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The Ford Motor Company in 1957

1984-90 Chevrolet Corvette

1937-41 Plymouth Commercial Cars



- Tom Gale Personality Profile
- 1975-81 Volkswagen Scirocco

1958 Buick Century Caballero Estate Wagon

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Thomas C. Gale: Design Leader

by Gary Witzenburg

We all understand how a vehicle's appearance can dramatically influence its sales. All other factors being comparable, buyers usually opt for the one that best pleases their eyes. And we know how this consumer predilection for attractive design can make or break a product's acceptance and its maker's market success. Thomas C. "Tom" Gale spent most of his Chrysler career working to create products that were not only pleasing to the eye but also very different from their competitors, and some have been credited with turning around his company's fortunes. Probably the best examples are the 1993 LH "cab forward" sedans, the 1994 Dodge Ram pickups, and the rear-drive 2005 Chrysler 300C and Dodge Magnum.

Growing up in the General Motors factory town of Flint, Michigan, north of Detroit, Gale wanted to combine his interest in art with his love for cars but could not see a way to get there. An elementary school art teacher named Mrs. Abrams had gotten him started along that path. "I was a kid who was always in trouble for sketching in my notepads," he relates. "She recognized that and told me to do a painting. I did, and it won a prize at the Flint Institute of Arts. That got me thinking that I could do this. She was an enabler and a wonderful lady. You get so much from having the right kind of encouragement as a kid."

His father and grandfather both worked for Buick in Flint, and Gale started studying engineering at Flint Junior College in 1961. Then he transferred to Michigan State University, where he studied engineering and graphic design. "I finally found a way into industrial design, which was a relatively new specialty at the time," he says. He worked summers as an



intern at GM's A.C. Spark Plug Division and had already owned 1953 and '55 Chevrolets, a '58 Chevy hot rod, '63 and '64 Buick Skylarks, and a hot '65 Buick Gran Sport convertible.

Following graduation from MSU with a B.A. in industrial design (with minors in engineering, physics, geography, and art history) in 1966, Gale was offered an opportunity to work toward a master's degree as a graduate assistant to Dr. Paul Love, gallery director at Kresgy Art Center. "Dr. Love brought in industrial design students to help run the gallery, which meant setting up for shows and a lot of traveling to shows. I loved that, and he became a dear friend." Then he graduated—again from MSU—in 1967 with an M.A. in industrial design.

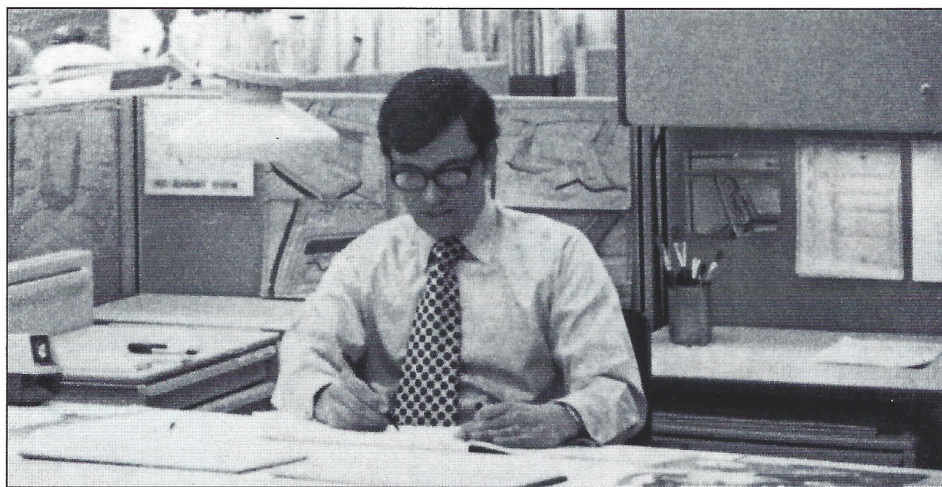
Coming out of grad school, Gale had offers from Chrysler Design and Advanced Engineering, a new depart-

ment. "Bob Bazzell, the young manager who was setting it up, was looking for someone with a design background, so I took that job, and he was a big enabler to my career. I figured I could always move from Engineering to Design but never from Design to Engineering. I planned on spending a couple years there, but it ended up being four."

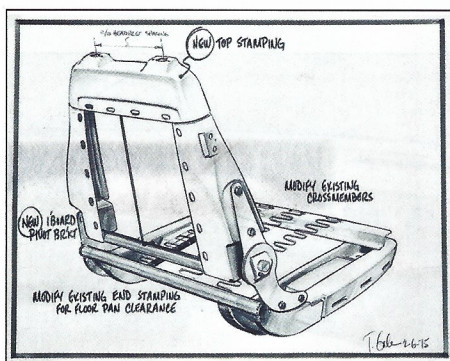
The first programs he worked on were the '70 Dodge Challenger and Plymouth Barracuda. "We did body structures, trim, hardware, and sealing, and got to visit suppliers and work with production engineering guys, which was a great learning experience." He also worked on the '71 Plymouth Satellite, Dodge Coronet, and Dodge Charger, along with some early work on the Valiant and Dart. "That enabled me to make a lot of contacts in Production Engineering and, importantly, in Design. Then another good

friend, design director Colin Neale, recognized my work and brought me over to Interior Design in 1971. I loved interiors because it fit with my engineering background, including the structure underneath the interior bits."

