

## The 2016 Concept Vehicles: Will They Be Showing Up In Your Bays?

Concept cars have a rich place in automotive history. The first prototype dates back to 1938 when legendary GM designer Harley Earl unveiled his Buick Y-Job. This visionary coupe design would leave its legacy and serve as a primary style influence on Buicks through the 1940s and early 1950s. This commenced the tradition we're now familiar with when concept designs get rolled out alongside the year's anticipated new models at the major auto shows in places like Detroit, Chicago and New York.

If you've attended one of these glitzy events, you've witnessed how concept cars have the power to steal the spotlight. Most automakers design and build them. These often futuristic vehicles, with their tantalizing body lines, high-tech interiors, enormous shiny wheels and even odd door configurations — often impractical on street-ready production models — help push consumers in a new direction, testing their reactions and preparing them for new design ideas that might be two or three years down the road.

A 2016 concept car might not end up in production for two or three years, but often enough, elements of a previous concept end up down the line in future models and brands. Even if a concept car doesn't end up being produced, it allows designers to have some fun and provides a vehicle designing exercise that's important in developing new features.

An example of a concept design that ended up in production — at least in part — is the new 2017 Chrysler Pacifica minivan due out this spring. Elements of the Pacifica were first rolled out during 2012, at shows like the Detroit Auto Show and others. At the time, Chrysler surprised many by unveiling a new minivan concept, when the style was losing steam and no longer the default choice as the prototypical family vehicle.

The 2012 700C offered a major makeover to one of Chrysler's family standbys, attempting to introduce some wow-factor and show the company wasn't finished with this tried and true family-friendly vehicle. Initial reactions three years ago were favorable, said Dianna Gutierrez, head of design communications for Fiat Chrysler (FCA) U.S.

"The Pacifica will be replacing the Town and Country model," Gutierrez said. "It's Chrysler's first update to our minivans since 2007."

How did the 700C morph into the new Pacifica? The concept version had a roof entirely made up of dark-tinted panoramic glass. The new model compromises with a triple-panel panoramic roof. Gone also is the boxy look in favor of a windswept silhouette with rounded aerodynamic edges that make the van look sporty, hiding much of its bulk. Later in the year, FCA will introduce a plug-in hybrid version of this reworked family vehicle.

The process driving the concept design exercise varies from brand to brand. Gutierrez explained it allows her company a chance to get a sense of what consumers are looking for. It provides their designers an environment centered on creativity and innovation, and they get to start with something fresh and new.

"We're certainly looking at what customers want," Gutierrez said. "Do they like what we're doing with our new design? Also, it's a great exercise and it offers our designers a blank paper, so to speak, to develop and design a vehicle that considers what consumers might want in a new vehicle, while also pushing the envelope a bit."

FCA also participates in the Moab Easter Jeep Safari in Moab, Utah. The safari is one of the country's

biggest gatherings of off-road vehicles and serves as a major showcase for the company's Jeep division.

"This year was the 50th anniversary — it also coincided with Jeep's 75th birthday," Gutierrez said. "We had seven new concepts participate."

Having begun talking about Buick as the archetype for concept cars, it's fitting one of the most talked about concepts at all the various auto shows has been the Buick Avista. It also continues the company's journey to remake its image, putting aside being considered stodgy and a brand for older car buyers and one that's been impressing the past few years.

The Avista offers up a 2+2 grand tourer with some power. It packs a 3.0-liter, 400-horsepower twin-turbo V6 engine, driving the rear wheels. Yes, that's right; this Buick is rear-wheel-drive. If it makes it to production — and many think elements of this year's concept will — it would become Buick's first rear-wheel-drive since the Rainier SUV, and the brand's first coupe since the front-wheel-drive Riviera of the mid-1990s.

Buick is tapping into a trend of late — power, performance and luxury.

Jack Nerad, Kelly Blue Book's vice president and executive editorial director, attended the Detroit Auto Show. He noticed an emphasis on power in some of the concept vehicles. He also indicated another trend that he found somewhat contradictory.

"On one hand, we have this continued race for horsepower that's been going on — I mean we have cars generating 550 to 600 horsepower in street cars, going from 0 to 60 in 3.5 seconds," Nerad said. "Then, you've got this weird door thing happening. Take the Lincoln Concept, with its gull-wing doors — I found it kind of strange."

However, Nerad sees concepts like Buick's Avista as catering to the consumers' desire for personal luxury, rather simply focusing on performance.

"I think there's the likelihood the Avista will find its way into production," Nerad said. "Buick's really done a nice job redefining themselves and their brand."

Tom Appel, longtime publisher of *Consumer Guide Automotive* and Chicago-based auto expert, liked Lincoln's Navigator concept. He attended his hometown Chicago Auto Show as well as others in Detroit, New York and Geneva.

"It was an obvious case of styling," Appel said. "It had elements of Range Rover's design, with an emphasis on the grille."

Appel came away impressed with Acura's Precision and the Hyundai Genesis concepts. Both offered new looks in design, while also offering both brands' signature practicality in the sedan category.

Fuel efficiency wasn't forgotten this year, and if that's the primary reason for owning a car, then the new all-electric Chevrolet Bolt might be to your liking. The 2017 Bolt, which was first rolled out as one of Chevy's concept hybrids two years ago, is another example of a vehicle that made it from concept to production stage.

The Bolt is intended as an affordable long-range electric vehicle, and the anticipated follow-up to several all-electric vehicles unveiled at previous auto shows that also included the acclaimed Chevy Volt. The Bolt

will even come with a mobile app that will allow car sharing and advanced GPS routing, according to a company statement. Specs indicate it's capable of a 200-mile trip without recharging.

The Bolt (along with the Pacifica) are also examples of concept vehicles taking a more conservative track. While previous concept vehicles made us think of sci-fi and maybe even flying cars, models like the Bolt are designed to tap into a specific consumer — in this case, the desire for fuel efficiency, sans performance and power — which is a segment of the car-buying public, for sure.

“I think manufacturers are taking a more nuanced approach to the role of concept vehicles,” Appel said. “There's much less of the wildly experimental concepts that I remember from my early days writing about new models — cars designed simply to wow the consumer, while also getting people talking about the brand.”

This is in part due to the cost of developing and producing a concept car and automakers remaining focused on the bottom line. Also, demographics are a factor in this, as younger drivers aren't as enamored with the driving and performance features of their cars and want more functionality, especially when it comes to technology and connected capabilities.

“Millennials are more interested in the tech features. That's probably why I didn't see as much about engine size, with more of the emphasis being on the technological features of vehicles,” Appel said.

As it's been for more than 75 years with concept cars, we'll have to wait and see what new stylistic elements highlighted during this year's auto shows make it into production or at least, have them featured prominently in future models, perhaps in 2018 or 2019.