

## Designing the Taxi: A Project of the Design Trust for Public Spaces in Cooperation with Parsons

Not since MoMA commissioned a handful of prototypes in 1976 for *The Taxi Project* has NYC's most iconic car received so much attention.<sup>1</sup> While the earlier endeavor was exciting for its time and more rigorous in its way, it was largely locked inside the car and unable to engage the U.S. automotive industry. The recent experiment at Parsons, which has produced the *Designing the Taxi* exhibition and its publication, has so far sidestepped Detroit as well, drawing instead from a broad range of non-automotive creatives and the input of owners and industry insiders to "jump-start the process of change" with the ultimate goal of showcasing a new vehicle by the 2007 centennial of the city's first gas-powered taxicab.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1  
View of the *Designing the Taxi* exhibition.  
All photos by Michael DeVito

Initiated by the Design Trust for Public Space, the concept for *Designing the Taxi* took shape during two workshops held last spring. The prolific not-for-profit and the design school brought together a select group of largely New York-based designers—product, urban, and landscape—and those who have the greatest stake: the owners, operators, and regulating agencies of taxicabs in NYC. Kurt Andersen, host of WNYC's *Studio 360°*, moderated the preliminary workshop on May 16, 2005, which assessed the current state of taxicabs and generated ideas on where to focus improvements. The second workshop held only twenty-three days later, presented proposals from about twenty designers and other participants, including at least one driver, Erhan Tuncel. With no specifications to follow, unlike MoMA's 1976 mandate, designers were free to look outside the vehicle. This incubator approach produced several intriguing ideas with a few verging on full-fledged concepts that were put on view inside of six months.

Pentagram, one of the participants, designed an engaging space for the exhibition. The installation recreated a portion of a city street in plywood, complete with sidewalk and curb. An actual mailbox (for visitor response cards) and free newspaper stand (for public programs though, true-to-life, empty the day visited), on the corner completed the illusion. The main element, though, was the L-shaped vertical plywood partition that created a vestibule for introductory text before it rounded the corner and ran the length of the rectangular gallery. This clever construct effectively mimicked the temporary walls used to mask urban building sites and conveniently hosted the main components of exhibition: hoardings of printed text in bold black and taxicab-yellow with several full-color illustrations of the proposals. Embedded in the wood panels were three "view boxes," windows holding television monitors, and towards the end, a doll-sized model taxicab. Choice clips from cinema and television where NYC taxis have enjoyed a supporting role played continuously, driving home the taxi's "vital symbolic status."<sup>3</sup> Three more concepts were parked bumper to bumper on the opposing length of gallery wall—no glitzy



Figure 2  
Visitors in the exhibition at Parson's gallery on 13th Street in Manhattan.

car-show prototypes here but two-dimensional, full-color realistic digital renderings that gave an adequate sense of scale and style if nothing of what might lie under the hood.

Ingeniously, Pentagram's design for the sixty-page, large format publication followed the same basic layout as the didactics pasted on the exhibition wall. More of a hefty brochure than a book, *Designing the Taxi's* catalog also contains, in addition to the proposals, a half-dozen "Forewards" [sic] and "Background Essays" excerpted in the exhibition. These texts formalized some of the workshops' commentary. Notably, Parsons' Dean (and *New Yorker* architecture critic) Paul Goldberger railed against the inadequacies of Ford's Crown Victoria, a family sedan which makes up about ninety-three percent of the New York taxi fleet, in "A Taxi is Not a Car," while design writer Phil Patton poeticized this "modern equivalent of a city gate," from the legacy of much-loved Checker cabs to the "grudging respect" won by Crown Vics, in "The Taxi as Icon."<sup>4</sup> Andrew Salkin, First Deputy Commissioner of the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission, said little in "Taxi Regulators Embrace Change," but, fortunately, consultant Bruce Schaller and fleet owner Michael Levine, respective authors of "The Taxi Vehicle in the Ideal Taxi System" and "Designing for the Industry," candidly discussed the industry's complexities, opening up possibilities for real change in an industry where a car's life is only three to five years. The rest of the

catalog is devoted to the proposals, organized by themes divided under two concepts, The Taxi System and The Taxi Vehicle, with the former defined as a "social and economic system that includes the passengers, drivers, fleet owners, garages that service and own taxis, and regulatory agencies like the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission and the Department of Transportation."<sup>5</sup>