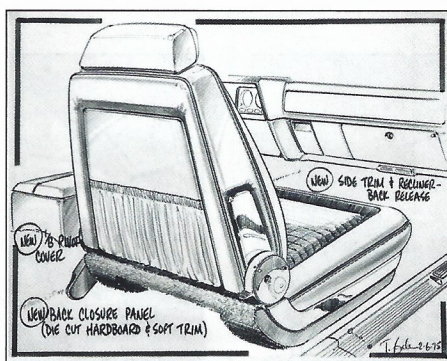
Gale moved up through a series of assignments in passenger-car, truck, and van interior and exterior design. "Then, because of my background in engineering, Product Planning came after me with an offer that was flattering and would be a significant promotion. Our design VP, Dick Macadam, said, 'I've never had a designer selected to go to Product Planning. I don't want you to go, but I don't have a manager job for you right now.' I said, 'If you want me back, I'll come back.' So, I went over to Product Planning, and it wasn't nine months before Macadam said, 'I have a manager's job for you, and I want you back.'"



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1. Thomas C. "Tom" Gale was serving as Executive Vice President of Product Development and Design, General Manager of Passenger Car Operations, and as a Member of the Board of Management of DaimlerChrysler A.G. when he retired in December 2000. 2. Gale at his drawing board in the Interior Body Development studio in the early 1970s. 3, 4. Sketches by Gale dated February 6, 1975, detailing seating structure and trim proposals. 5. This colorful sketch shows proposed Highlander Plaid interior trim for the cab of a Dodge pickup.

"Planning was a great experience that reinforced a lot of relationships in Engineering," Gale reports. "In Design, you always get engineers saying, 'We can't do it this way. We have to do it like this.' And I could call someone and say, 'What's the story?' If their story was real, we would work with it. We had a lot of good relationships instead of just butting heads."

Gale came back to Design as a manager on a new van program and did some early work on what would become the industry's first minivans, and he earned a Michigan State Advanced Management MBA in 1978. "That was night school and a lot of hard work for two years," he says, "but it really helped my career." Then Lee Iacocca [after being fired as Ford's president] arrived in 1979 and brought Don DeLaRossa over from Ford to replace Macadam as Design VP. Gale was promoted to director of Interiors in 1981, then director of Exteriors.

"It always seemed like General Motors, under Mitchell, was ahead, and we were two years behind...reactive instead of proactive. One thing I wanted to change if I ever got the chance was to make sure that we were out in front instead of following." He would get that chance after being named Design vice president in 1985 at the age of 42.

We visited Gale at his Northern Michigan home to get his take on Chrysler Design during his time there and the most memorable products created on his watch.

1981 K-Cars (Plymouth Reliant and Dodge Aries)

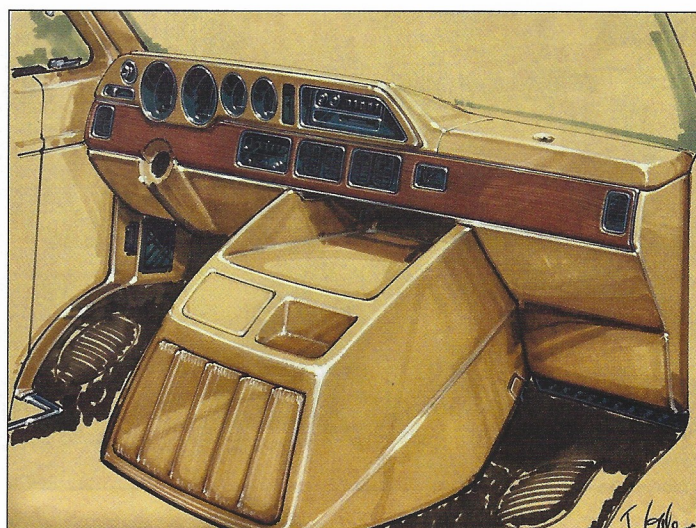
Gale: I worked on those in Planning and a little in Design. That program was very important for the company because they literally helped bring it back. Hal [Sperlich] got that rolling, and the minivans, and they enabled us to pay back the loan guarantee by 1983. A fabulous guy and engineer and planner extraordinaire, he became a mentor and a good friend.

