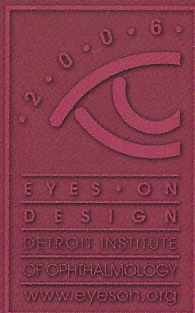


Eyes On Design



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GM Design Vice President Ed Welburn: "Say goodbye to boring GM design!"

Is it possible to make eight U.S. brands look distinctive, desirable and different from each other and everything else? "Absolutely!" Welburn says.

By Gary Witzenburg

Some critics contend that financially ailing General Motors should dump some brands, like it unceremoniously excised Oldsmobile not long after the marque's 100th birthday. Some suggest Buick and Pontiac are expendable. Others point to upscale niche brands Hummer and Saab. Jerry Flint, the crusty veteran journalist who has observed and relentlessly criticized U.S. automakers' industry almost since GM was born, disagrees.

"Killing a line just loses customers and reduces plant volume," Flint asserted in a recent

TheCarConnection.com column. "The trick for GM is to build distinctive vehicles from the same platforms." With GM's product quality, reliability, durability, fuel economy, performance and other capabilities finally as good as or better than most competitors', the key differentiator that will make or break the world's largest (still) global automaker will very likely be product design.

But how does once-proud auto design world leader General Motors -- not known for fresh, innovative or exciting styling for at least the last three decades -- manage to pull off truly distinctive and desirable vehicles for *eight* brands in the U.S. alone? We asked GM Design vice president Ed Welburn, who replaced the retiring Wayne Cherry two years ago.

"That is a big challenge," he responded with a confident, conspiratorial smile, "but it's a challenge I enjoy. "I think we can keep them fresh and very different."

Welburn grew up in and around cars in the town of Berwyn, PA, near Philadelphia, where his father ran an auto repair and body shop. Attending the Philadelphia Auto Show at the tender age of eight in 1958 -- an exciting and flamboyant time for American auto design -- he decided he wanted to be a part of that excitement. His mother encouraged him to read everything he could about cars and design, and -- at age 11 -- he courageously wrote GM for suggestions on what high school courses to take and how best to prepare for college. Someone there kindly responded: take art courses, get good grades, and develop a portfolio.



Welburn prepared well and was accepted to Howard University, where he majored in sculpture. Following graduation in 1972, he was hired by GM Design, where someone apparently remembered the car-loving kid who had contacted them and impressed them with his talent and drive a decade before. Soon the affable, energetic young designer was running an Oldsmobile studio, and by 2002, he had risen to Executive Director. When Cherry retired, he was chosen (by both Cherry and GM product czar Bob Lutz) to become just the sixth Design vice president in the company's near-100-year history.

Now Welburn occupies the expansive office and presides over the hallowed halls and studios once ruled by styling legends Harley Earl and Bill Mitchell at a time when GM is in deep financial trouble partly due to decades of dull, uninspired design. So what is his plan?

"The big brands, Chevrolet and Cadillac, are very clear what they are and very different from each other," Welburn asserts, "Saturn, too. Then there's the 'channel' strategy with Buick, GMC and Pontiac. With a complete range of GMC vehicles [at each dealership], Pontiac can focus on what it does best -- very spirited, sporty, athletic cars. They don't have to do trucks and SUVs. And Buick can focus on great Buicks without compromising them in any way."



ED WELBURN

The Buick Enclave crossover concept unveiled at January's North American International Auto Show has drawn wide praise as elegant and striking inside and out. And nearly everyone (except Mustang geeks) loves the crisply muscular heritage Camaro concept.

"Both of those are signals of what is under development at GM in terms of our overall capability, and interior design as well," Welburn says. "They capture the kind of bold design that I believe is very important in every vehicle we do."

His strategy begins with a strong halo or icon vehicle for each marque. Thus every future Pontiac will take its cues from the sexy new Solstice roadster. Saturn's will be inspired by Solstice sibling Sky. Saabs will be modern takes on the expressively iconic look of the early '80s Saab 900. Really!

Does that mean future Chevrolets, most now as bland as broth, will begin looking like that retro-rocket Camaro concept? "Yes," he responds without hesitation. "That car, along with another vehicle we did internally that's even more expressive, are doing a lot as we're developing Chevrolets for North American and other regions. That kind of spirit, the kind of energy you see in that Camaro design, you will see in other Chevrolets."

We ask him to walk us through these icon vehicles and his vision for each U.S. brand.

