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What is it about German Engineering?

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By David Newton

My first exposure to German engineering was ironically our family Volkswagen Beetle — not what people normally think of when referring to German design and quality. But the Beetle was in fact the essence of purposefulness; a place for everything and everything in its place — even if it was designed backwards.

When the need for cheap transportation presented itself, I bought my first Beetle without flinching. After all, I was intimately familiar with the quirks associated with its fundamental utility. The Bug (as we called it) was relatively inexpensive, got decent mileage and was easy to work on.

The weight of the engine sat over the rear drive wheels and the hollow front end made steering light and effortless. It was the perfect snow car. I bought it in the fall and sold it in the early spring with the same nearly treadless tires. And I never got stuck once.

When I was a senior in high school back in the mid-seventies, a friend of mine got me a job parking cars at a posh golf course. I'd only gotten my license the year before, so I would have worked there for hamster pellets and a compliment. It turns out that tips were better than most hourly jobs I qualified for, but the real bonus was driving the assortment of hardware that entered through the gates.

Aside from the usual Cadillac, Buick, and Oldsmobile, Mercedes-Benz was one of the more premium vehicles entrusted to me. I noticed two things when entering a Mercedes. Foremost was the sound made when the door closed; a heavy chunk like a bank vault sealing behind you. Then there was the deafening silence once entombed. I can't tell you how many times that summer I turned the key to start a Benz that was already running.

BMW hadn't yet reached the prestige that Mercedes had earned by then, and Audi barely existed here in the states.

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*Video by Valkyr Productions
Words by Matt Stone*

But the occasional Porsche did grace the club grounds. The owners were consistently particular about where they expected me to locate their investment — never under trees or on the grass, and definitely not near other residents.

I would nod my head empathetically and wedge it in next to its neighbor anyway — close enough to catch a pencil dropped between them. We were instructed to leave the windows down, as more often than not it was the only way back into the car. You shouldn't wonder why I never (ever) turn my keys over to a valet. I know the drill all too well.

I don't want to perpetuate the stereotype, but there is something about the minutiae of German design that I find fascinating. Take the glove box in my Porsche Cayman, for instance. It had three distinct features I've never seen in another car.

First was a set of clips to hold most any writing instrument, a clever pair of slots to accept, store, and eject my second and third most favorite CDs, and finally retractable cup-holder arms that swung out and retreated back into the housing with a click. It must have taken months to perfect this assembly, one iteration after another — meticulously tested, vetted, and reengineered until flawless.

Cars in general have never been manufactured as well as they are today. Therefore, setting yourself apart from other companies is incredibly challenging. Even brands once synonymous with chintzy, have improved to the point of consideration by even the most discernible buyers.

But the phrase German Engineering isn't purely about exceptional design details. It is perfecting the ordinary, simplifying the impossible and the creation of brilliant products using the finest available materials. It is the very definition of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

When it came time to replace our Acura RDX, my wife was sure there was nothing so wonderful as the fit and finish of her beloved SUV. And then this summer we acquired a Porsche Macan S. After several weeks of driving the Macan, she had a brief opportunity to reunite with the RDX, now being used as my train station transport.

The puzzled look on her face as she experienced the obvious difference is exactly my point. What had I done to her car in just a few months of driving? Nothing had changed, really. But now by comparison, the Acura she had loved to drive for the past four years was downright common.

Sometimes nuances are hard to describe. An understated sense of quality and excellence — faultless ergonomics and attention to details you would have never otherwise noticed. But once you experience German Engineering firsthand, it's pretty difficult to refute.

Photo courtesy Porsche

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