1990 Dodge Stealth and Mitsubishi 3000GT

Gale: That was a young man named Dan Sims, under Neil Walling. We had a partnership with Mitsubishi and owned part of it, and we did a lot of work on the things we shared. I was largely the go-between for Design and became good friends with their chairman, Mr. Nakamura. But company to company, we had a tough relationship and agreements



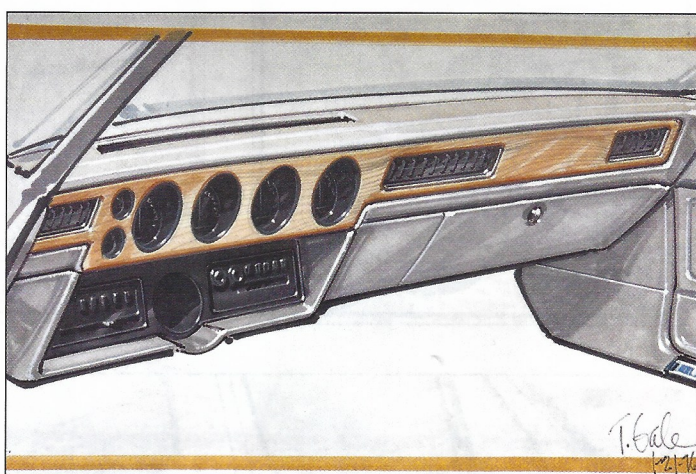
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were difficult. Neil and I would go over there once a month to meet with them and do a good-cop/bad-cop routine. The only way we could get into their theme selection was to send a model, and every time we shipped a model over, we did well in their theme selection. Nakamura knew what I was doing and welcomed it because it was waking up his crew. Dan was fluent in Japanese, so we brought him along a couple of times, and that made a big difference. Mitsubishi later hired him, which I figured was good for him and for them and our relationship.

1990 Lamborghini Diablo

Gale: We owned Lamborghini at the time, Marcello Gandini had done some wonderful cars—Miura, Countach—for them, and the guys at Lamborghini were tight with him. Then these two Americans showed up. Lee would take me along when we were doing anything with design, which was wonderful.

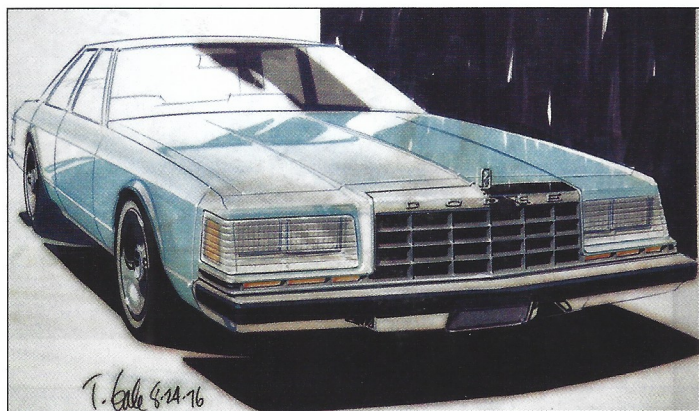
Lamborghini had a number of proposals for Diablo, and there were things we would have done differently. Gandini was there for some of those meetings, and he wasn't happy. We gave him assignments to work on this or that, and when we came back a couple months later, he hadn't changed a damned thing. And the guys at Lamborghini were cheering him on. They said, "Just send money, and we'll take care of it." But that wasn't going to work with Lee.

We had the next meeting at Lee's villa in Tuscany, and nothing on that car had changed. I said, "Lee, I'm going to pack this up and take it back to Highland Park so we can look at it on a weekly basis, and we are going to change it." In the end, the front was just about all that looked like what Gandini did. Then to add insult to injury, the Lamborghini guys put his name on it, which was a finger in the eye to me. But I didn't care.

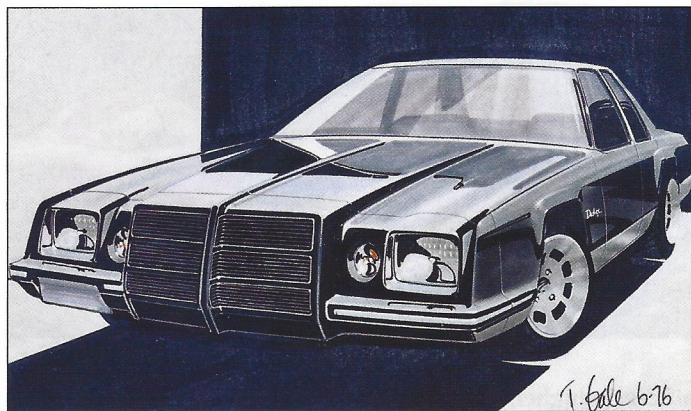
I wasn't going to raise an issue because I didn't think it would help Lamborghini to say it was designed by Chrysler. So, we just went with it.

