

Designer passion



From going back to basics, to convincing the marketing departments and company accountants that a design is good, various topics turned up heat at the inaugural Interior Motives Design Conference, as **Ian Adcock** reports



“Filled with fierce passion and controversy.” This is how the inaugural Interior Motives design conference, which was held in Berlin at the end of June could be summed up. Over 100 designers from all aspects of the motor industry got involved in the debate, and tried to pinpoint what drives the world of automotive interior design and what the future holds.

Perhaps it isn't surprising to learn, given his reputation, that Richard Seymour, creative partner of SeymourPowell, sparked off some of the most controversial debate by stating “Designers are running out of philosophy on how to deal with future challenges.” He asked pointedly: “What kind of designers are you if you're scared of technology?”

This point had already been touched on, both by Renault design chief, Patrick le Quement and Stile Bertone's managing director, Roberto Piatti. The point is that design, and especially interior design, is being hobbled by timid senior management or inefficient organisational structures.

Le Quement recalled that when he joined Renault 18 years ago, he found “. . . styling amateurish and cobbled together and . . . subordinate to engineering, product planning and other functions.” Le Quement added that there was an “. . . ignorance among senior people at Renault about design, especially with regard to interiors.” That, of course, has changed markedly and at the forthcoming Frankfurt show, Renault will unveil its 17th and 18th cars in its Z concept car programme.

This was a sentiment echoed by Piatti when he said the biggest risk an OEM can take is “no risk.” He continued: “The current conservatism is not creating any new trends, life is about the ‘wow’ moments and as an industry we have to create new emotions that aren't related to the myth of speed.”

José Diaz de la Vega and Roberto Piatti discuss design



Extensions of human capacity

Cars in the future, he argued, will become extensions of our human capacities and will reflect individual lifestyles much more closely than they currently do, by taking inspiration from the materials and lighting affects used in the home, workplace and leisure facilities. While broadly agreeing with this, Johnson Controls' Vice President of Industrial Design for North America, Bill Fluharty, reminded delegates that the automotive industry has a "lot of work to do to get interior design competitive with other industries."

"The industry needs to think differently about how it can support companies and address the business issues, such as rising material costs where designers have a crucial role to play in helping to keep down the bill of materials. We also need to be more critical about proposed projects and understand more about technology and not ignore research," maintained Fluharty.

The drive towards ever more complex technologies is one that seems to be falling out of favour. Volvo's creative director, José Diaz de la Vega argued passionately for reduced "visual confusion." With Fluharty adding, "There are too many technology choices and features in cars, manufacturers are always searching for the next innovation resulting in the interfaces and features being compromised."

Imre Molnar and Elizabeth Damour



left to right: Richard Seymour, Patrick le Quement, Olivier Boulay, Imre Molnar, José Diaz de la Vega, Ginger Ostle, Roberto Piatti, Bill Fluharty and Tony Hunter

Below: Olivier Boulay and Tom Matano



It isn't so much the fear of technology – the runaway success of the iPod and increasingly sophisticated mobile phones puts paid to that argument – but the manner in which it's presented to the consumer. The iPod is an example of an icon in design; although it is technically advanced, its idiot-proof functionality ensures it crosses all age barriers and appeals to both sexes. Bruce Fenn of Drive summed up the challenge faced by interior designers thus: "Technology should enhance our lives."

Keep it simple

With customers becoming increasingly design savvy, those working to develop interiors for future vehicles must expand their horizons and definitions. Patrick le Quement described Renault's philosophy as "Touch design, extreme simplicity and technological refinement, order without ostentatiousness, rich in ergonomic details, sensual quality, intimate." And one of the ways this is being achieved is by launching trend missions, where four or five designers immerse themselves in different non-automotive disciplines that might range from architecture to product design or sports equipment, for example, to understand and gather trends beyond the motor industry.

Piatti commented that traditional concepts needed to be redefined for the new millennium. "There needs to be a new definition of luxury. It's now related more to well-being and is not simply an ornamental factor. We need contemporary alternatives



or substitutes for traditional materials such as wood and leather, for example aluminium and carbon fibre."

