

Green-up

Environment takes stage at auto shows

By Dan McCoah
special writer

THE WORLD'S great auto shows have always been a stage for new machinery, a place where an incredibly complex industry meets to strut, posture and take sideways glances at its competition.

But a dramatic change is in evidence this year, as major auto shows — Frankfurt, Tokyo and now Detroit — take on some of the trappings of a political convention as well.

Issues important to both the auto industry and general public have been influencing both the speeches and the cars on display. For perhaps the first time, the auto manufacturers not only want to interest people in their wares, they want to be listened to.

The change emerged first at Frankfurt's Frankfurt auto show, held last spring — as usual, the first major European show, the gathering that traditionally provides the litmus test of new automotive technology heading for the world's markets.

For decades, Frankfurt has been the venue where horsepower wars begin, where roadholding claims are argued and the major Italian designers demonstrate why every major auto manufacturer in the world turns to Turin for advice on how a proper car should look.

THIS YEAR, the theme was air pollution. A decades-old issue in the United States, dating back to ancient talk-show jokes about Los Angeles smog, air pollution in West Germany was identified strongly with the observed decimation of trees just a decade ago — a circumstance that quickly led to the establishment of the so-called "greens," a political movement that quickly attracted such a large following, it became one of the strongest common grounds transcending countries and political parties.

In fact, Europe has lagged decades behind both the U.S. and Japan in adopting catalytic converters, setting emission standards and experimenting with alternative fuels. A good deal of the pro-environmental rhetoric has been aimed at the European auto industry as a result, and has evolved to include charges that even the no-speed-limit German autobahn network is wasting fuel.

The need to refute some of these charges, and promote the notion that Europe's auto industry is in fact socially responsible, prompted the green theme to emerge fully shown at Frankfurt this year.

Virtually every manufacturer sought, with some success, to point to an aspect of the business that solved some environmental problem or other.

VOLKSWAGEN AND BMW unveiled new electric cars, and both companies claimed to have solved the problem of re-acquiring and re-using plastics. Volkswagen went so far as to announce it was opening a re-manufacturing plant that ultimately would take in old Golf models, strip them to their basic components, and put them back in the materials stream.

Not all manufacturers found it easy to embrace the theme. Mercedes, introducing a 4,000-pound, V-12 luxury sedan with a sticker price in excess of \$125,000, struggled and squirmed, then brightly pointed out that its 200-mph exotic sports car on display was made of aluminum, hence could be recycled.

Regardless, the tone was set, and a few months later, at Tokyo, the Japanese pulled out all the stops.

The Tokyo Auto show, where U.S. and European manufacturers normally expected to be scared to death by new Japanese gadgets and auto technology, became a showplace where U.S. and European manufacturers were scared to death by a plethora of electric cars, new engines, experimental transmissions and even one concept car claiming 100 miles per gallon.

IT WAS fairly easy to dismiss the Japanese demonstrations as a public relations effort. Japan has been notoriously lax in enforcing its own environmental laws against industrial pollution and late in assessing Tokyo air quality.

But in recent years, this has been changing rapidly, with stiff laws and stiffer enforcement changing the industrial climate substantially. Underlying the Tokyo displays was the reality that most of the cars were headed overseas anyway, and it was crucial that Japanese cars stay current with the demands in the

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U.S. and Europe.

All of which leads up to Detroit, which has emerged in recent years as a major forum for world auto issues, as well as a stepping-stone point for new hardware.

The "green theme" pursued at Frankfurt and Tokyo is being shipped wholesale to Detroit, where U.S. consumers will get their first look at the likes of Nissan's and BMW's electric cars; the Honda high-efficiency engine; and even Mercedes and Audi's outrageous, but all-aluminum sports cars.

BUT IT'S a theme that mixes uncomfortably with the reality of the U.S. market today. In fact, the auto analysts that gather in

Detroit to debate current issues will be addressing the trade-offs that ultimately will follow a spate of environmental legislation — nothing like the wholesale embracing of the concept that emerged at Tokyo and Frankfurt.

In the midst of a deep recession, and anxious to rekindle public enthusiasm about cars in general and the 1992s in particular, the Detroit show this year ends up as a more traditional marketing onslaught, rather than a public issue forum.

Leading the way is Chrysler, which is anxious to quickly gain notoriety for its new intermediates due out in mid-year, and an all-new Jeep model that will be built in the

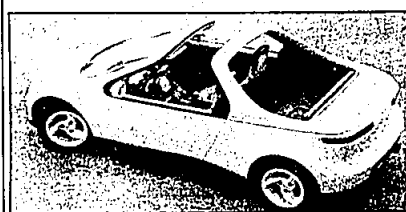
new Jefferson Avenue plant. The new models are being pitched as the cars that will "save" Chrysler, and sales acceptance is certainly critical to the survival of the company.

Likewise, the new Ford Taurus, GM intermediates and new Ford and Chevy trucks represent the largest investment in new models seen in several years.

IN THE background is ongoing debate in the U.S. Congress about extending emission standards or tightening fuel economy requirements. The U.S. already lives with the tightest safety and emission standards, and manufacturers are resisting any further legislation.

The result is an odd conflict between hope and a general celebration of new models intended to lead the industry out of the doldrums, and a plethora of concept cars making a political statement from Europe and Japan.

The green theme that emerged in Germany, and gained so much momentum in Tokyo, arrives in Detroit to confront glitz and hardware. The result is likely to add some drama to Detroit's effort, an underlying conflict that should make Detroit the most interesting of all.



Pontiac's seventh concept car, the Salsa, makes its worldwide debut at the Detroit auto show.

All-weather to convertible: Salsa boasts multiple faces

PONTIAC'S SALSA, Pontiac's seventh concept car in as many years, will make its worldwide introduction in Detroit.

The concept car features chameleon-like transformations from an all-weather, five-seat hatchback to a five-seat convertible or a two-seat panel delivery.

The fluorescent orange concept vehicle measures 70 inches at front and rear tires and 155.6 inches front to back.

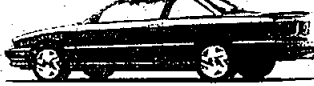
Salsa's glass treatment includes a bronze-colored windshield along with driver and front passenger windows that feature outside rearview mirrors mounted right on the glass. It also has dual-intensity neon stop, turn and tail lamps enclosed in black lenses.

The sliding cargo drawer and drop gate, which can be opened when the drawer is fully extended, makes for easy rear storage. The drawer slides in and out and can be latched on each tooth of its track to lock in a number of positions.

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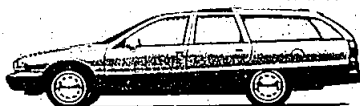
Eighty Eight Royale LS



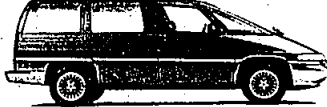
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