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What you need: an inspiration machine

That's the message Toyota is sending its Lexus designers, placing a conceptual electronic sculpture in their offices

BY PHIL PATTON

Meet the Personal Pond, a waist-high device that looks like the offspring of a Weber grill and the Starship Enterprise. Glowing with softly coloured lights and humming with ethereal sound, it was designed as an inspiration generator for luxury-car designers at Lexus, Toyota's premium brand.

The electronic sculpture (formal name: Toyota/Lexus l'Finesse Personal Pond), a one-off, will be displayed for designers working at the company's studios in Japan, France and the United States. It was created by ECCO Design, a New York firm that has also designed blobby toothbrushes for Colgate, sleek cell-phones for Virgin and ergonomic office furniture for Herman Miller.

The goal, says Eric Chan, president of ECCO Design, is "to imagine a car that incorporates the mental and physical processes of anticipation, memory and signalling, while also providing the user with luxury and comfort."

Toyota, long known for its efficient production, is now trying to cultivate its creative side.

The pond is "a highly conceptual piece to capture the core value of the brand and translate it into a non-automotive object for inspiration to the automotive designers," says Shin Sano, a strategist at the Caltly Design Research Center, Toyota's design studio in Newport Beach, Calif.

The Personal Pond is interactive — in a high-tech-Zen sort of way. Two stones, evoking boulders in a rock garden or markers in a game of Go, represent drivers. Users move the rocks to alter sound and light to match different moods (say, work versus relaxation).

Hand motions also change the configuration of the system in an intuitive way: wave a palm upward to raise the volume of the sound or music, for example.

This isn't the automaker's only inspiration machine. Toyota recently called on Karim Rashid to produce an embodiment of "vibrant clarity," which he did with a series of 30 blobby chairs incorporating unusual materials, colours and patterns. Rashid calls them



The Personal Pond: Created by ECCO Design, it's meant "to capture the core value of the brand."

meta-objects, but others might call them pods.

The object-pods, Rashid says, "represent the schools of influence that shape and reflect contemporary product culture."

Both projects were commissioned by Hideichi Misono, the senior general manager of the Toyota's Global Design Center, which oversees the Toyota City studio in Japan.

These abstract exercises have yet to be reflected in real cars, however. Pressed for translations, designers at Toyota talked about "shadow surfacing" and "beauty of contrast."

The only hints of what those noble phrases might mean when rendered in sheet metal are embodied in two concept vehicles, the LF-S, or Lexus Future Sedan, which was shown in Tokyo last October, and the LF-C, or Lexus Future Coupe, unveiled at the New York auto show last month. The sedan, with a BMW-like roofline, was so much like earlier models that it was met with a resounding "huh?" But the coupe, whose design was directed

by Kevin Hunter of Caltly, shows an energy in its sweeping roof and fenders that is new for Lexus.

Last fall, Toyota endowed an annual lecture at the Center for Creative Studies, the Detroit college known for training automobile designers, and Misono gave the first lecture in January, surprising his audience by criticizing his company. "We need to have more focus," Misono said. "Lexus must be bold, confident and dynamic, but at the same time unpretentious and sophisticated."

He promised to raise Toyota's "J factor," the "Japaneseness" of its cars, even while searching for influences from around the world.

Toyota, pushing hard to dislodge Ford as No. 2, after General Motors, in total world production, is known for the efficiency of its assembly lines, the quality of its products and its green design innovations. But Toyota's designs have long been considered dull and look-alike.

The first Toyota, introduced in 1937, took its styling from the Chrysler Airflow. Today, European and American designers often say

Lexus tends to produce committee-bred approximations of the Mercedes-Benz.

The company's fresh approach may have been inspired by the revival of Toyota's rival Nissan, whose design is supervised by Shiro Nakamura. The need to redefine Lexus may also turn on the introduction of the Lexus brand in Japan itself next year. (Lexus models are now sold in Japan as Toyotas.) But for some long-time observers of auto design, the Pond and the pods recall the Zen-like — and much-derided — brand statements that Infiniti began in 1992, when it required its dealers to display a waterfall and a sculpture by Takenobu Igarashi.

In fact, Misono's inspiration machines are a pretty abstract way to transcend a reputation for look-alike designs. Finesse, vibrance, clarity — those are high-flown abstractions. But the processes that made Toyota great are also embodied in some pretty abstract ideas.

A lot, in other words, can be lost in the translation.

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