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Some days Christopher Edward Bangle, BMW's American-born design director, may feel like the most hated man on the planet...or at least the car-conscious portion of it. As each of BMW's radically restyled models has been introduced—from the 7 Series to the Z4, the 5 and soon the new 3 Series—the animosity has increased. Enthusiasts have called for Bangle's head, posting a "Stop Chris Bangle" petition on the internet that has, as of this writing, more than 10,000 signatures. "Fire Chris Bangle," it demands of BMW's management, "and DO NOT allow him to design [ruin] any more of your wonderful BMWs."

Yet BMW has not only remained steadfast in its commitment to its new Bangle-led design direction, it promoted the 12-year BMW veteran to a new post as director of design for the entire BMW Group. At the same time, BMW promoted Adrian van Hooydonk—who actually penned the controversial 6 and 7 Series cars—to head its automotive design department. ("Chris takes the heat, but I did that work," says van Hooydonk, previously president of BMW's California design studio, Designworks/USA. "Sometimes life isn't fair.")

Whether or not Bangle is really the culprit, the effort to change the look of a BMW from conservative to cutting edge has met with a mixed response. With the debut of the E90 3 Series on the horizon, it seemed like a good time to let Bangle explain the rationale behind the move. Even if he doesn't draw the initial concepts, Bangle represents the public face of BMW design, and he's also the one who's ultimately responsible for it.

Bangle is the middle man between BMW's design studios—BMW, MINI, Rolls Royce, BMW Motorrad and BMW M—and its Board of Directors. He carries the Board's vision and direction to his design teams, then presents their proposals in full-size clay to the Board and offers his recommendations. The Board ultimately decides which designs will go into production and which will not.

Why mess with success?

Usually, when a car company's leaders set off in a radical new design direction, it's because they desperately need to. Think Cadillac and Nissan/Infiniti in recent years. BMW, on the other hand, had experienced great success with its previous bland but predictably handsome styling. Why would the company risk substantially changing its cars' aesthetic character?

"If you look outside the range of automobiles," Bangle explains, "you see examples of companies such as Apple that have estab-

TAKING THE HEAT

Chris Bangle didn't design BMW's most controversial new models, but he's borne the brunt of the criticism nonetheless. With the new lineup almost complete, the BMW design director talks about the rationale behind the revision.

By Gary Witzenburg Photography courtesy BMW AG





As BMW design director, Bangle's chief responsibility is to cultivate creativity among the designers he works with, and to act as an intermediary between design and production. Here he examines concept sketches and a clay model with his staff.

lished design leadership, but that doesn't inhibit them from innovating and creating a new leadership level and setting the bar even higher. In the case of BMW, there was the issue of growth within the brand and the types of products we could offer under the previous design strategy, also the question of a global presence and whether or not the previous strategy could fulfill that in the future. It was a case of a company trying to look as far ahead as possible."

In other words, the desire to expand BMW's car line into a deeper and wider cross-section of the global market was incompatible with the previous "same-sausage-cut-to-different-lengths" styling approach. The theme had to change to encompass a broader range of models with traditional cues and a family resemblance but greater differentiation among them.

Ready or not, change comes

The optimum timing to initiate such a change arrived with 2002's major redesign of the 7 Series sedan—which has not been, shall we say, readily embraced by the majority of BMW aficionados. "Some parts of the world may be ready for certain changes, while others may not," Bangle responds. "It happened that our need for a strategy to take us into the future coincided with the development of the new 7 Series, which was in many ways an enormous technological leadership jump. The way this product was being conceived was so different, so radical, that the previous strategy would not fit it."

He contends that the strategy will be better understood as the whole scenario plays out over the next few years. "Using the analogy of a play in three acts," he says, "BMW 'theater

goers' have been used to a certain type of play. And now a new play is being introduced in which the first act, the Z9 GT and xCoupe concepts and the new 7 Series, was one with different elements from what they were used to. These enormous steps, perhaps at intermission, left some people wondering where all this was going. Then comes the second act, the Z4, the 5 Series, the X3 and now the 6 Series, and the story begins to make more sense.

"We are trying to create a new spectrum based on colors that we knew before but with a clearly expanded arrangement. We want to make sure that an X3 is not a shrunken X5 or a 3 Series propped up on higher wheels. If you put a Z4 and a 7 together and park a new 5 Series between them, you can see how this whole-spectrum philosophy blends right across them."

The Z4 roadster, nearly as controversial at first as the 7 sedan, features unusual juxtapositions of concave and convex surfaces, a theme that Bangle once described as "flame surfaced" design. "When we did the Z4, we were pushing the envelope on surface to a new extreme and using that terminology to give some sort of reference to what that concave/convex surfacing is all about," Bangle said. "We also talk about dynamic surfacing and dynamic proportion. Basically, the new BMW look is a relationship scheme between these two—how much dynamic do I show in the surface, how much dynamic do I show in the proportions? And this carefully metered relationship establishes the positioning of the various vehicles.

