

Communiqués

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Horbury BioEssay

Peter Horbury

Peter Douglas Horbury was born in Alnwick, Northumberland, on the relatively remote northeast coast of England, in January 1950.

"I lived just north of Hadrian's Wall, which was the northernmost outpost of the Roman Empire. Our boast is that the Romans were never able to conquer us," he laughs.

"The Vikings probably had a greater influence on us. I like to believe that one of my female ancestors all those centuries ago met a handsome young Viking on the beach and that my interest in Sweden is a result of that."

Whatever the truth, his sense of humour is distinctly British!

Horbury's father was a sales representative and the family moved to various places in England and Scotland.

"When I was four or so, my father taught me the secret of drawing perspectives," he recalls. "And by the time I was nine or ten, I had decided that I wanted to design cars. So I began looking at the cars of the time and drawing my own 'new models'.

Peter Horbury studied for his Art Director diploma at the Newcastle-upon-Tyne College of Art and Industrial Design from 1968 to 1972, and received a grant from Chrysler UK to take a masters in Automotive Design at the Royal College of Art in London.

He naturally began his professional career with Chrysler Car Corporation UK in Coventry. At the time, Chrysler had just taken over Simca of France and the first model he worked on was the Simca/Chrysler Horizon.

After some years, he moved to Ford UK (having first spent a number of months in Germany), where he worked on the well-known Escort, Sierra and Granada models.

He joined Volvo in 1979, initially as a design consultant to Volvo Car Corporation in Gothenburg. In 1981, he moved to Volvo Car BV in the Netherlands, where he worked under Chief Designer Rob Koch until 1986. His first son, Nathan was born in Gothenburg in 1980 and his second, Edward in the Netherlands in 1982.

"In Gothenburg, I worked mainly on interior design, especially on the Volvo 480 sports saloon. I was given the job of transferring the design project to the Netherlands, which was to take three months. As it turned out, my stay was extended to six months, then to a year, then to five years. During that time, I was involved in the development of the medium-class Volvo 440 and 460 models, which followed the 480."

Looking for a fresh challenge, he decided to return to Britain, where he was appointed to establish a design department for the MGA Developments Ltd. engineering company.

"While I was still working out my notice in the Netherlands, myself and a colleague worked at night

on our first assignment for MGA Design. MGA had customers - including Rolls-Royce - all over the world and the whole experience was very enjoyable. During those years, I also learned that design has to be profitable.

"We expanded the vehicle and product design department to about 25 people, and the venture proved successful."

"In February 1991, I attended the Geneva Motor Show for MGA, where I met Hans Gustavsson and Lennart Svantesson, both directors of Volvo. They offered me the job of design director at Volvo Cars in succession to Jan Wilsgaard, who was about to retire. We had a chat, I made a trip to Sweden, then another..."

"That was almost eleven years ago and I've never regretted a single minute of it."

His first assignment was as 'consultant' to the Dutch Volvo S40 and V40 project. The next project, a big car known by the codename R800, was abandoned and Peter was instead assigned to work on an upgrade of the Volvo 960.

"The Environmental Concept Car, which was shown in Paris in autumn 1992, was a much more exciting project," says Peter Horbury. "The ECC was also a design study - an experiment - for designing the Volvo car of the future. It was based on earlier generations of Volvos - from the PV and Amazon to the S40 - and became a genuine blueprint for the future."

He describes some typical features and characteristics which have influenced, and continue to influence, Volvo design.

"We sell so few cars that they must display a clear likeness, so that people will make the connection. Whereas Gothenburg is teeming with Volvos of all kinds, you might see ten Volvo 240s for every S60 in the midwestern USA. In that situation, it must be clear to the observer that the cars are from the same stable.

"Volvo design has always been functional. The cars have to be the safest on the market - which is something that we never compromise on. Traditionally, this has meant that the styling has been a little boring, a little boxy. But why not aim for the best possible design when you are spending millions of dollars on the press tools anyway?"

"Look at the new Volvo V70 for example," says Horbury. "At the front, it is styled like a sports car, with its steeply sloped windscreen and rounded lines. However, the further back you go, the straighter - and the more practical - are the lines. In other words, it's a combination of the elegant with the functional.

He notes that, in Sweden, it is not done to show off a classy car. Here, the car should preferably be black, both inside and out, and should be parked in the darkest spot one can find.

"In a country like Italy, on the other hand, a Volvo owner is proud of his car and loves to park it outside his local restaurant or café on a balmy summer evening so that everybody can admire it."

He emphasises the importance of listening to the customer - everywhere he or she is to be found.

"For this reason, we have a design centre in Barcelona and another in Los Angeles, where we can be in close contact with our customers. My ideal would be to have a floating design studio, which we could sail from place to place to keep track of the trends in all of our markets.

"Our aim is to create the cars that our customers really want. A Volvo should be more than the car that you need - it should be the one you desire."

Horbury jokes a little about the Swedish mentality, as expressed by the belief that a safe car must be inherently boring and boxy, in the same way that the best medicine must also be the nastiest or that the torture of eating surströmming - the famous, or perhaps infamous, Swedish fermented herring - must be endured before going on to the tastier items on the menu.

"Nevertheless, the Swedish identity is extremely important to the design of our cars," he stresses. "The Swedish national identity is precisely what customers buy. Volvo reflects Sweden; we show that we really care about people.

"So, although functional design is important, it can be combined with the attractive, the rugged and the luxurious. I believe that we have shown that very clearly in our present product range!"

Asked about his leisure pursuits, Peter Horbury responds with another question: "With a job like mine, who needs a hobby?" But he does add that cooking - without recipes, in the Keith Floyd style - is one way of spending his spare time creatively while working off the stress of the job.

"I also travel a great deal and I love to visit new places. We must never just sit in our ivory towers and dictate; we must get out there all the time and listen to people."

La description et les faits repris dans le matériel de presse concernant la gamme de voitures internationale de Volvo Cars. Les équipements peuvent être optionnels. Les spécifications peuvent varier en fonction du pays et peuvent être modifiées sans préavis.

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