1992 Dodge Viper

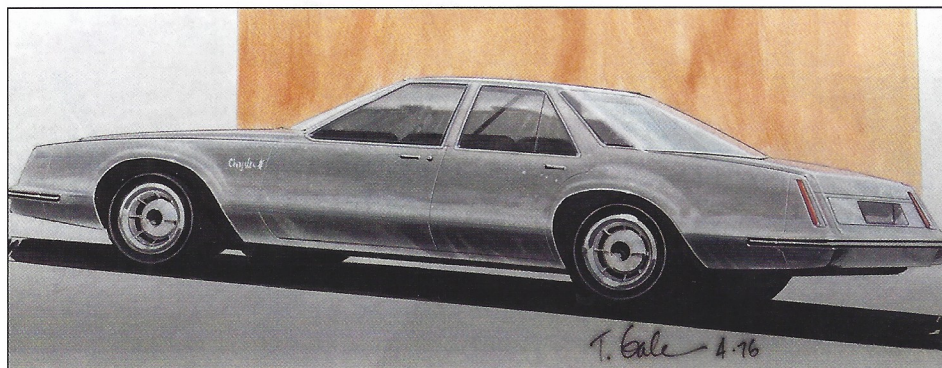
Gale: When I took over Design, we had almost nothing you could point to from a design point of view. So, I figured one thing I could do to show that we were not brain dead was concept cars. Bob Lutz was a fabulous champion for design and a great product guy, and he had an Autokraft Cobra at the time. I knew he was interested in doing something along those lines, and we were looking for ideas for a concept car for the 1989 Detroit Show. We had worked on concepts for the V-10 engine and had mentioned that a couple times. We had the packaging pretty much done, and when I took him to view the clay model, he looked at it and was fired up about it. We had to get budget for the concept



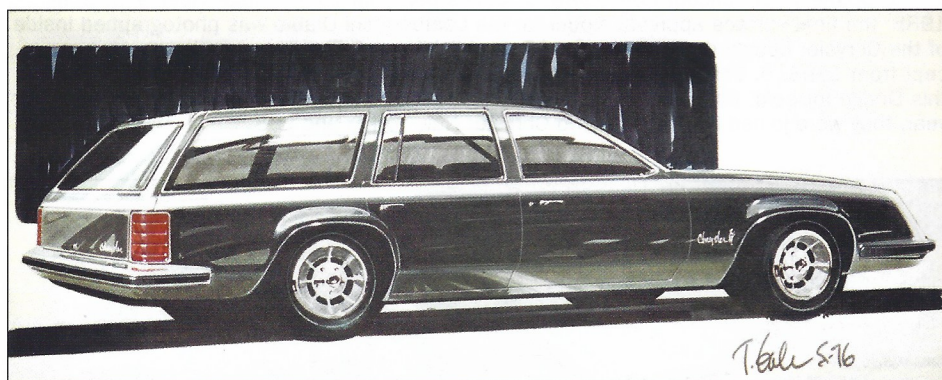
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1, 2. Sketches from 1975 showing a proposed facelift and a new dashboard for the Dodge B-series van. 3. A roof study for the Dodge Ramcharger sport utility. 4. This sketch from January 1976 shows a proposed passenger-car dashboard. 5. A front-end proposal for the eventual 1979 Dodge St. Regis. 6. Gale proposed this sporty Dodge with a prominent grille and split front bumpers for the 1979 full-size program. 7. Gale's take on a big Chrysler sedan for 1979. 8. A full-size station wagon proposal from May 1976 for the company's 1979 lineup of downsized large cars.

deserve credit for it besides me, especially Tom Tremont and Kevin Verduyn in studio director Neil Walling's organization. We were looking for something different and to change the way we were doing surfacing, and it was meant to recognize what Alex Tremulis had done with his 1941 Thunderbolt. If you look at the LH Cars and other cars at that time, we were trying to lead the market to where we saw surfacing going. That was an important exercise.

1994 Dodge Ram

Gale: Bob Nixon, who had come over from AMC, was the studio chief. What we had until then was basically like the other guys' trucks, only later and not quite as good. I was looking for something different. The inspiration was long-haul trucks, big Kenworths and the others, so we decided to start looking at lowered front fenders to enhance what was going on in the engine bay, with surface character having forms related to the wheels instead of slab sided, which really made it different.

It hit a note without being outrageous or something customers would not consider. Our share up to then was seven or eight percent on a good day, and after we got going with this, we saw shares sig-

and the marketing guys got behind it. It turned out very well.

