

Auto fest follows long, winding road

By Dan McCosh
special writer

VISITORS TO THE North American International Auto Show from the metropolitan area can be forgiven for being merely awed when they walk into a Cobo Hall reincarnated with multi-level displays that spread real cars well above the show floor, circumscribed by an experimental electric car on an elevated roadway.

Visually, Detroit is the most imposing of the big international shows, if only because it is concentrated mainly in a single hall, rather than in the multi-building convention centers in Germany's Frankfurt or Japan's Tokyo.

This year, it's also the most expensive, incorporating the most new car introductions and the most new concept cars of any show in the world.

More intriguing is the intellectual stretch, with the addition of Industry Trade Days and a significant showing of futuristic engineering, affecting both the safety, power and

structure of future automobiles—all efforts to expand NAIAS into a forum for issues, as well as a showcase for cars.

Still, it's an auto show, which means that all this can't be done without a solid dose of hoopla, dancing girls and artfully arranged models. (Don't laugh, Bill Bonds once did a stunt on an auto show turntable.)

The organizers are still feeling their way to set the proper tone. Last year, the most popular event was a group of Lansing auto workers who carefully assembled a Buick Reatta on the show floor. This year, who knows?

Past auto shows have included a trained seal balancing piston rings on its nose, the Andrews sisters, a live cougar and, once, a model who lived in a trailer on the show floor for the duration of the Chicago show.

DETROIT'S OWN auto show, now laboriously renamed the North American International Auto Show, still claims to struggle for recognition among the world's great car expositions in Europe and the Orient.

On the surface, such insecurity about the annual pagan ritual that celebrates the car in its spiritual homeland makes as much sense as Arnold Schwarzenegger worrying about standing out in a Boy Scout troop.

But the fact is that it's just three years since a coalition of Detroit area dealers and industry leaders decided to stand out Detroit's show to international stature.

That was when members of the Detroit Auto Dealers Association, including Heinz Prechter, Dave Fischer, Carl Fischer, Ken Meade, Bob Thibodeau and Gordon Stewart, led by executive director Dan Hayes, made a calculated effort to create an international media event out of what had been mainly a huge local tent sale for Detroit-area retailers.

"We realized there was an opportunity to raise the stature of the show in the eyes of the world," said Stewart, co-chairman of this year's show.

The DADA found immediate support for expanding the concept of the show from then-GM President Robert Stempel and GM Vice

President Lloyd Reuss.

"The support of the manufacturers was critical," Stewart said. "It's really their show. They supply the cars and the displays. They make it happen."

THE VISION that the group began pursuing was that of the archetypal European auto show, a concept that was, well, foreign to most Americans.

Detroit, in fact, is one of the oldest auto shows in the nation, tracing its roots to a livestock-and-car show at the Light Guard Armory in 1899, a year before the first National Auto Show in New York. The DADA tried its first show in 1907, in Beller's Beer Garden.

Early U.S. auto shows, particularly the national show in New York, were driven by the intense competition between hundreds of fledgling auto manufacturers scrambling to present themselves to the New York investment community, and also to potential dealers willing to take a chance with their new products.

The scramble for attention led to the use of paid tours, chauffeurs and

other self-proclaimed experts who would endorse the products on the floor.

One ingenious entrepreneur led new showgoers to a one-way elevator that led to his upper-floor display, after which they had to walk back to get to the main show floor.

NOTHING MUCH has changed except for the scale of the event, with glitzy selling efforts sharing space with displays of new cars.

The U.S. auto show thus historically has been a populist appeal to the masses, the marketing alter ego of the mass-produced automobile, which was quickly embraced by the American middle class as quickly as the manufacturers could develop the technology that lowered its price.

Not so in Europe, where the car took longer to descend from its position as a plaything for the wealthy.

Even in the post-World War II era, when numerous European manufacturers launched minicars to put a war-torn economy back on wheels, a car was only a distant dream for the average consumer.

Hence the spectacle of the European auto show, which became more of an emporium of unrealized dreams than a place to sell cars.

