

Press release
11 September 2019

“10 questions to...” Thomas Sycha.



Since 1 July 2019, Thomas Sycha has been the head of Exterior Design at MINI. Ever since he has been able to think, automobiles and their different characters have fascinated the 55-year old Polish national. Read the following interview to find out how his passion for design and automobiles influences his daily work, what the exterior design of the MINI might look like in the future and how electric mobility, autonomous driving and connectivity could affect design.

1. Why did you become a car designer?

Ever since I've been able to think, I've always drawn things – from cartoons and houses to automobiles. I was particularly fascinated by the varying characters and forms of expression that vehicle design can convey. I grew up in Poland, where the profession of automobile designer didn't exist at the time. That's why I started by studying architecture. I wanted to work creatively and design something. The desire to turn my passion into a profession stayed with me. Back then, I came across pictures of Marcello Gandini's designs for Bertone in the press by chance. Futuristic, powerfully wedge-shaped vehicles from the 1970s, the Fiat X 1/9 and Autobianchi A112 Bertone Runabout, which he had drawn in very architectural perspectives. As a young architecture student I tried out the same thing – and it was immediately clear to me that that was what I wanted to do. I found out which universities offered

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Press release

Date 11 September 2019

Topic **“10 questions to...” Thomas Sycha.**

Page 2

degrees in automotive design. There weren't very many: London, Los Angeles and Pforzheim. I chose Pforzheim – and was accepted there.

2. What inspires you?

I find inspiration in different experiences, in moments when you feel like you're facing the imaginary future. One example is when I first visited Zaha Hadid's BMW plant in Leipzig: I was impressed by the expressiveness and emotion that the building contains. Although at first glance it is “only” concrete, there is so much it promises. It has a sense of expectation or promise that there is a future in which emotion and technology can be combined. I am also touched by the beauty of technical masterpieces from the past – whether boats, vehicles or other machines. When I see old mechanical engineering art, I immediately feel like reaching for a pen and drawing something myself. The suspension of a vintage Bugatti is pure inspiration for me. It is also inspiring to be able to create something new, as is the very process itself – i.e. drawing per se. In the BMW Group and specifically for MINI, I get to work in a team in which a great deal of creative work is produced. The drawings on the walls in our studio alone are a daily source of inspiration.

3. What is the key to creating a vehicle design that won't capture the spirit of the times until five years into the future?

As an automotive designer, you actually have to live a few years ahead of your environment in terms of the work you do. The vehicles we're currently working on are the brand's future. So we ask ourselves: what kind of character should they have? How do we create a “wow” effect? And what is aesthetic? We see that aesthetic appeal and taste are often part of a process that thrives on disruptions. So we want to create precisely these disruptions, which are then seen as new, innovative and ground-breaking. Being able to capture this requires a mixture of experience and talent – and that's what we seek to draw on at MINI.

4. What is typical of MINI as far as you are concerned?

MINI has two sides for me: on the one hand, the brand has a powerful connection with its history and British origins. On the other hand it is also modern and innovative. This is precisely what makes the MINI identity so fascinating as I see it. MINI is likeable, positive and open. This makes it easy for any driver to establish a direct relationship with the product. At the same time, MINI is self-confident and individual. For me, this combination makes the vehicle and the brand unique. Of course, it also results in high customer expectations – and rightly so. As a design team, we see it as our task to continually fill the space between tradition and modernity with new life in an authentic way.

Press release

Date 11 September 2019

Topic **“10 questions to...” Thomas Sycha.**

Page 3

5. What will a MINI look like in the future?

The future is something positive for me. That's what drives us all here. A lot is changing and in a state of flux: I see great opportunities in this that can be drawn on for the purpose of good design. MINI already has various characters that will continue to change. There is a whole MINI family. We're always thinking about what else might be added. I strongly believe that a MINI will retain its sympathetic expression. To exaggerate somewhat: even if it were to become a self-driving box, the experience in a MINI would always be very personal and radiate sympathy. Just what form that would take is what we're working on. The MINI experience has to be charged with optimism: when you see your MINI again in the morning, you instantly sense that it's probably going to be a good day.

To be specific: for me, MINI will definitely remain emotional in the future, despite the ubiquitous process of digitalisation, or indeed precisely because of it. Interaction with a MINI will be personal and above all positive. It will make you smile. Perhaps a MINI will welcome its driver from the outside in the future – because it has active media projection surfaces on its exterior. The interior will also offer completely new possibilities for personalisation through digitalisation.

