

I just spotted the date on the first column I ever filed for this magazine, it was in early 2002 – six years ago! Gosh! (That’s not exactly the word in my head, I have substituted something more publisher-friendly) The piece isn’t bad, actually; It’s mainly about the way automotive designers often explain their designs by saying they’re *inspired* by this or that. This still goes on of course, and it’s still really funny: “The Slinky’s interior is inspired by the inside of a 1957 Frigidaire Sheer Look refrigerator”, that kind of thing. Or an Alpine marmot’s nest. It’s interesting to note that the iPod – the designers’ *uber*-inspiration of our times – had only just been introduced back then. Steve Jobs unveiled the little white and chrome slab in October 2001 but it took a long time to earn the icon status it enjoys now. Inspired-by-iPod is always a difficult proposition anyway, because the simplicity and purity of its design spring from the simplicity and purity of the job it has to do: it’s 90% clever interface, 10% a nice arrangement of atoms. You could go further and point out that an iPod is just the tip of a planet-sized iceberg the shape of iTunes and the re-invention of the way we collect, own and enjoy music. So if you try to apply mere iPod Style to an old-fashioned, complex product with lots of messy mechanics and multiple user interface modes and functions, the result is trivial, a fashion thing. I remember a few years ago some designers speculating on the web about the likelihood of an Apple phone; they got the iPhone name right -- a no-brainer – but posted renderings of iPod-like cellphones with nice flat, round buttons and dinky displays. In other words this was just iPod style rather than iPod thinking, which is a way of thinking that the recently new, real iPhone demonstrates quite clearly.

My point is that to be inspired by an approach to design, a set of ideas and strategies (like the ideas that created the iPhone) is a lot more useful than mere inspiration by style (for example just the way the iPhone looks). If you applied this kind of thinking, a car could be inspired by a Shaker house (a useful idea: the spare simplicity, economy, honesty, ingenuity and practicality) but not in any way look like one. A

Shaker car would be a ridiculous style inspiration, but it's an intriguing starting point for design thinking.

If you really wanted to apply Apple-type thinking to a vehicle design problem, you'd need to start by trying to understand the whole consumer transportation system of roads, fuel, car brands, dealers, insurance, taxes, vehicle resale – all that stuff, then you'd try to work out how some clever innovation could initiate a process of insidious, progressive change, change that could ultimately result in the re-invention of the big system. What kinds of innovations could possibly set in motion such a bloodless revolution? My money could be on a package for people either side of family life – singles plus young and older couples – two seats, integrated detachable trailer, narrow tires, ultra-light, IP-based 'nervous system', sold only on the web, all-in-one annual insurance and service package, built-in eBay-style resale system. And how about modular power-train so you can upgrade the 'hard-drive' to something more economical and planet-friendly as and when? And finally, but only finally, the product would need to be dead cool. It would look clever and different, a bit like an iPhone...

Incidentally, Apple didn't come up with the iPod-iTunes idea anyway; it was brought to them by Tony Fadell, who had worked for Philips, and only after Philips and RealNetworks had turned it down. Funny how Steve Jobs doesn't really talk about that.

[627 words]