

Press release
11 January 2018

“10 questions to...” Oliver Heilmer.



For Oliver Heilmer, Head of MINI Design since September 2017, design is not just a career, it’s a vocation. The Munich native has been driven by the desire to create new cars since he was a boy. Here, the 43-year-old tells us about his idea of good design, his plans for the future of the MINI brand and the sense of boldness and daring they require.

1. Why did you become a car designer?

Ever since I can remember, cars have totally fascinated me. I’ve always drawn cars – and always had a big smile on my face at the same time. It started with scrawling extra spoilers onto photos of cars in magazines when I was a young kid. Later I began to design and draw my own cars. It was soon clear that I wanted to be a car designer. Back then, this wasn’t an established career as such, like medicine or law. So as you can imagine, my family were rather sceptical. A pre-university internship at a well-known carmaker in Stuttgart after my Abitur [secondary school leaving exams] strengthened my conviction that this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. Not that I would have guessed back then that I would end up where I am today.

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2. Where do you find your inspiration? What gets your juices flowing?

In essence, I am fascinated by anything that fuels my imagination and sparks my creativity. For example, I find music extremely inspiring – anything from jazz to hip hop. However, the aesthetic of technical products also excites me. I’m thinking of products that have been developed and built by engineers from a purely technical standpoint – but which still exude extraordinary beauty. You may be familiar with the Faema espresso machines from the 1950s and 60s, for example. That’s the sort of product I’m talking about. Since I was a small boy I’ve also been fascinated by the combine harvester at my grandparents’ farm. I was spellbound by it and I could spend days driving on it and just gazing at it. And it goes without saying I like beautiful things. Although beauty is, of course, very subjective.

3. What do you think of as “good design”?

For me, good design is consistent and reflects a purpose. The function of a product has to be immediately clear from its form and, above all, usable. It doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with beauty. Another ingredient of good design for me is that it is not too loud. But at the same time it should polarise, at least to some degree, or it will risk being anonymous. There are many examples of car designs which initially polarise opinion but despite this – or perhaps because of it – blaze a trail for a whole new vehicle segment. The BMW X6 is a case in point. Good design does not necessarily need to come from a designer, although a certain feeling for aesthetics is required. The metalwork for the bodies of many classic cars was beaten into shape using wood. The guys doing it at the time weren’t designers, but particularly gifted craftsmen with just this sense for the unity of form and function. It’s unlikely they knew much about theories such as how to create surface line sources, accelerate surfaces or position highlights. They just found a way of doing it right.

4. What does MINI mean for you?

To me, MINI embodies a confident and modern attitude far removed from luxury in sheer size. It doesn’t matter how exclusively or expensively equipped a MINI is, it is always compact on the outside. In my eyes, this shows that people who drive a MINI do so for their own enjoyment. Of course, they want to be distinctive and express their personality through their car to a degree. But they do that through the inner values of the car. In my view, MINI is classless in how it achieves this. And then you have to bear in mind that many MINI customers have a unique and profound connection with their cars. MINI is a very emotional brand, and you don’t find that very often in this form in the car world.

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5. What excites you most about your job as a car designer?

As car designers we are actively creating an important part of all our futures and we are always looking to make the best out of this exciting time. Of course, we don't know exactly what the future will bring. But I'm sure the technological changes we're experiencing will be positive. Knowing that I can contribute to this process is all I need to get out of bed in the morning. Another thing that excites me about my job is that design gives you the chance to stir it up and challenge certain things. I find that extremely energising. But it's not enough for me to make demands without suggestions. In a few years, I want to be able to look in the mirror and say I've done everything I could to bring MINI design and therefore the MINI brand into the future. Preserving existing achievements, things that are already impressive, is not where my focus lies.

6. Where do you see MINI in the future and what sort of things are you keen to encourage as Head of MINI Design?

The way I see it, MINI is a brand which is not only capable of constantly developing, changing even, but which needs to do so. The product range we've put together at MINI is very good. From a quality point of view, in particular, we're scaling greater heights than ever – and outperforming many of our competitors. However, it's also clear that our path can not only be evolutionary. We've got some big items on our agenda: autonomous driving, electric mobility, digitalisation and shared services, to name but a few. And we need to be shaping these areas. To this end, the key thing for me is that the substance of MINI remains authentic. After all, MINI is an urban brand and that's something it should continue to embody in the years to come. So for me, MINI in the future will be pure electric. Clearly, much still needs to be done in terms of infrastructure. But I'm positive about the future. Another important issue which will occupy our minds a whole lot more than it does today even is the relationship between car and customer. We know that our MINI customers have a special connection to their car and also the brand. So wouldn't it be great, in the future, to also be able to communicate and interact in a way we're only currently familiar with between people and good friends, instead of via menus and clicks? I see great potential for MINI as a pioneer here.

