

Car Trends - Will Future Cars Spoil Us?

By Ann Job

Automotive designers and engineers, given their way, aim for more than just "standard fare." Way more. Look for enhancements to safety, performance, comfort, and style.

Automotive designers and engineers say if they have their way, vehicles of the future will begin to take on new, sleeker shapes. They'll have more safety equipment and new features that enhance convenience and passenger comfort. They'll use technology to get more performance out of powertrains.

Consumers won't have to wait long for these hot trends to take hold. Concept models at auto shows and some of the newest vehicles arriving at dealer showrooms this year already are initiating these trends.

Safety Onboard: From front to back—newfangled headlights to backup parking aides—new and upcoming vehicles will feature better and more safety equipment.

It wasn't long ago when halogen headlamps were the state of the art. Now, high-intensity discharge (HID) lights, which give stronger illumination, are being offered on an ever-increasing array of models.

Expect more than one automaker to offer headlights that swivel sideways to illuminate the car's path as a driver goes around a curve or a corner.

Perhaps the most exciting development is light-emitting diode headlights. Such LED lights have several benefits. Chief among them is their small size and the innumerable shapes that they can take on, which is sure to change the looks of future cars.

Tire pressure monitors promise to become standard fare on upcoming vehicles. Already featured on many models today, they're part of a federal government regulation intended to give motorists an onboard alert when a tire is going flat.

Look for more—and more sophisticated—electronic stability control systems. They're being added to lots of vehicles now, especially tall-riding sport utility vehicles, in an effort to help drivers maintain control. They work by applying braking force to just the correct wheel, helping to avoid understeering or oversteering. Future stability control systems might even intervene and briefly take over the steering if a driver is steering incorrectly and getting close to skidding out.

Some safety advocates are urging that backup parking aides be mandatory on all vehicles, especially tall SUVs and pickup trucks. They say the devices, which

typically use radar or a rearview camera to alert a driver how close the vehicle is to obstacles behind it, can help keep a vehicle from running over children. Comfort and Convenience Growing: We are a spoiled bunch inside our vehicles, and in the future, we will be more so.

Seats inside cars are undergoing development and promise to take on new shapes and materials. Already, some vehicles have seats that both cool and warm their occupants.

Watch as center consoles next to the seats in some future cars take on a streamlined and stylish look and extend all the way from the dashboard, between the front seats and then right on to between the back seats as one solid-looking piece.

Today's on-board navigation systems can guide a driver from one place to another. Future nav systems will offer more information and new features. A sought-after development is integrating traffic congestion information into a nav system so it automatically routes a driver around traffic backups. As if this isn't enough, at least one automaker envisions a nav system that could sort of serve as a tour guide, giving information about nature along a car's route.

Performance Upgrades: Thanks to electronics, we are in an era where transmissions are being re-engineered for greater performance and reduced emissions.

So watch for more automatic transmissions with a so-called "manumatic" feature. This allows a driver to shift from forward gear to forward gear—for example, from first to second and then on to third—via a shift lever, but without having to depress a clutch pedal. This electronic shifting can provide more spirited performance than a plain automatic transmission might.

Another trend is the increased number of transmission gears. Just a few years ago, it wasn't unusual to find three-speed and four-speed automatics in cars. Now, four- and five-speeds are the norm, and several vehicles are moving to six-speed transmissions and a few even use seven-speed automatics. Again, the benefit is improved performance and better pollution control.

Styling Changes: It appears that in some segments, the aggressive, burly styling of today is starting to wane.

So expect to see more sleek, aerodynamic designs, especially in the SUV crossover category. These vehicles also are starting to eschew plastic cladding that often adorned the lower body panels.

Big and fancy wheels will grow in popularity and add sizzle to all manner of cars, trucks and SUVs. The reason: Wheels are the easiest way to change how a vehicle looks and make it distinctive.

Jan 1, 2004