Chevrolet – 2006 Camaro concept

"I think of value and spirited design when I think of Chevrolet. We have done a deep dive into Chevrolet, and I believe its best years are ahead because of that work and its power as a global brand. The Camaro concept gets at that very spirited, very sporty, bold design. Whether it goes into production or not, that Camaro concept is fast becoming a halo for Chevrolet just as the Evoq concept [which became the edgy SRX roadster] was for Cadillac."



Cadillac – 1999 Evoq concept

"We are not going to soften Cadillac designs. As we develop future Cadillacs, they need to continue to have that edge and to be very dynamic and aggressive. The form vocabulary may become more sophisticated, but we cannot lose that edge. The Sixteen has hard edges, but between those hard edges is a bit more shape in the surfaces."

Saturn – Sky roadster

"Sky is the halo for the brand, which is taking on a much more international or European look, linked to Opel. Saturn and Opel will share a design vocabulary. They are both looking for the same thing in a vehicle, a very clean and contemporary execution."



Pontiac – Solstice roadster

"Pontiac designs are youthful and aggressive without being angry. Dramatic proportions are a huge part of Pontiac design because Pontiacs are athletic...meaning no bulk, no excess. The G6 was well under development when the Solstice concept was created, but we had time for it to influence the front end design. The Solstice has a very striking proportion with a long dash-to-axle. G6 has a very different proportion but is just as athletic."

Buick – 2006 Enclave CUV concept (production version due early 2007)

"I believe Buick can go after Lexus in a very strong way. When I think of Buick design, I don't think of long parallel lines. Both Lucerne and Enclave have very fluid, very romantic shapes. The tire-to-body relationships are spectacular, with wide tracks and their bodies fairly close. The grilles are a contemporary execution of the Buick waterfall. The chrome accents around the tail lamps, and similar accents around everything, show great attention to detail. Even the chrome moldings on the Enclave's side lamps taper like brush strokes. The body shape flows, like there's wind blowing over it."

GMC – top-of-the-line Denali

"GMC is 'professional grade,' a very strong brand. We've not done a force fit of any vehicle into that brand; it's just grown very naturally. We have very much used Denali as the halo for the brand, and it is having a very good influence over everything we do. There are those who want that premium feel of an Escalade, but maybe not as overt and in-your-face. I believe there is even greater potential for GMC, and we continue to look for opportunities for it. There have been a couple of concepts that have explored how far we can go with "professional grade," from somewhat of an urban perspective and from a very upscale perspective."



Hummer – H1

"Hummer's identity is very clear, and we continue to explore possibilities with the brand. The form vocabulary is very obvious, very overt, but we need to look at how we can continue to keep it fresh. We've worked from H1 to H2 to H3, which is a much more affordable, youthful vehicle with better fuel economy and a real conquest vehicle that has brought people to GM who have not bought GM products in the past. We continue to explore other options, other concepts and other vehicle types for that brand."



Saab – early 1980s 900

"In some ways, doing a Saab is very much like doing a Corvette or a Camaro. You have something that is very obvious for the brand and its heritage, so the challenge is executing it in a very fresh way. The C6 Corvette and the Camaro concept are very fresh designs, but it's obvious where their roots come from. One of the landmark cars for Saab was the 900 -- coupe, four-door and Turbo. That's the one that really resonates. We talk about the jet aircraft influence, the kind of design that is influenced by the air. That 900 has striking lines -- the way the grille sweeps into the headlamps and the headlamps sweep around the corners with a very aero influence, the wrap-around windshield, the backlight, the concave side view, the beltline that sweeps up into the sail panel. Even the rear has a plan-view tuck that seems influenced by aero. In the interior, the basic shape of the IP and the ignition key in the console are elements we continue to build on."



We ask Welburn about his direction for GM interiors in general, which have lagged well behind the competition in recent years. "The Enclave interior is right at the core of the work we've been doing," he responds. "It is a real renaissance in interior design for GM. We've put many of our absolute best designers on this mission, and there is a real spirit around it."

"We had to go back to the basics of interior design to get a better understanding of materials, fit and finish, harmony and human factors, all of those components, and they've been building on that with efforts that become even more creative with each design they develop. They've put together swat teams to address certain issues, and they continue to raise the bar with everything they do. It's not just the styling...it's the grains, the textures, the gloss levels, the colors that

are chosen, placing chrome accents in just the right places and sectioning the chrome so that it gets that sparkle. I look forward to every interior review because they are building and building on what they're doing."

"In a market as crowded as ours," he sums up, "I think it's very important that a brand has to stand for something. It has to have a clear identity. It has to be recognizable. If there is something there that is very powerful and clear, and it's good, we should build on it. If you look at those icon and halo vehicles for each brand that I've talked about, they are all very clearly different from each other. That kind of proves that we can do it. And we are getting it done."