

GM's Impact, an electric concept car, is expected to appear sometime in the not-too-far-off future.

Future cars

A barometer of public sentiment

By Dan McCosh
special writer

CONCEPT CARS fit neatly into the American dream of the future, when everybody will be wearing strange clothes, living in oddly shaped houses and, of course, driving weird cars.

It is a dream carried forth by a series of so-called "future cars" that mainly date back to the early 1960s, when the idea of a three-wheeled vehicle powered by a jet engine seemed just around the corner, after a few bugs were worked out.

In fact, auto styling and auto technology seems to work in a series of closed loops, with trends repeating themselves as relentlessly as the shift from wide to narrow ties. In the early days of the industry, a "concept car" was a ridiculous notion, since every bona fide concept was being tried out and marketed in a mad scramble between the hundreds of companies trying to get a foothold in a booming industry. There was no time to fool around with future fantasy.

But when the post-World War II era seemed to offer stability, serenity and a touch of boredom, the automakers began to attempt to create their own vision of the future.

The result was a series of styling exercises considered so wild and crazy, they had to represent the

future of automotive styling. This was a logical outcome of the mid-1950s fin car era, when everyday cars were getting even wilder and crazier.

TODAY, THERE is more attention paid to concept cars than ever before. One reason is that auto stylists are still feeling the pulse of public interest, anticipating a change that could be as dramatic as the sudden adoption of the so-called "aero look" that altered the industry at the beginning of the last decade.

Today's concept cars are, in fact, much closer to production cars than in the past, and frequently provide at least a broad-brush look at where contemporary car design is headed. At this year's North American International Auto Show, more than 25 futuristic design exercises will be on the show floor, probably the largest single collection of such artful fiberglass of any show in the world.

The large number of concept cars makes NAIAS something of a forum for world design. All the domestic manufacturers will participate, along with Linamarina, Bertone, Mercedes Benz, Mitsubishi, Nissan and Toyota.

Few of these show cars even run, and most that do barely crawl around under their own power.

Regardless, they are among the most expensive cars at the show, with a full-powered, high-tech exercise costing in excess of \$25 million, while even a minor styling tweak running up a \$100,000 bill.

Concept cars have, in fact, created a minor local industry with a few highly skilled prototype shops specializing in the creation of these design exercises.

ONE OF the largest is Special Projects in Plymouth, founded eight years ago by auto designer Ken Yanez. Special Projects specializes in producing the one-off fiberglass bodies that clad the show cars.

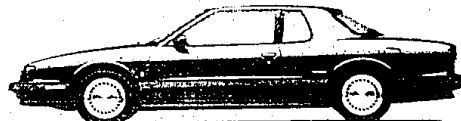
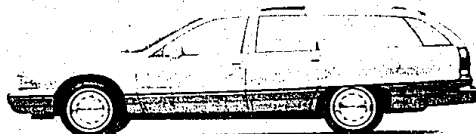
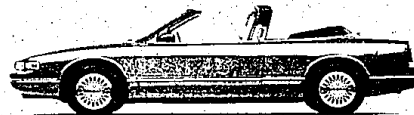
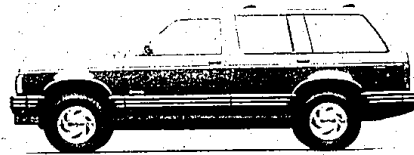
Some of their work is a joint effort with AMC Corp. in Southgate, another custom prototype operation that also has a joint venture with Metalcrafters, a California-based custom bodybuilder.

The cars start out as a design exercise on paper, or more likely on a special design computer that allows a designer to build up shapes in three dimensions. The computer, in turn, guides a milling machine to reproduce the designer's vision in three-dimensional clay. Often a three-eighths-size model is built first, to test the design, followed by a full-size clay.

"We take molds off the clay model, then develop the fiberglass

Please turn to Page 8

Wondering what's new with the New Generation of Oldsmobile?



Chrysler to show designs

THE NORTH American International Auto Show will showcase the latest efforts from Chrysler's design and engineering staff, the Chrysler 300, Dodge Neon and Jeep Wagoneer 2000.

The four-door Chrysler 300 hopes to conjure memories of the company's luxury performance vehicles of the '60s. The 300's all-black, driver's cockpit, including performance-style seats, instrument cluster and contoured steering wheel, makes a bold styling statement.

The rear compartment, accessible through a hinged back door, contains separate headlamps and combination TV/VCR cellular phone.

With more than a passing nod to the 300's performance heritage, the concept car's engine bay is filled with Chrysler's 8.0-liter, V-10 "Happe thread" engine mated to a four-speed automatic transmission.

According to Chrysler president Robert Lutz, the 300's designers had one purpose: "We want a car that will make everybody run out to the store and look at it."

THE DODGE Neon will likely ensure that auto show passersby will stop and stare a little more at Chrysler's display.

According to Chrysler's vice president-product design, Thomas Gale, the Dodge Neon "addresses recycling and other environmental issues as well as investigates an array of new features in a fun-to-drive package."

Underscoring the concept vehicle's environmentally conscious design, nearly every section on the Neon is made up from, or can be recycled. For example, the wheels are made from recycled aluminum. All interior panels are coded to identify the type of plastic used in the manufacturing process.

To fulfill the promise of fun-in-the-sun cruising, the Neon is equipped with an open-air, sliding sunroof that incorporates a self-stowing rear window.

Technically, the Neon showcases Chrysler's revolutionary External Breathing Direct Injection two-stroke engine. The powerplant provides greater output from a smaller displacement and weighs 40 percent less than a traditional four-

stroke engine. The 3.1-liter motor produces more than 100 hp.

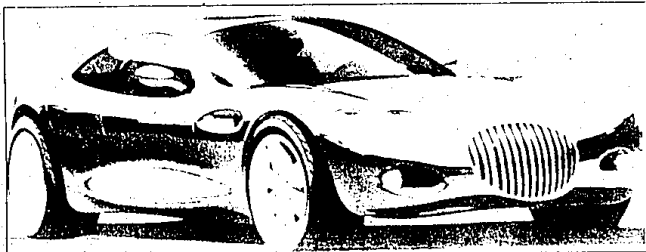
IN THE heritage of Jeep's oldest and largest vehicle, the Grand Wagoneer, the new four-door Jeep Wagoneer 2000 provides a glimpse of what might be seen in future off-road vehicles.

To start, the Wagoneer 2000 has an unusual six-person seating arrangement. What looks like two regular bench seats actually turn into a 2 + 2 + 2 bucket seat configuration.

The middle of each bench contains a smaller, center seat, which can be relocated behind the second bench to vary the arrangement.

The "entertainment center," featuring a TV, VCR and compact-disc player, moves on a track through the middle of the vehicle between the six passengers. To keep the Wagoneer in the spirit of weekend fun, the tailgate pulls down to reveal two removable stadium seats.

A flush-mounted, pop-up roof rack accommodates the sports equipment owned by most Wagoneer buyers.



The Chrysler 300 is a four-door concept car with a rear compartment accessible only through rear doors. The luxury performance vehicle sports an eight-liter, V-10 engine.



The Jeep Wagoneer 2000 offers a view of the future of off-road vehicles. It boasts an unusual six-person seating arrangement and a moveable entertainment center.

Still wondering?

North American International Auto Show, Booth 1000, Exhibition Centre

The New Generation of
Oldsmobile