

Press Release

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Volvo concept cars – part of a conscious strategy

What is a concept car? An odd or amusing vehicle which attracts a brief period of fame at a motor show. Or something more serious..?Concept cars have become an essential part of the activities of Volvo Car Corporation. Now part of a conscious strategy, the concept car is created for many different, albeit important reasons.

Volvo's first concept car was unveiled in 1933, when the company was a mere six years old. Known as the Venus Bilo, this creation was a highly streamlined model. Built by an independent company under contract from Volvo, it was developed to test the response of the general public to streamlining prior to the introduction of the PV36 'Carioca' a few years later.

However, the Carioca was not a success, perhaps indicating that the concept had not been evaluated sufficiently.

The interesting feature of the Venus Bilo is the striking similarity of its styling to that of one of Volvo's latest concept cars, the VCC, including the door openings, the rear wheels at the corners and the sloped rear end.

The idea of building a car more similar to an American model than the small, rounded PV was conceived in 1952, some years before Volvo made its first attempt to enter the North American market. The result was the 'Philip', a big car with a V8 engine and embryonic 'fins' at the rear. Although the car might now be regarded as attractive, it never reached the production stage.

Introduced twenty years later in 1972, when Volvo had seriously adopted safety as one of its core values, the VESC (Volvo Experimental Concept Car) fitted the image well. The car was not only the test vehicle for a series of advanced safety features, but was also something of a prototype for the 240 series, which was to appear two years later.

In short, the VESC was carefully designed for clearly defined purposes.

Psychoanalyst at work

"This has been true of every concept car since then," comments Sven de Smet, brand strategy manager at Volvo Cars.

Sven hails from Flanders in Belgium and comes from a family with a feeling for things Swedish: "You might guess that from my first name," he smiles. "My father also had a canary yellow Volvo 140, so I was almost destined to end up at Volvo."

After qualifying as a psychoanalyst, he began to specialise in consumer affairs.

"I found consumers more complex and interesting than patients with psychological illnesses. So I began to get involved in market research and soon got a job with the Volvo marketing organisation in Brussels. After a few years with them, I moved to Göteborg four years ago."

Sven de Smet is now responsible for brand strategies and corporate identity.

The slogan The Soul of the Brand is used to describe what Volvo cars stand for. In the recent past, Sven's group of six was also involved in developing a completely new advertising image.

Since 2000, he has been involved with all of the different concept cars the company has exhibited at shows around the globe.

Deliberate strategy

“Part of my job is to coordinate the company’s concept cars. We establish cross-functional teams to develop these on the basis of the strategy we have devised.

“No concept car is produced by accident,” stresses Sven de Smet. “The incorporation of Volvo Cars in the Ford family signalled a new beginning and provided fresh energy.”

He lists a number of acronyms – SCC, ACC and PCC (some with the suffix ‘2’), as well as VCC (Versatility Concept Car).

“We take a holistic approach to concept cars today,” he declares. “These must reflect dreams and visions, and they must be a source of inspiration to people both inside and outside the company. Stylists and designers must be given an outlet for their creative energies, while journalists and customers must have an opportunity of assessing the results.

“Concept vehicles include many examples of advanced development projects. Each is something of a ‘competence rally’ which stimulates reactions and generates debate.”

He adds that the SCC (Safety Concept Car) actually attracted more column inches in the press than some recent product launches. The SCC was also used in an advertising campaign – the first time in Volvo’s history.

Journalists like the unknown

“Journalists are extremely knowledgeable and their interest can often be stimulated by something which does not exist – in other words, by a concept car,” remarks Sven de Smet.

“The SCC is an example of what we call ReVolution, which obviously attracts motoring journalists, as well as their colleagues from the lifestyle press. The model exemplifies the fact that design and technical development have once more become ‘one’. It is important for a car to be attractive and technically advanced at the same time. And the SCC is quite simply the safest and most attractive model of its kind!”

He remarks that one of the latest concept models, the big VCC from 2003, is a ‘living model’, which features many innovations and has consequently attracted a great deal of attention.

Sven de Smet notes that Volvo Cars has a fantastic design team, which exploits the opportunities of re-using known forms in new concepts.

“Many of the design cues in today’s Volvo cars include styling elements from the Volvo Amazon. It’s amazing that we are still able to use them – and will be for a long time to come!”

Globetrotter from Mexico

This leads us naturally to José Diaz de la Vega at the Volvo Design Centre.

Born in Mexico City, José grew up with a passion for cars.

