



The history of Nissan Design Europe...and how London graffiti helped create the crossover segment

- **Nissan's European design hub celebrates 15 years in London on January 25 2018**
- **Doors opened at The Rotunda in 2003 after relocation from Germany**
- **A "thrilling... extraordinary" time for design staff working there**
- **Derelict building's character helped inspire the all-new Nissan Qashqai**

PARIS, FRANCE (January 18, 2018) – Nissan Design Europe (NDE) first opened its doors in 1990, and was located in Cranfield, Bedfordshire, UK. Then, as now, it is the home of Nissan Technical Centre Europe (NTCE).

Initially the design work done by NDE was to support manufacturing at the plant (NMUK), in Sunderland, UK.

In 1992 NDE relocated to Wolfratshausen, a town in Germany to the south of Munich. The move allowed NDE to expand its remit and work on creating new models, drawing in talented designers from Germany and Italy.

In 2000 the decision was taken to move NDE to London – one of the world's major creative hubs. As the city was home to an established and diverse international population, it was the perfect environment for Nissan's multicultural design team.

Senior management believed the move to London would inspire the huge creative transformation they knew Nissan needed to be successful in Europe. It would also allow NDE to build stronger relations with NTCE and NMUK.

The brief from Shiro Nakamura, at the time senior vice president and head of design, Nissan Motor Company, was to find a 'landmark building' in London. A local property company was given the task, and the search stretched from the fast-redeveloping Docklands area in the city's east to around Heathrow airport in the west.

The list of buildings put on the shortlist to visit included one called The Rotunda, an unusual oval-shaped concrete building in Paddington, an area to the north of London's famous Hyde Park.

The Rotunda was designed in the mid-1960s by architect Paul Hamilton as a road vehicle maintenance depot for British Rail, but had been abandoned during the 1980s and fallen into disrepair.

Dave Godsell, now a design project manager, was part of the team which made the first visit to The Rotunda. He commented: "It was a real mess and full of water, but such a cool building. We sent photos back to Japan, and eventually Carlos Ghosn [at the time president and CEO of Nissan Motor Company] came to have a look. We were amazed when he agreed to it because it needed vision to see the potential. A really brave decision, but I think it paid off."

Vision was exactly what was needed. Officially located at 181 Harrow Rd, London, W2 6NB, The Rotunda was also covered in graffiti and its official status as a 'listed building' meant that couldn't be cleaned off.

It was also not easy to get to; located almost underneath an elevated section of the A40, a key road into the city from the west, The Rotunda was situated just metres from the Grand Union Canal. For anyone working there or visiting, it would only be accessible by walking on the tow path immediately next to the water.

What it had was potential. The open-plan site meant a spacious interior which could be transformed into a tailor-made urban design studio.

Work began in 2002 with a plan for three floors of workshops, offices and creative facilities. The interior was based on the Japanese concept of 'wa' – meaning harmony – and reflected a fusion of Japanese and European cultural and design influences. As for the graffiti, it was simply covered up with wall cladding, which remains there to this day.

The new NDE officially opened for business on January 25, 2003 as the newest of four worldwide design studios. The others are the Global Design Centre in Atsugi, Japan, plus San Diego, USA and Beijing, China.

The opening ceremony in London was attended by both Carlos Ghosn and Shiro Nakamura. At the event Carlos Ghosn commented: "Design is fundamental at Nissan. [Opening Nissan Design Europe] is a demonstration of the value we place on design, as we continue to create and launch exciting and attractive cars specially designed with European customers in mind."

In 2003, The Rotunda became home to approximately 50 automotive designers, modellers and support staff. In collaboration with colleagues around the world, their role – then as now – was to conceive and design the next generation of exciting models for European customers. That included working collaboratively with the engineering teams at NTCE, and manufacturing operations at NMUK and in Barcelona, Spain (NMISA).

Mat Weaver, at the time a senior designer, now design director at NDE, was one of those involved right from the start. He described it as "one of the most extraordinary periods of my career".

Mat commented: "There was a newly found pioneering spirit about the whole company and NDE was very much central to that within Europe. We were at the height of the 'turnaround' phase and the mentality of 'bold and thoughtful' was our mantra. We knew Nissan had to make vast gains quickly, so for a designer it was a thrilling time."

In 2003 the NDE team had completed work on the next-generation Almera, Nissan's C-segment hatchback. But designers had been challenged by Carlos Ghosn as to whether it was the right product for the business.

That question marked the start of an adventure which changed the automotive landscape in Europe. In conjunction with colleagues at NTCE and product planning, NDE designers began a journey that would ultimately lead to creation of the Nissan Qashqai... and the beginning of the crossover segment in Europe.

Mat added: "The history of The Rotunda and the way we found it before we moved in was part of the inspiration for the Qashqai concept. The graffiti in the building was used to inspire the interior fabric and helped communicate the 'urban crossover' theme of the vehicle."

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