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ROBIN PAGE, VICE PRESIDENT OF
INTERIOR DESIGN AT VOLVO, TALKS
MODULAR INTERIOR DESIGN AND
TURNING CONCEPTS INTO REALITY

- BY LEM BINGLEY -



At the Geneva Motor Show in March, Volvo unveiled its second-gen XC60. The new mid-sized SUV marks the third major release from the Swedish firm in its current cycle of rejuvenation, which began with 2014's XC90 and continued with 2016's S/V90. These cars have been very well received by critics and customers alike, and the company hopes it has hatched another winner.

Robin Page, Volvo's vice president of interior design, is clearly proud of the new vehicle. "I think the guys did a really nice job," he says. "It captures what we've already launched with the XC90 and S/V90 – their far more premium feel – and puts it into a smaller vehicle. So it's a pretty good deal for the customer: they're getting all our SPA technology in a sportier, smaller SUV."

SPA – scalable product architecture – is the modular platform underlying all of Volvo's 90- and 60-cluster cars.

Another platform, compact modular architecture (CMA), will underpin the smaller 40-cluster cars, starting with the XC40 later this year.

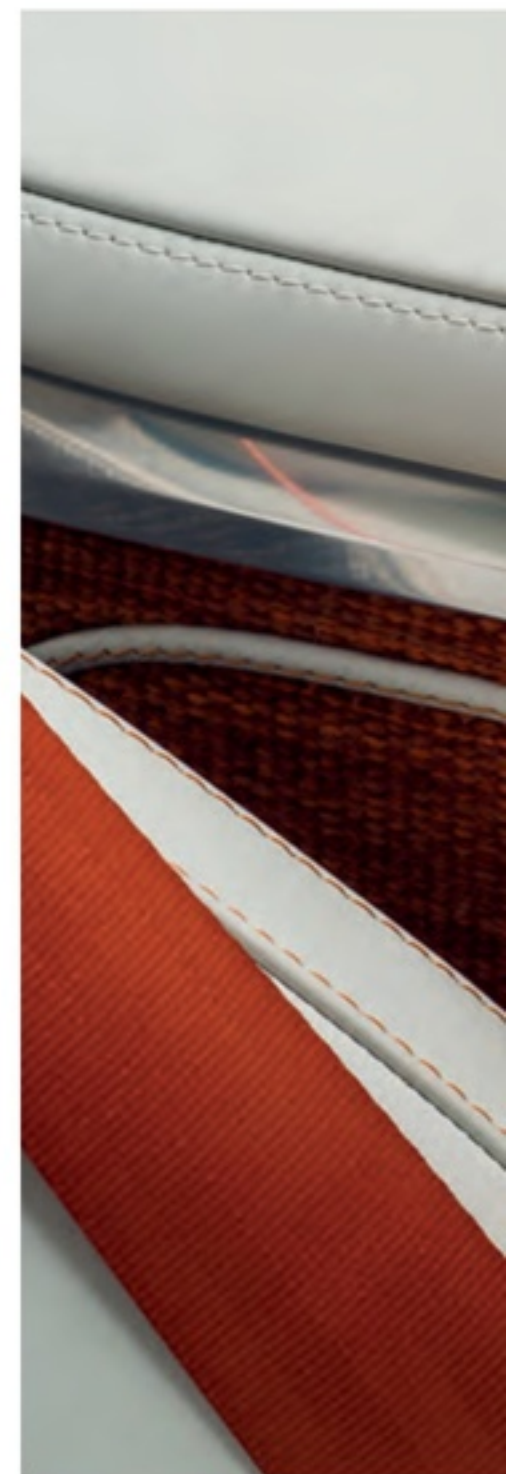
Both platforms enable Volvo to compete with much bigger rivals in the premium market by creating deep component commonalities across models. At the same time, both platforms remain flexible enough to support different heights, widths and wheelbases. SPA's dash-to-axle ratio is one of few fixed measures, for example.

The same approach extends to the interiors – SPA is about the sharing of interior components just as much as the ironmongery of chassis and powertrain. The business case for Volvo's interiors rests on the very pragmatic determination to maximize component sharing, with increased volume unlocking financial barriers to higher quality.