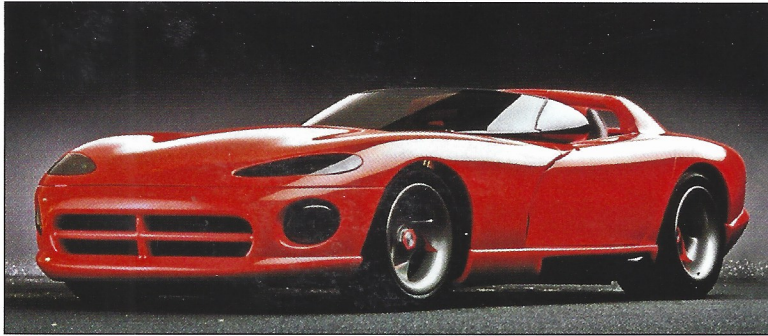
1993-94 LH Sedans (Chrysler Concorde, New Yorker, and LHS, Dodge Intrepid, Eagle Vision)

Those were exactly what I was talking about in terms of trying to lead instead of follow, and to do that, we had to change the proportions. We wanted it to look like a concept car with a different character and form vocabulary that would make it noticeable. With the packaging we had, we were able to move the A-Pillars forward—that's where the "cab forward" description began—which enabled us to extend the wheelbase and move the front

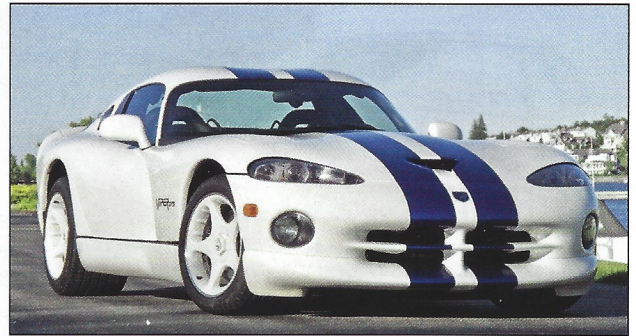
door hinge forward and have both front and rear entry different from anything else in the industry. The architecture was derived from an old AMC/Renault platform, and the V-6 was longitudinal, not transverse, which gave it a long front overhang because of the way the transmission was packaged. That wasn't ideal, but overall, it worked very well, and we took it even further with the second generation. When you do something that makes people stop, look, and think about it, you've made something happen.

1993 Chrysler Thunderbolt concept

Gale: That car was done in our Pacifica West-Coast studio, and so many people



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nificantly higher, even up into the 20s at some points in time. That was a big deal and made a big difference for the company. Those are the kinds of things that can get a studio going. People get excited and you really start to go after it.

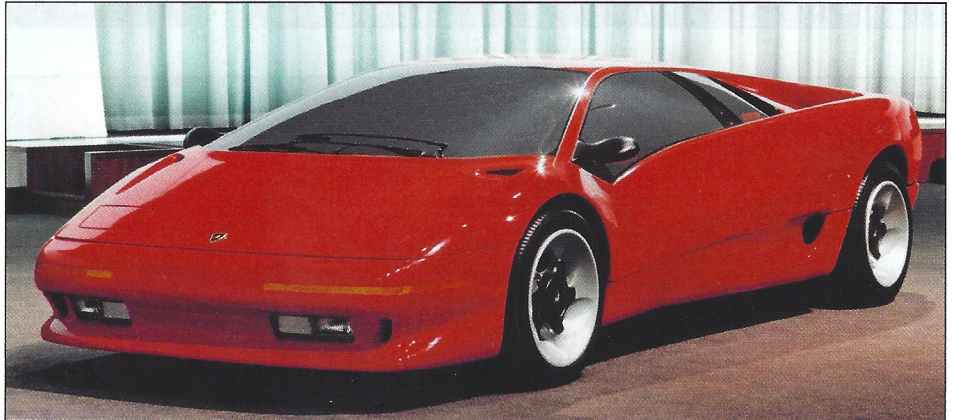
1995 Chrysler Atlantic concept

Gale: Lutz had been wanting to do a car that celebrated late-'30s French design. The surface work was done by Bob Hubbach in Neil Walling's studio, and that car was important in a lot of ways. It brought about the wing badge, it had heroic wheels and tires, and we had a field day with the surfacing, having the wind split in the middle of the car going through the windshield and down the backlight. The powertrain was twin four-cylinder engines mated end-to-end for a straight eight because we needed something to legitimize that hood. It was just remarkable. It's probably one of the most flamboyant and sought after of all our concept cars.

1996 Minivans

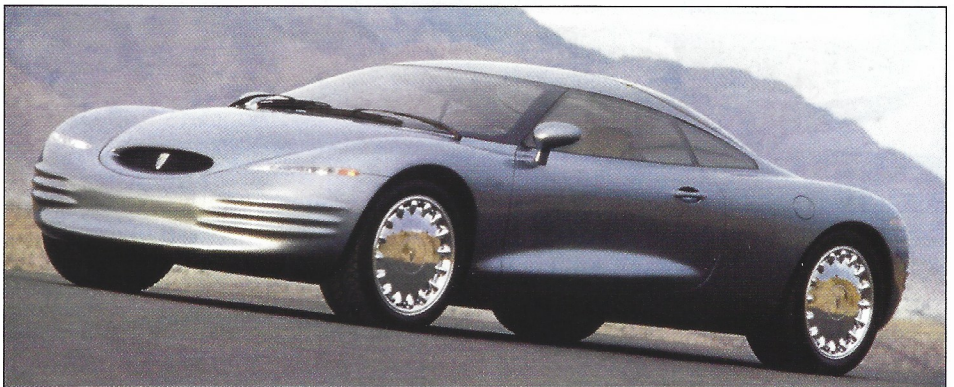
Gale: I became VP of Design in 1985, then in '91, Lee said, "I want you to take over as general manager of minivans." I said, "I'll do it, but I still want to have Design." Lee was very much a proponent of minivans because they were our bread and butter, and our margins were fabulous. As general manager, you were the center point in the team structure that we were starting. Engineering, Marketing, Sales, everybody came to you for direction and recommendations. But when I took minivans, that first generation was pretty well done.

