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DESIGNINGWOMAN

FROM NEWBURY PARK, VERENA KLOOS DRIVES THE FUTURE *of* INNOVATION.

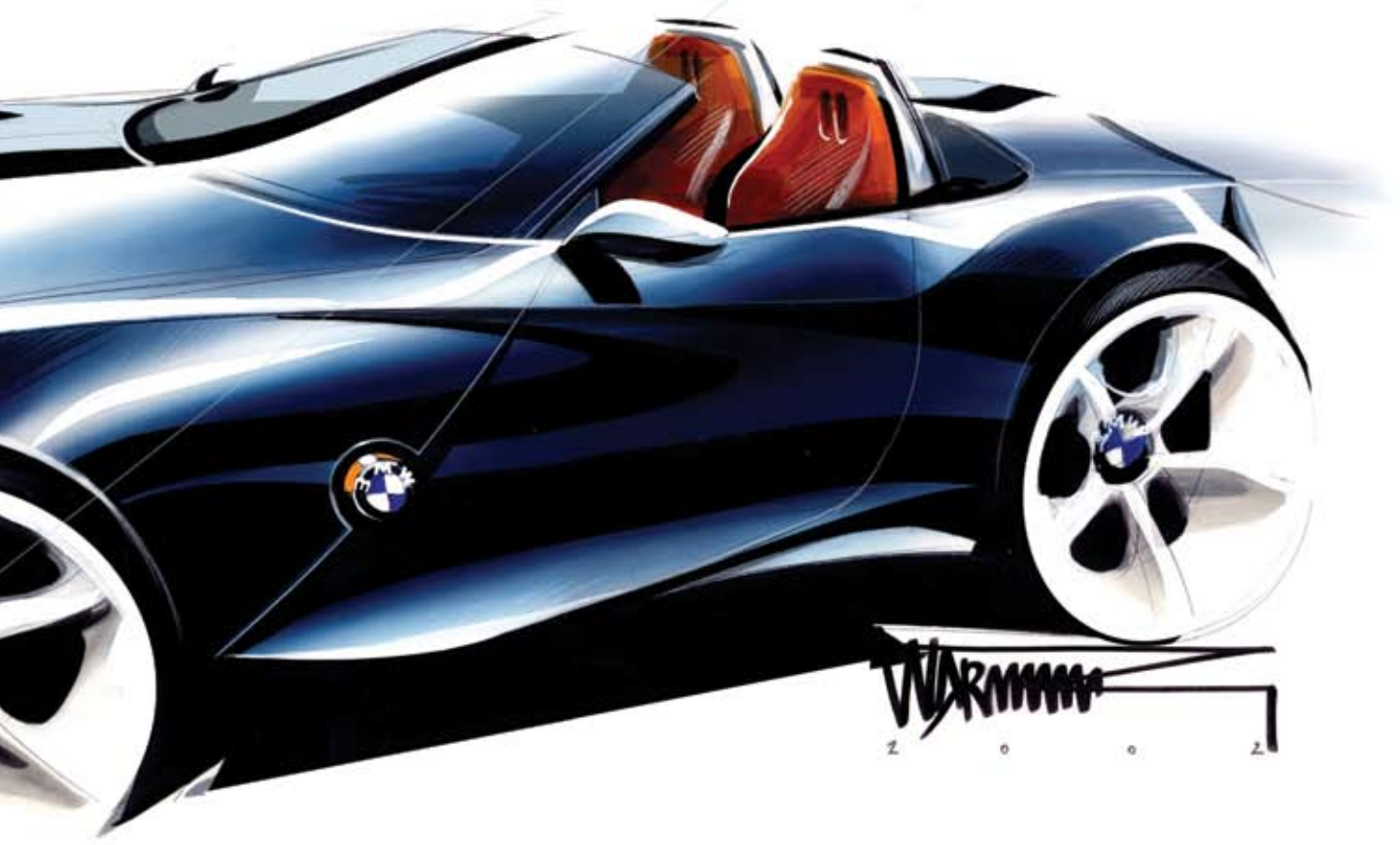
It is not quite as long a road from Northern Germany to Southern California as you might think. Verena Kloos, president of DesignworksUSA, in Newbury Park, can serve as proof of that. Since 2004 she's presided over this innovative and influential studio specializing in product development and automotive design. Kloos has bridged the gap not only from her native Wolfsburg, Germany, to Newbury Park, but has sent out emissaries—in the forms of pioneering design work—**TO THE REST OF THE WORLD.**

BY ANTHONY HEAD



PRODUCTS DESIGNED BY DESIGNWORKSUSA ARE NOT JUST EYE CANDY; EACH AND EVERY PRODUCT—FROM RIDING MOWERS TO BICYCLES TO AIRCRAFT INTERIORS—IS INTENDED TO PROVIDE AN IMPROVEMENT TO THAT PRODUCT SEGMENT THAT WILL SET THE BAR AND RETAIN ITS STYLE FOR MANY YEARS.