The Taxi System necessarily includes the physical area that taxis use, and several proposals focused on where and how taxis interact with customers. A proposal by Birsell + Seck cordoned off a car-sized portion of the street with a rectangular *Avenue-Q*-orange painted pad with a tongue that lapped over the sidewalk for orderly loading. A similar idea for a taxi stop was erected in the exhibition. A nice idea for outer boroughs where yellow cabs are sparse but one that hardly seems practical on Manhattan's crowded thoroughfares. CityStreets' pod-like sidewalk vestibule services passengers' and drivers' needs with shelter, restroom, and wistful amenities like a machine to refill MetroCards, which would also work for taxis, and a means of recharging the batteries of electric cabs. Truck Product Architecture, on the other hand, focused solely on the drivers. Better known for its retro-ply furniture, the six-year old firm created a pleasingly original concept in "STRETChfence," a slinky-like yellow relief stand that wraps around existing green space encouraging drivers to stretch or have lunch, a small way of combatting the sedentary nature of the job that contributes to poor health and eating habits.

Hailing a cab could be as easy as dialing one on a cell phone, currently only permissible with livery car services. Such wireless communication proposed by Weisz + Yoes and Ideo would also reduce the amount of time cabs spend trolling for passengers. Ideo's upgrade includes black boxes and GPS-based navigation as well as using free cabs for delivery service. Recognizing a cab's availability through the insider logic of the current rooflights, long a problem for visitors, could be remedied through the friendly, "Maybe...", "I'm Free!", or "Nope," indicators by Weisz + Yoes or another that simply lights up in easily seen LED

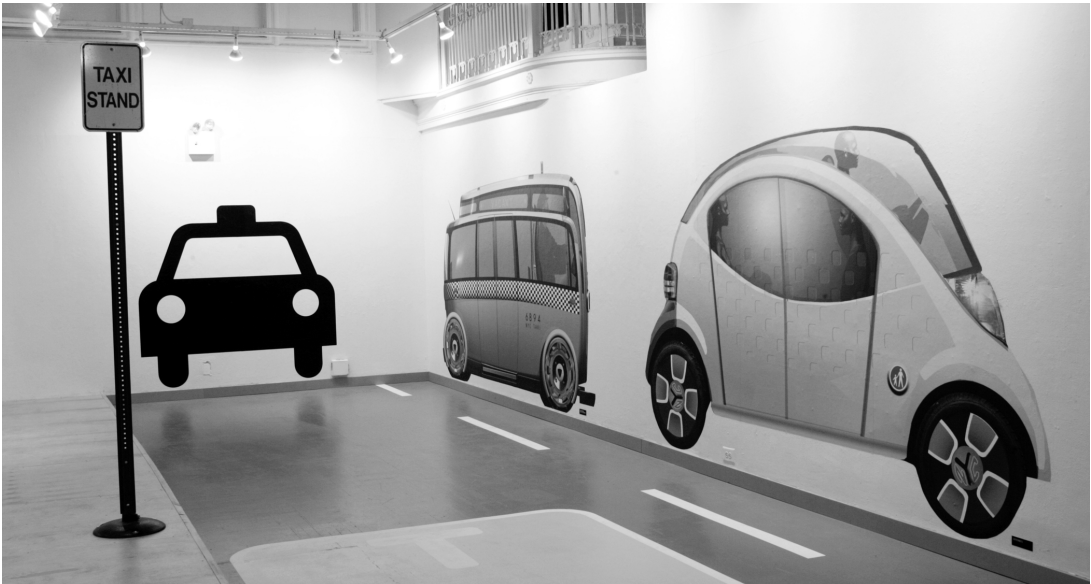


Figure 3

CityStreet's *CABsule* (with hubcaps that recall erstwhile subway tokens) and Hybrid Product Design & Developments *MiniModal* concepts doubleparked in the exhibition designed by Pentagram.

with the word, "VACANT," by Antenna Design. Better use of the Plexiglas partition, loathed by drivers, as more of a passenger console also features in Antenna Design's proposal. A retrofitted partition could facilitate a GPS map and a cashless pay system by ATM, credit card or a system like "Hailstone" suggested by Imagination (USA) Inc. A clear convenience for passengers, the latter would also make drivers less of a roving target for criminals.

