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VAPOR OF EXPERIENCE CHUCK PELLY

The founder of Hallmark Cards, Joyce Hall, once was asked how he knew what greeting cards would sell. Hall replied: "The vapor of experience."

When it comes to design, Chuck Pelly brings the same vapor of experience accumulated over a life-time of designing race cars, boats, snowmobiles, farm equipment, office furniture, packaging, cameras and cars for GM, Chrysler, American Motors, Mazda, Subaru and BMW.

A graduate of Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California – the Harvard of auto design – Chuck designed the first Scarab for Lance Reventlow, the late Formula One race car driver. "It was pure love and adventure," he says of his favorite car, which is now valued at more than a million dollars. "I got a \$200 design fee and a ride around the track."

After working for the legendary Henry Dreyfus in the '60s and early '70s, Chuck started Designworks USA in 1972. "As a pioneer in industrial design, Dreyfus really instilled the practical – products must last a long time and be carefully executed. He also loved all product design. It was a perfect foundation for my training."

Designworks grew from a staff of three working out of a Malibu Canyon garage to one of the world's leading design firms and a subsidiary of BMW. "Designworks was the first design firm purchased by a car company," Chuck notes. "And to this day it's the only mixed discipline studio."

Chuck's current passion is the Design Academy, a design management consultancy he established in 2000 with Joan Gregor, an experienced business planner, researcher and marketer.

Chuck and Joan also are driving the 2006 Los Angeles Auto Show's "Ultimate Green Car" Design Challenge to focus more attention on Los Angeles as a center of design and new ideas in automobiles.

"It's a chance to re-evaluate and re-think the automobile," Chuck says. "Green is not just mileage. It's recyclability, safety, the whole act of making mobility more earth friendly. This is going to open up imagination in multiple ways – from mass transit to personal transportation."

So as you read what Chuck Pelly has to say about cars and design, it's worth remembering that he has the vapor of experience guiding him.

www.pellydesign.com

DESIGN INSIGHTS

Q – You've been quoted as saying that automotive companies are not getting the most out of their designers because the risk factor is causing unique ideas to be over-analyzed until they are virtually the same. How can companies manage risk better?

Chuck – The investment in establishing a global market of any kind is so huge that it throws an incredible challenge to the designers to not make a mistake. But the problem with design is, like writing music or anything else, you have to make mistakes. You have to try different ideas. You have to get input, especially to do a product that has something special. The wow factor has even more importance now. As companies increase risk management, the wow factor gets smaller and smaller. It's a tough challenge. The answer is to deal with risk like they do in Las Vegas. You have to establish a higher budget for design risk because the payoff, just like in Las Vegas, can be mammoth.

Q – Speaking of the wow factor, is there any auto maker doing a good job at this?

Chuck – Renault has achieved the wow factor with very sophisticated design. They are being reprimanded by the fact that the design is too unique and advanced. So it's being de-tuned. It's sad to see those taking risks that could have a payoff in two or three years, getting squelched and returning to a more conservative nature. Certainly, when BMW did the new 7 Series, there were a lot of risk management people that just went upside down. But BMW stuck with it and it paid off.

Q – Were you surprised by the BMW 7 Series controversy?

Chuck – No, we knew it was coming. It was an experiment. There were technical reasons for this. BMW needed more trunk space. They needed a higher aerodynamic profile. They needed a car that was taller. The new engine made the hood higher. There were a lot of physical requirements that compounded this unique design change. The nice thing is that BMW management stood by the design and said, "Yes, it's different and, yes, some people may not like it. But it not only has a unique look, it has functions to boot."

Q – What are the lessons for car designers in all this?



The iPod is the Holy Grail, according to Pelly, because "it fuses everything into a highly successful financial package."

Chuck – The first year was horror: "Oh, my God, don't experiment." The second year was a good chance for people to vent their ideas and express themselves. It created a new medium, allowing something like blogs in the design of cars. I was going through U.S. Customs and an agent asked what I did. When I told him I was a designer and had been at BMW, he squinted his eyes and said, "I hope you don't have anything to do with that new 7 Series tail." To me, that showed how the styling of a car had reached a point never attained before. Luckily, the controversy passed. People have accepted the design and sales are up. Now it gives designers a chance to be braver. And people are free to vent their opinions. The hope is that the use of show cars will expand so that people can really express themselves when they see a show car. That's when we'll get better cars.