DESIGNWORKSUSA is an integral company within the BMW Group, and ideas that move people (literally) around the globe take shape here before they hit the road. Such a task requires regularly checking out the world that inspires while also being directly affected by it, which is why it's tough catching up with Kloos. Her company has satellite studios in Munich and Singapore, and Kloos estimates that she travels an average of 100 days a year to those offices and to design-industry-related functions. In fact, she just recently returned to her Newbury Park office after a lot of time abroad. "Quite a lot actually. It's part of global design work, which is what we're all a part of now," says Kloos in her light German accent that, at times, slips into other European cadences. "I was just in Munich, Germany, the headquarters of the BMW Group. I was also in Hamburg to see an aircraft interiors show, then on to the Salone Internazionale del Mobile, which is a furniture design show in Milan. And I also took part in a presentation at the Concorso d'Eleganza of Villa d'Este [in Cernobbio, Italy]. It's a vintage car show on par with the Concours d'Elegance at Pebble Beach."

Approximately fifty percent of the commissions from DesignworksUSA are for the BMW Group. DesignworksUSA also works with Mini and Rolls Royce, and it has many other clients that are not affiliated in any way with BMW or the automotive field. Such design work ranges from aircraft interiors to boat exteriors. Trucks and trains. Golf equipment. Skateboards. High-end medical equipment. In fact, teams from DesignworksUSA have helped clients as diverse as Nokia and Hewlett Packard, Adidas and Amtrak.

"While we do have people who stay on one type of task, we believe that doing work in other areas provides us a great deal of learning in the 24-7 lifestyle of our BMW drivers. We call this approach 'cross-fertilization,'" says Kloos. She goes on to explain that interchangeable ideas can be applied by the studio's creative minds to a wider variety of projects only after her designers gain insights into the projects themselves, and such movement of energy keeps the fires of creativity lit. After all, it would be a shame to waste a good idea simply because it doesn't fit snugly into a current project.

As president of DesignworksUSA, Kloos oversees the company's day-to-day tasks and defines its overall working structure. She assists in the creative work, too. "Not in every single project. I have a very good team of directors who are running the individual design studios here," she says. "But I try to be involved in many projects because it's pure fun. Pure delight. But I don't like to be micromanaged, and I don't want to micromanage."

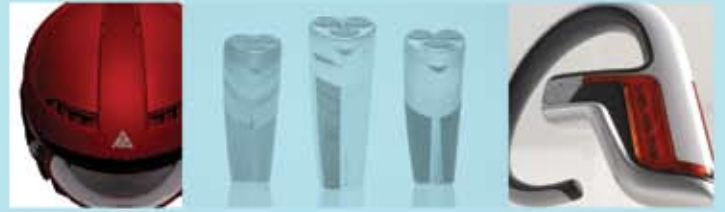
That would be impossible anyway. At any given time, over fifty different projects, both grand and small, might be floating around DesignworksUSA at several different stages of completion. Not everything will come to market right away, either. Sometimes development won't be completed for years, so working with other products and companies, Kloos believes, keeps her teams' thinking flexible for longer terms.

The various concepts behind design are elastic, too—and they're pervasive. Everything man made is man-designed, and so mastering design as a business pursuit means, say, finding ways for all sorts of technology to fit into one sleek package like a cell phone; or getting an engine to squeeze another two miles from a gallon of gasoline. Individual designers have their own approaches, but for Kloos, there are definite core principles: Great design has deep and lasting impact. It delivers responsible solutions. It improves the clutter of life.

"We dive deep into the brand we are working for. All the projects we do are of a complex nature, and we study the framework of the product, including consumer behavior," says Kloos. "Great design to me is not giving a momentary solution. It's appealing right now, sure, but the trick is to have that appeal last for quite a long time. We never try to deliver solutions that are right for just the moment—but rather a solution that doesn't leave the client worried about the future. It's amazing to me which products make it around the globe. The cars we do for BMW definitely deliver. They have global appeal."

The lion's share of work for BMW by DesignworksUSA and its other offices include strategic automotive design, exterior design for existing lines, and new product lines. When working on concepts for the future, Kloos says her teams may come up with ten different design ideas for the very early stages of a new car model. After assessing various practical, financial, and physical aspects, they may proceed with more work on five of those ideas. That number gets narrowed down to three, and then two until a new model hits the showroom floor—the winner, if you will, of the automotive design version of *American Idol*.