6. You were involved in pre-development and helped create the new design language for BMW, among other things. To what extent will you renew exterior design with MINI?

Ongoing development of a brand's design style is always a process, not something that is decided on overnight and then implemented. With every project, you take one step at a time, consistently driving the renewal forward. Demands in terms of individual mobility are constantly growing: as designers, our everyday work is defined by challenges such as legal requirements and the prerequisites of new technologies. Autonomous driving and the integration of the sensors and connectivity required are examples of this. But we also have to take account of ecological and social developments that have an impact on the design of the future. What is important here is that MINI must continue to be recognisable in hallmark fashion but in line with contemporary style. As you can imagine, that's no minor undertaking.

7. The MINI brand recently launched the first all-electric MINI, the MINI Cooper SE. Does the exterior design of a MINI with electric drive differ from one with a conventional combustion engine?

Electric mobility represents a technological leap that involves completely different technical requirements. The drive system is relatively small, but the energy storage system is still very large. This means we have significantly different requirements in

Press release

Date 11 September 2019

Topic **“10 questions to...” Thomas Sycha.**

Page 4

terms of installation space here, which at the same time give us the opportunity to rethink the car's proportions. And of course we want to continue to create a typical MINI style. The MINI Cooper SE already shows the direction this might take, as a first small step. It combines the familiar MINI face with a refreshed aesthetic that appears cleaner and quieter. Its front section is almost completely closed since there are no components that need to be cooled and no other components that need cooling elsewhere as compared to the combustion model. The clear, generous surfaces give it a modern look. At the same time, they improve aerodynamics, thereby increasing range.

8. To what extent will autonomous driving change the design of a MINI in the future?

The effects will be similar to those of electromobility, but their appearance will be significantly different. Of course, the interior in particular will change significantly, simply because you suddenly have the opportunity to do something different while travelling. But this change will be reflected on the outside, too. Let's take the typical MINI face, for example – one of the most important MINI features for me. Today there are two round, friendly headlamp “eyes”. But this might be a subject of debate in the future when vehicles drive autonomously. After all, headlamps only exist so that we as drivers can see ahead. An autonomous vehicle will no longer need them. Instead, it will use a large number of sensors that need to be integrated. We can also rethink window surfaces. When do I want or need to see something, when is this not the case? The vehicle could adapt to the situation.

9. What impact will connectivity have on MINI exterior design in the future?

Connectivity will make mobility much easier for us in the future. Today we talk a lot about the future use of artificial intelligence to support people while they're driving – whether for performing driving tasks or other activities such as booking a hotel. But there are possibilities on the exterior, too. In the case of shared mobility, a connection to the vehicle could make personalisation possible. The appearance of the vehicle might change as soon as I'm on my way to it, for example. We suggested this scenario in the MINI VISION NEXT 100 three years ago. We're talking about active surfaces, for example: what is painted sheet metal today could be an active media input surface in future, reflecting moods or conveying specific messages.

10. What do you want for the future of MINI design and how do you see your role as Head of Exterior Design MINI?

I hope that people will continue to talk about MINI icons in the future. Just as the MINI is already an icon today, the MINI of the future should also have this quality. I

Press release

Date 11 September 2019

Topic **“10 questions to...” Thomas Sycha.**

Page 5

would like a MINI to still be immediately and authentically recognisable, trigger positive emotions and perhaps also have an impact on other design areas. So generally speaking: the challenge is to retain the iconic character traits of a MINI and translate them into the new technoid world – so that a MINI doesn't become a soulless, self-propelled capsule in the future. I have the privilege of being able to work on this as part of a highly motivated international team, and I seek to give these creative minds the opportunity to develop their ideas, turning them into reality in the form of products. After all, the greatest experience for a designer is to actually see their own design in a vehicle on the road. That's what I want to contribute to.

Thank you very much for the interview!

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The BMW Group

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In 2018, the BMW Group sold over 2,490,000 passenger vehicles and more than 165,000 motorcycles worldwide. The profit before tax in the financial year 2018 was € 9.815 billion on revenues amounting to € 97.480 billion. As of 31 December 2018, the BMW Group had a workforce of 134,682 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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