7. Let's talk about electric mobility: What is the most appealing thing about creating an all-electric MINI and how does the design of such a vehicle differ from that of one with a conventional combustion engine?

New technologies are always exciting for us as designers, because they inject fresh energy and can therefore initiate something totally new. The electric drive system and its packaging benefits allow us to challenge established geometric solutions. The

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drive system is significantly smaller, but the batteries take up more space than the fuel tank they replace. In the future, this will give us whole new freedoms as far as interior space and proportions are concerned. And I see great potential here, in particular, for MINI.

8. You’re currently working on the first all-electric MINI, which you’ll unveil in 2019. What can we expect?

The all-electric MINI will be a genuine MINI. In other words, it will major on emotion and have a minimal footprint. The car’s electric nature will be visible in its details – e.g. unconventional and innovative details which reference the traditional MINI world but which at the same time combine it with new technologies. 3D printing will certainly play a role. I can’t give away more details, as we’re still working intensively on the design and there are still decisions to be taken.

9. So what can we expect in future from MINI and, above all, from MINI design?

MINI does not dwell on the present or the past, even if we do have a strong history to call on. The classic Mini was designed squarely for a particular purpose and developed in response to a powerful need. This is one of the reasons behind its status as an icon today. I’m keen to project this core further into the future – with all of the possibilities that this has to offer us. It is this balancing act between tradition and future focus that makes my work at MINI Design so incredibly exciting for me. At the same time, MINI has a license – an obligation even – to provoke. Indeed, MINI is an extremely emotional brand. We could and should allow ourselves to be more daring more often, even if that comes with a risk of making mistakes. Ultimately, you see, it’s about emotion. For me, MINI is no longer only a product; I see it as embodying an attitude. MINI is about constant change and the urban environment; its heart beats to the rhythm of the city. And for me MINI is definitively about diversity – the very opposite of monoculture. MINI cannot be pigeonholed. All in all, you can sum this up as a fundamental openness. And I believe that MINI has to work with others significantly more in future in order to achieve this. By that I mean collaborations which don’t only have a substantial knock-on effect, but which most importantly think beyond the boundaries of the car itself – as we have already done with MINI LIVING and MINI FASHION. I’m convinced that MINI as a brand also works beyond the car. And I’m keen to accelerate the connectivity essential for this in the future.

10. How will that look in detail?

With an eye on current developments, we are, of course, asking ourselves what will set a MINI apart in future. Will it be the floating roof or the hexagonal radiator grille? Or will the design of the interior determine the exterior, given the living space inside

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the car that will come our way as a result of autonomous driving? However it happens, our task will be to make a MINI recognisable as a MINI, even if – to overstate the point – at some point in the future our roads will be dominated by autonomous rectangular boxes. I’m in no doubt that our focus in the future will shift. We will no longer be creating just cars, but experiences. MINI will be recognisable by the experience and by an honest concept which will continue to excite and stand apart from the crowd. I expect the fundamental needs of our customers to remain similar in the future: they want to keep on the move and up-to-date, they want their needs to be anticipated and, in so doing, they want to be helped to enjoy interacting with their vehicle. Take the example of connectivity. Here, we’re talking not only about display sizes, but the emotional connection during usage. A central issue here is interaction, and this is something we have to shape. One approach for MINI here would be to push the technology required into the background and instead offer the MINI experience in hallmark style. There is a big opportunity here, but also a major challenge. MINI has the chance to follow a new path, to go its own way.

Thank you very much!

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The BMW Group

With its four brands BMW, MINI, Rolls-Royce and BMW Motorrad, the BMW Group is the world’s leading premium manufacturer of automobiles and motorcycles and also provides premium financial and mobility services. As a global company, the BMW Group operates 31 production and assembly facilities in 14 countries and has a global sales network in more than 140 countries.

In 2016, the BMW Group sold approximately 2.367 million cars and 145,000 motorcycles worldwide. The profit before tax was approximately €9.67 billion on revenues amounting to €94.16 billion. As of 31 December 2016, the BMW Group had a workforce of 124,729 employees.

The success of the BMW Group has always been based on long-term thinking and responsible action. The company has therefore established ecological and social sustainability throughout the value chain, comprehensive product responsibility and a clear commitment to conserving resources as an integral part of its strategy.

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