

Creating the Cybertruck & Vehicles that Change Lives - Tesla Designer Franz von Holzhausen

Lynn Walford - Nov 07 2022



Tesla chief design executive, Franz von Holzhausen, spoke at the Petersen Automotive Museum and ArtCenter College of Design. He talked about efficient designs and why the Cybertruck draws crowds. He reveals to Auto Futures his story of how he thought about electrification when he was at GM, his vision of Tesla cars everywhere on the road, and the car that inspired him.

Early History And Influences

During a presentation at the Petersen Automotive Museum, von Holzhausen gave an overview of his career. He grew up in a household of design - his father was an industrial designer.

"I think I was always inspired by the fact that you could create products and you can make beautiful products by my father," said von Holzhausen, who grew up in Simsbury, Connecticut.

He came to Los Angeles to go to ArtCenter College of Design.

"I came to ArtCenter because it was the best place to learn the craft of designing and creating cars," von Holzhausen told Auto Futures.

"I was fortunate to spend some time also at the ArtCenter satellite campus in Switzerland, it opened my eyes to European influences and designers. I did some internships here in America and also at VW."

After college, von Holzhausen worked at VW reimagining the Beetle.

"Ironically, when we were first developing the new Beetle, it was thought of as an electric vehicle, which may be foreshadowing."

He learned about the Bauhaus design philosophy from designers at Volkswagen.

"I think the thing that I learned early on from J [Mays] and Freeman [Thomas] was purity, the sense of purity and a kind of an idea about design that stems from Bauhaus and those basic principles. I think they're still prevalent today in the work that I do. Some of the ideas that we work on at Tesla, it is really about form and function working well together."

Then, von Holzhausen served as design manager for General Motors, where he worked on the concept and production design of the Pontiac Solstice sports car and Saturn Sky roadster.



Getting the Electric Bug

While at GM, he learned about electric cars.

"Electric vehicles was not really a conversation, but it quickly became one. While working at GM, I was driving an EV1 around and realized that, hey, this is the future. We got to get on this bandwagon. Nobody, no manufacturer was actually doing it. So when I talked to Elon [Musk] he was all in 100%, electric. No one was trying concertededly to make a radical change to help," von Holzhausen told me at the [ArtCenter Invitational](#).

"I was driving it around. I got the bug and understood that that is where the future could convert convergence of technology capability. What we are doing at Tesla, its early days was really a flashpoint," said von Holzhausen

He is free to work on designs and is not expected to market or be a spokesperson for the Tesla brand.

"Elon takes care of that. He is kind of the voice of Tesla. I just try to keep my head down and do my job - creating vehicles that are changing our lives," he explained.



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Designing Cars for the Whole World

At the ArtCenter Invitational, he spoke about his design philosophy and how he learned about different customers across the globe.

"You always hope that things are going to be inspirational. It can lead to the next thing and the next thing and become something. I think the world needed something to jolt it out of its addiction to fossil fuel. It wasn't going to come from a company that was doing internal combustion engines," said von Holzhausen.

"At Tesla, we're bringing something new to the scene. So we have early adopter attraction. At the same time, we need good design to be attractive so people are interested in it, they feel good about it. They aspire to it."

However, that does not happen overnight, he cautioned.

"That takes years and years of knowledge and learning about what works in environments and what doesn't, studying the different marketplaces and being immersed in those marketplaces."

"We are solving problems. We want to make the experience better for everybody. The Model 3 is a global car. We want to make a car that feels appropriate around the world," he said.

He says there is a family resemblance to Model S, Model X, Model 3 and Model Y. The familiarity is intentional with the philosophy behind those cars being efficiency. The cars should look beautiful but also be efficient.



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Why the Tesla Cybertruck is Radically Different?

The Cybertruck is a great example of being radically different, says von Holzhausen.

At the ArtCenter Invitational, a Cybertruck prototype was shown. It towered above all the other cars. The Cybertruck is a behemoth in-person and shimmered in the sun. Local Tesla engineers noted that the actual production model will be 95% of the size of the prototype. The Cybertruck was introduced in October 2019.

