

**Chris Bangle: The future of auto design; the purpose of life**

by Drew Smith 06 Jul 2010



Chris Bangle gives his keynote speech at UID's Design Talks 2010 under the topic of 'Change'. Click for larger images

As part of the recent graduation exhibition at Umea Institute of Design, Chris Bangle was invited to give the keynote address. Given that the theme for the event was change, it's difficult to think of a speaker better qualified to pass on their insights to a new generation of designers.

To take a superficial view of Bangle's career is to remember him as the man who made BMWs desperately cool *objets d'avant garde*. Or alternately, if you're an automotive design traditionalist, maniacally ill-formed beasts. However, to do so is to ignore the greater depth of his achievement.

In bringing about a fundamental change in BMW's approach to design and by making design strategy a core component of the company's development process, he transformed a conservative monolith into a brand that not only sparked renewed critical debate about automotive design but also achieved great commercial success in the process.

It was to this topic, transformation – cultural, physical, emotional and political – that Bangle spoke with passion, a touch of frustration and even a little of the playful bravura that irritated so many in his days as BMW's design director.

Over a flowing 50 minutes, Bangle wove old projects together with explorations of work he has completed since leaving BMW, like PiNK! – conducted in collaboration with the SENSEable City lab at MIT in 2009.

Echoing earlier MIT work that developed the concept of the Internet of Things, Bangle and his partners envisioned a world in which every object is embedded with meta-data and can communicate with other nearby objects, enable real-time physical adaptation to purpose. In a typical Bangle moment, he also announced that the PiNK! team had managed to resolve the purpose of life (which, if you're wondering, is to "oppose entropy").

This pronouncement drew a knowing chuckle from the audience, but coming from Bangle's mouth, it also allowed some insight into his design thinking and, perhaps, why he decided to leave the automotive industry at large.

The opposition of entropy or, more plainly, fighting a gradual decline into disorder, is something that the inertia of the automotive industry renders almost unimaginably punishing to both mind and soul. Yet for what many consider to be an all-too brief period, Bangle truly achieved this in his research work at BMW.

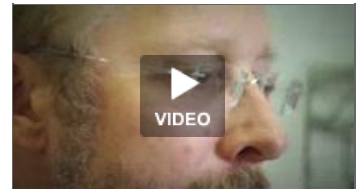
The GINA project, born out of a brief to BMW's non-automotive designers to imagine their ideal car, was the starting point for a series of design studies that looked at reducing the immense environmental impact of producing vehicles, the foremost factor driving



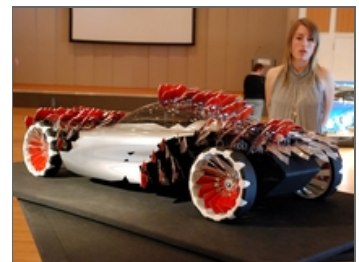
The ex-BMW Chief of Design gives invaluable feedback to Umea Institute's class of 2010



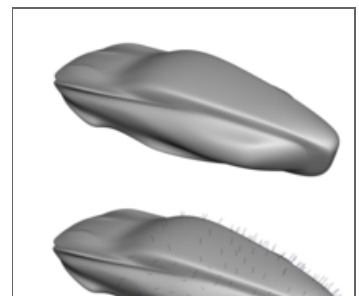
BMW X-Coupe concept (2001) was the first car to display Bangle's (in)famous 'flame surfacing' design language



Video: Bangle introduces BMW GINA Light Visionary Model



Anna Forscher's Lovos (Pforzheim, 2009) takes obvious inspiration from her involvement in 'susthetics' during her internship at BMW

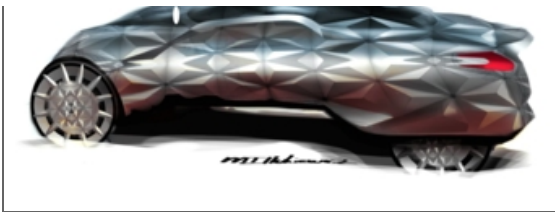


Bangle and fellow PiNK! contributors – in collaboration with the SENSEable City lab – resolve the purpose of life

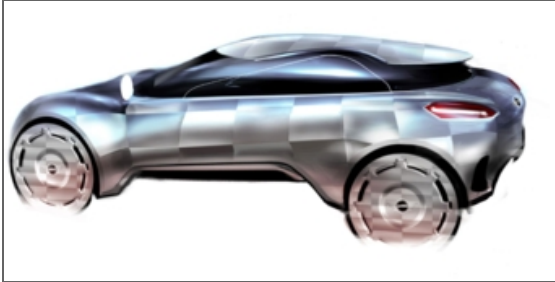


BMW's GINA Light Visionary concept explored design and engineering solutions outside of the auto industry to tackle issues such as the relationship between sustainability and aesthetics





