

The Art of Environmental Vehicles - Kenny Schachter

Sept 23, 2011, Design Council, London, UK



12:grn:hvs - design a green car in a day!
a Green Car Design event



Please excuse me, it's hard enough to deal with the school run at this hour and I am well out of my depths speaking to you on this subject. Also it's London design week: though I haven't quite figured out what that is, I've been out every night celebrating it. So again, please forgive me. On the subject of environmentally sound vehicles—I don't like the term friendly because it sounds a bit pathetic; it's nothing to do with affection but rather common sense. A person has to be pretty incapacitated mentally not to pursue environmentally sound cars with the global tide of popular opinion in favor to such an extent, not to mention the preservation of the planet that is at stake. Then there's complying with emissions regulations, tax breaks, grants, the insane cost of fuel. And, more importantly, with green cars, all the benefits are ultimately passed on to the end user. So you don't need to be a rocket scientist to see the writing on the wall. Which kind of explains why I'm here today.

When I was asked to say a few short words about eco design, I thought it was a little amusing. At the expense of seeming like an idiot, I'll be frank: I am not to any great extent proactive in terms of being green, though I am certainly very conscientious of the issues, like most. True, any car I have ever driven in London (for the most part) has been small and light; the mantra of the new breed of eco designers like Gordon Murray (though I'm sure he was responsible for the consumption of a lot of fuel in his days in F1). But, that's largely because I'm American with perceptual difficulties and would have a hard time navigating the narrow streets of the UK in anything other than a small car.

What I mainly do is write, curate and deal in art ranging from emerging just-out-of-school works to more mature artists that have fallen through the cracks and become underappreciated or undervalued. The chief US Supreme Court justice stated when asked to define pornography, I can't explain it but I know it when I see it. Same with good art and same with well designed cars. But cars, like art, must build on history to go past it, to create it going forward. And to make matters more difficult and complex, looking good is no longer enough, it's got to be smart and make sense in the context of today's world, today's environment.

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We are all impacted by environmental concerns and will continue to be so not for the foreseeable future but forever. The logic is clear: it's always been a matter of not only environmentalism but the plain and simple fact that newly designed cars are too often too big, too heavy and too ugly. I just read that safety regulations force cars to be bigger and have less visibility and have in turn resulted in higher accident rates. But It cost same to design something well as to do it badly. We have a long way to go when you look at the design of a car like the Prius, and especially the G-Whiz even before the recent catastrophic accident involving a fatality.

Its as though the cars were made to look like medicine—bad tasting but good for you. Nowadays, it seems the cost of entry for a hybrid is at or near the same for a combustion-powered car. Size and weight still have a lot to do with it, so I'm still ok with the 60s to early 90s cars that I like to drive and collect. You can always look at it like this: at the least, eco cars are better business and marketing anyway! Facebook changed the way we communicate and the Prius changed the way we consider cars; the sky is the limit as to what's next so better we try and keep it less polluted

For nothing more than a love of car design, I commissioned Zaha Hadid to design 2 hybrid city car concepts and a boat. Zaha designed the BMW factory in Leipzig, a French parking lot and another in the works for Miami, the Olympic Swimming Pavilion, the Maxxi Museum in Rome, a great school in Brixton and much more. In addition to the Hadid cars which are on view now in museums in Germany and the States, Rem Koolhaas is designing a hybrid motor/sail boat for me. I still strongly believe in the notion that a small production environmentally and design conscious bespoke vehicle is a viable business notion.

Personally, I don't differentiate between a painting, sculpture, chair, spoon or a 70's Porsche; whether a van Gogh, Picasso, or a vehicle, it's a holistic notion of a lifestyle. We all want to live longer, cleaner and more efficiently and cars are a good place to start to clean things up. There is a lot of making up to do—which is apparent if you look at US cars of the 40s and 50s, where the focus seemed to be the bigger and more gratuitous the better. But cars are the most ubiquitous form of design in society; as my friend Sam Livingstone, a consultant and tutor at Royal College where I lecture on occasion, said, we see more than 2,000 of them a day. So I say, why not make them nice, or at least nicer. Cars will be more and more efficient not only because they have to be but because they can. And not just in the near future but now.

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