“And for speed, beauty and health,” he adds. “From an early age, I wanted to design cars – and to compete in them.”

However, his resources extended only to go-karting, while his father – an engineer with his own car firm – competed in boats. José and his brother were also water-skiers, and he became Mexican champion in the sport.

Nevertheless, the urge to design cars remained strong and was to take him around the world. He qualified first as an industrial and product designer at the university in Mexico City, before enrolling at the Royal College of Art in London and becoming a car designer. He also lived and worked in Australia, the USA and France, as well as for Japanese companies in Europe. Scandinavia also played an important role in his plans.

“The harmony which exists between a first-class work-life balance and good design is a part of everyday life here. The environment and the people are good. I see these positive elements as challenges – values which we must preserve for future generations – and as instruments which enable us to offer exciting and reliable cars,” says José Diaz de la Vega.

José joined the Volvo Cars design department in 1990, becoming head of Interior Design, Colour and Upholstery. As such, he was also involved in all of the concept cars – as well as being responsible for the interior in all current production models.

He is now creative director of Strategic Design and Global Studios.

Continuous cycle

José tells us that strategic design thinking is a sub-conscious mental process which is common to all creative people. To take full advantage of its potential, Volvo Cars established Strategic Design in 1999 as part of its product design process, whose goal is “to constantly evolve Volvo’s product identity, and to generate and develop new ideas as part of the product cycle plan”.

This also involves “a continuous cycle of innovation and creativity”.

“Concept cars are part of a continuous process of development – and research,” explains José Diaz de la Vega. He begins to sketch a ‘mindmap’, with ‘concept cars’ in the centre and lines extending to all of the groups which have a use for them. He begins with suppliers and other external groups, such as motoring and lifestyle journalists, as well as customers. Internally, this includes the Volvo Cars design centres in Göteborg, California and Barcelona, as well as the company’s market, public affairs, technical development, purchasing and management functions.

“We have to maintain an intensive dialogue with company management to determine if a concept – or parts of it – is commercially viable,” he says.

“A concept design feature can sometimes become a major innovation in a production model. For example, we might see the ‘transparent’ A-post in the SCC (Safety Concept Car) in an ‘ordinary’ Volvo sometime in the future.”

Volvo – a luxury car!

José Diaz de la Vega tells us, that distinction is made between ‘standard’ technologies (the engine, chassis and so on) – which are functions expected by the customer – and design-related ‘emotional’ features. This leads him naturally to the VCC. He begins by describing the Swedish temperament:

“Swedes are people who are reluctant to blow their own trumpet. Although Volvo is a luxury marque, Swedes refrain from saying so and regard it as ‘basic’. We must dare to refer to Volvo as a luxury car even at home! In other countries, a Volvo is something that people desire and their owners are proud.

“Volvo is known for its safety standards, its concern for others, timeless and innovative design, functionality and richness of variety. However, it has always been an undervalued brand in Sweden.

“The Versatility Concept Car is the first truly luxurious example which demonstrates that Volvo really is king of the versatility models,” stresses José Diaz de la Vega. “The car represents Scandinavian luxury translated into Volvo’s design language. The concept is of a holistic nature in which all of the visual styling elements clearly display their origins – the front end of the Volvo 164 and the rear end of the 1800 ES. While it is not quite so square at the rear, it is more visually dramatic, and naturally reflects the design language of our current S80 and V70 ranges in terms of its shoulder line, lights, bonnet and other features.”

Although he does not mention the 1933 Venus Bilo, the relationship is obvious!

Swivelling headlamps are an example of the technical advances in the VCC and the shape is also an important design element. He wonders if it is now time for Volvo to abandon the characteristic rear-lamp configuration in the D-posts.

Scandinavian space

José answers his own question: “Customer reactions may provide an indication about this” and goes on to talk about his own area of responsibility – the interior.

He describes the interior as a ‘lounge’ – a space for relaxation, listening to music and socialising.

“It represents a Scandinavian use of space. The cabin emanates calm with its pleasant colours and shapes, as well as the high quality of its materials. The design is a combination of tradition and high-tech – united by a quality of craftsmanship which gives the occupants a feeling of well-being.”

He talks about the driver interface, or the driver’s workplace, which has been made as simple as possible to minimise visual clutter:

“The technology is so advanced that it makes life simpler for the driver. At the same time, the children enjoy a full range of infotainment in the rear, while the child safety features make them as safe as children should be in a Volvo.”

