

Innovative, stylish and meaningful: BYTON Vice President, Benoît Jacob on the future of mobility and car design

Stylish, unmistakably futuristic and digital, but also homely and warm at the same time – BYTON’s chief designer Benoît Jacob’s influence is characterized by a design that is innovative yet focuses on what matters most.

In this interview, he explains the BYTON design philosophy, the need for a feel-good atmosphere and how the new technologies changed our demands on vehicle design.

What impact does the BYTON motto “Time to be” have on your work as chief designer?

Benoît Jacob: “Time to be” stands first of all for new travel experiences offered by new technologies. Autonomous driving offers us new ways to spend time in a car – whether as the driver or as a passenger.

The focus is returning to people. I can now decide freely how I spend my time in the car – for communication within or outside the vehicle, for entertainment, or even for working. A self-driving car lets me finish my working day earlier as I can simply just hold the last video conference call of the day in the car. Alternatively, I can start planning my evening right there in the car, such as reserving a table at a restaurant. This also gives me more time for other things at home. The change in technology within the car also has a direct impact on my free time outside the vehicle.

Anticipating these changes in mobility and technology in the design is arguably the most important task of an automotive designer at the moment. In this context we created our mobility platform to exploit the advantages of modern communication technologies. A specific example of this is our Shared Experience Display, which covers the entire width of the car’s cabin. The dashboard acts as a stage for this display, which all passengers have a perfect view of as the seats swivel. This turns the vehicle cabin into a digital lounge with a corresponding layout.

For many people, digital technology is increasingly dominating their everyday life. For some, this progress is happening too fast. How can design provide comfort in this regard?

Benoît Jacob:

We have an optimistic attitude towards the future; and I believe that there are many more exciting experiences to come out of the opportunities offered by new technologies. I don't see the world of the future in a post-apocalyptic way, but instead the chances.

First, let's take a closer look on the BYTON Concept to see how this reflects on design. Its Smart Surfaces, for instance, beginning with the front grill. LED lights throughout the front highlight the luminescent logo in the middle, along with connecting lines and dots that can switch to different display modes to suit different driving scenarios as well as communicate with users and pedestrians. We combine other technical design solutions, such as cameras for the rear view mirrors or handleless doors, with a very stylish and organic silhouette that is very appealing.

On the other hand, this also means that the cabin design is even more important than the external design as focus and attention is no longer drawn only to the outside precisely for these reasons. Within the car we're actually focusing on creating a cozy feel-good atmosphere with warm materials, such as leather and premium fabrics that show real craftsmanship. At the same time, it is extremely important that we remain clear and unambiguous in terms of vehicle design given the increasing complexity of vehicle functions.

The seating arrangement with seats that can be swiveled relative to each other also improves communication between people within the vehicle – it also allows even better use to be made of the footwell so you can stretch out if you want. In addition, electric drives are suddenly bringing the design of the vehicle floor into focus.

As there's no longer a need for large powertrains, this can now be flat in design. At last, you might say. While the floor in your home is always the first and most important aspect in terms of furnishings, so far hardly anyone's thought about it in a vehicle.

A vehicle also positions itself in the market through its external appearance. What is unmistakably BYTON?

Benoît Jacob: We really have to rethink in terms of exterior design. The electric drive will ultimately change the conventional silhouette of vehicles. To give an example: As a distinctive design feature, the front grille will no longer be needed technically. As electric motors are much more compact than combustion engines, this frees up space for the cabin to grow. This has a corresponding impact on the overall design – the roofline will get longer and the A-pillars will be positioned more to the front. The BYTON Concept is a very stylish solution in the way that it illustrates this. Here, we combine classic SUV traits with a sleek, sloping roofline, long wheelbase, large 22" wheels, and short overhangs with unmistakable high-tech details. Slimline LED headlights crown the precision Smart Surface.

The vehicle front is illuminated using a combination of LED strips that switch to different display modes to welcome approaching drivers or indicate the charge status. As a lighting signature, they play a distinctive key role in defining the vehicle's facial expression.

Given all this, at \$45,000 the car's entry price remains affordable for a premium SUV.

How much does the price dictate the design?

Benoît Jacob: It's easy to design a car without a price limit, but to us it is important to always get to the bottom of what is really needed and what are perhaps just gimmicks. To give you an example, at the start of the design process our CEO Carsten Breitfeld asked for a really striking door design. While we could have done it, we questioned whether getting in and out of the vehicle really matters that much. We came to the conclusion that nobody needs car doors designed to perform acrobatics, and that we would instead prefer to reallocate this investment in favor of a premium cabin. Innovation matters to us, but it must never degenerate into an end in itself. To us, innovation means restricting ourselves to solutions that fit exactly into our innovation strategy. Ultimately, the cheaper the vehicle is to be, the more focused and creatively the design team has to work.

What are you particularly proud of in terms of the BYTON's design?

Benoît Jacob: The BYTON's design meets many varied but always highly exacting demands on safety, aerodynamics, innovation, protection, and atmosphere.

In retrospect, however, I am proud of something in the BYTON Concept that very few notice: The steering wheel. If you picture a steering wheel for cars that are mainly autonomous, they're often small or have completely new shapes. It took a long time for us to realize that a steering wheel already has an almost perfect shape, and that it should remain round. When the vehicle steers automatically, the steering device moves too – no matter what kind it is. And this shouldn't be distracting nor should it be unusually complicated to use should the driver need to intervene. The BYTON steering wheel is precisely what it should be: Round and restrained in design with a compact integrated digital display for critical information. Ultimately, it showed us that there are things that we shouldn't fundamentally change even in terms of the future of mobility.

About Benoit Jacob

Benoit Jacob is one of the world's most foremost car designers, wowing drivers worldwide with his unique designs over the last 20 years and garnering numerous awards from recognized institutions and media establishments, such as Red Dot, IF and Good Design, among many others.

Before joining BYTON, he served as BMW Group's vice president of design. Among his many achievements for the German automaker, he is responsible for the BMW i design and is credited for the highly innovative i3 and i8 electric cars. He also led BMW Group's advanced designs, outlined future projects for the BMW, MINI and Rolls-Royce brands and headed the exterior design teams for several BMW models. He designed the BMW M1 Hommage concept car that was presented in 2008.

Benoit graduated from the Art Center College of Design Europe. In 1994, he began his career at Renault and was tasked with the exterior design of the Renault Sport Spider, the Renault Fiftie concept car, the Laguna 2 Salon and Estate and the Dacia Logan. In 2001, Benoit joined the Volkswagen Group in various international management positions to focus on advanced design.

The French native lives in Munich with his wife and son. In his spare time, he enjoys traveling as well as collecting and restoring classic sports cars.

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