

Taking Taxis Into the 21st Century

NEW YORK — For many, a ride in a New York City taxi can be memorable, but not necessarily for the right reasons. Now a handful of design firms are vying for the chance to scrub away those memories with some new concepts.

By the time of its 100th birthday in 2007, the New York City taxi might, with some luck, look considerably better. Glass roofs for skyscraper sightseeing, futuristic yellow benches from which to hail cabs and vivid signals to indicate a passenger exiting are some of the proposals. About a dozen design firms showed off sketches and booted up PowerPoint presentations for "Designing the Taxi," a workshop assembled this month by the Design Trust for Public Space and Parsons School of Design. An exhibition about the proposals will be at Parsons this fall.

The aim is to get the city's Taxi & Limousine Commission to implement some features for the centennial. As one workshop presenter, Tucker Viemester, president of Springtime USA, said, "There are a lot of good ideas all over the place. Everyone should look at this as a quick stab of what people could do."

Here, a snapshot of some of the proposals.

The Company: Pentagram

The Pitch: The New Checker is a bio-diesel/electric hybrid car with large sliding doors for easy entry, an ergonomically designed "cockpit" to reduce driver stress and fatigue, an individual ventilation and cooling system, and wider windows for a better view.

The Payoff: Wheelchair-accessible, more comfortable seating, extra storage space and *ideally* a more pleasant ride. To boost the New Checker as a brand, the yellow-and-black checkered design will be used for other products such as T-shirts and a CD compiled of taxi drivers' favorite tunes.

The Company: Imagination

The Pitch: Riders use "Hailstone," a cashless payment-loyalty card for taxi transactions. With a swipe of the card, passengers can earn reward miles for the distance covered and/or pay for the fare like one uses a prepaid phone card.

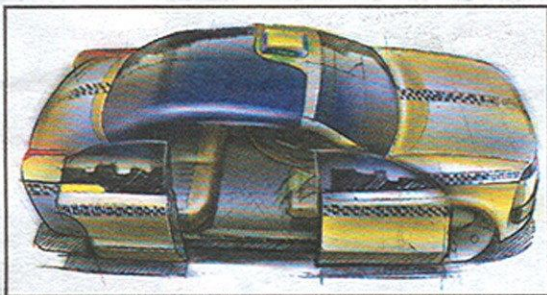
The Payoff: With an incentive program, New Yorkers would be more inclined to take a cab than to walk or take the bus or subway. Taking cabs to certain neighborhoods at designated times will result in double points and will

help bring cabs to areas where they are needed — rides to Times Square around 10:30 p.m. will help the post-theater crowd. Drivers find fares faster and leasing companies earn revenues through unused portions of prepaid cards.

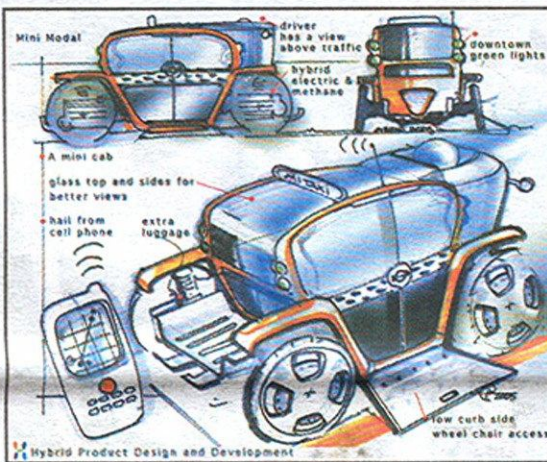
The Company: Antenna Design

The Pitch: Oversized rooftop "Vacancy" signs with super bright LEDs. A control panel on the partition has an outlet for laptops, a computerized map with route and traffic information, adjustable air vents, temperature controls, indication of the vehicle's speed and a slot for credit card payment.

The Payoff: A hassle-free way to find a cab. Automated sliding doors are safer and less strenuous to open. Riders have a more comfortable trip and better sense of where they are going and how long it will take.



Pentagram's taxi with sliding doors.



Hybrid's cab with a view.

The Company: Weisz + Yoes

The Pitch: Passengers can use a designated button on their cell phones as a pinging device to signal any cabs within a few-block radius. Drivers can signal back with an ETA. Airport taxi stands will have plasma screens for passengers to chart their route, check the traffic or learn about the city.

The Payoff: Taxi seekers will not be standing with hands overhead when a cab is only a block away. Airport travelers will pick up more than a pamphlet while waiting for a taxi.

The Company: Hybrid Product Design & Development

The Pitch: Drivers steer an electric-methane hybrid. Passengers will be able to hail cabs using their cell phones. Drivers will be seated higher, better to see the traffic.

The Payoff: The hybrid is more compact than standard cabs even though it would have ample baggage space and is wheelchair-accessible. With a glass top and sides, passengers will catch all the sites.

The Company: Imagination

The Pitch: Cabbies learn yet-to-be-defined behavior guidelines for dealing with passengers. The Taxi & Limousine Commission might provide the training. In London, for example, passengers must speak with taxi drivers before they enter the cab.

The Payoff: Everyone gets along.

— Rosemary Feitelberg