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what goes around Concept Car Design

Many years ago as a child, my father took me to the Amsterdam RAI every two years and I was always excited since this meant going to the AutoRAI and I could look at a lot of cars for a full day. But of those hundreds of different models, it were the few that really grabbed my attention, or better said; my emotion. These few could take away the hours, so that only little was left to see the rest. But I didn't mind, because these handful of Concept Cars were the reason why I so gladly went. I just kept staring at them, much longer then I did looking at the normal production cars. Now looking back I think the biggest influence in liking these concepts were the aesthetics, but I then never thought of why car companies made these concepts. Why were these so awesome but could you not buy them? What made car companies spend their money on vehicles that never hit the road? So overall, what's the point of concept cars and what are the influences? In this essay I'll try to find answers to these questions, so that I eventually know what I saw back then, as an inspired child at the AutoRAI...

In 1957, Juliano presented his view on automotive society with the Aurora concept car. As a catholic priest, it perhaps was his biggest belief to address safety in vehicles. The concept car included many technical novelties but, for which it is most remembered, the aesthetics were also strongly influenced by the addition of safety zones. This led to bulgy round shapes and the reputation of being one of the most ugliest cars to date. Concept cars usually differ from what people are used to, introducing the societal aesthetic acceptance. Presenting a concept that is totally different from what people are used to is a risk when the eventual goal is to sell. For the Aurora, it meant going bankrupt.



Aurora Concept (1957)

Looking at the intention of the concept, it was mostly developed to address a certain function or focus. In this case safety. From a societal perspective, Juliano already understood that safety should be of big importance when designing cars. It's a pity however that he didn't look better at these societal circumstances, because he then maybe also knew to be careful with the aesthetics and design a 'good'-looking concept car that people actually wanted to be seen driving in.

As for the Aurora, the same can be found in the Volkswagen L1 concept. In an ongoing research for fuel efficiency, the concept's outer shape was designed with a small and long body to resemble the teardrop shape to reduce drag and noise. So the intention of the concept design was also to address a certain function/focus, which in this case was fuel efficiency. Unlike the Aurora however, the L1 had no further intentions of selling. This meant that the design could differ more from what society was used to and therefore would accept, but it did not mean a free ticket to ugliness. It having an attrac-

tive design was still important for Volkswagen since it represents the company's design philosophy.



Volkswagen L1 Concept (2009)

Looking at the previous examples, these were influenced by us as society. The way we drive unsafe and use up all the oil, triggered people to address these problems and come with solutions wrapped in a concept car. But both used the society only as an input and did not create a concept that society would also accept and buy. Societal aesthetic acceptance is of big importance when a concept's intention is to sell. I remember from my visits to the AutoRai that I recognized design elements in production models a couple of years after I saw those first concept cars.

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Take for example the Opel Antara GTC Concept and the now known Opel Antara. As the concept was presented in 2005, the production model hit the streets in 2007 and resembled much of the concept car. In this case, the concept was developed with the intention of provoking the public to react and thus understand if the society would accept this car in the near future. For the Opel GTC Concept, the public accepted this design instantly and meant that the design did not had to change that much. Off course it did have to be turned into an affordable and producible car so it did not become an exact copy.



Opel Antara GTC Concept (2005)

Opel Antara (2007)

Although the Opel GTC was used to get feedback from the public, it can also be a tool for preparing the public for design changes. Take the Mercedes E-Class for instance. Although the strategy

was already set out to introduce the new model in 1996, the concept was developed and presented in 1994 to let the public get familiar with its new face. The concept was used to smooth out the transition between the old and the new model. Thus, besides figuring out our cultural acceptance, concepts are also used to influence our cultural acceptance.



The concept was used to adress the frontal change

Looking closer at this cultural influence, more can be discovered. Shortly after WWII, the American people were highly familiar with the jet-powered aircrafts, rockets and space flight. In this they saw victory and that what made the USA a world power. Elements of aviation began to determine concept

cars like the well-known tailfin. Although it was a rather extreme design change, the public seemed to accept the design since the aviation shapes represented this American power. For a decade, this historical happening shaped American car design. So in this example we can see how the public (and thereby a culture) also could push concept design.



Design influenced by us as society and culture

The way the tailfin came alive in concept design (and soon went into production) was based on a historical happening. Something that culture had endured. A similar case can be found in today's hot subject: Retro. As many believe the designers plundered the back-catalogue in search of inspiration not knowing which way to move forward, nevertheless retro is nowadays one of the most visited

themes of concept car design. Despite there were no direct means of putting these into production, it was the public that instantly fell in love and set of every car firm to look into their old models for ones that could be turned into a successful selling new model. Reason for this acceptance had most likely to do with the level of cultural heritage. It provides the cue to remind a contemporary audience of the glories of that model and invite the user to relive those happier times. So as the concept had no direct intent, it did start a cultural force that sent these into production. So funny enough, the acceptance made it an influence for later concept cars addressing the same retro theme.

The way Retro concept cars eventually were intended to let people relive that cultural heritage, in a way can also be seen as it having a story. An example in which the embodiment of a story has become the main intention of the concept is that of the Jaguar B99 Concept. Its design was the result of the embodiment of its brand name; the Jaguar. The ancient Aztecs and Mayans worshiped this noble predator

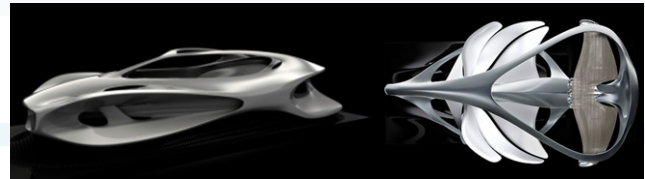
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for its cunning tactics and sheer power, calling it “Jaguar”, meaning “he who kills with one leap”. The animal has short powerful legs for silent hunting and a powerful jaw capable of crushing skulls. Every Jaguar must be smooth, silent and lightning fast, yet still a most elegant and noble automobile. Bertone made it the centre on which to base their design. The B99 Concept did not have a certain function driven intent or cultural meaning. It was for the designers a way to show their creativity, since Bertone (being an independent design studio) actually has no obligations towards Jaguar. For this reason the story became of big importance since it let people grab a better hold of its design, selling the ‘emotion’ and thereby creative quality of the studio.



Jaguar B99 Concept (2011)

Having the intention to present creativity can also be seen in the Mercedes Aesthetics 1 and 2 which don't even resemble a car, but is the result of finding new inspiration to set out forms that could shape the future of the brand. Being a sculpture it was influenced mainly by microscopic diatoms. This is also where car designers can be most creative as their designs have no restrictions and are not created with societal acceptance in mind. This side of concept design is more meant to embody the psychology of emotion. It is meant for the boundless eternal search for beauty...



Mercedes Aesthetics 1 & 2 (2011)

When we look at all the examples, every concept eventually has a certain purpose. Some for selling (being it direct or on a short term basis), others to evaluate the acceptance of the crowd or show their creative mind and inspire.

All are build out of intentions and influences which can be split up into three main categories:

- Function intended or influenced concept design.
- Cultural intended or influenced concept design.
- Story/creativity intended or influenced concept design.

Personally, I like the last most because it has the ability to present creative new shapes. As sketches have an unfinished feeling and sculptures maybe not even have wheels, these are the concepts that inspire me the most and leave lots of room for imagination.

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