"We've seen a fairly complacent form of a pickup truck for the last 100 years. It is basically a motor in the front cabin and a bed in the back. They look the same," said von Holzhausen to the crowd, which was captivated by the Cybertruck.

He said before designing the Cybertruck, Tesla staff played the game of lining up the different truck brands to try to tell them apart and couldn't.

"We felt we couldn't step into that same similar type of thing. We also started looking at the idea that form follows function. We wanted the truck to actually be strong on the outside - tough on the outside, instead of having the fragile paint and everything that you can scratch easily."

So stainless steel became that thing that was needed, he shared.

"We had to figure out how to craft with stainless steel."

Thick stainless steel can not be formed easily - if at all.

"From a manufacturing and engineering perspective, having a single side brake press to create the forms of the truck is where we ended up. Then the design evolves---when you can only bend a surface in one direction. You have to come up with innovative solutions," said von Holzhausen.

"So you thought I was playing a lot of Minecraft," he joked, debunking bloggers who wrote that the Tesla Cybertruck looked like it was designed by a five-year-old in Minecraft.

"It is such a unique design. We were really intrigued by the fact that a lot of people who have placed an order on this truck have not actually ever owned a truck before. I think that was really interesting, but the Cybertruck will be as functional as any full-size pickup truck market, if not more," he added.

He explained that the bed is bigger than most trucks. There is a vault in the back that is lockable.

The front interior space fits five adults. The Cybertruck has all the performance specs of any internal-combustion-engine pickup truck on the market.

"The Cybertruck is provocative looking. It's different. It functions and does everything you would ever want to do with a pickup truck and then some. So it can appeal to anybody."

He announced that Cybertruck is coming next year- and - it will look like the prototype in front of him.

At the Tesla Cyber Rodeo earlier this year, Elon Musk announced that the final version of the Cybertruck's doors will have no handles.

"The truck knows you are there--so there is no need for handles," said Musk. The Cybertruck will be built in the Giga factory in Austin, Texas.



The Popularity of Teslas

Tesla cars are very popular in Southern California. Auto Futures asked von Holzhausen, 'Did you ever think that there would be so many Teslas on the road?'

"I always thought, 'Wouldn't it be cool one day if there were more Teslas than Toyota Priuses.' When we started, there were tons of Priuses everywhere. I thought it would be cool if we saw more Teslas," he answered.

Since that comment, I noticed that when I am driving on major roads in Southern California, there are many more Teslas than Priuses, usually at least one Tesla on each city block or more.

Tesla is expected to sell 800,000 Model Y cars this year. Then the model would become one of the top five best-selling vehicles in the world.

"I think we've proven that we can make cars equal to or better than what else is offered out there. But we have a long way to go - so I'm excited about that."

Although von Holzhausen can drive any Tesla model, the car that inspired him, and he wished he could get but never got, is a Ferrari 250 GTO - only thirty-six were made.

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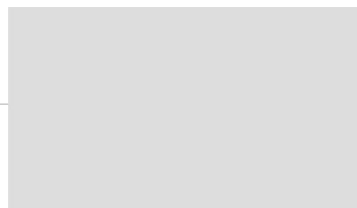
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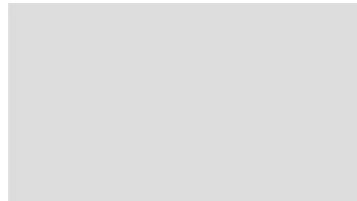
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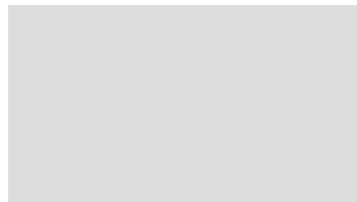
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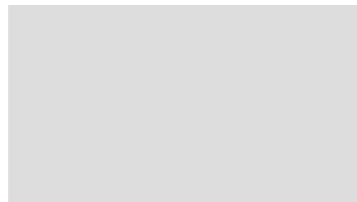
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