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The Show, the Big 3, and the Future of the American Auto Industry



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ON THE SHOW, THE BIG 3, AND THE FUTURE OF THE AMERICAN AUTO INDUSTRY

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The North American International Auto Show (NAIAS)'s descent on Detroit in the past few weeks was as much a celebration of the American auto industry as it was a showcase of world-class design and engineering. Car shows tend to exhibit the stuff of dreams, a combination of concept cars that draw us into the future of the automotive world and a life-size gallery of metallic shimmer with a price tag out of reach for the average American.

For the American auto industry, however, the 2016 NAIAS sang a different tune. American car – and mobility – companies are telling consumers what to expect in the 21st century, a refreshing shift from the bemoans of the golden years of market domination.

The Chevrolet Bolt EV, of course, captured event participants, but the bustle surrounding the car was a welcome sound for a corporation climbing its way out of a federal bailout and a few too many media nightmares. \$30,000 after a \$7,500 federal tax incentive and a 200-mile range, the Bolt is hard not to love for both its utility and its symbolic significance. As "the first architecture designed for an electric vehicle

The Show, the Big 3, and the Future of the American Auto Industry – The D Profile
significance. As the first architecture designed for an electric vehicle since the EV1," according to President of GM North America Mark Reuss, the auto's presence at the show left the Nissan Leaf looking pale in comparison and may have very well driven Tesla to pull its exhibition space.

Alex Davies of Wired magazine sees the importance of the Bolt's symbolism. "For GM, the Bolt stands to offer a head start in a new kind of market for electric cars," he says. "But for the rest of us, there's a broader significance to this news. It's not just that Chevy will likely be first. It's that a car company as lumbering and gigantic as GM, with infrastructure and manufacturing capacity on an epic scale, has gotten there first – and is there now."

It's also a sign that GM, along with Ford and Chrysler, is responding to pressure from a spectrum of other American companies through a messy combination of partnership, collaboration, investment, and competition. What is absent is a business as usual mentality: the teams running the American auto industry invite a world of decreasing car ownership as car-sharing programs abound and their own versions of the autonomous car as Google announces its own plans to enter the world of mobility. It's outside American innovation that's thrusting the Big 3 forward. In an interview for American Way magazine, Executive Chief Engineer for Electrified Vehicles Pamela Fletcher said, "New technologies – advanced propulsion, cars linked up to the Internet, advanced safety systems – are coming together to fundamentally change the way we drive. This perfect intersection isn't very far away." The new technology begins with the Bolt. Darin Geese, product manager for the Bolt, has lauded the car for "bringing 200 mile range to everybody. It's for the masses," and GM CEO Mary Barra has referred to it as "the first EV that cracks the code of long range and affordable price" and "more than a car: it's an upgradable platform for new technology." As the first electric vehicle since the EV1, the wonky-looking car that tried, unsuccessfully, to push through a hostile market, the Bolt is, if nothing else, the phoenix rising from the EV1's ashes, purified, if you will, in what it can offer a consumer base that's finally ready for it. In 2016, making a car for the masses means building user experience into four wheels and a battery. Barra herself has said, "No one's gonna buy 200 miles if it doesn't come with a great vehicle," and

so GM has worked for a sleek design but also the space to make those 200 miles comfortable. "You won't make any compromises when it comes to space in the Bolt EV," she promises.

While the Bolt has received the lion's share of media attention, other GM cars have quietly collected accolades of their own. In 2017, Cadillac will introduce an autonomous car, and Buick, once your grandmother's auto but now, somehow, the new American luxury sedan, let its Avista shimmer under Cobo Center's lights, a sparkling blue beast that looked more like a Jaguar than anything the brand has showcased before. And while Honda and Volvo captured the North American Car of the Year and Truck of the Year, respectively, the Chevrolet Malibu remained a finalist for the former. Motor Trend's separate decorations honored the Chevrolet Colorado as its Truck of the Year for the second year a row and the 2016 Chevrolet Camaro SS as its Car of the Year.

Touted as a "better, more entertaining car to drive than a BMW 3 Series," by Motor Trend, the Camaro tells its own story as an American reinvention. "The Camaro's journey from 1989 to 2009 to 2016 has... been truly remarkable, and not just in terms of its engineering execution: This is a car whose whole *raison d'être* has been transformed," writes Angus MacKenzie.

