

## Detroit Auto Scene

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## 1938 Buick Y Job Was Industry's First Concept Car

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He got his start on the West Coast, designing custom bodies built on Cadillac chassis for the elite of Hollywood. Don Lee, the biggest Cadillac distributor on the West Coast, saw these vehicles and brought them to the attention of one of the Fisher brothers.

Earl was brought to Detroit to design cars for GM, and his first vehicle was the 1927 LaSalle.

That was the first car designed by a stylist, Wallace said. Before that, they were designed by mechanical engineers.

"Styling was a new kind of thing in those days," Wallace said.

"Earl then went on to become head of GM's Art & Colour Section.

"From there, he went on to create the most sought-after vehicles in the world."

Earl was a hands-on creator, Wallace said. He liked to take his concept cars out and do the "clinicing" himself.

He would drive the vehicle into a big city and bring a photographer with him. Then, as people asked to sit in and even drive the vehicle, Earl would ask them what features they liked.

The Y was a very influential car, Wallace said. Other vehicles started to pick up on the aerodynamic, sleek look. But the Y went on display at the start of World War II.

By February of 1942, however, the production of automobiles stopped and wouldn't start for another four years.

And the first models made after the war were basically 1941 or 1942 designs.

New and improved designs didn't hit the market until around 1949.

Today's concept cars are more practical in nature, Wallace said. A very popular design might actually go from concept to reality.

But the early concept cars were more "dream" vehicles that had technology that wasn't ready for the marketplace or whose specs couldn't pass muster.

Wallace is especially happy that the Y has survived. It's still drivable and has 25,000 miles on the odometer.

While it has many parts in common with Buicks of its era, replacing parts often requires custom work.

"So many of these concept cars were scrapped or just lost over the years," Wallace said. "The Buick Y is a thing of beauty and its sale price today, I wouldn't even want to guess a value, but it would be in the millions.

"The sky is the limit, and it is such a beautiful car."

## Got News?

If you have solid business news for this paper, please contact us at News@DetroitAutoScene.com.

## Thin Shell Over Steel Frames Makes Faurecia Seats Special

by Jim Stickford

They say build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door. Well, the international parts supplier Faurecia believes that same principle applies to car seats.

Mike Miner, product line manager for Faurecia, said the company recently showed off its urban rhythm seat at the recent Los Angeles Auto Show.

"Seats are one of the main things where the driver interfaces with the car," Miner said. "About 60 percent of the human body comes into contact with a car seat. The seat and the steering wheel are the two points of contact the driver has with the vehicle."

Miner said when a customer walks into a showroom, the first thing he or she does is look at a vehicle. The second is to sit in the car. That experience of sitting in the car defines whether that customer will be happy with the car or not. And the seat must be comfortable, not just in the showroom, but over the life of the vehicle.

Faurecia uses a traditional metal frame, instead of one built around more advanced materials like composite plastics, because the OEMs know and are comfortable with metal frames, Miner said. So when they showed off the urban rhythm seat they used metal instead of composites used in some of the company's other "vision" seats.

The thing to remember, said Miner, is that while customers care about comfort, OEMs care about safety. Car seats must meet rigid federal safety standards. But while the frame uses metal, its architecture is configured in such a way that the seat mimics with the driver or passenger's spine. This allows the company to eliminate a lot of polyurethane foam. The seat pivots at the top and slides at the bottom.

The urban rhythm seat also us-

es what Miner calls a compliant shell that goes over the frame. This shell makes it possible to eliminate foam trim covers, making the seat lighter.

This seat can still be trimmed with either leather or cloth, Miner said.

And because the seat uses a different architecture that doesn't require bulky foam, it gives the passengers in the rear seat a sense of openness as well as creating more leg room.

Miner said the reaction from the OEMs has been positive.

"They like the level of comfort that comes from the different architecture," Miner said. "And they're impressed with the look. But these are innovations that are still in the early development stage.

"One of the things we have to do is validate the concepts with the OEMs. We will want to work with them and do some ride-and-drives at their test tracks as they do long-term evaluations of the seat."

Miner said Faurecia's early testing shows improved levels of comfort. He said it's a firm seat with a firmer feel, and has no hot spots, which he defines as an area of a seat with no pressure points.

"It has a very even pressure distribution," Miner said. "Even with the limited amount of foam used on the seat."

Miner said the urban rhythm seat isn't the only new technology Faurecia is working on. The company has also created a change in cover-carving technology. Miner calls it foam-in-place trim cover. That's when the foam is directly molded into the fabric.

This process saves trimming labor and allows for the trim cover to be placed on fine surfaces that normally can't be done using traditional trim cover production methods, which take place when a bag or sock is pulled over the seat.



Both thin and sleek, Faurecia's urban rhythm seat incorporates responsive thermoplastic surfaces that adjust to body size, shape and posture to keep occupants comfortable and safe.

## Club GM Reduces Auto Show Tickets

Those who are looking for discounts on tickets for the North American International Auto Show need look no further.

Club GM will be selling tickets to this year's NAIAS at the Renaissance Center level A food court across from Fish City between the hours of 10:30 a.m. and 1 p.m. on Jan. 17-18 and Jan. 21-25.

The Auto Show is open to the public from Saturday, Jan. 19, through Sunday, Jan. 27.

Adult tickets through Club GM are \$9, \$3 less than the \$12 Cobo door ticket price.

Tickets for children and seniors may be purchased only at Cobo Arena.

Money raised from the sale of tickets by the club will go toward Club GM's many charities.

For more information, visit www.gmmensclub.org.

## Electronics Now Fastest-Growing Auto Commodity

With continued pressure from legislators and consumer bodies to increase the fitment of active safety systems, Livonia-based TRW Automotive expects several notable trends to develop in the electronics field.

One is crash avoidance technologies becoming mainstream. There will also be a focus on affordable radar and camera systems and increased demand for open architecture systems.

Peter Lake, executive vice president, Sales & Business Development for TRW, said, "Electronics is the fastest-growing automotive commodity. Industry estimators now place the percentage of a vehicle's cost attributed to this area to be as high as 40 to 50 percent, up from 20 percent a decade ago.

"Today, the industry is stepping up to the mark as organizations such as the World Health Organization and the European Commission have set ambitious targets to drastically reduce the number of road fatalities globally by 2020.

"To support this, New Car Assessment Programs (NCAPs), including Euro NCAP, are revising their rating programs to reward and promote safety improvements in new vehicles over the coming years.

"One of the most important goals of the new scheme will be to include emergency crash avoidance technologies, which will significantly boost the fitment of electronics content on new vehicles."

With Driver Assist Systems (DAS) set to become mainstream technology, TRW expects that optimizing costs will become an important topic for vehicle manufacturers and suppliers.

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