"The idea that you could look in your mirror and couldn't tell a 3 from a 5 from a 7," he adds, "brought up the issue of how much of this family identity was becoming a clonal

identity and whether it was helping us or not. The way we decided to go strategically—a Board decision—was to spread them out a bit. If your sister's face is an exact clone of yours except for longer hair, you may have issues of how much family resemblance is [a good thing]. On the other hand, if you can see in your sister a clear identity of the person she is and at the same time the family traits that mark her as part of your family instead of someone else's...that is what we are hoping to do. We have kept the kidney grilles, the famous 'Hofmeister kink' in the C-pillar and the double-round headlights. But we tune each of those elements to the specifics of that car so it has its own identity."

Technology-driven design

It's not widely realized that, because the new for '02 Valvetronic (electronic valve lift) V8 engine was taller than the previous version, it required higher hoods, and therefore higher beltlines and rear decks. Which led to the controversial "Bangle bustle" trunk lids on the 5, 6 and 7. "That is one key reason why the 7 Series demanded a whole new design strategy, Bangle says, "Our engine guys are fantastic, and we'll fight with them over every millimeter. But at the end of the day, we know how important [these technologies] are. When we launched the 7, it had somewhere in the order of 14 percent better performance and 14 percent better fuel economy. No one has ever before been able to put those two numbers together."

Other improvements made these cars wider and chubbier than before. "We had to improve the interior space, the headroom and the crash structure. If you take a cross-section of the pillars, you're looking at up to 100 per-



cent larger sections than before because of the airbags in them and everything else. When you add these challenges together and try to stretch the old design philosophy around them, you realize that it's a no-go. So the company put this challenge upon us to come up with a single strategy that would encompass these new technological progressions. And I'm really proud of that."

How does a new design come about at BMW? "In the past," he says, "we had such a clear knowledge of what the famous BMW 'sausage' was that all we had to do was work around that. Now, not only do we have to solve some problems with the car, we have to solve the problem of how it fits into the whole new world of BMW cars. Design's job is to show [solutions to] both of these phenomena at once and the range of alternatives from which we can choose. By the time we go to the Board, we have reduced these

is put through another loop, and we go through an elimination process that's competitive, like that in any studio, to [reduce the number of choices] from six to four, to three, to two and ultimately to one.

Does this need for a new direction extend to interiors, and is the widely criticized iDrive control system part of that direction? "Absolutely," Bangle says. "BMW considers the 'office' of the driver a very important element and crucial to the enjoyment and performance of the vehicles. And the jobs to do in that office, the content, is a dynamic evolving matter. There was a real risk that by applying the previous approaches we would be creating a confusing environment with too many buttons. So we've taken the philosophy that we've always had—keep your eyes on the road and your hands on the wheel as much as possible—and interpreted that into an environment [with] new tech-

cupholder capability, specifically in America? We took that seriously and reorganized that space so that putting the car in gear allows you to have your hand on the steering wheel, and we use that valuable space for storage and cupholders. Design needs to accommodate function so that the basic philosophy of 'driving first' always comes through. That was a functionally driven decision."

Well, if iDrive is so wonderful, why does almost no one seem to like it, even when given time to get used to it? Bangle responds that "if you talk to the development drivers and engineers, the ones who put hundreds of thousands of kilometers on the cars, about iDrive and shift levers, you get to understand how people inside BMW who are core believers in how a BMW should drive are saying that we need exactly these types of elements to make driving a better experience."

Risks and challenges

Given the amount of negative response to these new designs and their importance to BMW's success, does it make him nervous to be responsible for radically changing BMW cars' appearance? Does he sleep well at night with the future of the company riding on his back?

"Of course, the risks are always there," Bangle says, "and no-one in the company—least of all Design—wants to do anything just to upset people. At the same time, it is a company that believes very strongly that it has to do the right thing, and the right thing is setting yourself up for the curve, getting your product palette in place as the world economy changes and shifts, as markets open up, as technologies make themselves available and as customer needs refocus on some issues as opposed to others.

"This is what we're trying to do when we propose new design concepts. We're not doing it to freak anybody out but because we

"When we propose new design concepts," Bangle says, "we're not doing it to freak people out, but because we believe these are the best solutions."

down to a reasonable selection of models that should fulfill both criteria."

Who is this decision-making Board? "It is a group of seriously sharp people," Bangle asserts. "They're all engineers, they know the cars inside and out, they drive them all the time and they have a long-range commitment to the company, to the product and to the customer."

The review process typically begins with six candidate models. "They may say, 'OK, we understand that these are close to fulfilling the criteria, but they've got these problems from our point of view.' That feedback

nologies such as the iDrive controller and the head-up display in the 5 and 6 Series.

"We had a real issue with the start/stop switch, for example...whether there should be a starter key cylinder in a key crash area, or whether—by using an electric start/stop—we could eliminate those elements and offer networked functionality to the driver. The same is true with putting the vehicle into gear on the 7 Series. We knew this car would be 100 percent automatic, so should we use enormously valuable acreage on the console for a gear lever? Or should we address the serious customer issue of storage space and

believe these are the best solutions that will fulfill these and upcoming challenges. And we do our homework to make sure we can say, 'Did we do the best job we could, did we leave no stone unturned and are we convinced through the whole process that we're doing the right thing?'

"When you've got the Board behind you, that makes taking the critical reviews a little easier. You can take a long-view perspective. When it works, the credit goes to the team. When there is criticism, it's more than natural that it should be targeted at me...that is part of my job."