

Essay: Nature and Concept Cars

by Kristina Dryza 09 Jul 2008



Mazda's 'flow' (Nagare) design concept was introduced two years ago, and for the design team in Yokohama, it felt very natural to be inspired by nature. As Atsuhiko Yamada, Chief Designer at the Yokohama Design Center told Car Design News, "it felt natural then, as it does now, as fundamentally we are all a part of nature."

But how does an ethereal concept like flow come to be expressed in the form of a car? One way the concept was explored was through a series of experiments. Photographing a piece of material fixed over a fan allowed the Mazda team to visually experience how air moves over objects and surfaces. Capturing images allowed the team to visualize something that isn't normally visible, and this envisioning helped the designers create and develop the form. "Invisible air flows by the visible form, and this aesthetic form was the language for the Taiki concept car," Yamada describes.

Joe Reeve, a designer at Mazda's Yokohama studio added, "We wanted to stop being inspired by the 'normal' stuff. It's usually pictures of planes, anything mechanical, or other design disciplines that are a primary source of inspiration. It's traditionally been car design being inspired by other forms of design."

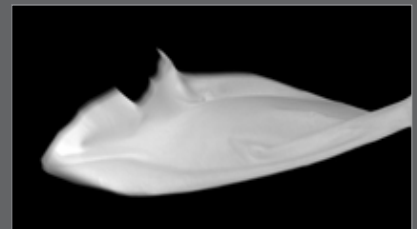
Most car designers are trained solely to design cars, and the field is seen as an isolated discipline of design. When wider spheres of influence are referenced - lifestyle, societal values, the environment - the ideation process blossoms. It opens up to be more reflective, and much less fragmented. The design process is then seen (and understood) as part of the inter-related whole.

It was the holism and the 'secret' of nature that Mazda were trying to reference with the flow series of concept cars. As Yamada eloquently puts it, "anything I see I try to capture the 'something' behind it." While at the beach, he would take endless photographs of the ripples on the water's surface, knowing he wouldn't see the foam dance on the same wave - in that same exact way - again.

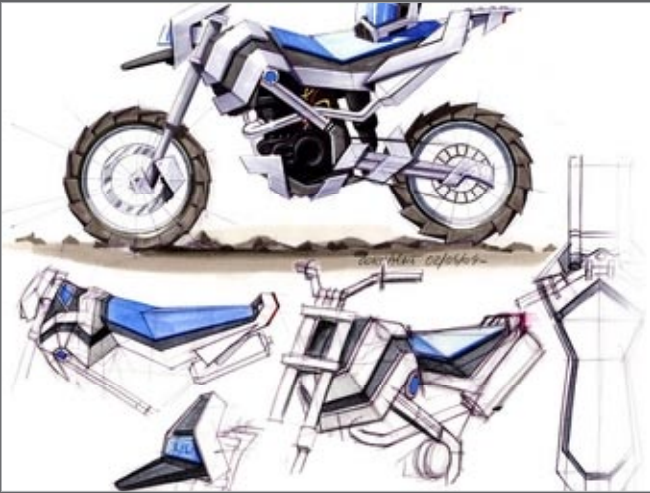
Flow is a continuing concept that Mazda is actively exploring as "flow is life, as it's in constant motion." The famous Spanish architect Antoni Gaudi said he understood architecture by learning from nature. And this is what the Mazda design team did - they sought out flow in nature. In Gaudi's words, "nothing is art if it does not come from nature, as from nature come the most beautiful and extraordinary shapes."

Reading nature is therefore as essential as reading an encyclopedia; but where do intuition and emotion fit into the process of concept car creation?

Continues →



Essay: Nature and Concept Cars



Alexandre Cornaert, a designer working for DCI Studio, says his emotions are his main source of inspiration. "Concept car creation is all about emotion. The passion comes from life experience. Research lets you know what exists on the market, but to always be comparing and checking against what already exists, is not very innovative."

Concept cars are a medium to communicate, a means to send a message, and a way to illustrate a narrative. The car is an art form of emotional expression. And as Cornaert says, "When you draw certain lines, it feels good. And it's always your intuition that will draw the first line."

The skill of the designer then exists in adapting the intuitive first line to the brand. A marketing department may give key words like 'sensual' or 'sporty', and the line will have to be modified to fit in with the spirit of the brand, but as Cornaert points out, "it's crucial to retain the emotion that was in the first line at the beginning of the process. That first line is what contains the essence."

Cars for many people are no longer special objects, but now just another consumer product within a raft of other non-descript products in their lives. They're also seen as not fit for today's environment. The list is endless: too big, too polluting, too fast, too dangerous ad infinitum. For car manufacturers, it's now a constant process of adaptation, requiring greater fluidity and agility to adjust to the current landscape.

In these times, the role of concept cars takes on even greater importance. These vehicles become one of the best ways for a brand to express its distinctive point of view - to express both its essence and intent. And as many manufacturers know, the visual and conceptual influences that the design team is exposed to, is what gives many concept cars their presence. Mazda's satellite design studios exist in LA, Frankfurt and Yokohama (feeding into the main headquarters in Hiroshima), and their primary role as satellites is to create artwork. The car is second, the art piece is first.

Concept cars need to be an emotional expression of the brand - a shared vision - as well as a work of art. So rather than taking influence and inspiration from cars of the past (and other mechanical objects) - nature, intuition and the wider society at large - are proving to be the most important stimulus for concept car creation.

