

Volvo Bertone 780 Creators' 35-Year Reunion



BY DAVIES OWENS

This summer, the Swedish and Italian teams behind the Volvo Bertone 780 met in Turin for their 35-year reunion. For many, it was the first time they had seen each other since the end of the project.

The 780 Project Vision

From the very beginning, Volvo's plan was audacious—even risky—for a company better known for a more conservative approach. For the men and women who worked on the eight-year project, their shared journey would bond them as friends for life.

The year was 1981. Volvo leadership wanted to extend its market-reach to the more affluent buyer, a segment largely dominated by brands like BMW and Mercedes. According to Hans Gustavsson, Volvo's product planning and development vice president, the vision required building an automobile that would exude an X factor—defined as something with strong influence and potentially unpredictable outcome. This was an appropriate description of the 780 project, which would likely mean partnering with another manufacturer.

A Partnership Was Born

Building an exclusive, limited-series car at the high-volume Torslanda or Ghent plants didn't make sense. So, Volvo reached out to Carrozzeria Bertone, their former partner in Turin on the 262C coupe and the 264TE limousine in the 70s. This Italian coachbuilder was known for creating exotic and exclusive cars. As a result, the 780 claimed status as both a luxurious coupe, hand-built in Italy, and an authentic Volvo. This despite the fact that all the body panels, trim pieces, and 90 percent of the interior were totally different from the 760, which was concurrently in production in Sweden.

In many ways, the partnership was a perfect marriage between Volvo's engineering and quality expectations and the flair and elegance of a world-renowned coach builder, known for such creations as the Miura and Lamborghini Countach.

The deal was signed in 1983 by Håkan Frisinger, Volvo's president 1983-87, and Nuccio Bertone at his chalet in the picturesque town of Sestriere, a resort in Italy's western Alps near the French border. By

then, Volvo had commissioned artists to sketch three initial designs, developed prototypes, and hired the team that would carry the car into production.

At the time, the 780 project was overlooked by many Volvo employees as a quirky, specialty-car, side project. Yet, the legacy of the car to both Volvo and Bertone, and to those who participated in its creation, has lasted for nearly four decades.

Hiring of the 780 Teams

Back in 1984, Sven-Gunnar Johansson was a 30-year-old engineer working in Volvo's product development department. He was approached by Hans Gustavsson, who told him he would be transitioning to the new team. He needed to pack his bags and help build a Volvo in Italy.

Little did Sven-Gunnar—the new 780 technical project leader—know the impact this “special project” would have on him as he was soon immersed in the very culturally different world of Italy. From Gothenburg's frigid and dark winter days to the sunshine and humidity along the Mediterranean, Turin was a long way from home.



Today, Sven-Gunnar, who just retired from Volvo this summer, fondly recalls his time on the 780 project as “the highlight of my professional career.”

Bertone also formed a new dedicated team for the partnership with Volvo. The company has a rich coachbuilding history, going back to 1912, with a reputation for creating style as well as hand-building unique cars—a tradition that continued until 2014 when they unfortunately declared bankruptcy and closed.

Mario Panizza was 32 years old in 1983, when he replied to a newspaper ad and was hired by Bertone. He had worked for a well-known Italian helicopter manufacturer for a few years.

Signing a contract with a major manufacturer like Volvo was a big deal for Bertone, Mario recalls. He began working in the newly renovated factory in Grugliasco, an area just west of Turin.

Initially, he was hired to oversee the experimental shop, where many of the 780's pre-production parts, like the interior door panels, were molded and fabricated by hand



Sven-Gunnar Johansson and Mario Panizza at the production line.

using wire frames and fiberglass.

Mario recalls the daily challenge of translating the engineers' drawings into working models that could eventually be presented to suppliers to for the actual production. Even parts like the seat foam was carefully sculpted by hand to get the right form and feel, while others hand-stitched the upholstery.

