

The Volvo estate reimagined

The Swedish car maker is ditching the boxy family wagon and parking itself firmly on the lawn of the Scandinavian design community, writes Johan Deurell

FOR MANY, VOLVO means estate cars: praised and loathed, these functional, safe, box-shaped motors have come to represent the Swedish manufacturer's core values. But with the release of the V90 this year, Volvo is attempting to place the old family car firmly within the realm of Scandinavian luxury design.

When showing its concept coupé in 2013, the first design conceived under the direction of Thomas Ingenlath, Volvo made clear it was no longer just about the egalitarian and utilitarian – it was also about the sumptuous. 'I think the company has no future if we are targeting the mass market,' chief executive Håkan Samuelsson stated frankly at the event.

Behind the transformation lies a re-interpretation of Volvo's design

history – luxury has now become a key word. 'The way we design our cars, and the thinking behind them, is deeply rooted in the values of Scandinavian design, but at the same time we are developing new expressions of that heritage,' Ingenlath says. 'Scandinavian design will only be perceived as a luxury experience when it strives to be of the highest quality, execution and precision.'

With its slanted trunk, the Volvo V90 looks different to its predecessors, which were all recognisable by their box-shaped backs. Until the release of the third-generation V70 in 2007, it was possible to trace this practical and divisive design feature right back to the 1950s Amazon. On the decision to scrap it, Ingenlath says: 'We cannot use the ▶

The 2013 Volvo XC concept coupé and estate were part of a move to reposition the company as a luxury design brand

aesthetic recipes of past decades to define the Volvo of tomorrow."

Perhaps the real issue is that the box was heavily associated with a niche market that was rapidly disappearing: people who cared more about cultural capital and humanitarian values than about money and flashy cars. In Sweden during the 1970s, 80s and 90s, Volvo estates were so synonymous with the creation of the welfare state that opponents of social democracy labelled them 'socialist containers'.

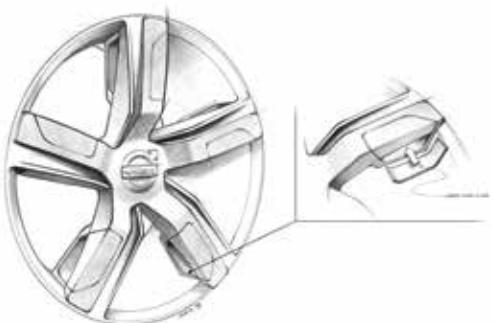
Elsewhere, that signification became a selling point. In Britain, Volvo estates tended to be driven by an educated suburban middle-class who shopped at Waitrose and listened to *The Archers*. Across the pond, they had similar connotations, as shorthand for the liberal intellectual – perhaps a professor, teacher or human-rights campaigner – making them a popular choice for Hollywood filmmakers portraying such characters.

But, for Ingenlath, the new car

maintains a strong Volvo design identity: 'Among today's premium cars, the V90 is a beautiful, proud and true-to-form estate, which means it doesn't cater to the fashion for coupé-like roofs and window lines.' He adds, 'There is a cool, new interpretation of the iconic upright rear light featured in many Volvos.' However, it does seem that the front of the V90 series is more closely related to the 1960s P1800 sports car, as driven during car chases in the television series *The Saint* (which the head of design also admits is his favourite Volvo of yesteryear).

Although the box is gone, the new Volvo marks a return to a modernist design sensibility. Largely freed from ornament, the V90 stands out in a world of cluttered, generic and loud car design. For Ingenlath, it is proportion and harmony that are important. 'I believe in design that looks good even after many years have passed. A car shouldn't get outdated after a season.' ◆

volvocars.com



ABOVE A wheel trim detail from the Volvo XC concept coupé

BELOW The V90 has shorn the Volvo of its box-shaped back

