

I do love big, stupid cars — barges like the 1961 Lincoln Continental and the '62 Chrysler Imperial, cars that managed to reconcile interesting contemporary design with a criminal level of status-appeal; they can be appreciated simply as objects, feats of design and industrial production. But big stupid cars are a phenomenon that peaked a long time ago, in post-war boom America when they almost made sense; they helped drive the economy by fuelling consumers' fantasies, and greed. Today only the Rolls Royce Phantom and Range Rover manage to carry off the big thing, simply by being breathtakingly good designs — in my view. Other current barge-cars are too retro, too ironic, or (and this goes for many) too blisteringly, achingly pug-ugly. But whatever their design credibility these are all, above all other functions, objects of desire-for-status, whether the beneficiary of that status is an individual, an organisation or a nation (think queens, dictators and bullet-ducking presidents).

Right at the opposite end of some prestige-to-practicality spectrum are a few vehicles that earn their living by, er, earning their living — practical products whose beauty, should they have some, is of the same non-rhetorical kind that a pair of Levi 501s or an Aeron chair might have. Very few cars could be placed bang up against this ultra-practical end-stop: Jeep, Land Rover, Citroen 2CV, Fiat Panda — and only in their original, pre-consumerised versions. What they have in common is their reductive design, reductive as in reduced, distilled down to the essence of what is essential, if that makes any sense. And none of these is a design with what you could call an emphatic styling idea, or if it has one, the idea is so bound up in the vehicle's construction and functioning, as to be inseparable from the whole. How the 2CV is constructed and how it looks are essentially the same thing.

Please, I'm not suggesting that the old adage 'form follows function' actually is true: form always follows the designer, who may in turn be following function but who makes form-giving decisions all the time; she or he is always in charge of the shape, so to speak. In purely practical designs, construction and engineering take

precedence over form, the designer must follow — and that hasn't happened for a long time in the auto business. It's tragic really because what we, and the planet, need right now is practicality. When you're in a fix, practicality overrules all other considerations. We're in a fix now — oil, the atmosphere, bikes being swapped for cars at a rate of hundreds a day — and the auto industry is in magnificent denial. But with or without government legislation, simple economics will force real change soon whether we like it, whether we plan for it, or not. If the auto industry isn't ready for massive change, then other businesses will move in.

So all this has made me wonder: what would a purely practical car of today be like? It's hard to know because everything around us now is so massively Designed — capital D. The contemporary design process is somewhat 'engineering neutral', in that visual forms are barely influenced by construction, material or process. To achieve the shapes dictated by design, the surfaces you see, inside and out, are underpinned by structures of immense complexity and sophistication, structures visible only in the brochures' cutaway illustrations and the Damien Hurst-like, sawn-in-half exhibits in auto shows. It would be nice to see a contemporary purely practical car, a modern-day 2CV, something pure, spare, pragmatic, lean, light, clean... whose beauty grew directly from construction and material, outside and in. A cut-away would reveal little that wasn't already apparent!

I'm going to stick my neck out and predict that purely practical vehicle design will be very evident in a few short years' time. Today's cars might seem rather irrelevant, decadent, in the hard-to-imagine world of the mid-21st century.

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