It would be two years before the 780 debuted at the Geneva Motor Show in March 1985. Mario was soon promoted to 780 project manager, reporting directly to Nuccio Bertone himself. Given his new responsibility, he was soon working daily with Sven-Gunnar at Volvo and the rest of the Swedish team. They became almost inseparable over the seven years with monthly planning meetings, rotating between Turin and Gothenburg. Daily phone calls, fax messages, and frequent flights with handfuls of prototype samples would become part of the routine.

Sven-Gunnar recalls the meetings that would last literally for days with countless details to be ironed out. “We burned out four overhead projector bulbs in our last three-day planning meeting.”

Other members of the Volvo and Bertone teams were also deeply impacted by their experience on the project. Many of them made the journey to Turin for the 35-year anniversary gathering.

Roberto Vigliano, a 20-year-old “young boy” at the time, recalls his early days at Bertone when he began working first on the 262C and then the 780 project. “I still remember with great nostalgia those years spent in the technical department. In my opinion, Volvo's influence was the best gift

to the company. Back then, Bertone, and Italian car body works in general, were famous all over the world for the beauty of their designs, but the quality of the documentation, such as parts list and tracking technical changes, was not the best.

“The arrival of the Volvo team gave us the opportunity to work with a new organization and modern processes. I was the point person for the parts documentation on the 780 and communicating with the team in Sweden. Volvo had a direct computer connection from Gothenburg to our offices in Turin, back when computers were rarely remotely connected to one another. This was invaluable, as we were able to send and receive updates to the ever-changing parts list in real time.

“I visited Volvo in Gothenburg several times and felt right at home from the very first trip. We often met after work and spent the evening together, eating good Swedish food and talking about our two different worlds. I still have those memories fresh in my mind and they bring me great joy.”

Karin Malm Ribartis, who oversaw the financial side of the project, travelled to Turin for the anniversary. “There is a special bond between us. Why else would we take time out of our vacations to meet? When I think of the reunion, what comes to mind is the importance of creating personal relationships with your colleagues. It improves communication, stimulates creativity, and makes you go the extra mile.”

Paolo Caccamo, Bertone CEO, who also served as translator for Nuccio Bertone, came to the reunion from his home in Milan to be with his old friends. “I worked with



Uzzi Michele, who worked in manufacturing at Bertone, signs the commemorative photos.

Nuccio Bertone and was present at all the 780 meetings with Volvo, serving not only as translator, since Nuccio didn't speak English, but was the point person on many aspects of the project. I traveled with Nuccio, when the 780 was introduced to the U.S. dealers, to places like Boca Raton, Florida in 1986."

Jan Dahlström, who served as documentation coordinator, started with the 780 project in 1984. He recalls the difficulties of working with a small group and limited resources. "This made us a very tight team. Probably the reason why we still meet."

Staffan Ek, who oversaw the 780 model year changes from 1987 to 1991, was unable to attend the Turin gathering, but one of his fondest memories is attending the 1990 World Cup soccer game in Turin, where Sweden played Brazil. The 780 team managed to get last-minute tickets to the sold-out game where the Swedes unfortunately lost 2-1.

Special Bonds

One of the reasons this group bonded so well was the difficulty of the task. Any group bonds when forced to work together through what seems like impossible odds. While building the 780 wasn't necessarily a moon landing, it was filled with challenges. Sven-Gunnar explains that, unlike a typical large corporation, in a taskforce you have the authority to decide what is needed to solve the problem. You can avoid the bureaucracy and focus on the results, which is how we operated at all times."

Ulrika Brolin, who spent six years on the 780 project, initially as secretary to the project assistant, drove 20 hours to Turin for the gathering. She shared the same sentiment. "We were a fantastic team with the perfect spirit. It was us against the big projects, which made us stronger. What they did, we wanted to do better."

Reine Sandqvist, who meets in Sweden

each year with the 780 group, recalls his time working with the 780 test cars and engineering as "absolutely the most interesting period of my 43-year career with Volvo."

