

At the Interior Motives conference in Turin, June this year, a great collection of speakers covered a wide array of subjects and issues of interest to vehicle designers; I spoke about future perceptions of luxury for example. But one topic that arose again and again was autonomy, and the widely held assumption amongst designers that at some stage this century most of us won't be driving our own cars, most of the time. This is not to suggest that there'll be a sudden availability of affordable chauffeurs named Maurice, or that thousands of identical, gleaming white Honda Asimo robots will do the driving, and then hang around in groups smoking and comparing racing tips while we're in the office, shopping or out having a beer. No, our cars will simply drive themselves. The consensus seems to be that driving in the overcrowded roads of the future will be too complicated, and too dangerous, to be trusted to ham-fisted, daydreaming amateurs like us humans — best leave that to the cars, cars remodelled as knowledgeable and intelligent, networked robots in their own right. Sorry Asimo, if you saw a job opportunity here.

Quite a few designers are suggesting there will be no need for a driver's seat and controls at all because we'll all be passengers. But for the same reason there's a paperclip hole next to your DVD slot and electric gates have an emergency crank handle, perhaps a bright yellow, get-you-home, drive-by-wire steering wheel and controls will be lurking behind a concealed cover, ready to pop out in the event of your car's intellectual incapacity. Better that than to find yourself sitting powerlessly in motionless plush luxury, in the overtaking lane — in a car that suddenly can't remember its own name.

So maybe no more driving — for us — and with that comes a great loss, a loss of engagement with the journey and the visceral pleasures associated with controlling a speeding mass of metal on four rubber tyres. More than a few of the Turin speakers shared the view that car culture would split in two: robot cars for transportation, while for pleasure 'sports cars' — generally rented and kept away from the highways so as not to disturb their neatly arrayed, equally-spaced, autonomous passenger pods.

A huge challenge for designers will be to invent compelling form and material languages for driverless cars. We can easily imagine spacious, comfortable, tasteful interiors with inward-facing seats for passengers and all kinds of home-like features and widgets, but how do you make these places sexy and charismatic, the way we routinely do with cars that have a driving seat and a wheel? The culture of car design is at least in part founded on the aesthetics of speed, power and control, and designers have a well-honed set of tools for making products that reflect these values. When inspecting a new car the first thing any consumer wants to do is sit in the driver's seat and grip the wheel. If this seat and this wheel disappear, does the magic go too? No instrument panel? No dials? Just imagine.

Designing a driverless car will be an interesting project; designing one people feel compelled to buy will be a tricky one.

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