



3-in-1 concept

BEING A designer ain't an easy job. I should know, because I was one. After four years of study and six years of industrial humiliation at the hands of engineers who, apparently, knew a helluva lot more about design than I did, I reoriented my pen away from the drawing board and started writing instead. I am prepared to confess that one of the reasons for doing so was to get back at those engineers. While they may have been able to argue entire rainbows into their faces regarding the aesthetic and technical values of my visual creativity, when it came to the evaluation of words most of them were... well... literately challenged.

But, 10 years on, I still jump at any opportunity to interview a designer, or to evaluate the work of those people, many of my own generation, who managed to survive the scathing comments of the technocrats.

With this background in mind, I want you now to imagine my reaction when Audi invited me along to the opening of its brand group design centre in Munich. Is an image forming yet? Well, add a bit more dribble and a manic grin... now you're getting it.

Not only was I promised the presence of top brand group design dog Walter De'Silva himself, but also Gerd Pfefferle, responsible for Audi design, Luc Donckerwolke (Lamborghini) and Brit Steve Lewis (SEAT). On top of this I, and the other 50 or so journalists present, would get free access to a selection of the other 18 creative types that now populate the design centre.

To say it's new is a little bit of a stretch of the imagination. Audi has had a design studio there, reporting to Ingolstadt, for 20 years now, but, over a space of 6 months, this space was converted, extended and modernised to turn it into a concept design facility for the three marques in the Audi Brand Group.

The studio brings together, for the first time, the creative skills of all three brands into one location, and puts them under the direct

control of Walter De'Silva, thus removing them from the day-to-day issues burdening their design colleagues in Ingolstadt, Sant' Agata and Barcelona. These folks are responsible for blue sky thinking, for coming up with ideas and products that won't start to seep into production vehicles until at least the generation after next.

The vast majority of them are designers, but there is also one engineer there. This, I must confess, has long been a dream of retribution for me. During my years of torment, I used to fantasise about a world where I was among many like-minded souls – all of us designers – debating matters at a creative level no mere mortal could possibly appreciate. Then, into our lair one day would wander an itinerant engineer. He would look over my shoulder at my latest creation and utter those considered words of damnation "It's too pointy at that end, and you'll never get a proper seal for that joint."

At this point the multitude would rise up and turn on him and mock him with jeering scorn before finally pummelling him senseless with protractors, adjustable set-squares and slide rules.

Do you sense unresolved issues here? Well, you're quite right.

Anyway, back to that lucky band of designers populating the Audi Brand Group's new studio in Munich. There's a core team of 4 or 5, and the rest "rotate". That is, those poor sods that have to live in the real world get to escape from time to time to Munich to refresh their creative juices, and perhaps be inspired by the chic ambience of Munich's Schwabing – the city's trendy university area, populated by intellectuals and crammed with cafés, museums and assorted fine architecture. The team is largely German, but has a pretty international overtone, with French, Italian and Spanish making up part of the current team.

These folks (including an unusually high proportion of women) are free to think as far out of the box as they can get. They play around with ideas such as Lamborghini off-roaders or SEAT super sports cars. They also work on non-automotive products. Principally such articles are aimed at each brand's range of accessories, and are designed to reflect the imagery and values of their respective brands, rather than simply designing, say, a watch, and slapping the four rings onto it.

For a very entertaining hour in the afternoon, we were divided into three groups and each one given 20 minutes to consider a specific design task, with the assistance of studio incumbents, before moving onto the next of three challenges. A fascinating exercise indeed, and one that took me back a bit.

But, when faced with the task of designing a belt to reflect the SEAT brand, one journalist repeatedly insisted that this could not possibly be achieved without incorporating the SEAT logo into the design.

Ah well. There is some comfort in knowing I no longer face such problems.

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Designers at work

