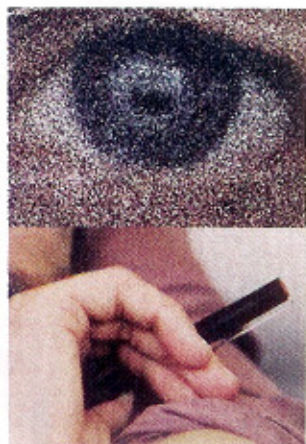


(interview) chris bangle



auto firms invariably were. Design had an insignificant voice. Cars were tasteful, elegant, and similar in style despite size. Bangle was given license to change by managers who knew a bold step was needed—and change he did. Of BMW's rich design DNA, only three styling genes were preserved: the twin-kidney grille, the quad headlamps (although lens shapes have been revolutionized), and the Hofmeister kink—the hook in the side windows at the rear pillars, named after the BMW

design director who first drew it in 1961, Wilhelm Hofmeister.

The launch of the E65 7 Series in 2001 confirmed the radical change in design direction hinted at in concept cars like the muscular Z9 coupe and the oddly asymmetrical X3 coupe.

It was time, insists Bangle, for a change. "The old 7 Series, the E38, was an elegant car, an evolution of the classic BMW look. But it wasn't penetrating the luxury market as we desired. It just didn't have the presence to be noticed. At the same time, cars were screaming for change. They were changing—new more powerful motors, way more technology, more speed—they were fundamentally different cars. Put me in one more time, and I ain't gonna fit, they were almost saying to the designers. Factor in the changing demographics. We knew China and Asia as a whole would be the big growth markets. Our competitors were dominating in these countries in the luxury market. So we needed to do something new. Whenever you move ahead, you leave some people behind."

Did he not feel the smallest *frisson* of uncertainty before those covers came off the E65 7 Series, revealing the high Bangle butt, those sad, spaniel-eye headlamps, the incomprehensible iDrive (can't blame Bangle for that, though), and all those convex and concave curves and sweeping lights that melded to give Bangle's signature flame surfacing? Not for a moment. "We'd done our homework. We were confident. We were never going to go back to the old way."

But has the subsequent criticism—of the 7 Series, the 5 Series, the Z4 (which brilliant industrial designer and car enthusiast Marc Newson once described as having been designed with a machete), the X3, and the 1 Series—hurt? "A lot of criticism came from reactionary elements who weren't expecting change, especially such a pronounced change, and from such a completely unexpected quarter—BMW. They forgot BMW was once renowned for its design bravery. I think perhaps we at BMW had forgotten that, too.

"Yes, the press—or elements of it—were vicious. But the only thing that bothered me was when it reached my family, and it hurt them. I have a 17-year-old son, who was 13 at the time, and he was affected by the criticism. It hurt him. You need to separate the professional from the private; you need to draw the line. In fact, it probably brought us closer as a family."

Although his name is irrevocably linked to them, Bangle takes little credit for specific Bangle-era vehicles, always citing the name of the chief designer responsible. For the 2001 7 Series, it was one of his protégés, Dutchman Adrian van Hooydonk, who has since been elevated to chief of design for the BMW brand (Bangle continues as head of design for the entire BMW family, including Mini, Rolls-Royce, and motorcycles).

Bangle sees his job as "managing the conflict between corporate pragmatism—the clear need to make money—and artistic passion. My role is to inspire people, to work as an editor and a director of the whole thing, to make sure that if there are issues between ourselves and the board they're resolved as quickly as possible. BMW felt it was time to move, they allowed us to move—we did it together.

"So, yeah, I do feel we've kick-started this industry. It had slept for a while. Now I look around and see other car companies are waking up and starting to do good."

Now that the fuss is dying down and sales of his designs are growing, does Bangle feel vindicated? "You know, my mind is now somewhere else already. I worry that the industry isn't looking far enough forward. We're closing in rapidly at the end of the current paradigm in the evolution of the car, and if this paradigm lasts beyond 2020, I'll be amazed. After that, cars, as we understand them now, will be different animals.

"We as an industry know change is happening, but we don't seem to be able to deal with it. The design schools—which are way too conservative—aren't researching this; the relationship between engineering and design is in a stasis. But, man, we've got to go so much further. We need engineers to be prepared to go up front and lead!"

The key issues, contends Bangle, include urban congestion, pollution, and that the automobile is beyond the economic reach of many people, especially in the developing countries where makers are targeting growth. Cars—or, more accurately, personal-mobility devices—need to be made much cheaper. "Automobiles are now like computers in 1952. We're a long way from PCs that you go down to Wal-Mart to pick up. We're miles from where personal mobility could be if it achieves the efficiency and lost-cost dynamic we've come to expect from other industries. So come on, guys, let's roll!" ■

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