Q – What is it about cars that cause so much emotion?

Chuck – Automobiles are rolling pieces of sculpture. You are dealing with art, as well as performance and function. It's a complex triad. We find that emotional responses can be directly correlated to certain design cues: the shape of the wheel well, the stance of the car from the back view, the profile, and whether or not the car has a lean, tight and taut look. People seem to react negatively to a car that looks saggy and non-engineered. The general public doesn't have a vocabulary to express their feelings toward cars, like they do for architecture or fashion. Certainly, there is a wonderful vocabulary when men talk about women or women talk about men. The subtleties in beauty among women can be very small – the twist of a lip or the raise of an eyebrow...things that are so subtle you'd think nobody would notice. But they certainly are noticed.

Q – Over the years there has been a lot of talk about "macho" and "muscle" cars and, yet, the words you're using to describe a car are feminine. Do you consider cars more feminine than masculine?

Chuck – Absolutely. Fifty-one percent of the world is female. Their purchasing power is vastly underestimated. There is a rebirth, especially in the Far East, where cars have very soft, gentle features and almost smiling faces. We've talked to a lot women and men who are feeling the backlash of macho cars. Enough is enough. Macho is great; power is great. But there are a lot of people who like to drive just as a gentle sport, of going place to place. There's definitely a change toward upbeat, happier cars.

Q – Is this one of the more significant changes you've seen in your career?

Chuck – The '50s and '60s had obvious design cues that were almost easy to solve. Cars were awkward, high, and un-aerodynamic. They had definite shortcomings that a good technical designer could improve. During this period, of course, we had lots of cars with flair. In the '80s, conformity moved into place and unbelievable developments in safety and legal requirements put binders on design to a point where people are still recoiling from these limitations. Over the last five years there has been a freedom to work within these rules, with forms and shapes that haven't been used before. These forms are more fluid and imaginative, less rigid. It's a conscious and exciting effort to break away from sameness. We'll see more unique niche vehicles, which will allow people to portray their personality in the car they drive.

Q – You've said Asians will dominate automotive design in 10 years, accounting for about 60 percent of the design chiefs at car companies. What's the basis for this opinion and how will it impact future car designs?

Chuck – The reason for this is education and the cost of education and subsidized education. In recent years, whether it's personal or government contributions, the Asians have had the ability to fund students at a higher level than the North Americans and the Europeans. There's also an enthusiasm and love for automotive design among Asian students. It's only logical that this will continue on into the industry.

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Q – And what impact will these Asian designers have on car design?

Chuck – Well, it will be something new because they are coming from a different history. We've gone from the American hot rod syndrome where kids grew up really knowing about their cars, toward a generation of young people who have always had cars, but didn't have to work on them. So the priorities are different. Some of them are more humanistic. Some are funny looking, at least to us old hot rod guys. But who is to say what is right or wrong. The fact is that it's going to make for very different designs.

Q – How are car designers different from other product designers?

Chuck – The passion of automobiles seems to be all encompassing. This brings youth – generation after generation – so enthusiastically into car design that everything else falls aside. Generally, car designers have an extremely one-track mind. They are required to live five years in the future at all times because they are designing for people five years from now. This makes them a little frustrated with every day living. They tend to be young and have less social skills than other professions, because of their overwhelming attention to the automobile.

Q – What can car designers and product designers learn from each other?

Chuck – From car designers, product designers can learn passion and emotion. From product designers, car designers can learn logic, interdisciplinary exchanges, a tighter coordination between engineering and technical use. The exchange is very, very helpful.

Q – At Designworks, this became part of your approach to design. You put car designers in the same building as designers for other products, such as medical. First, what gave you this idea? And, secondly, how did it work?

Chuck – The original idea started because I love all design. I didn't care whether it was a car, a tape recorder or pair of pliers. I enjoy all of it and refuse to do just one part of it. The second part was that it became apparent to me that the interest and retention of talented designers depended on giving them the ability to move around and try different projects. If you're going to draw cell phones day and night for years, you burn out. The basic premise turned out to be very workable and productive.

Q – You've said that the next generation of car designers must be more closely connected with engineering. What can be done to bridge the gap between design and engineering?

