Leader of GM design staff gets 'his' first cars

auto talk
Dan McCosh

Just as I never predict who the next chairman of General Motors is going to be, I never predict who is going to take over from Chuck Jordan to run GM design staff.

Jordan is due to retire a year and a half from now, after a relatively short tenure at the top of the world's most prolific auto design department. Since he took over in 1986 from Irv Rybicki — and it takes about six years for a bright idea to get into the showrooms in sheet metal — the 1992 GM product line is about the only one Jordan is claiming full credit for.

ACTUALLY, EVEN this is a bit misleading, since no one at GM design staff seems to claim full credit for much of anything. It's a big company, and a radical design for a new car has about as much chance of surviving the corporate committee system as do suggestions for improving the recipe for hamburgers coming from the cooks at McDonald's.

This is, of course, why it's worth considering who ultimately will replace Mr. Jordan. His job is not that of a designer — the sheer proliferation of GM products precludes any hope a single person will set the design tone for the corporation. But it is Jordan who must don the rusty armor and head off the flailing windmill arms. Like they say, everybody's got an opinion, and for a half-dozen years now, Jordan's has been more influential than most.

JORDAN HAS been an outspoken proponent of the notion that the appearance of a car is what sells. He also has been striving to end the look-alike syndrome that supposedly plagued GM in the mid-1980s, when GM cars were supposed to all look alike. Oddly enough, this, never seemed to hurt the Japanese, but it became anathema to GM design.

Frankly, I would argue that there are worse sins in design than looking alike. Far worse is dysfunctional design, where the function of a car is compromised, rather than enhanced, by its appearance. Second is simple bad taste — a car that looks different, all right, but you had better keep the garage door closed.

TWO CRITICAL GM cars introduced recently have suffered from dysfunction. One is the APV minivans, which indulge in such an excess of sweeping angled windshield, that they are nearly impossible for a short woman to drive — and they are supposed to be sold mainly to women, short and otherwise. The second is the Saturn, allegedly a family car, which has negative headroom in the rear seat — allegedly to allow a nice-looking, low roof line that only the guy in the next lane can appreciate.

On the other hand, GM has managed to revive some semblance of taste with the Buick Park Avenue and the new 1992 Cadillac Seville. Neither are ostentatious designs, and both have the kind of rich look that gets you a little consideration at valet parking.

REGARDLESS, FEW GM products these days take many design risks, and even fewer set new trends. It's a hazardous position to be in — even Toyota is starting to get the hang of making good-looking cars that function well, and eventually even frumpy Honda may hire someone who can draw cars.

A recent article published in Automotive Industries looks at the post-Jordan era and walks through the obvious choices for his replacement from a list of well-known GM designers — namely Wayne Cherry, from Opel, "Mr. Corvette" Jerry Palmer, John Schinella of the elite-striking Fiero, and Len Casillo of the aforementioned Park Avenue.

Not to wish any of them ill, but another lockstep organizational change will likely take the best designers GM has and get them pushing paper instead of drawing new cars. Maybe a more profound shake-up is in order in the whole scheme of things, to turn the best and the brightest loose to come up with car designs that really work.

It's long overdue at GM.

Dan McCosh is automotive editor of Popular Science Magazine.

business people

Joyce Conklin of Farmington Hills was named manager of the new Kohl's Department Store in Farmington Hills.

John Garber of Birmingham will become vice president-finance, treasurer, and chief financial officer of Newcor in Troy.

Gary Grabowski was appointed to target marketing manager for Volkswagen United States Inc. in Troy.

T.R. Harrell of Rochester was named director of advanced engineering of Woodbridge Inoac Inc. of Troy.

Edward Orelski joined Huntington Banks of Michigan in Troy as vice president in the Macomb commercial loan division.

Brenda McIntosh earned the designation certified pension consultant from the American Society of Pension Actuaries. She is director of pension services at American Plan Administrators Inc. in Bingham Farms.

Four employees of the Ross Roy Group were made vice presidents: **Jane Brennan** of Birmingham, vice president, account supervisor, Ross Roy Advertising; **Sherri Crispin** of West Bloomfield, vice president, senior research project director, Ross Roy Advertising; **Mary Salata** of Canton, vice president, account supervisor, Ross Roy Communications; and **Craig Dunaway**, vice president.

Gregory Gallas of Farmington Hills was named chairman of the board of Foodland Distributors in Livonia. He is responsible for overseeing the daily operations of the corporation and the execution of all decisions made by the board.

Paul Schmansky of Bloomfield Hills, a practicing pharmacist of Specialized Pharmacy Services in Livonia, was elected to a four-year term on the executive board of the Michigan Pharmacists Association.

Donald Runkel of General Motors Corporation was named to chair the Executive Committee for ESD, The Engineering Society's 1992 International Programmable Controls Conference and Exhibition. He is a General Motors vice president in charge of the Advanced Engineering Staff.

Lynne O'Meara was promoted to the position of Accounts Processing Manager at the Metrobank of Farmington.

Dr. Kastytis L. Baltkus is providing allergy services at the Providence Medical Center, North Woodward in Berkley. He maintains an office in the Providence Medical Building in Southfield.

Beth Brest was selected by the Educational Services of America Inc as the newest member of the ESA family licensees. She will be able to offer scholarship and grant matching guidance for area high school and college students.