www.newdesignmagazine.co.uk
twitter.com/alinewdesign

newdesign

issue129/**2017**

Wheels of fortune

About town
Commuter bicycles

Meter reading
London's electric taxi

Information overload
Making sense of data

Automotive | Cycling | 3D printing | Data | Brand

© 2017 DRIVE INC. LTD All rights reserved

drive

+44 (0) 1483 211 200
WWW.DRIVEDESIGN.CO.UK

Performance driven

Passion and precision inform the work of automotive design consultancy Drive. **Alistair Welch** reports

Automotive design consultancy Drive celebrated its 20th anniversary in style. In August the company decamped to the Goodwood Revival where it occupied a pop-up design studio which, in the nostalgic spirit of the motorsport event, showcased some of the car design techniques of yesteryear. Whilst today you're more likely to see a designer working in 3D CAD rather than at a drawing board, a passion for exceptional automotive design is timeless.

Drive was founded by Chris Longmore and Mark Pritchard in 1997. In its earlier days automotive work was just part of a broader spectrum of design consultancy that comprised product and FMCG work for companies including Flymo, Nokia, and Unilever. However, from 2010 the directors decided to focus more exclusively on its automotive clients. The consultancy had built a strong reputation in vehicle design and the volume of work was sufficient to make specialization the smart move. "It was important to have a clear offering and build on our experience," comments Longmore. "With the future increase in electric vehicles and new brands producing them, we were in a strong position to add real value to automotive clients."

Drive's offer to clients covers the entire gamut of design services, from automotive research and concept development through visualisation and prototyping to resourcing and communications. Its designers are well versed in the more traditional techniques of sketching and physical modelling and expert in an array of digital tools including 3D modelling in Alias, CGI, rapid prototyping, and, increasingly, the use of virtual reality.

Whatever the particular project, Drive places great emphasis on understanding the brand DNA of an automotive client. "In the early stages of a project we will investigate a brand to gain a deep and comprehensive understanding of its values, drilling down into what differentiates it from the competition - what makes a brand special. It's more than just a grill or particular motif, it's an approach and attitude," explains Pritchard.

One of the difficulties of writing about automotive design is that so much of a consultancy's recent work will be bound by strict confidentiality agreements. However, one story Drive can share is its work for Zenos Cars. Zenos is a British maker of high-performance lightweight sports cars that have an accessible price point relative to the market. The brand, founded in 2012, built an enthusiastic community around its vehicles. Financial difficulties following cancelled export orders meant that the company entered administration in January 2017, but Zenos was acquired by AC Cars in March this year and the company is set to continue production and develop its next generation of vehicles.

Zenos is an example of the niche brand, low volume manufacturer that represents one aspect of Drive's work. "They came to us to look at how they could brand and style their cars to create something unique in the marketplace," says Pritchard. "We looked to create a language which would have longevity and could be built upon with subsequent cars. Yes, they have had some investment problems but it was a great project for us, a fantastic calling card."

The vehicles – road-going but track-focussed sports cars – are built with a carbon fibre chassis the low cost of which is enabled by moulding offcuts. "When Zenos came to us they had little more than a company name," continues Longmore. "Working together we developed a good idea of the sort of car we wanted to produce. We were trying to represent an exciting car and part of the brand was the

Opposite | The Drive team at Goodwood Revival: Mark Pritchard (2nd from right), Chris Longmore (far right). Credit: Jason Leaman jlphotography.co.uk
Below | Mark Przeslawski (right) in the Drive design studio

Opposite top | Zenos
Opposite | Caterham C120

involvement of everyone in a club. The whole process was very open."

To help deliver a product within a tight budget, Drive used digital modelling to cut out iterations of physical modelling. Indeed, Zenos' first show car had not seen any physical models built before its production. "We were confident in our abilities and the digital processes to get what we were showing on screen and in visualisations into the physical world," adds Longmore.

In addition to work with niche vehicle manufacturers, Drive engages with the world's major automotive OEMs. For example, Drive has worked with Ford for over ten years. The consultancy's expert users of Alias have helped Ford to develop and visualise a broad spectrum of design ideas, particular on behalf of the OEM's Advanced Product Group. Meanwhile, Caterham Technology appointed Drive to contribute to the development of a high performance road car – the C120 – which was to be created as a joint venture between Caterham Cars and Renault's Alpine brand.

Sadly for Drive, this was one instance where its extensive design work was never realised in a production vehicle. Not seeing the fruits of your labours on the road is an occupational danger for the automotive designer. However, in this instance the disappointment was tempered by the fact that the project – although not fully realised – demonstrates Drive's ability to interpret the DNA of a car band in delivering an exciting new model.

