



Yellow cabs ready for a re-design

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June 17, 2005

New York has a future, and that future has to include taxicabs a little sexier than the dowdy Crown Vic.

On those two points, just about everyone at Thursday's "Designing the Taxi" workshop seemed to agree.

Beyond that? Like most things taxi-related to New York City, every bold assertion was met quickly with a bold counter-assertion, which was met quickly with a bold counter-counter-assertion, which was met quickly with -- well, you get the idea.

Should the taxi of the future be street-hailed or summoned by electronic text messaging? Should the driver stand or sit behind the wheel? Should global-positioning satellites plot the route to Kennedy Airport?

"GPS is a wonderful thing," taxi driver Erhan Tuncel declared without equivocation.

"An expensive abomination," driver Bill Lindeaur shot back, warning of blurry video images, IRS tax snooping and assorted other potential hazards of the high-tech mapping technology.

What did you expect? Uniform agreement on the future of New York's most notoriously cantankerous industry? At least somebody is talking about this stuff.

Actually, big credit goes to the Design Trust for Public Space sponsoring such a far-ranging conversation and to the Parsons School of Design for hosting it.

The exercise could have been called "Re-designing the Taxi," only the current state of taxi affairs was never consciously designed in the first place. It just kinda got here by fits and starts, like a rush-hour cab inching its way into the Midtown Tunnel.

But here they all were Thursday, urban planners, architects, designers, citizen advocates -- along with taxi drivers, owners and regulators -- scratching their heads about the future. And not just the future of the taxi vehicle -- the future of the whole taxi system, the taxi economy, the taxi aesthetic and the city all those taxis serve, although imperfectly.

Harris Silver of the group CityStreets was promoting his "cabsule," a tall, narrow taxi designed to scoot through tight Manhattan. "So many New Yorkers have dogs," Silver added, "Why not have a separate dog compartment in the vehicle?"

Several of the city's top design firms took on parts of the taxi puzzle. Birsel & Seck is sketching taxicab baby seats that don't take up too much of the grown-up room. Pentagram has focused on creating a unique New York taxi silhouette, as recognizable around the world as London's.

The folks at Antenna Design are vowing to smooth out the passenger "interface points" -- finding the cab, hailing it, opening the door, climbing in, giving direction, paying the fare and so on.

No one seemed too eager yesterday to sing the praises the industry's current workhorse, Ford's 12-mile-a-gallon Crown Victoria, famous for its sunken seats and stringy legroom.

Matthew Daus, chairman of the city Taxi and Limousine Commission, came closest. "They're not that horrible," he said. "They're selling them on 42nd Street as Matchbox cars."

A few people did get all misty for the Checkers of yore, but the current Plexiglas security dividers came in for a thorough pounding. "There are plastic surgeons in New York that have a specialty in divider injuries," Silver said.

Ernest Tollerson of the Partnership for New York City was the one who broadened out the conversation beyond vehicle design.

"You can have the greatest vehicle inaugurated by 2007 or 2008 and still have it stuck in traffic," he cautioned. Maybe New York should consider something like London's system, where drivers pay 5 pounds to enter the city's central zone.

"The honor system seems to work," Tollerson said.

There was no shortage of gee-whiz taxi technology, much of which really could become reality as soon as the TLC demands it. Credit-card swipers in the back seat. Sliding doors that won't cream passing bicyclists.

But that still doesn't answer the question that fleet owner Michael Levine said he still gets asked every time a stranger hears what business he is in. "Why can't I get a cab on Friday at 4:30 in the rain?"

One simple solution, Levine said, is let those car services accept legal street hails.

But everyone seemed to have a bottom line.

For TLC chairman Daus that line is a very bright yellow.

"I think yellow is important," he said of the New York taxi of the future. "We are known worldwide for yellow."

That should be maintained, Daus said, whatever other changes come.

"There's a history of yellow, and it is my favorite color."

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