The question was how to make them different yet marketable. At the time, we had about 50 percent share of minivans and wanted to keep that. We did a fairly minor refresh for '94 but added the sixes, long and short wheelbase, and all-wheel drive. Then for '96, I had a wonderful product planning guy, Dick Winter, and

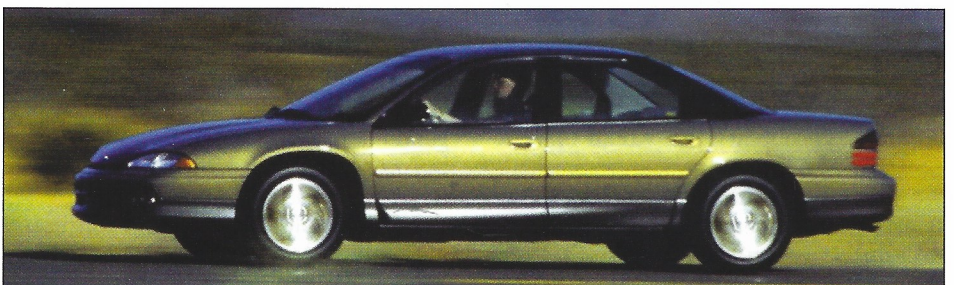


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1. The Dodge Viper concept from 1989. 2. Gale's personal 1996 Dodge Viper GTS. 3. In 1988, the final surface approval model for the Lamborghini Diablo was photographed inside of the Chrysler design dome in Highland Park, Michigan. 4. The Chrysler Thunderbolt concept from 1993. 5. Chrysler's "LH" cars used dramatic "cab-forward" design. In addition to this Dodge Intrepid, Chrysler Concorde and Eagle Vision models debuted for 1993. The next year, they were joined by the LH-based Chrysler New Yorker and LHS.



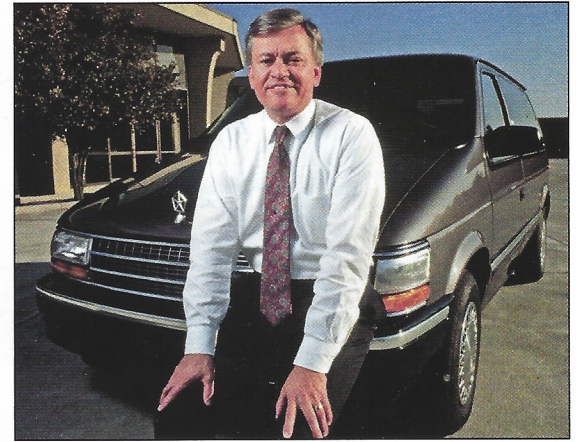
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1. The Plymouth Prowler concept was first shown in 1993. The factory-built hot rod entered production as a 1997 model. 2. Gale was the general manager of Chrysler's critical minivan business in the early 1990s. 3. Chrysler's design staff created numerous memorable concept cars during Gale's leadership including the wonderfully flamboyant 1995 Chrysler Atlantic.

1997 Chrysler Phaeton concept

Gale: That interesting concept car was primarily Mark Trostle in Neil Walling's Pacifica Advanced studio. We wanted to do a four-door convertible with a working top mechanism. It was built at MetalCrafters in Fountain Valley CA, who were wonderful fabricators. Neil and I would go out to MetalCrafters frequently to oversee what was happening, and we would usually send them a fiberglass skin from a clay model so they would have something to shape sheetmetal from and make sure that our intent for surface was what we were going to get.

2001 PT Cruiser

Gale: That was Brian Nesbitt, a crackerjack young designer who had done some character sketches for us in his studio. People pick on it today, but in the context of the time—you could see in Europe where the trend was—Americans would not drive a five-door hatchback to save their soul. That was a unique way to bring in a very practical five-door package and do a lot of things that were outside the box. Lutz was a strong proponent.

To this day I love the PT Cruiser. It was an amazing success, and then we did the GT version with the turbo and larger wheels and tires. I think they sold 1.3 million with great margins compared to most small cars, which have little or

that's when the idea came for adding sliding doors on both sides. Renault had that in Europe, and we had plans to go after the European market. Instead of reacting to what others were doing, we were trying to get out there and be proactive.

