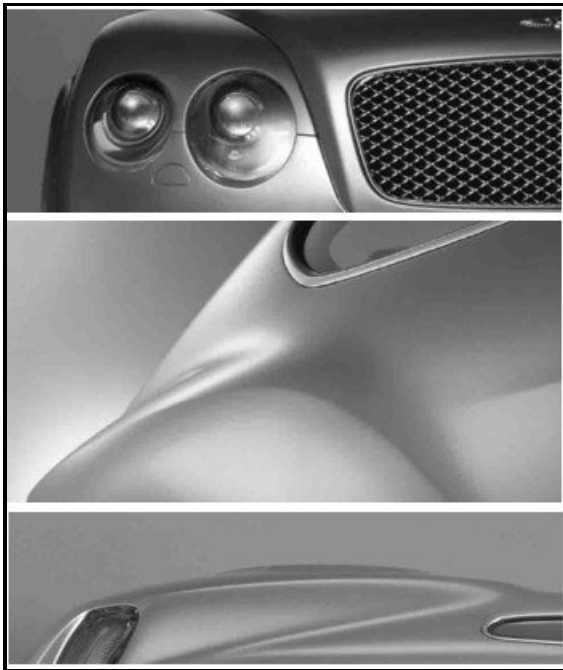


CLASSIC DRIVER

Bentley's GT coupé design challenge - the styling story



When challenged to create the first all new Bentley in fifty years, the brief laid down to design director Dirk van Braeckel was as simple to express, as it was difficult to fulfil. The car would be a GT coupé, entirely contemporary in design yet unmistakably a Bentley. It would need to be timelessly elegant and overtly sporting, yet carry four people and accommodate their luggage. The resulting car would set the tone not simply for Bentley in the 21st century, but for a new generation of cars upon which the company's future would largely depend.

Work started on the GT coupé in August 1999 and was ready to be submitted for board approval by December. 'I'm still staggered it took less than four months,' says van Braeckel. 'Whenever you design a car there always seems to be a story to tell and this one was about getting the right team of very talented designers, all of whom understood what we were trying to create and how we were going to do it.'

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Dirk freely admits his design philosophy for the car was based on heritage and inspired by certain key cars in Bentley's bloodline: "But as I tell everyone, I refuse to do retro cars – there is just no need and taking a 1952 R-type Continental and projecting it forward half a century would have been entirely wrong."

Instead, he looked at the past to provide the key styling elements that would always make a Bentley look like a Bentley, no matter when it was designed: "I tried to understand where the roots came from and if you look back at the early days of Bentley, it was all about the engine. They had the appearance of being powered by big engines that enabled them to be driven at high speeds, low revs and minimal effort. And that is as true today as it was then."

So the key to how the GT coupé should look today, lay in providing it with that kind of presence, a stance on the road that is inimitably Bentley.

Though the packaging requirements both in the cabin and under the bonnet remain secret for now, it is fair to say they presented an extraordinarily tough challenge, not simply for Bentley's engineers and packaging experts, but also the design team. This is why van Braeckel was also responsible for concept engineering, so that the often-contrasting objectives of package and style could be blended to mutual advantage.

To capture the correct Bentley proportions, it was critical that the GT coupé had a short front overhang and dominant bonnet, expressed by the unusually large distance between the front axle line and A-pillar. Given the package of requirements, the dangers of making the car too long and therefore both inelegant and impractical, were clear to see. However, it was equally important that its cabin had a sleek and compact appearance.

Overlaying this was a design form language that was evolved for the car. While van Braeckel was working at Audi, he employed methodical industrial design to great effect, carrying the same sectional theme of functionality from one end of the car to the other.

The approach required for the GT coupé was almost the polar opposite. "It needed to be alive, with a form that appears and disappears like muscle on a gymnast's arm, sculptural yet lean" says van Braeckel.

Equipped with the practical, historical and emotional hard points of the car's design, van Braeckel and his fast growing team set about the job of styling. The aim throughout was that the car's appearance should strike consistent themes when viewed from any angle, even from directly above. "I never wanted one part to look like it didn't belong to the rest of the car, even if it was quite beautiful in its own right," he says.

The shape itself is quite complex, with different surfaces displaying different tensions but throughout, iron

discipline has been exercised to keep fussiness out of the design. Brightwork is used only where an accent is needed.

Central to the design of the car is its pillar-less cabin. Creating a car with a 'B' pillar would have been easy and expected but the visual delight of an unbroken aperture from the front to the back of the cabin proved irresistible. "Had we not done it," says van Braeckel, "no-one would ever have commented or criticised us. But once we saw how the car would look without a central pillar, we knew there was no other way to go – even if it has given my colleagues in engineering a few further challenges!"

Another key feature that needed to be incorporated into the design is a rear wing that will provide downforce and keep the car stable at the colossal velocities its power and aerodynamics will provide. The challenge here was to design a spoiler that was both effective and – in true Bentley fashion – absolutely discreet.

The design team was well aware that the headlights and taillights of any car are perceived to be its jewellery and getting these aspects right was essential. The team decided on an oval theme, which recurs throughout Bentley's design history, and then applied it in a way that was fresh, unique and unforgettable. Most noticeable is the decision to use a four-headlamp appearance at the front, with the inner lamps being the larger pair. Not only does this create a striking face for the car, it also acknowledges a time during the 1920's and 1930's when large and elegant headlamps, mounted close together either side of the bonnet were the hallmarks of luxury car design. There is also a practical benefit as the headlamp position and size helps to provide exceptional illumination.

The principal reason, however, for designing the headlights this way is to draw attention to the area between the lamps, namely the inimitable Bentley radiator shell and grille adding both presence and immediate recognition to the car's appearance.

The interior of the car has yet to be revealed, but it is safe to say that, like the exterior, it will be both thoroughly modern and instantly identifiable as that of a Bentley. Like all Bentleys, the GT coupé will be available in a large number of standard specification permutations. Thanks to the unique talents of Bentley's Personal Commissioning and Design departments, this will be extended further to an almost endless number.

And of course the GT coupé marks just the start of the design revolution at Crewe. Before Dirk van Braeckel arrived in Crewe in April 1999, the design team comprised just three people. The team now numbers 48 and is still rising, working in a design studio created on site to style the Bentleys of the future.

Though most of the new recruits have come from design schools and manufacturers in Britain, some have come from as far afield as the US and Brazil. Van Braeckel sums up what this means for him and his team: "It is some indication of the pace of change at Crewe and the entirely new approach we have to the business of designing Bentleys that you can increase the number of design staff six fold and still be busier than ever coping with the workload."

Text and photos: Bentley Motor Company

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