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Book Review – An English Car Designer Abroad

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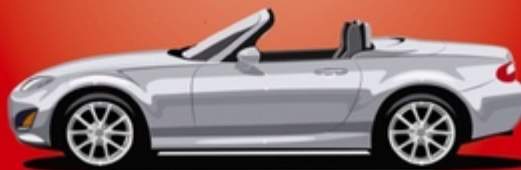
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AN
ENGLISH
CAR DESIGNER
A B R O A D

Designing for GM, Audi, Porsche and Mazda



PETER BIRTWHISTLE

Book



Review - An English Car Designer Abroad...

...Reviewed by Kieron Fennelly

Title: An English Car Designer Abroad

Author: Peter Birtwhistle

Published by: Veloce Publishing Ltd. www.veloce.co.uk

256 pages; hardback

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Peter Birtwhistle managed what many young men aspire to, but few achieve - to become a car designer. An RCA graduate, he worked first for Vauxhall under Wayne Cherry. When Vauxhall styling was merged with Opel's, the up-and-coming Audi offered more potential and he moved to Ingolstadt. Working so near to Stuttgart, he could not resist the lure of Porsche where he was much involved with the 984, an MX 5-size sports car which never saw the light of day, but he failed to be let loose on the 911. In 1988 he was one of nine Porsche designers to leave to join Mazda which was then establishing its European design office outside Frankfurt. He would complete his career there as chief designer.

This is a very personal autobiography, concentrating on what the author did and his relationships with fellow designers and managements. There are some telling observations: At Audi the new technical chief was Ferdinand Piëch. When he issued an instruction, "It was as if someone had opened a fridge door." The author was involved in the Audi Quattro and he recounts how the short wheelbase version came about because the production car was not agile enough for rallying; the SWB's more upright windscreen was designed so that the driver would not be troubled by reflections and the car itself was based not on the Quattro



coupé, but on a truncated Audi 80.

Involvement with the predecessor of the Audi A8 for which Piëch was contemplating using the 928's V8 engine served as Birtwhistle's introduction to Porsche. His four years at Style Porsche were ultimately unsatisfying and he paints a fascinating insider picture of a company increasingly in stasis. His admirably balanced portrait of his boss, 928 designer Wolfgang Möbius will be of especial interest to Porsche devotees. The author's long tenure at Mazda coincided with the Japanese company's establishing its name, not just for its persistence with the Wankel engine, but with a distinct brand identity. By 2014 when he retired, Mazda's sharp styling was setting it apart from its rivals and Birtwhistle explains in layman's terms what the company means by its 'Kodo' design. He makes a fine job at several points in the book in fact of explaining the 'design language' that stylists tend to talk in.

VERDICT

The author is never self-effacing: He was after all in the thick of many design projects, both successful and unsuccessful, but his readiness to acknowledge others and indeed his own shortcomings is impressive and it makes for a thoroughly entertaining as well as historically informative read. Britons of a certain age will warm instantly to an author when early in the book in a reference to his car mad childhood, he writes that the models you really wanted were the Dinky and Corgi models: "Matchbox Toys were always a sort of consolation prize."