Jonny Lieberman, also for Motor Trend, adds, "We judge types weren't talking about the Camaro in relation to the Mustang GT that we brought along as a benchmark. We were talking about future Camaro comparison tests against BMWs, Audis, and AMGs. I'd even throw a Porsche into that mix. Absolutely world-class sports car performance and dynamics from an American icon."

The other two-thirds of the Big 3 have new ideas from the drawing board as well. Mark Fields, CEO of Ford Motor Company, said in a press release, "People keep talking about how auto companies will be disrupted by tech companies. We want to disrupt ourselves." Ford is expanding its platform to enter what Fields has called "the emerging mobility market" through FordPass. The service's various elements appeal to the 21st century consumer, through "FordGuides, human operators who offer assistance; FordAppreciation, a loyalty aspect; FordHubs, physical locations where the FordPass brand will be expressed; and FordMarketplace." The system will also include parking

assistance and car-sharing.

Technology has, after all, changed the way consumers interact with the world, and innovation in the automotive industry means meeting consumer needs and expectations that have changed drastically in the last 10 years. For Chrysler, which has held its own as an American minivan manufacturer, it means appeasing a segment it knows well.

“Due to its large footprint and multiple daily trip patterns, the minivan is ideally suited for electrification technology,” said Bob Lee, Vice President and Head of Engine, Powertrain and Electrified Propulsion Systems Engineering, FCA – North America, in a press release. “The all-new 2017 Chrysler Pacifica lives up to this promise and then some, with efficiency, power, and refinement.” And he’s right. With 80 miles per gallon equivalent (MPGe) in the city and 30 miles of all-electric range, the 2017 Pacifica introduces fuel savings to a marketing segment already clipping coupons and hunting down department store sales. Certainly foreign automakers offered their own impressive array of innovation, but the shift occurring in American industry is undeniable. The Bolt’s range stole the limelight from Volkswagen, Nissan, and BMW’s previous electric vehicles, leaving Nissan to explain the Leaf’s 107-mile range with the promise, “We will match the Bolt” but no model to show for it. Toyota has little to report on hydrogen fuel cells. Honda captured the Car of the Year, but while it might have met consumer expectations, it didn’t dazzle them. And though the Mercedes-Benz 10th generation E-class comes as a plug-in hybrid and with a slew of remote features, the car is hardly one for the masses. For locals visiting the show, the resurgence of American cars in the spotlight parallels hometown pride. The Bolt, after all, will undergo manufacturing in GM’s Orion Township assembly plant, and the corporation’s technical center in Warren remains the largest automotive battery lab in North America. The suburban locations around metro Detroit are homes to some of the most significant changes in the American auto industry.

It’s no wonder, then, that the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) has lauded the state for its contributions to the industry. As the state has bounced back from the crippling recession, it has much to show for itself. According to the MEDC, Michigan has

produced more than 20,000 automotive patents in the past 50 years, and between 2009 and 2014, the state added 105,000 automotive jobs. Look as far west as Ann Arbor, where the University of Michigan's Mcity facility exists as "the world's first full-scale, simulated urban environment designed expressly for testing the performance and safety of connected, automated, and autonomous vehicles under controlled and realistic road conditions," according to the MEDC. The University's on-site battery lab has also fostered collaboration with companies across the metro area.

That's why, as the auto industry garners attention from Silicon Valley, it's an exciting time to be in Detroit. In his article, "Power Play: How GM (Yes, GM!) Beat Tesla to the First True Mass-Market Electric Car," Alex Davies writes, "The men and women who built the Bolt are pure Detroit. Mary Barra, [former Line Director for the Chevrolet Volt Tony] Posawatz, and [Executive Director, Hybrid and Electric Powertrain Engineering] Larry Nitz are all GM lifers. As a kid, Pam Fletcher built engines for race cars with her father. [Car Chief Engineer for the Bolt EV] Josh Tavel raced motocross before getting into stock cars as both a driver and an engineer. He practically sweats gasoline. And yet he led the engineering team that could bring electric driving into the mainstream."

It's a pool of local talent and the grit of surviving billion-dollar setbacks that have forged the American auto industry of 2016. It's university students at 15 nationally ranked institutions carrying classroom theories into internships in Warren or Auburn Hills or Dearborn. It's the excitement of a new day dawning, when the West Coast is suddenly competing with the Motor City for tech jobs, when retirees and executives, union workers and employees' children, manufacturers and designers can survey the NAIAS floor before them and say, with authenticity, that they're proud to be here.

For additional information on the show, hosted by the Detroit Auto Dealers Association, please visit the show's website: naias.com

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