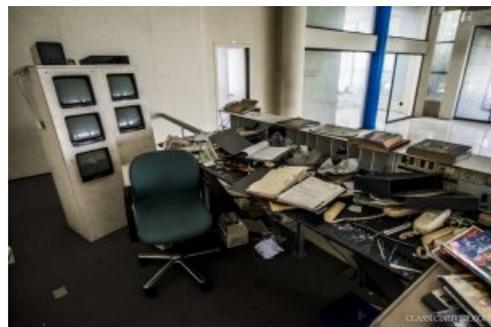
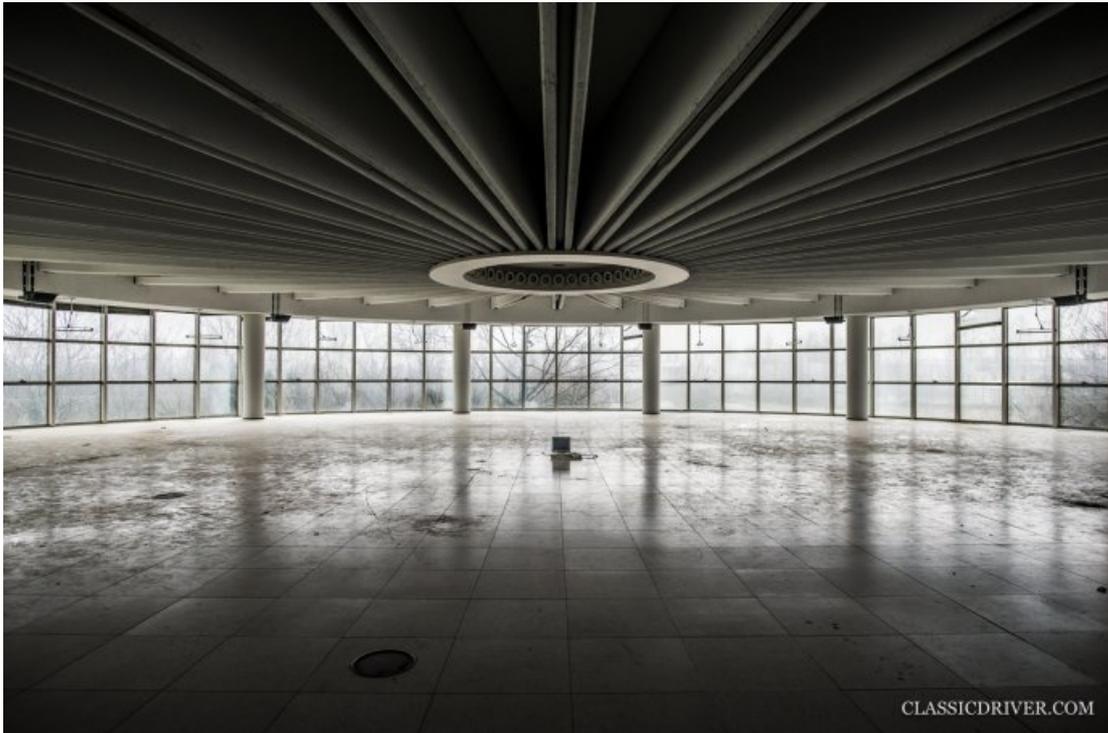
Spearheading the cavalcade was an opulent Type 57. Affixed to its signature horseshoe grille was a tall rectangular box housing a steadily glowing flame – a novel move by the revived Bugatti’s charismatic founder Romano Artioli to symbolise the link between the marque’s illustrious past and its then-exciting future. See, while the idea of setting up shop in Molsheim was one that enthused Artioli, ultimately the pool of talented designers and engineers in Italy’s ‘Motor Valley’ was impossible to resist.

You can read a detailed take on the story of Bugatti Automobili in [our no-holds-barred interview with Artioli himself](#), but the long and short of it is this: just five short years and fewer than 130 cars later, the marque collapsed quite spectacularly amid financial turmoil and alleged industrial sabotage.