Early on there were signs that Kloos would end up in this business and have such a great impact





on automotive issues. Her hometown of Wolfsburg is home to Volkswagen's first factory. In Wolfsburg, Kloos' mother had a talent for tailoring and design; her father was a businessman. Kloos says this rather personal form of cross-fertilization—one side creative, one side business—still helps her today.

"I think it was a good mix for me. I started sketching and drawing from early on. It was always a good excuse to escape from family duties," she says—and just a hint of a young schoolgirl escapes with Kloos' laughter at this particular memory. "But I did not want to work in the car industry. It was so clear to me because I had grown up in those surroundings. But after a university field trip to the Volkswagen design studios, I was amazed at how complex and how versatile car design work was. So I did my internship there, wrote my thesis, and here I am 21 years later."

Of course, there was the odd job or two and a few milestones reached in between Wolfsburg and Newbury Park. Kloos took her design degree from the University of Art in Braunschweig and put

it to use for several leading auto manufacturers. By 1992, Kloos was design director for Volkswagen in Simi Valley. Following a return to Wolfsburg for Volkswagen, she went to work for DaimlerChrysler in Renningen and Sindelfingen, Germany. Just prior to joining DesignworksUSA, she worked in Como, Italy, responsible for developing passenger car interior concepts for Mercedes-Benz. Kloos has been commended for her work on the popular European micro car, and has been recognized as one of the "100 Leading Women in the North American Auto Industry" by the *Automotive News*.

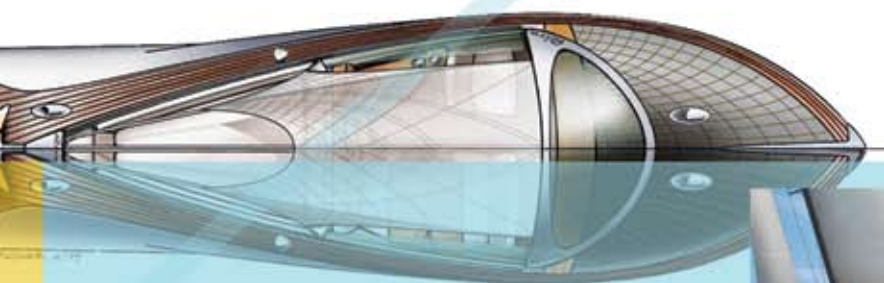
She attributes much of this success to having fully embraced car-loving California, and more importantly paying attention to the needs of Southern California's car-dependent culture. "This is an automotive design capital all on its own. Many of the big car companies understand that they have to be here to develop ideas for the future," says Kloos. "People are car enthusiasts here because they depend on a car. And multi-car families are the norm.