Predictably, most every designer addressed in some way the still woefully unresolved issues of fuel efficiency, emissions reduction, access and safety. It may come as some surprise that electric cabs briefly dominated the industry before gas-powered cabs appeared on Manhattan streets in 1907. Many of the other improvements—hybrid motors, wheelchair ramps, and reconfigured seating to accommodate wheelchairs—were aired in 1976. None are yet norms although a few hybrids do exist and both passenger-exiting signals and sliding doors are used on minivans. A refreshingly low-tech enhancement is the childseat by Birsel + Seck that folds down like an armrest revealing buckled straps for the littlest passengers. Fox & Fowle Architects proposed a filtration device mounted on the existing grills as a short-term solution for this major polluter. Ken Smith, the landscape architect, called for a total "greening of the taxi fleet," one of the themes, by putting

smaller yet roomier, bright green fuel-efficient vehicles onto dedicated traffic lanes. Such standards would provide safer passage to customers, pedestrians, and the average 120,000 daily cyclists in the city.<sup>6</sup>

Among the more developed vehicular proposals, a few stand out. Hybrid Product Design & Development's *Minimodal* concept, a half-width noseless vehicle that recalls something of the short-lived German Rumber, drives around half the passengers on hybrid-power optimally at half of highway speeds—factors that fit urban traffic patterns. The firm offers two larger vehicles, the *Maxi* and the *Mogul*, to accommodate more riders for longer trips to the airport. All are wheelchair accessible as is CityStreets' *CABsule*, which can also, somewhat inexplicably, carry a Segway scooter so passengers can drive themselves, presumably when traffic is at a standstill. Pentagram's "New Checker" is the most developed and to this reviewer the most stylish of the bunch with detailing that recalls a checker but a body that is more muscle than flab. Its long snout, low chassis, partially covered rear wheel hubs, double sliding doors and a passen-

ger area based on London's cabs, instills a feeling of security while restoring an air of glamour. Acknowledging the draw taxis have for tourists, a glass roof encourages sightseeing—a feature shared by Hybrid's Modal series and the splashy dome of Blue Marlin Brand Design's beetle like taxi.

*Designing the Taxi* also attempts to elevate the public profile of the much-maligned taxi drivers, largely made up of immigrants from the Middle East, India, Pakistan, Africa, and the Caribbean. Designers' responses celebrate rather than confront drivers' diverse backgrounds in entertaining ways. Citystreets' sketches of checkerboard-trimmed yellow headgear—fezzes, turbans, aviator-style hats, and Afghans—add a light-hearted touch to a call for professionalization. Also fun is the boxed set of world music culled from drivers' favorite tunes, part of the branding scheme offered by Pentagram.

While some may find fault with the lack of historical context or prototypes, one cannot but laud *Designing the Taxi's* efficient presentation and many of the engaging proposals. The whole is such a neat package that one questions the need for gallery space and costly publications at all. This topical show could be staged as happily at one of the well-trafficked taxi pick-up points at area airports or train stations greatly expanding its reach. Already, the *Designing the Taxi* book may be purchased for a reasonable fee or downloaded for free, assuring reach if not impact.<sup>7</sup> By putting the design process in the hands of so many in such a short time period, one wonders where this cooperative venture will lead. Realizing a new design for a taxi would be a good start.

- 1 Emilio Ambasz curated the exhibition held June 17–September 6, 1976 and edited the accompanying 160-page publication. See *The Taxi Project: Realistic Solutions for Today* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976).
- 2 Deborah Marton, "About Designing the Taxi," Deborah Marton et al. *Designing the Taxi* (New York, Design Trust for Public Space, 2005), 5.
- 3 Marton et al, *Designing the Taxi* (New York, 2005), 17.
- 4 Phil Patton, "The Taxi as Icon," Marton et al. *Designing the Taxi* (New York, 2005), 17.
- 5 Marton, et al, *Designing the Taxi* (New York, 2005), 19.
- 6 Source of statistic is Transportation Alternatives' December 12, 2005 press release, "Advocates' Advice to Weather a Transit Strike." <http://www.transalt.org/press/releases/051212transitstrike.html> [January 2006]
- 7 [www.designtrust.org/pubs/publications.html](http://www.designtrust.org/pubs/publications.html) [January 2006]