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ISSUE 06/2006
US\$9.99
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The Silent
GENIUS

**Do you know who was head of BMW design prior to Chris Bangle's era?
No? Well read on to find out all about Claus Luthe, the man behind the 1980s BMWs**

Over the years, the automobile industry has had more than its fair share of charlatans; smoke and mirrors guys who have made extravagant claims as to their achievements. Thankfully most have a very short shelf-life.

For most of us, though, the person who styled our favourite car is immaterial – it looks attractive to us and performs all the functions we want it to, end of story. Others like to know who designed their car and seem to feel some affinity to that person. Where BMW is concerned, the media has made sure that those who want to know will realise that the current range of BMWs was designed by a team under the leadership of Christopher Bangle. He seems to attract the media like bees to the honey pot.

But who was the man who preceded Bangle at BMW? Who was the man who established that neat-but-conservative style for which the marque became so famous? Unless you are a real BMW anorak you will not know the answer, because he was one of those quiet achievers who was rarely in the spotlight. I admire quiet achievers, people who simply get on with the task at hand with no fanfare, no histrionics. And for that reason I admire Claus Luthe. A quietly determined man, he has avoided the glamour and glitz of the international spotlight, preferring instead to let his designs do the talking for him. Interestingly this quiet achiever was, for many years, the design director for one of the world's most extrovert, high-profile manufacturers – BMW.

Claus Luthe began his career at NSU back in

1958 and retired from BMW in 1990 with a stint at Audi in between. Luthe's first contact with BMW was through Wilhelm Hofmeister who approached him at the Geneva Salon in 1975. 'I was on the Audi stand when he came over and asked me to meet with him later. When I did he inquired as to whether I would be interested in working at BMW. After a brief conversation he asked me to call him in a couple of months' time,' said Luthe, who continued, 'I did not believe his proposal so I didn't call him.' That simple question set off a period of turmoil in Luthe's life. About four months after that initial contact Hofmeister rang Luthe at home in Ingolstadt, the phone being answered by Luthe's wife, Trudi, who thought the caller was a salesman! Apparently he had to go through



Luthe meets Giorgetto Giugiaro at the formal presentation of the Torino Design Award for his E32 7 Series



The E28 was Luthe's first BMW design, but he only tweaked the details as the shape had already been signed off by the board when he arrived at BMW

quite an explanation before she was willing to hand the phone over to her husband.

It was not long before management at Audi became aware of the approach to Luthe, and in particular Ferdinand Piëch who was unhappy about possibly losing him and was quite blunt about it. Nonetheless, despite the tense atmosphere at Ingolstadt, Luthe and Hofmeister concluded an employment agreement in October 1975 with a view to him starting work in Munich in April 1976 as Design Director.

Luthe inherited a staff of less than 30 people in the styling department. One of his first initiatives was to go out and recruit new team members. In the next few weeks he enticed Boyke Boyer away from Ford in Cologne and Hans Braun from Porsche. Boyer was given responsibility for the Exterior I design studio, Braun for the interiors. Modellers, too, were in short supply at BMW and again a recruitment drive was set in motion. Within a year Luthe's team totalled around 100 people – 25 stylists and around 75 modellers.

'At first we looked at recruiting established designers from our competitors but more and more I wanted to attract young people from the universities and various colleges to get new ideas in our team,' said Luthe. 'We also needed skilled modellers, too, and I followed much the same strategy there.'

Included in the original team inherited by Luthe was long-time BMW stylist, Manfred Rennen, who was placed in charge of the Exterior II studio. Recruitment really never ceased as the demands on styling grew, and as the years passed the team included people like

Klaus Kapitzka (recruited in early 1984) who was given responsibility for the Exterior III studios, Johannes Hirschler, who had responsibility for colour and trim, Klaus Gevert whose responsibility was styling the famous BMW motorcycles, and Wolfgang Kilian, who was the technical liaison between styling and engineering. That group of people would remain the nucleus of Luthe's team from 1976 until 1990.

The first BMW that Luthe worked on was the E28, released in 1981 and roundly criticised by the media. Not an auspicious start as Luthe conceded but with the explanation, 'I knew it was a conservative style but by the time I arrived the design had been signed off. I was only able to change minor details. However, you must remember it was what the board wanted.'