José Diaz de la Vega can talk for hours about the many advanced features and smart systems on board the VCC. However, he stresses again that despite continuous development, the origins of the car – as exemplified by its typical shoulders – should not be forgotten:

“At the same time, the VCC is a car which offers both maximum enjoyment of life and a sense of social responsibility – Scandinavian heritage with a universal interpretation.

“The VCC can help us to remind customers why they bought a Volvo. We tend to forget that.”

Captions:

1. Known as the Venus Bilo, Volvo’s first concept car appeared in 1933. The similarities with the VCC are striking.

2. As Volvo’s first truly purpose-designed concept car, the VESC (Volvo Experimental Safety Car)

reinforced the company's reputation as No. 1 in safety. The model was also something of a prototype for the later 240 series.

3. The Volvo LCP (Light Component Project) was an early indication of Volvo's foresight in terms of adopting new materials and power sources.

4. The 1992 ECC (Environmental Concept Car) was both a hybrid drive test vehicle and a design study for the subsequent Volvo S80.

5. Unveiled in 2001, the ACC (Adventure Concept Car) showed the world that Volvo was on the way to producing an SUV – which duly appeared in the form of the XC90 in autumn 2001.

6. Volvo built a VCC (Volvo Concept Car) as early as in 1980, mainly to test the design of the Volvo 760. The new VCC (Versatility Concept Car) shows how the versatility model of the future is likely to appear.

7. Sven de Smet.

8. José Diaz de la Vega.

FACTFILE 1

Volvo concept cars

Over twenty concept, experimental and special cars have been built by and for Volvo Cars over the years.

1. Venus Biló: A design concept (not built by Volvo)1933
2. Philip: A design for a US export model 1952
3. Elisabeth I: A design study 1953
4. VESC (Volvo Experimental Safety Car): A safety concept and design study1972
5. Volvo Viking: An exterior and interior design study built by Coggiola 1972
6. Volvo electric car: Volvo's first environmental concept car 1977
7. Volvo experimental taxi: The 'New York taxi' 1977
8. VSCC (Volvo Safety Concept Car): Meeting future US safety standards1978
9. Tundra: A design study by Bertone1979
10. VCC (Volvo Concept Car): A design and safety study1980
11. Volvo 244 Diesel Turbo Special: Alternative fuel and performance 1980
12. XD-1: Built to set new diesel speed record 1981
13. LCP (Light Component Project): Built to demonstrate future environmental and technological advances 1983
14. 480 Cabrio: Dutch-Italian-American design study1990
15. ECC (Environmental Concept Car): Environmental concept car and design study1992
16. ACC (Adventure Concept Car): An 'appetiser' and lifestyle model 2000
17. PCC (Performance Concept Car): An S60 featuring high power and advanced safety 2000
18. SCC (Safety Concept Car): Safety in a small car2001

19. PCC2 (Performance Concept Car 2): Safe performance in an estate model 2001
20. ACC 2 (Adventure Concept Car 2): An S60 featuring high power and advanced safety 2002
21. VCC (Versatility Concept Car): The versatility model of the future 2003
22. Five small car models: Built to test the public attitude to small cars 2003

FACTFILE 2

More about Volvo's concept cars

Over the years, Volvo concept and experimental cars have been built for a range of different purposes. The following is a selection of the best known.

1. Venus Bilo 1933

The Venus Bilo was built to order for Volvo with the purpose of testing the streamlined shape prior to the launch of the PV36 – introduced in 1935 and known as the Carioca.

2. Philip 1952

Determined to initiate exports to the USA, Volvo chief Assar Gabrielsson's idea was that Volvo should sell an American-inspired model. The Philip was a bigger car with embryonic fins and was powered by a V8 engine. Although an attractive creation, it was ultimately the PV, and later the Amazon (known as the P120 in the USA), which was a success in the transatlantic market.

3. VESC (Volvo Experimental Safety Car) 1972

Two years prior to the introduction of the 240, Volvo built a number of VESCs to test both the design and a number of safety systems. With features such as crumple zones, rollover protection, a 'disappearing' steering wheel, ABS, automatic seat belts, airbags, pop-up head restraints, interior trim and reversing camera, the VESC attracted enormous attention.

4. Volvo electric car 1977

Volvo built two examples of its first electric concept car between the oil crises of the 1970s. The little (only 268 cm long) model was a two-seater. Integrated with the rear axle, the drive unit developed 9.5 kW (13 hp) and delivered a top speed of 70 km/h.

