

# Alive and Well in Longbridge

by John Zajac

Pardon me for blowing my own horn a bit, but I thought I would write to the Club about my participation in the “Design the New MGB GT” competition held by the *MG World* magazine. Participation which took me to Longbridge, the current home of the MG-Rover car company and source of all the new MG cars on sale every else in the world but the U.S. and Canada.

Over the last few years, I’ve struck up an e-mail friendship with prominent MG historian and author, David Knowles. I saw the notice for the competition in *MG World*, which David writes for, but I had thought they would only entertain entries from designers themselves, “from their own hand”. But David, who knows of my industry background as well as enthusiasm for MG, encouraged me to “subcontract” the actual drawing, and put forth an entry regardless.

To be brief, I had a designer from work who was willing to toss out a few sketches under my suggestion, the talented Sid Ramnarace, and we set to work. The design was clearly to be something derived from the feeling and spirit of the original, which was not such a horrible thing for a designer, as the original was such a clean, elegant design and the new one would try for that “timeless” quality as well.



The designs you see on these pages were part of a presentation, which included roadster, fastback GT and wagonback “four door” GT versions. The idea was to be just as innovative as the original, which was the first “hatchback”, by combining the wagonback liftgate feature of the original, along with rear-hinged rear access doors for the +2 rear seats. My presentation noted that the promise of rear seats in the original B GT was, er, “not fully realized”.

The design was meant to be reminiscent of the original, yet be completely contemporary. I compared the original MG B to the 911 Porsche, which came out at the same time in 1962, and which had the Type 993 final air cooled engine, original body version replaced by the new Type 996 water cooled engine, Boxster derived bodystyle in the late Nineties. It was still a 911, just up to the minute. This proposal was analogous.

Well, the competition was keen, and seven finalists, in the end, were chosen and invited to Longbridge, near Birmingham, where current chief of MG-Rover Design, Peter Stevens would choose the winner, and who would be spirited away for quick drive in the 320 hp MG SV supercar.

For many reasons (timing, costs, pressing issues), I dithered about going, but my wife Nancy and many supportive friends insisted that I attend, and so I went to England to meet with my fellow competitors and various MG representatives, which burned up the lion’s share of my remaining air miles.

I arrived at London Gatwick mid morning of November 12<sup>th</sup>, took the train to Victoria Station, and transferred to Euston Station, where Virgin (!) Trains runs a near non-stop service to Birmingham. I had anticipated that the whole business might take as long as eight hours, but from touch down to arrival at the hotel, it took about four hours and I was at the hotel in Birmingham before three in the afternoon.



Thursday, November 13 was a somewhat gray, dreary day, but I was in a buoyant mood, leaving the hotel for the MG-Rover Visitor’s Centre in plenty of time for some tire kicking before the 11:00 am start of festivities.

We were ushered into a conference room at the Centre, where introductions were made and the day was laid out for us. We would “pitch” our designs in turn, and then have a brief lunch. The party would then take a factory tour while David Knowles and Peter Stevens would evaluate the proposals, announce the winner, and then we would all glower in envy and he took his ride

in the new MG supercar – something which had eluded everyone else except for MG insiders. Peter Steven's introductory included a key thought for him. MG designs from the TF to the MGA to the MGB each represented huge leaps in design direction, and he was very much interested in a design which had that same forward thrust. The pronouncement was a clear signal about his preferences, and an "evolutionary" design like mine was swimming upstream.

The rest of the entries were done by young and hopeful design students or recent design grads. I could tell they hadn't been fully vetted into their profession, because despite hearing 6 presentations, the terms "design language" or "gesture" were not uttered, the only word close to jargon was "proportion", which was pretty mild, after all.

My presentation was last, and I made a point that my proposal was meant to be a system, that is, to meet the needs of the customer, the limitations of the manufacturer and the heritage of the marque. My point of view was not as a designer, per se, but



as a vehicle planner, which is my profession. I pointed out that owners of sports cars did not tend to trade in their cars every year or two. The cars typically become members of the family, and that while any design ought to be modern and contemporary, it ought to have a long shelf life, as the customer will tend to keep it long, and car companies themselves tend to build sports cars for long life cycles.

We had pleasant lunch, and there was little, if any, competitiveness among anyone at the table. I know that I felt like a winner just being there, as I assume everyone else there did as well. I did

notice, though, as the other competitors were all in their twenties, they huddled together at one end of the table, chatting away, while us "gray beards", Peter Stevens, David Knowles, Kevin Jones from MG-R, and myself talked among ourselves.

Our after lunch tour started out with a look at the plant's collection of historic vehicles, MG's from Abingdon as well Austins which were built there, and a look at Herbert Austin's preserved original office. The only photograph in the office, by the way, was that of Mr. Austin's close friend, Henry Ford, another man from Michigan who did well in the car business.

The plant itself was similar to many plants, if you're familiar. Due to all the upheavals in the plant's business and ownership, you see parts trays with Land Rover, Austin, MG and other markings. The plant itself is clean, and busy. The Just-in-time philosophy is evident by the rapid dispersal and delivery of small batches of parts at all times (and be mindful of the rapidly moving trucks with the flexible, easy opening sides for rapid unloading of precious vehicle components).

After a quick tour, we were brought back to Visitor's Centre for the news of who ended up at the top of the heap. Peter, in keeping with his announced direction, picked a forward looking and aggressive design by Christian Quarre, of France, to be the winning entry. All the designs, as Peter was quick to point out, were excellent and worthy, but he had to pick one, as that's what

competitions are about. Christian's was very powerful and in keeping with today's directions, and I must confess, mine does look a bit "flat" in comparison.

We all then assembled for various picture taking, congratulations and anticipated for the arrival of the MG SV, the 60,000 GBP, 320 hp, carbon fibered, beast created by MG's X-Power operation. It came snarling up with a distinct V8 bark to its bite, in bright blue, and after many pictures and a bit of to do, Christian was whisked away to his reward.

In the meantime, David had been asked to sample a quick drive of the equally new MG ZT260. This confection is the



MG ZT sports sedan (Saloon) stuffed with the Mustang GT's 260 hp SOHC V8, driving the rear wheels. Prior to knowing this, I had asked if David wouldn't mind dropping me at my hotel. Well, given his assignment to make a quick assessment, he offered me a perch in the navigator's seat, which I promptly accepted. Off we went, and I was sure, with the burbling V8 merrily moving us along, that I had at least secured second place in the competition.