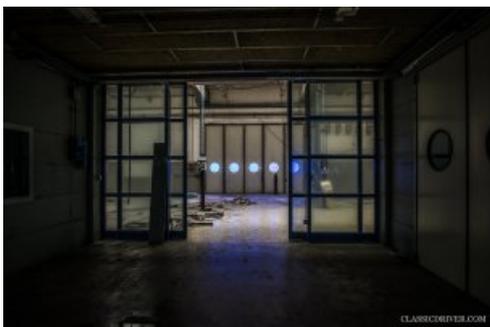
On a shabby wall calendar in one of the now derelict offices, the fateful day the factory was sealed, 23 September 1995, is still circled. After anything of value was publicly auctioned in early 1997, *La Fabbrica Blu* was simply abandoned and, to this day, remains frozen in time. It’s like the Pompeii of the car world – an enchanting and tragic reminder of such a proud and promising chapter. And the magnificent avant-garde factory itself was at its heart.

“Build me the Bugatti of factories,” Artioli was reported to have told his younger cousin, the architect Giampaolo Benedini. And in just three short years, it’s fair to say he did. The 13,000-square-metre complex in which the world’s most technologically advanced supercar was built comprised a glass circular office building and design studios, an engine test-and-development facility and a vast assembly hall.



“Ettore Bugatti always worked independently to combine technology with aesthetics,” Benedini explains, “so I thought the best way to honour him would be to respect those principles and build the factory in continuity with his exceptional motorcars.”

From the outset, the physical and mental wellbeing of the 240-odd people who’d be working in the factory was the primary concern. “The workers had to feel part of something different and exciting,” Benedini continues. “Artioli had not only purchased a brand, but also a philosophy of excellence – those responsible for building something that embodied that philosophy simply couldn’t work in a banal environment.”



Banal his factory was most certainly not. Take the assembly halls, for example. The prefabricated concrete slabs – each proudly bearing the famous ‘EB’ logo – that form the outer walls are angled in such a way to deflect sunlight and moderate the temperature inside. They’re flanked by concealed floor-to-ceiling windows that allow plenty of natural sunlight in. And inside, there are no fixed walls, ensuring production flexibility and adaptability.

“It is a functionalist architecture that reflects the purpose for which the factory was built – the design studio, for example, is circular primarily because it better moderates brightness. We actually designed a large motorised panel to follow the movement of the sun and avoid direct sunlight but unfortunately it wasn’t built. I benefitted from ample freedom in my decisions because the time constraints left little time for discussions.”



Artioli did nothing by halves and his (reported) 1bn-franc factory was no exception. The foyers and lobbies were liberally decorated with white Italian marble and stainless steel, the engine test building had a state-of-the-art four-wheel dyno machine and certified emissions testing facility that other manufacturers frequently used, and the canteen served the finest local food. He even had a wooden door transplanted from the original Bugatti factory in Molsheim into Campogalliano. For the workers, at least, it paid off.

In the time since Rémi Dargegen took these photographs, *La Fabbrica Blu* has been given a thorough spruce up by its longstanding caretakers Ezio and Enrico Pavesi. It's ironic how the same VW-owned Bugatti which once ordered Ezio to cover up the huge Bugatti logo on the outer wall chose Campogalliano as the place to present its homage to the EB110, the Centodieci. Its official recognition of Bugatti Automobili was long overdue. There is arguably something more romantic before the makeover, however, and more human – exactly what Benedini strived to achieve.





That Benedini went on to finalise the design of the EB110 itself is but another fascinating footnote in the history of the EB110. So, how does he feel about the state of his factory, once an epicentre of automotive innovation and creativity, today? “I’m sorry to see such little attention paid to its preservation and I wonder why the group that acquired Bugatti did not buy this factory, which is now an inseparable part of the history of the brand.”



We’ll let Romano Artioli, who used to merrily zip around *La Fabbrica Blu* from meeting to meeting on his bicycle, have the closing word on this one, however. “The people of Campogalliano are still shocked that they had the opportunity to work in such conditions taken away from them,” he says. “Every year they have a meeting to remember and they continue to cry - it’s simply incredible.”

Photos: Rémi Dargegen for Classic Driver © 2019 / Benedini & Partners

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