Much the same criticism was encountered with the release of the E30 in 1982. Again Luthe was adamant that the board chose the design they wanted but in his defence he said: 'we do not have to create models that are radically different from the ones they replace. To maintain our tradition we do not need to design 'way out' designs. The important thing to keep in mind is to make sure there is continuity from the old model to the new model. It is absolutely essential that we build a lasting image of what a BMW is and not be swayed by ever-changing fashion trends.'

From the beginning, Luthe enjoyed the full support of the Board, in particular Eberhard von Kuenheim. Importantly, he was given as much time as was needed to get a design right, and a budget that was more than adequate. However, as he said with a grin, 'The caveat was that we had to provide the board with the best options to carry the BMW

image forward,' and added with some emphasis, 'Mistakes in design should never occur!'

As the manager, Luthe gave each designer a great deal of freedom and independence to produce his own ideas on any project through sketches and technical illustrations. 'I believe this 'ownership' of ideas stimulates the team to develop higher quality solutions to a given project which leads to superior team dynamics,' he said.

With any project, Luthe's strategy with the board was always to present three proposals, the ones that have the greatest potential for further development.

Luthe added: 'At this stage we would have been working in close consultation with Dr Reitzle, with whom I had the most professional of working relationships and who admired our work.'

The E30 platform became the most exploited to that time in the company's history. The two-door was released in 1982 and was followed by the first four-door 3 Series a year later: the Cabrio in 1986 and the Touring (wagon) in 1987. Where the original Touring had been a hatchback development of the 02 Series, Luthe's team developed a stylish wagon from the four-door sedan, he commented:

'Marketing studies showed that there was an emerging niche for what some people call a station wagon. But we didn't want to design something like the Volvo that was boxy and lacked the style BMW buyers demand. I think the Touring that we designed was well accepted by the market, don't you?'

'And don't forget the M3 in that time. The design team really enjoyed doing that one, too. It's a very collectible car I hear,' said Luthe.

Following the criticism of his first BMW designs Luthe was determined to push the envelope for the next generation of 3, 5 and 7 Series, and the



The four models E30 model were overseen by Luthe, but despite criticism from the press he liked the design and is keen to point out that it was what the BMW board wanted



replacement for the 6 Series that had achieved classic status in its own lifetime.

The first to be released was the E32 7 Series that was presented to the press in 1986 and was exceedingly well received and reviewed. Claus Luthe smiles when he thinks back to the time of its design. He said, 'Von Kuenheim stopped by my office one day and said that he wanted what he called a 'noble car' to really challenge the S-Class Mercedes-Benz. My designers accepted the challenge and we came up with a car of elegant style with classic proportions which became the best-selling luxury car in Germany.' The first styling sketches for the E32 were drawn in 1979, seven years before the car appeared. This unusually-long gestation was deliberate according to Luthe, who added, 'So we searched for more classic styling that would remain undated on the market.'

Two years later BMW released the E34 5 Series which was, to many critics, little more than a shrunken 7. 'Not so,' countered Luthe quickly 'Yes, there are some similarities in style, particularly at the rear (they both featured the distinctive L-shaped tail-light units) but that apart they are their own models with their own character.' Both models were immense sales successes and were still selling well when replaced many years later.

Claus Luthe is particularly proud of the E32 7 series, because it won the 1987 Car Design Award presented in Turin. At the gala presentation he met and chatted with the famous Giorgetto Giugiaro, a time that Luthe cherished. So proud was BMW of this achievement that it presented him with a fully detailed 1:10 scale model of a 750iL and a replica of the trophy. Both are displayed in a prominent place in his Munich apartment's Hall of Fame.

The E36 3 Series was awarded the Torino Design Award, too. He smiles and says, 'You know we had to fight very hard for the E36 3 Series because many board members thought it too radical, too big a step forward over the old model. I actually prepared an even more radical, aerodynamic proposal for the presentation that my designers and I liked, but I knew it would not be accepted.'

The E31 8 Series is a design that he is particularly proud of too, even though he admits many in the media disliked it. 'It was another occasion where we took a large step forward in design terms from the classic and much-admired 6 Series. Klaus Kapitzka, who later became the chief designer at BMW Technik, was responsible for the exterior design. It is a strong design that I think has matured and is something of a classic now. I liked it because it was different and distinctive.'

Luthe's lasting legacy at BMW has been the successful blending of form, functionality and elegance into every BMW that was designed on his watch. So much so that BMW now challenges arch-rival Mercedes-Benz for market superiority internationally.