We did two wheelbases with sliding doors on both sides and widened the front and rear tracks, which made them look substantially wider, and they were much roomier and had a much softer shape along with a whole host of features and options. The surface vocabulary was quite unique. When you look at those compared to everything else out there, it was literally remarkable. I think Ram did that, minivans certainly did, and the LH cars as well. Then I left minivans in '93 to be president of Chrysler International because management asked me to take that, but I still kept Design.

1997 Plymouth Prowler

Gale: We did the design work, and I'm a hot rodder, so I get either credit or blame for that, but it is probably not a product I would have done. I love the

design but not so much the powertrain. It was not terribly successful, partly because it should have had a V-8. It had the smaller LH V-6, then later the 3.5-liter, with a high-speed drive shaft from the north/south-mounted engine back to a four-speed, front-wheel-drive transaxle in the rear. Those cars were light, so they performed as well as many big cars at the time. But they get poo-pooed by hot rodders as not legitimate because the factory did it, and they didn't have a V-8. But they had the first 20-inch wheels in production, and I was also able to push through 20-inch wheels for the Ram.

My rationale for getting behind it was that, except for some composite panels, the body was mostly aluminum, as were the suspension components. Our company could never afford a lot of engineering and research, so we had little knowledge of aluminum stampings, extrusions, castings, welding or joining. So, Prowler became important for applied research on aluminum joining and forming and working with aluminum-savvy suppliers.



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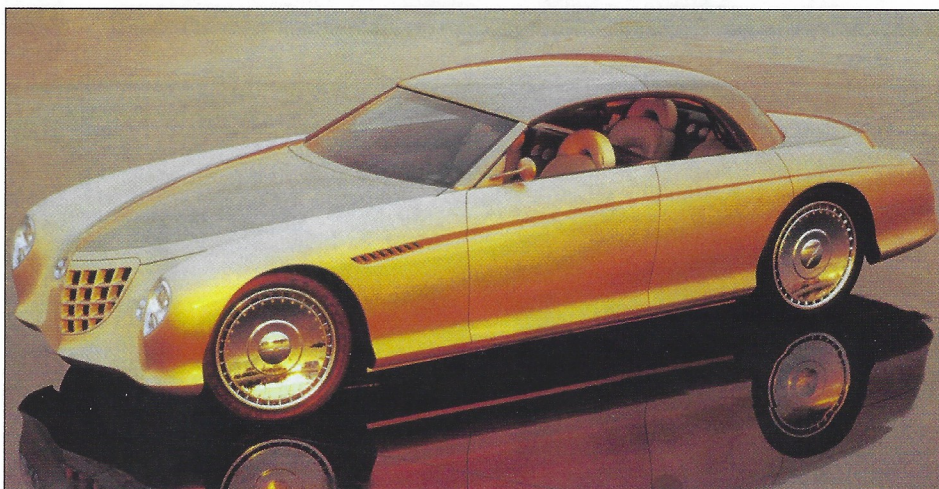
no margin. More importantly, it got the market accustomed to a five-door car. But any car that unique creates the problem of how to do the next one.

2005 LX Cars (Chrysler 300C and Dodge Magnum)

Gale: I can't take full credit for those designs but did get the platform done. I had been lobbying for an advanced engineering group so I could influence packaging, and we had been working on rear-drive cars for some time in our advanced studio, because it would look more upscale and very different from its front-drive competitors. We were always trying to get there, and finally I said, "I want to go after a rear-drive car." And everyone said, "You dope, why do you want to do that?" I said, "Because everybody else domestically is front-wheel-drive. So, you're going to spend billions of dollars on a new car, and you're going to do front drive? That makes no sense to me."

So, we built rear-drive models and did some early research, unbranded, and it proved several things. I said, "You guys tell me that rear-drive is going to cost more. How much are we talking about? What's the number?" They said, "Hundreds of dollars." I said, "Fine, I'll give you \$1000. I'll give you \$2000." They thought we didn't know what we were doing. So, we took the rear-drive platform out to see what customers' perception of price would be vs. a normal front-drive car, and it was \$5000-6000 higher. That really helped us sell the program.

I had that Advanced Engineering group in the early '90s and later became head of both Engineering and Design. And when we got done with the packaging on those rear-drive cars, the merger [with Daimler-Benz in 1998] was coming along, so that opened up the parts bin. I was general manager for a large-car plat-



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1. The 2001 Chrysler PT Cruiser was a market sensation. 2. Gale championed the rear-drive Chrysler 300C that hit showrooms as a 2005 model. 3. The 1997 Chrysler Phaeton concept was a four-door hardtop convertible. 4. Gale's personal collection is home to a 1970 Plymouth AAR 'Cuda. 5. While the Prowler was being developed at work, this '33 Roadster coming together for Gale. Most of the body panels are handformed from aluminum and the hot rod rides on a fabricated frame. Power comes from a supercharged 5.9-liter Chrysler V-8 backed by a Torqueflite automatic. He describes the car as a "labor of love and mostly just art." 6. Gale with his Hemi-powered '32 Ford roadster hot rod.

form, and that's when we did the 300C and Magnum.

