

The Truck of Tomorrow

What can you do with a cab and a box? Some say a lot.

The pickup of the future is going to have a passenger compartment up front and a cargo box out back. That's what makes a pickup a pickup. But after that, it's anybody's guess.

Ask Nissan's design chief, Gerry Hirshberg, the direction pickups should take, and he'll quite likely pull out pictures of the Gobi he and his design staff created a couple of years ago. You'll notice the Gobi does indeed have a passenger compartment and a cargo box. But that's where the similarity to today's pickups ends.

The idea, Hirshberg has explained, was to create an entry-level vehicle with the excitement of a sports car and the versatility of a pickup. And why not? Where is it written a pickup truck has to have a box-like cab followed by a box-like cargo container? Why not a helicopter-style passenger compartment and a cargo box with folding sides?

And inside, why should tomorrow's trucks have a featureless instrument panel set in front of a bench or a pair of buckets? The Gobi has an asymmetrical interior with a driver's "work station" and a "spacious lounge-like area" for the passenger.

But the Gobi is a bit too radical a departure for the near term. A sure thing for the showroom is a version of GMC's Sonoma GTX Sportside that is on the auto-show circuit this year. To use GMC's words, the compact-size Sonoma GTX "is the latest expression of its goal of translating automobile high performance technology-oriented engineering, comfort and convenience features and overall safety in light-duty trucks."

There is a growing similarity in what customers want in an automobile and in a personal-use truck, according to GMC Truck general manager, Lewis Campbell: "We can see the day, just a few years in the future, when almost every high-tech 'car-like' comfort, convenience and safety item will also be available on every personal-use GMC truck."

The Sonoma GTX Sportside, as its full name indicates, has a sportside cargo



Nissan Gobi

bed, a style which is currently not offered on any production compact. There's also a front air dam with integrated fog lamps, recessed grille and a rear spoiler integrated with the tailgate. The truck's unusual (for a truck) raspberry color will be available on some future GMC trucks. The production version of the Sonoma GTX will arrive in the 1994 model year.

Another near-term is Ford's F-150 Superflare 4x4 in off-road trim, also currently on the show circuit. It's based on the production Flareside. Ford says the Superflare is a real truck, "one we could bring to market when the time is right."

The Superflare has dual power domes on the hood—for no apparent reason—a combination bumper/brush guard, a cab step bar/roll bar with driving lights, a duck-tail spoiler and dual exhaust. Like the Sonoma GTX, the Flareside is basically a dressed-up, we-could-easily-do-this production model, and it, or something very close, is definitely around the proverbial corner.

Although details are very sketchy, that corner is also concealing all-new pickups from Toyota and Dodge, and while the new Toyota truck poses a serious threat to Ford and Chevrolet, it's the Dodge truck that has the industry talking.

According to George Peterson of the auto marketing analysis firm, AutoPacific Group, in Santa

Ana, California, the Dodge T300 full-size pickup will debut in the 1994 model year and will look very much like the Little Red Truck (LRT) concept pickup that first appeared at the 1990 Detroit auto show.

(Its appearance was brief, probably intentionally so; after the press got plenty of photos, it was pulled from the show. Unnamed executives said it was simply too close to the upcoming production version, and having it at the show

gave away too many secrets to the competition.)

The LRT is almost retro in styling, with its fifties-look fat fenders, power-bulged hood, and squat, aggressive stance. It will come with a full range of engines including, probably for 1995, a version of the 8.0-liter V-10 now in the Viper. If the T300 does indeed look like the LRT concept truck, it will be a landmark in production pickup design.

The Toyota pickup, due in the 1993 model year, will be mid/full-size; that is, smaller than full, bigger than mid. It will have a V-6 at introduction with a V-8 later on. Talk is, the new Toyota, while not full-size, can nonetheless hold the obligatory four-by-eight sheet of plywood between its wheel arches. Toyota also has plans for an all-new compact pickup in 1994.

AutoPacific's Peterson also says to expect a new Ranger from Ford this fall. There will be a personal-use (non-commercial) 4x2 model and a "husky" 4x4 that will look very different from the 4x2. Mazda will get a version, and will drop the B2200.



GMC Sonoma GTX Sportside



Dodge LRT

As to truck trends in general, Ed Schoener, Chevrolet's assistant segment manager of full-size trucks, says there will be a proliferation of niches in the truck market, such as all-wheel (not for off-road) drive, and trucks with sports-car-like handling.

"In terms of variants [step side, extended cab, crew cab, sport side, etc.] what we have now is about it," he says. There will be a lot of concentration in the future on improving ride quality, on features and technology."

He also expects the government to renew its interest in truck CAFE and emission standards when the recession is behind us. That's going to mean some changes in engines and transmissions to meet tighter regulations. Cars use multi-valve, OHC engines, turbocharging and supercharging to maintain performance while meeting regulations. Will trucks get the same technology? "Those are expensive answers," Schoener says. "Hopefully, we won't have to go to extremes in adding expense to trucks [to get the necessary results]."

When asked if the look of Chevy trucks will change, Schoener said, "You'll find out in a little while." That could be a reference to the major changes known to be coming for the S-10 pickup for the 1994 model year.

He is in the camp that predicts Dodge's T300 will have a "real traditional truck look." Will Chevrolet follow that path?

"I don't think we are going to back off from the position we have staked out for high style," he says.

Chet Kuziemko (Ku-shem-ko) is Ford's truck-marketing plans manager. His crystal ball predicts a move toward more aerodynamic, more "friendly looking" exteriors, with more car-like interiors for pickups in the near future.

"However, we don't want to get away from the tough, durable look," Kuziemko says.

He sees more step cabs, especially now that more and more women are becoming prime users of pickups, more high-performance trucks (Ford will introduce one in 1993), and improved ride and handling.

And as for the T300 that everybody in the business is talking about these days, Kuziemko says, "If you want to sell something, it has to be cheaper, better or different. Clearly Chrysler went the different route." ■