When Claus Luthe retired in 1990, after a family tragedy, he had overseen the completion of the styling work on the next generation 5 and 7 Series, the E38 and E39. Both would continue that conservative extension of the corporate styling envelope while at the same time develop new themes, particularly the 5 Series with its coupé-like rear roofline. Both models, despite some criticism

from the press (mainly aimed at their conservative design), have been enormous commercial successes for BMW and their designs have achieved that timelessness that Luthe strove so hard for.

But no matter what Claus Luthe's recent successes have been, he has been forever etched into motoring immortality for his stunning NSU Ro80. Considered somewhat controversial at the time, it became the beacon leading all other automobile designers down the path to aerodynamics, its shape highlighting one of Luthe's favourite themes: Die Keilform (the wedge).

Conceived in 1963 – more than forty years ago – Luthe was asked by NSU's Managing Director, Dr Ing Gerd Stieler von Heydekampf, to build an car that would showcase the advantage

Luthe's legacy at BMW has been the successful blending of form, functionality and elegance into every BMW that was designed on his watch

of the Wankel engine's compact dimensions.

Luthe's comments would make many modern-day stylists very envious indeed: 'I was free to do as I wanted. There were no boundaries to the concept because it was not going into production. Well, not at first anyway. The wedge shape and its application for aerodynamics fascinated me and so all my sketches for it featured the wedge in one form or another.'



Classic two-door E30; Luthe oversees fitting the windscreen into place on a 1:1 scale model of the E30; Luthe and his team who created BMW's look of the 1980s and 1990s

Luthe is particularly proud of the E32 7 series, because it won the 1987 Car Design Award presented in Turin



Displayed at the 1967 Frankfurt IAA, the Ro80 was the star of the show, especially among the technical motoring press who raved about it. The car-buying public wasn't so enthralled, apparently, according to Luthe: 'for most people the car seemed somewhat strange, a totally different form from what they were used to. It was not helped by NSU not having an image as a maker of luxury automobiles. And the Wankel motor was suspect, people didn't trust it yet. I was disappointed with the initial reaction to it.'

Nonetheless, the Ro80 was a walk-away winner of the 1967 Car of the Year award, something NSU's executives did not expect. That award catapulted tiny NSU and its small but brilliant team of designers and engineers, including Luthe, into the world spotlight.

'The Ro80 was my work entirely and no one else,' emphasised Luthe, clearly indicating that this is one ghost from the past he wished to exorcise. Luthe's first complete car, apart from

rebadging the odd Fiat or two for NSU and modifying the Sport Prinz coupé body in collaboration with Bertone to create the Wankel Spider, was the Prinz 4 of 1961. This Corvair-ish design evolved into the NSU 1000, TT and 1200 that were good money-spinners for the company.

'The first sketches and models I did for the Prinz 4 had been approved for production. Albert Roder and I visited the Geneva Salon in March 1960 and when we saw the new BMW 700 that Michelotti had styled I knew that I would have to draw a new design because ours was too similar!'

'I quickly sketched another design that Frankenberger (the technical director) approved on the spot. The first prototype was ready on October 10, 1960, and the first car left the assembly line on August 2, 1961. Better than anyone can do today!'

Born 71 years ago in Wuppertal, in central Germany, Luthe lived in Wurzburg for much of his youth. As a young car enthusiast he admired the work of Harley Earl and Bill Mitchell at General

Motors. 'I loved the show cars they did. You know, I used to spend hours drawing them from photos in the car magazines. That's what inspired me to study to become a car designer and modeller.'

Luthe lives in retirement with his wife Trudi in Munich. The stairwell in his neat penthouse-style apartment is decorated with memorabilia of his many achievements including a 1:5 model of the Ro80 hanging vertically on the wall. Ill health has reduced his mobility but he still enjoys his grandchildren, music and reading.

The only comment Luthe would make about Bangle's BMWs was, 'I believe he will develop a new BMW design philosophy that will be quite different from mine. Whether it will be as good for BMW we will have to wait and see.'

You gained the impression that he was almost afraid that all the years of cleverly establishing that styling continuity so important in BMW's aura were in jeopardy ●



NSU Ro80 was all Luthe's own work ; E34, E36, E31 and E38 were all designed under Luthe's watchful eye; BMW board initially thought E36 Three was too radical a design