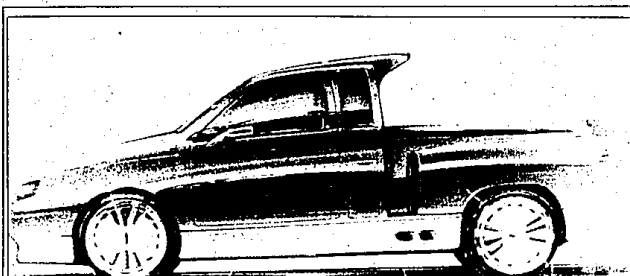
THE HUGE halls at Frankfurt also became something of a social mecca for the whole industry, with so-called "press days," where the executives espied journalists, programmed for a week before the show opened.

Along with the new cars, there were hundreds of support groups, including suppliers, aftermarket manufacturers, even repair tools, each with their own exhibit hall.

The European shows became so extensive that few countries attempt to carry one off every year. But that merely expands the mystique, as Frankfurt trades attention back and forth with Paris every other year.

To the Europeans, and later at Tokyo, what is most important is the atmosphere that combines corporate marketing omnipresence with the notion that it is at Frankfurt or Paris where the reputation of a major automaker is set in stone.

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On the range

Ford will introduce the Ranger compact truck design (above) at the North American International Auto Show. The design is executed on a Ranger extended cab sports vehicle. A fully functional vehicle, this futuristic design illustrates what the personal use buyer can do with a little imagination. Unique exterior styling modifications com-

plete the aggressive theme of the vehicle. Meanwhile, Ford has tapped the new Explorer or utility vehicle to design a futuristic "office on wheels." This vehicle will contain the latest electronic gadgetry, including state-of-the-art communications hardware surrounded by a detailed executive office environment.

CARS, in all their majesty and mystique, will take on an exciting new meaning for fourth graders during the 1991 North American International Auto Show.

More than 450 youngsters from 13 Detroit-area schools will receive a hands-on lesson in building and making cars at the Chrysler Corp.-sponsored education center.

Kids will be introduced to designing, engineering, naming and marketing cars.

"For many of these boys and girls," said Valerie Becker, Chrysler's national education program administrator, "this will be their introduction to some of the important and exciting jobs in the auto industry."

Participants will learn how to modify cars to improve gas mileage. They'll also have the chance to design their own concept car.

With the help of computers, they'll mix and match various interior and exterior color schemes, pick a name for their car and identify target markets.

A tour of the auto show will climax the very special lesson, just

Credits



one of the highlights of the auto show Jan. 12-20 at Cobo Conference & Exhibition Center, Detroit.

Forty of the world's car makers will display 750 cars and light trucks. More than 50 exhibitors and 25 van conversion companies will take part.

The world-class event will showcase 30 global and North American introductions, including 10 production cars and 20 concept cars.

Since the show grew from regional to international status in 1989, attendance has averaged 647,547, a 44 percent increase from 1988. Dollars raised for charity leaped from \$245,000 in 1988 to \$600,000 in 1990. Charity preview

attendance rose from \$4,919 to \$3,346.

In this second special promotional section for the auto show, we've strived to present a closeup look at what's new for car buyers not only in 1991 but also the decade ahead.

Cars indeed have come a long way in the century since Henry Ford I built a quadricycle and tinkered with the internal combustion engine during the 1890s in a wood and coal shed on Bagley Avenue in Detroit.

— Bob Sklar
assistant managing editor

Bob Sklar coordinated this special section, with assistance from staff writer Gerry Fraley, graphics editor Randy Horst and staff photographers Art Emonville and Guy Warren. O.E. representatives Brian Allen and Chris Bitzer oversaw advertising. Cindy Cole designed the cover.

The Los Angeles Times Syndicate provided some of our copy.

Direct queries to Bob Sklar: 591-2300, ext. 313.

AUTO SHOW

ALL THE LATEST
HONEY-ALL
THOSE DEALERS
AND ALL OF
THOSE CARS

AND THE
FINANCING,
EIGHT POINT
THIS, AND
SEVEN POINT
THAT...

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ONE CHOICE
THAT I
CAN SEE

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