Chuck – It's so interesting to see Ford's new campaign. They claim that they've revolutionized the whole design department and made closer ties between engineering and design. How they do this remains to be seen. But it has to happen. The examples of really exquisite design, such as the Formula One cars, where you have an absolute tie between ultimate engineering and design, give a car an inner-beauty. The little peek-a-boos – seeing the brakes through the wheel -- give a quality and richness that brings exterior design to the interior of a car.



The controversy over the styling of the BMW 7 Series "gives designers a chance to be braver".

Q – Do you see the design trend toward customization continuing?

Chuck – Customization is not going away. All the car companies are working on ways to make lower volume cars that are unique, but still cost effective. If you take the lineup of the vast array of cars, from SUVs to crossovers to sports cars, the choice is expanding in quantum leaps each year. I see this continuing for the next five years.

Q – How will designers use colors, special effects and materials to differentiate cars in the future?

Chuck -- This is one of the first steps toward good customization. What color and materials can do for the whole driving experience will be a great advance. Lexus just came out with a new silk-based synthetic liner for seats. The material was developed for the lingerie industry. And the touch and feel is having immediate impact. So this is just one example of a whole new world of materials that we're going to see.



Chuck Pelly designed the first Scarab for Lance Reventlow, the late Formula One race car driver.



This Pelly-designed Chaparral was considered the most innovative in Formula One racing during the 1960s.

Q – In recent years you've worked closely with design schools in China, Singapore and New Zealand. How do young designers in Asia compare with those in U.S. and Europe?

Chuck – It's been a big surprise. It's something I thought I knew about, but it turned out I didn't. Preconceived ideas are fatal when you talk about young people. Their exposure to the world now via the internet, television and movies is a bit of an equalizer, but their cultural background is also creating unique qualities. All these things I used to generalize about, I no longer can. I find that there are geniuses in the most unlikely places. And it doesn't matter where they were trained or came from, it's just innate talent.

Q – You've mentioned Finland and New Zealand as unlikely pockets of excellence. What are some other sleepers out there?

Chuck – There are a lot of sleepers in small specialty areas. I expect that Switzerland, for example, could create attention to details and sensitivity to design that might surprise the world. I could see a pocket of excellence emerging from South Africa where they might combine traditional imagery with modern fabrics. The exciting thing is to watch these most unexpected places jump forward.

Q – How does a company measure design in a meaningful accurate way?

← How does a company measure design in a meaningful, accurate way.

Chuck – It's extremely difficult to quantify design success. This whole world of measuring market acceptance of design parameters is a very intense field right now. There are a number of guidelines we can use, but the challenge is that you are measuring emotion. You are measuring the feelings that people get from a beautiful piece of music or the visual stimulation that people get from looking at a beautiful painting. One of the breakthroughs has surprisingly come from architects. The American Institute of Architects (AIA), in conjunction with the Salk Institute, is trying to measure biometrically the mind's reaction to different kinds of spaces. In other words, what's the feeling when you enter a highly ornamental lobby or a very clean lobby? They are actually able to measure emotional responses in the brain. If we can pursue measurement of human reaction, we'll have one more piece in trying to establish design metrics.

Q – How are U.S. companies doing in managing design?

Chuck – Over the past five years, large corporations have developed very competent design groups. They have been developed very quickly and without history. So now we have very large, highly funded design offices run by corporations who have reached their own glass ceiling. They are having trouble managing creativity and expanding innovation. There's going to be a leveling here -- a broadening of these monoliths that have been created. It's an exciting but very challenging time for design. Products like the iPod symbolize what can happen when management and design work together. Believe me, the iPod has affected every design office in the world as to: "Are they doing things right? Can they do better? Can they work together? And how can they steer this to a better future?"

Q – Are you saying the iPod is the most influential design of all?

Chuck – It has become a Holy Grail because it is science and art combined, as well as management and engineering. It fuses everything into a highly successful financial package.

Q – What should companies do differently?

Chuck – Design has to come from the top – the CEO. It's the only way. This means that design has to be part of the CEO's education, training and interest, in addition to finance.

Q – With CEOs leading the way, doesn't this put more pressure on designers to deliver financial results?

Chuck -- Design has reached a level of responsibility that it was not prepared for. It was an enjoyable, intuitive, and artistic profession that suddenly got thrown into the disciplined world of business. This is the designer's challenge: to grow the profession into a real integral part of business.

PAGE 1 | PAGE 2