"It makes complete sense and the beauty is that customers benefit on the smaller cars with the work we've

“You can play around with the hard points, but you keep the expensive pieces common”

RIGHT
New Volvo XC60 made its debut at the Geneva Motor Show in March





LEFT XC60 boasts a superb Bowers and Wilkins sound system that uses the same advanced digital surround sound processing technology as in the 90 series cars, and features 15 speakers and a total output of 1,100W



ABOVE The all-new XC60 features some lovely Volvo design touches, like the crystal gear lever and diamond-pattern rotary switches as well as horizontal wood surface styling cues



LEFT Page says it's vital to use wood veneers in ways that don't force the material into unnatural shapes, as showcased on the XC60

done on the bigger ones, so they get really good components," Page notes. "The investment that goes into the technology, the screen, the steering wheel and the seats – those are the really expensive parts. You can play around with the hard points, but you keep the expensive pieces common."

HUMAN RESOURCES

The SPA approach predates Page's time at Volvo. He arrived in Gothenburg in March 2013 from Bentley, but early work on SPA began in 2008 or 2009, while Volvo was still under Ford ownership. A small group of designers and engineers began working on the platform in an almost skunk works fashion. When Chinese firm Geely acquired Volvo in

August 2010, its ideas were brought out of the shadows and green-lit.

Shortly after the acquisition, Volvo design chief Peter Horbury took over Geely Design in China, creating a vacancy at Volvo that was filled in 2012 by Thomas Ingenlath, former head of Volkswagen's Design Center in Potsdam, Germany. Ingenlath went on to recruit former VW Group colleagues Max Missoni to lead exteriors and Page to take charge of interior design.

"Bentley was very much focused on heritage, tradition and craftsmanship, and at Volvo the emphasis shifted more onto human-centric design, well-being and Scandinavian style," Page recalls.

"I've always been very interested in Scandinavian design: it's about designing

DRIVING FORWARD

The other major interior tech topic occupying Page's mind is the looming arrival of autonomous vehicles (AV). "That's the thing we're playing with in the studio: ideas for the future," he notes. "That's the time when you can say, okay, let's do a flat floor, take out the console, change the seating. It's a real opportunity."

Page argues that Volvo has a strong history of designing for human beings as opposed to drivers, and that this will be an asset as electric and autonomous vehicles become commonplace. "It's quite a nice thing to work with, rather than just focusing on driving performance," he says.

"What we want to do is to provide environments that make people feel happy and comfortable, rather than sitting in front of big black screens with lots of information being thrown at them."

AV interiors and tech is likely to develop along two distinct paths, Page predicts: "Cars sold directly to customers will be the ones that have occasional driving, so you'll still have a steering wheel as well as the option of autonomous drive."

"And then there will be service provider interiors, which will be fully autonomous, without a steering wheel system. Those are the two interior worlds that we're heading into now."



ABOVE Volvo Concept Coupe was the first of a series of three concept cars that reveal the design and interior tech possibilities created by the OEM's new scalable product architecture

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surfaces that complement the materials you use and designing around people's needs and lifestyle. It's a really modern and interesting approach compared with Bentley, which was very much about racing heritage and craftsmanship."

CONCEPTUAL THINKING

Ingenlath's new team quickly stamped out their vision for Volvo with a trio of show cars, starting with the Concept Coupe exhibited in Frankfurt in 2013, and followed by XC Coupe and Estate concepts at the Detroit and Geneva shows the following year.

The three concepts were closely related, but each embodied a different aspect of Volvo's brand – described as authority, activity and creativity. Of the three, authority is perhaps the hardest to pin down, but Page says it's about

having the confidence to use just one or two lines rather than three or four.

While most concept interiors are quickly forgotten, the striking shapes and jewel-like details of Volvo's three show cars have gradually become production reality. "With XC90 and S/V90, we brought a little bit from the concepts into each car," Page says. "We started with the XC90 and the portrait screen, crystal gear lever and diamond-pattern rotary switches. With the S/V90 we introduced vertical vents either side of the screen. And then in the XC60 we've brought in the horizontal wood

surface that gives it another dimension. Normally you'd use wood vertically, but we've made a horizontal kind of ribbon. We wanted it to look like it was carved out of a solid piece."

Page adds that it's vital to use wood veneers in ways that don't force the material into unnatural shapes. "As soon as you start doing that, soaking veneers to be able to go into negative surfaces, then you start to disbelieve that the material is wood and assume it's plastic."

Volvo's safety culture also adds an extra dimension to the normal battles between design and engineering. "It's not that we've got a legal requirement or we need to hit a target; we are always striving to set new standards in safety," Page explains. "Our team is striving at the same time to set new standards in design, so you have to fight the right battles. It would be bad for the brand if one team won, because it would mean the other team had lost." ■

LEFT The Concept Coupe features a sparkling crystal gear-lever, that then made it to production in the XC90