Building surfaces with fractals – in doing so building structure into it and facilitating mass reduction – was one of the susthetics solutions

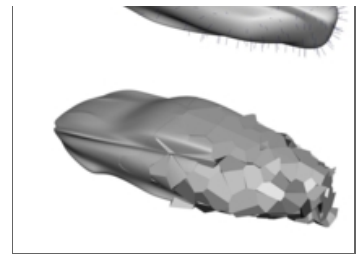


entropy in the automotive industry. The projects also set out to address another entropic factor: the decline in the emotional resonance of the car, something that in many eyes, including Bangle's, has simply been reduced to the veneer of 'brand'.

In the 10 years following GINA's completion in 1999, Bangle and his team came up with numerous ideas for re-imagining automotive surfacing. The aim was to not only find a balance between aesthetics and sustainability, but to also put an end to what Bangle derisively refers to as the "fetishism of perfect surfacing", letting automotive form speak honestly – characterfully – of its purpose, eliciting stronger emotional responses as a consequence.

Collectively named 'susthetics' within BMW, the solutions proposed are as radical as they are visually engaging. From building a surface based on a fractal – in doing so building structure into it and facilitating mass reduction – to openly, aesthetically acknowledging the soft-front-hard-back nature of optimal aerodynamic forms, nothing was off limits. Some of these ideas came to light in the projects of students that interned at BMW, such as Anne Forschner's Lovos (Pforzheim, 2009), and some we have been permitted to publish here. Yet even without seeing the full gamut of the Bangle-led explorations, one thing became clear during his talk: we ain't seen nothing yet and we possibly never will.

Continues→



This BMW project visually acknowledges optimal 'soft-front-hard-back' aerodynamics

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Bangle was given Carrara marble by the BMW Group Design team as a leaving present



He has refound his passion for painting since leaving the limelight of the auto design industry

There was a strange ambiguity to Bangle's departure after this period of intense experimentation. On this front, the most insightful quote delivered during the presentation, one he pulled from Oliver Wendell Holmes, perhaps illuminates his motivations: "A mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions".

It's not difficult to imagine that a BMW board, shaken after the vicious lashings of the media to the design of later works like the 1 Series, demanded a strategic retrenchment that the designer's mind simply couldn't countenance, especially given the demographic, cultural and environmental challenges he was – and still is – acutely aware of.

Of course there's the possibility that his revolution of design culture had simply run its course and, as periods of intense evolution are bookended by stasis in the biological world, so it will be at BMW.

Speaking of the impact of these challenges at a company like BMW, and particularly the death of the 'masterpieces' of internal combustion engineering in the face of a shift to simpler electric powertrains, Bangle noted that "there's a whole culture staring at a blank hole for its future. And that's kind of a scary thing for any culture, when their own meaning is changing."

Happily Bangle is not looking into a blank hole of his own and is still dealing with the issue of how we get around, but in a fashion that's far more in tune with the monumental changes afoot in our societies.

Building on the ideas of GINA and PiNK, Bangle is now investigating self-assembling mobility solutions that acknowledge a future that is both resource-constrained and emotionally opposed to the dogma of ownership. He envisions a future where "stuff exists to smooth sharing...makes us feel better about being together", fully cognizant of an emerging state of thought that values relationship over ownership and a generation that won't pay for anything it doesn't have to.

Fear not, this future doesn't contain personality-free blobs that move us emotionlessly from A to B. No, Bangle's faith in the avatar – that necessary ability for personal mobility to absorb and reflect the personality of the user – runs just as strongly through his post-car work as it did when he found fame with the Fiat Coupe. In the future we'll simply own the avatar and add the mobility to it on an as-and-when basis.

So, after a wide-ranging romp through culture, cars and his hopes for the future, what closing thought did Bangle leave us with? To the assembled guests, he said simply this: "know that culture counts, challenge everything, but most importantly, be courageous and just do it."

Speaking with some of the students afterwards, there was a palpable sense of shock at some of what they'd heard about their future. Some, however, were already willing to question the orthodox career paths they had thought they were about to embark on. Given Bangle's reputation as an agent of change, we should hardly be surprised. And one imagines with that, Bangle could hardly be more pleased.

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Chris Bangle with Anna Valtonen, Rector of the Umea Institute of Design



Fiat Coupé showed Bangle's faith in the avatar which is as strong as ever