A full-scale model of the C120, the 'Caterham that never was', shows a new direction for Caterham. The car is based on a package that the brand had not used before so the most recognisable Caterham visual design cues (think the long bonnet and front engine of the Caterham 7) were not available; designers needed to evoke a sense of the brand in a different way.

Mark Przeslawski, lead designer at Drive, describes on a blog on the Drive website (well worth reading in full) how the C120 was to be a modern interpretation of a historic brand. "Starting with the overall proportion, it is lithe, nimble and carries no excess weight whilst remaining visually planted in stance. The front rakes back from the iconic Caterham nose to a short rear overhang. The arch lines communicate some of the iconic Caterham 7 design gestures, the combination of the long diving front agile arch line and the rear pert, perfectly poised line evokes the similar feeling you get from looking at a 7," he writes. "Everything works together to deliver maximum performance whist interpreting the Caterham design philosophy for the 21st century. Everything is there for a reason too, from the central grill, splitter and side intakes, designed for function hinting at influences from Caterham motorsport. It was a landmark project for Caterham and Drive; something none of us will forget and I only wish you could see on the road."

Whilst no two automotive projects are the same, Drive will always spend time at the start of a project developing a deep understanding of the client's brand DNA. "Sometimes we'll catch ourselves producing almost no work whatsoever for a few days because there is a lot of talk trying to understand the feeling," admits Pritchard. "We're well versed in mood boards and looking at other cars – sometimes it is easier to define what something is not rather than what it is. We get under the skin of a brand – the way a surface or line can express lightness or heaviness."

Drive places great emphasis on understanding the brand DNA of an automotive client

One of the advantages of being an independent consultancy is, according to Pritchard, that Drive can bring a fresh approach to a design project. "Some [in-house] designers can get so institutionalized by a company that they find it difficult to step back," he says. "I think that's where we can come in – as outsiders we can say what work is worth holding on to and what it might be better to let go."

Longmore picks up the theme: "Obviously in-house designers completely understand the product, the brand, and the whole company. But sometimes you might cling onto things because you have a history within the company. Looking from the outside, quite often we'll work with the PR agency on the marketing side of things and the message they are trying to get across."

Of all the trends in automotive design, the mass-market adoption of electric vehicles has the potential to be one of the most disruptive. But what does the advent of fully-electric and advanced hybrid powertrains mean for the design of a vehicle? "The first thing is it should give more freedom," answers Pritchard. "You're not reliant on traditional building blocks or constraints so there is more flexibility in where certain components can go. One key dilemma is what people will expect an electric vehicle to look like."

Take a car's front grill as an example. For many automotive OEMs the grill is a key identifier of

consultancy

Main | Zenos E10R
Below | Development of the Zenos in Alias

brand identity. However, given a grill's primary function is to cool the engine they will not necessarily be required on an electric vehicle. "Now how do you define this space?" asks Pritchard. "People are well versed with the front face of the car. Remove those grills and you've got a bit more freedom on the front to define a face, but then suddenly if you just put a blank wall in there you don't have a face. It's an interesting challenge – particularly those companies that are doing an EV from the ground up, it's interesting to see where they are going to take it."

"These are big questions," agrees Przeslawski. "The autonomous car pushes the boundary even further. It's unchartered territory at this time. Like electric vehicles, autonomous vehicles will build a different set of users compared with your traditional 'petrol head'."

Having just celebrated 20 years in business, Drive's founders are now looking to the future. "Technologies and techniques have changed in our workplace and across the industry – there's a lot of areas that will keep changing and we'll try to keep up with that," says Longmore. "I think we can be helpful in taking a fresh look at the development of electric and autonomous vehicles. We want to get our teeth into good projects and bring forth our knowledge to help niche vehicle people and bring further value to OEMs."

Whilst Drive has moved away from the product design work it completed in its earlier days, ironically, the consultancy's excellence in automotive design has attracted potential clients looking for an 'automotive feel' in the design of new products. "We're still involved in product to an extent but it's something we don't publicize for fear of muddying the message," adds Longmore. "We're very strong on design, digital modelling, animation and CGI – those stem from getting automotive right and that's why other industries now come to us."

Fundamentally, keeping a fresh outlook and a stream of challenging new projects underpins Drive's outlook. "Drive doesn't feel like a 20 year old company," Longmore concludes. "It's exciting that the technology has moved on from the drawing boards we saw at Goodwood. Drive is an exciting place to be working on concepts with clients who trust us to deliver." |