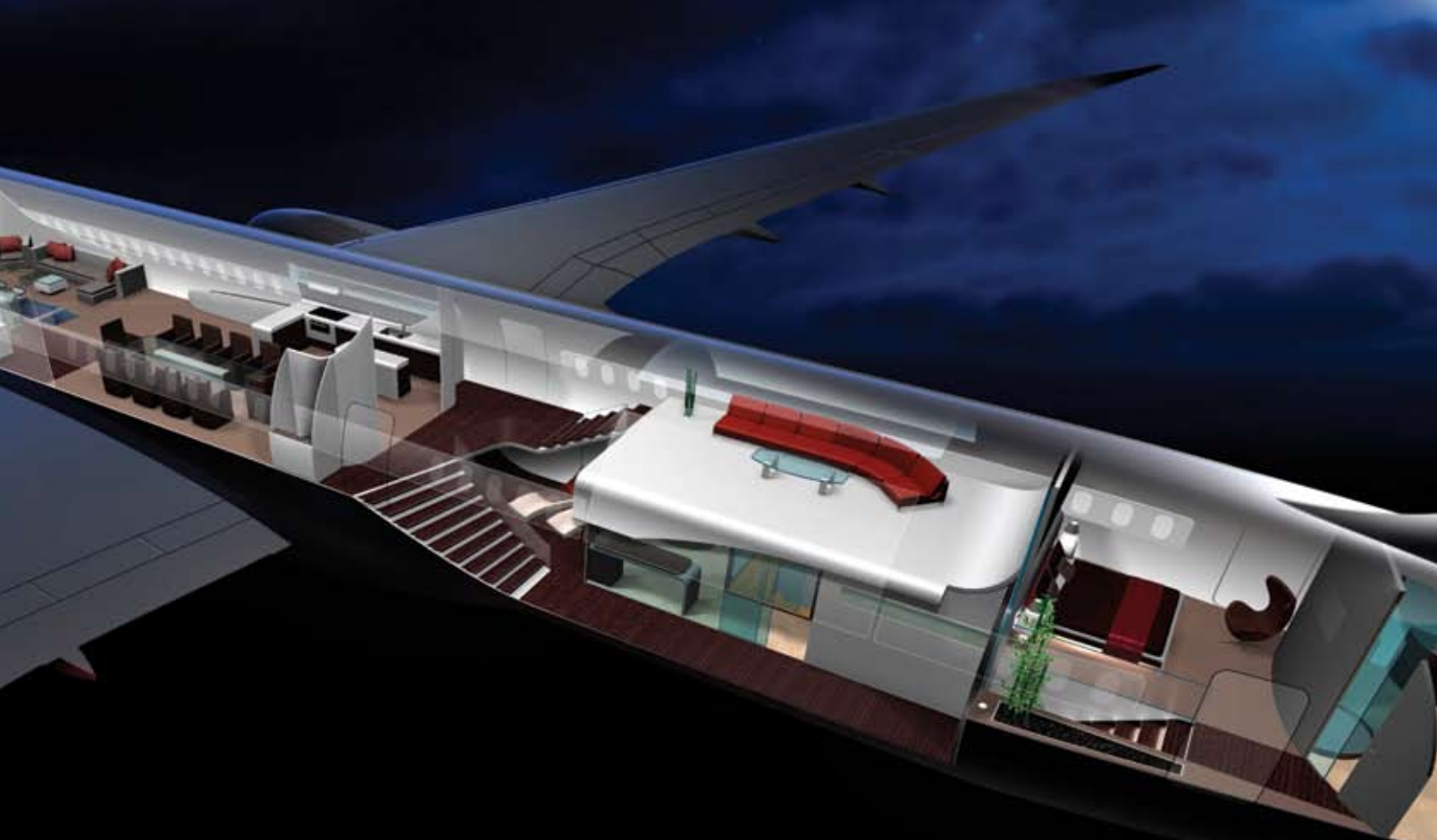
The car culture here is unique because a great climate keeps old cars in good condition for longer without as much erosion as other places. There are car shows and clubs. People are crazy about cars.”

She also admires how proud people are of what they drive, especially compared to some places in Europe, and Southern Californians are open and even prone to showing off their cars—which is the perfect environment for someone like Kloos to be thinking of the future.

“So many people told me before coming here that I would love San Francisco and hate Los Angeles. But I find it very nice here. There’s a certain easiness here. I remember many years ago coming down from Northern California and driving through Thousand Oaks and Westlake Village. It was a Sunday evening and all the other people and all the families were coming home in their cars. I knew I could live here. This is such a beautiful location.”

Now a Malibu resident, Kloos is, ironically for an automotive designer, an avid walker and runner, and she finds the local climate pretty ideal for such non-automotive diversions, too. When clients come to town, however, Kloos says driving them around is always the plan. “I drive through the different neighborhoods and take them to different types of restaurants. I might suggest a trip to the Getty Center, or maybe go through Downtown Los Angeles, and there’s always the beach. Sometimes these are people, like me, who are traveling a lot and aren’t used to how much we have here. They’ll say, ‘I need a rest now. We have been sitting eight hours in a car with more things coming. I cannot digest this much.’” Kloos laughs again and says by that point they usually haven’t even reached the Thousand Oaks Auto Mall to see what Kloos describes as “an amazing stretch of automotive offerings.”





Such a plethora of diversions, she knows, can be tiresome and daunting. But someone has to stay on top of things in order to put together the successful traits of a car and recognize the timeless qualities of our world. Which is why Kloos refers to Southern California as “the problem of too many opportunities.”

To keep her perspective, Kloos has a unique personal pursuit. “I love natural paper. I have traveled a lot to Asia, where I first came across beautiful natural paper from Japan. It’s handmade. I love the tactility of the natural finishes. You cannot do this with a computer. It’s just not the same. So I started to buy this paper and I have a large collection at home,” she says.

When her time allows it, Kloos also indulges in creating objects from paper. She sees such an activity as a wonderful contrast to her work life, which can involve so much digitalization on the computer. (Yet another example of successful cross-fertilization.)

“The paper objects in my office inspire me. There’s nothing here that I’ve actually made, but I love to be surrounded by things that are handmade and are not industrial artifacts,” she says. Who knows? Such paper totems may one day inexplicably help Kloos find the emotional center of a car’s interior concept, or they may assist in some other design facet as she leads such a vast innovation machine toward the future. ■

For more information go to www.designworksusa.com.