5. Volvo experimental taxi 1977

Volvo developed its experimental taxi for a competition announced by the Museum of Modern Art and a number of other organisations responsible for public transport and taxi services in New York for a purpose-built taxi suitable for operation in a major city. The Volvo vehicle was powered by an in-line, six-cylinder, 70-hp diesel engine driving the front wheels.

6. VSCC (Volvo Safety Concept Car) 1978

Volvo unveiled its VSCC (Volvo Safety Concept Car) in 1978. In addition to the usual systems, the car was equipped with 25 safety features designed to make the American authorities aware of the many innovations which can improve traffic safety.

The same year, the Volvo 240 was nominated as the standard for car safety in the USA and the NHTSA carried out crash tests on 24 of the cars.

7. VCC (Volvo Concept Car) 1980

The VCC was developed largely as a concept car for the Volvo 760, which was to be launched barely two years later. The VCC was called 'the 80s Volvo', referring to its enhanced safety, low fuel consumption and cleaner exhaust gases – not to mention its modern styling, futuristic instrumentation and interior trim.

8. LCP 2000 (Light Component Project) 1983

The LCP 2000 project comprised several cars with different engine options for testing different types of fuel. The LCP was built largely from lightweight materials, such as aluminium, magnesium and plastics. The engines were turbocharged diesels, although one of the types was designed to burn other fuels, such as rapeseed oil. The body suspension, wheel suspension, steering system, brakes and electrical system boasted many state-of-the-art features and the cars were front wheel-driven.

9. ECC (Environmental Concept Car) 1992

The ECC was Volvo's third proposal for an ecological car of the future. Built almost entirely from recyclable materials, the model was powered by a hybrid drive in the form of a gas turbine and an electric motor. The car could run on basically all types of fuel, both fossil and renewable. The ECC was also a design study and was almost identical to the Volvo S80, which was to appear six years later.

10. ACC (Adventure Concept Car) 2000

The ACC was unveiled a couple of years before the introduction of Volvo's SUV (Sport Utility Vehicle), the XC90. The car was clearly described as an 'appetiser' or a 'thermometer' to test the waters for the forthcoming model. Those interested could convey their views to the product developers over the Internet.

11. PCC (Performance Concept Car) 2000

The first PCC built by Volvo Cars showed was based on the new S60. Equipped with one of the world's most advanced, dynamically controlled chassis - FOUR-C (continuously Controlled Chassis Concept) - electronically controlled four-wheel drive and a 300-hp engine, this concept car showed how a high-performance car of the future may look.

12. SCC (Safety Concept Car) 2001

The SCC is a unique creation in many respects – a vision of the safety developments which car buyers may expect in future. Even in a small Volvo. When the driver takes his place behind the wheel, a sensor detects his or her eyes and adjusts the height of the seat to provide the best possible field of vision. The floor, pedals, steering wheel and centre console/gear lever are also adjusted automatically to ensure the most comfortable possible seating posture. The A-posts are of latticework construction to make them 'transparent'. The personal safety features include a heartbeat sensor which can initiate an alarm if a child or animal has been left behind in the car, or if an intruder enters it.

13. PCC2 (Performance Concept Car 2) 2001

Unlike the first PCC, the second version of the Performance Concept Car was a saloon. The model boasted the same high standards of performance and driving safety, with a number of additional safety features.

14. ACC2 (Adventure Concept Car 2) 2002

The Volvo ACC2 was developed to demonstrate that the Volvo Cross Country concept has an exciting future. The interior is extremely futuristic and the car is packed with IT systems which still belong in the future. The centre console is a docking station for an individual PDA (Personal Digital Assistant) and the car is equipped with various systems, including bluetooth technology, for communicating with the outside world.

15. VCC (Versatility Concept Car) 2003

The Volvo VCC was designed to show that Volvo can continue to produce big cars in the premium segment – without compromising its core values of quality, safety and environmental care. The VCC is a versatility model with a wide range of 'smart luxury' features. Despite its futuristic styling, the car is strongly reminiscent of the streamlined Venus Bilo of 1933 – although the resemblances end there! The interior of the VCC conveys a strong sense of the future, while the luggage compartment is extremely practical. Although the engine develops 250 horsepower, the fuel consumption is only 6.5 litres per 100 km, thanks to features such as new turbo technology and a function which switches off the engine when the car is stopped.

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Descriptions and facts in this press material relate to Volvo Cars' international car range. Described features might be optional. Vehicle specifications may vary from one country to another and may be altered without prior notification.

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