But, as Bill Fluharty commented, with luxury moving down market how will it be redefined in the future?

Part of the answer for de la Vega is the considered choice of materials and, just as importantly, colour: "Scandinavian products had a design value even before it became a trend. Volvo has done extensive clinics with modern, new colours and contemporary versions of paint from the 16th and 17th Centuries and we've found that each time it is these classic colours that turn out the most popular. If you don't follow fashion, then you won't go out of fashion."

Lunch provided an excellent opportunity for networking



Inside Johnson Controls' 3e concept



One step beyond

Imre Molnar, dean of the College for Creative Studies added that "the new luxury is simplicity, but that won't work if the tactility is poor because of junky material." One of the biggest dislocations within the business is the design and material differences between motor show concepts and what's eventually launched, two examples cited being the original Porsche Boxster and the more recent Range Stormer from Land Rover. "Show cars must have the same features as production cars," insisted Piatti, while Seymour insisted, "There's a disconnection between concept and production cars."

This is being tackled within the Fiat Group by establishing 'One Step Ahead' under the management of Roberto Giolito. Working beyond Advanced Design at Centro Stilo, the OSA group's role is to observe emerging external phenomena that will influence developments within the Fiat product portfolio. Its intentions are to feed these influences into both design and engineering to develop products that link the past, present and future, to be realised in concepts such as Trepìuno. "This helps management to see more than just retro," claimed Giolito.

But designers can help their case by developing more contact with the market place, said Ginger Ostle, Creative Partner of Car Men GmbH. "People want the same brand message from the interior that they get from the exterior and in many cases that simply doesn't happen." Part of the reason that lies behind this

Below (left to right): Tom Matano, Elizabeth Damour, Hannah Macmurray, Tony Hunter, Roberto Giolito, Bill Fluharty and Imre Molnar



dislocation is designers' ability to argue their case with senior management and their contemporaries within the company, according to Elisabeth Damour from consultants, Suivi d'Effets. "It's obvious that designers need more skills than just creating new products. They need to learn management skills during their design courses." As example, one delegate suggested that it was partially due to Chris Bangle's ability to communicate his controversial styling strategy that persuaded BMW's management to adopt it.

"We need to dream"

Many of those BMW directors, as in other marques, are not enthusiastic car people but professional businessmen and women. "In the past, men of vision like Ferry Porsche and Henry Ford led manufacturers, now it's marketing men and accountants," explained Olivier Boulay, General manager of Mercedes-Benz Advanced Design Centre of Japan. This imposes even more responsibility on design departments, as he explained, "Designers are the guarantors of brand values. Design is at the centre of the business, there to create new visions and new products, but its overall influence still isn't strong enough in most instances."

Boulay urged: "We need more spirit and passion, we need to dream. Design is communication and that interpretation has to be authentic."

Japanese design, although improving, according to Boulay, still dates quickly, partially due to the fact that rather than



developing their own Japanese house style, designers copied rival western manufacturers. "Additionally," observed Boulay, "the Japanese are not as attached to their past (in cars) as Europeans or Americans."

"Not only that," added Tom Matano (now Director of Industrial Design at San Francisco's Academy of Art) "but Japanese beauty and design tends towards two dimensional profiles and proportions. It's difficult to project Japanese-ness into three-dimensional forms." He also observed that manufacturing processes need to change to help interior design improve, but that can only come about through improved communication to purchasing and manufacturing managers.

"That," said Land Rover's Tony Hunter, "is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve, as costs are pared to a minimum to improve profitability per vehicle. We need jewel-like quality to buttons and tactility like the iPod, but it can be very difficult to get that past the accountants."

"Additionally, it's a struggle to achieve the quality levels demanded by the manufacturers," said Fluharty. "Products are still not as reliable as other consumer items and as suppliers, we need to solve these problems not create them for the OEMs."

As Richard Seymour succinctly put it, "We do the future, so we'd bloody well better be careful." △