Following the merger, Daimler-Chrysler had an Advanced Product Committee, and I was given responsibility for product strategy. They were not going to give us much, but we needed a transmission, and that's where the five-speed automatic and a lot of other components came from. It was our platform, but we used the transmission and a lot of Mercedes E Class engineering and suspension technology. The engines and the rest of the powertrain were ours.

Those original LX cars are deceptively tall, about 56 inches tall, and to get the proportion we wanted, we needed short front and rear overhangs, which we were able to do with wheel and

body placement. The front wheel location was a huge issue and one enabler for the appearance of those cars. Out of that came relatively tall tires – I wanted at least a 29-inch tire, which we couldn't get with front-wheel drive – and that masked some of the weight of the body side. Then we raised the beltline, which gave a lowered look to the greenhouse. The Chrysler was done and the Magnum started before I left at the end of 2000, but they took a long time to come to market.

We asked Gale how much the often precarious state of Chrysler's financial situation may have hindered his career. "That was one of the challenges through the years," he concedes. "It was always an issue, at least until the '90s when we were really hitting our stride. Nineteen-



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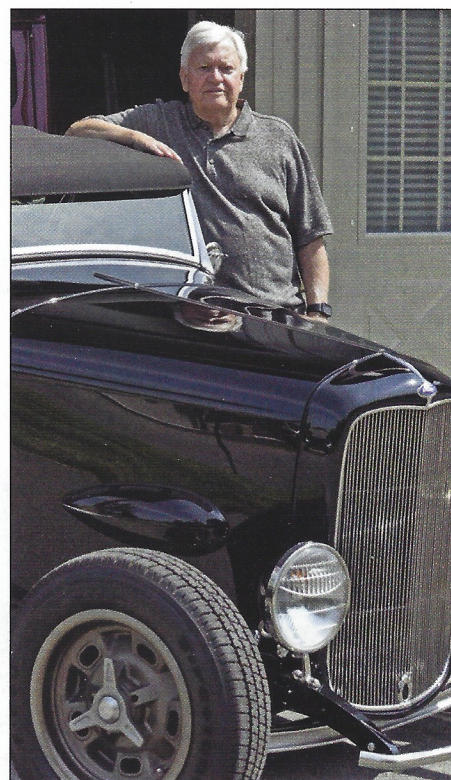
eighty was a tough time. The '73-'74 oil scare was a tough time. But then when Lee was there, after we really got it going and all through the '90s, our product plan was relatively stable. It would change for various reasons but usually not because of finances. We had a product plan that was long range, and that was a major part of our success. To the credit of Lee and Bob [Lutz] and others, we ran those programs and met our program budgets. We did what we said we were going to do, and the product showed it."

And there are many stories about how this or that product literally saved the company. "They all did," he responds. "The K-Cars paved the way to get to minivans; minivans paved the way to get to the LH cars; and on and on. The truck program in '94 finally started to deliver some high margins. The acquisition of Jeep was huge because the margins on Jeeps were very good. All those things that started with the 1986 acquisition of American Motors really paid dividends

through the '90s, and that's what enabled that stable plan. By the time the company was given away to Daimler, we had \$10 billion in cash. And that cash was the only reason Daimler was interested. That's all they cared about."

About his relationships with Iacocca, Lutz, and Bob Eaton, who Iacocca brought in from GM Europe after deciding that he didn't want Lutz to succeed him as CEO: "We all had our opinions," Gale says, "but I thought the world of Iacocca. He was very supportive of me and my career. Eaton was wise to let people do their things and co-existed with Lutz for a while. I also got along very well with Lutz, but the Board wanted someone from outside the company."

Gale retired from Daimler-Chrysler in December 2000—two years (by contract agreement) after the merger—but has remained plenty busy serving in his community and leading various committee activities, and he has coordinated the design and build of hot rod vehicle



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projects for both friends and auto aftermarket suppliers and fabricators. He has served as a design consultant (and board member) for Rivian Automotive and automotive gauge company Classic Instruments.

He has continued his four-decade-plus involvement with classic and collector-car events, including many years as a judge at the Pebble Beach and Amelia Island concours, EyesOn Design, and many other such events around the country and was elected by his peers for EyesOn Design's Lifetime Achievement Award. Closer to home, he has served on his yacht club board for over 14 years and three terms as Commodore.

Beyond all that, Gale says, he is trying hard to find time "to practice oil painting inspired by the travel and cruising opportunities since retirement, and to maintain and drive the cars near and dear to my heart.

"The nice thing about living in the world of design," he adds, "is living four or five years ahead of what the public sees. If we can get comfortable with something new while we're working on it, there's a pretty good chance that it will be accepted. And by the time we get there, others will want to get there as well."