Overcoming Challenges

It wasn't uncommon for the Turin Caselle airport authorities to delay Volvo employees when boarding a flight with an odd-shaped prototype part or a large tube with drawings in it. The *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades) was still active and called for heavily armed police at the airport. It wasn't always easy for the Volvo team to explain the strange looking packages—this was well before today's airport security with x-rays and scanners, of course.

What Bertone excelled at in terms of Italian design and creativity, it lacked in quality control. One of the key problems was corrosion control. Hitherto, Italian cars were often known as rust buckets. Bertone built 45,000 sq. ft. of additional factory space to house the improved rust-prevention systems, such as electrolytic coating and using galvanized sheet metal for stamped parts.

Even something as basic as managing the parts list was more complicated than for other manufacturers. "There were tens of thousands of parts to track. Some came from Volvo and were shared with other platforms, others from existing Volvo suppliers, a third group from Bertone suppliers, and finally all the parts that were made in-house at the factory. On top of that were the thousands of updates, when parts were superseded by new ones," says Roberto Vigliano.

Language was another challenge since Italian and Swedish are so different, which meant the teams had to resort to English.

Sven-Gunnar checks out Gaetano Benedetto's 780, a local car found in Turin.



Mauro Charriere, a former Bertone manufacturing engineer, still has a copy of the original “translation guide,” which was used to translate part names from Italian or Swedish to English. It has a rusty staple in the upper corner to keep the tattered pages together after years of usage.

It wasn’t all hardships. When an American journalist visited the factory in 1989, he was asked whether he wanted his coffee “fixed” or not. This was a time-honored way to inquire whether a shot of Sambuca or Amaretto should be added. He found this a bit odd since a sign in Italian on the restaurant wall said, “There shall be no alcohol served during work hours.” To make sense of it you have to think like an Italian—you couldn’t consume alcohol by itself, but mixed with coffee it was perfectly fine.

The Geneva Motor Show

The 780 debuted at the Geneva Motor Show in March 1985, where it was the centerpiece of both the Volvo and Bertone stands. The car arrived in the U.S. in 1987 after a few production delays to ensure impeccable quality. Initially, each dealer got at least one 780, but it soon became apparent that selling a Volvo with a price tag \$15,000 higher than any other model wasn’t going to be easy. Most luxury car buyers were down the street looking at the bigger marques, while the traditional Volvo buyer was shopping for a more sensible 240 or 740.

Last minute decisions not to include the proposed turbo diesel for the U.S. market, in lieu of the B280F V6 engine, further damped customers’ enthusiasm.

In 1989, the 780 and its team were moved under the Specialty Cars division and a renewed effort was made by Volvo in both Sweden and North America.

On December 7, 1990, the last 780 rolled off the production line as the program was officially terminated. By the end, only around 8,500 780s had been built.

Post-Production Years

It would be understandable if the people involved in the project quickly forgot about their time building the 780, but this didn’t happen.

Sven-Gunnar and Mario stayed in close contact, occasionally visiting each other or jointly attending an event like the Geneva Motor Show. Sven-Gunnar also continued to convene many of his 780 colleagues, at his home or an Italian restaurant in Gothenburg, to celebrate their friendships and enjoy at least an annual meal together. At times, Mario and others from Bertone have come back to Sweden to visit after having been introduced to Swedish life.

The 35-Year Reunion

The July 2019 gathering in Turin was the



The 8,000th 780 rolls off the assembly line in 1990. Paolo Caccamo, Bertone CEO, second from left, with a mix of Volvo and Bertone folks.

first time such an ambitious reunion had been organized. Almost 40 people showed up.

It started in 2018 when Mario eagerly invited the Swedish team to come to Italy the following summer to reunite with their Bertone comrades.

Sven-Gunnar appointed Mario CEO—Chief Event Organizer—who spent almost a year planning the three-day event. He in turn recruited Roberto Vigliano, now a travel agent, to put his organizational skills to work in booking hotels and venues for the gathering. The Rivoli Hotel in Turin, not far from the factory, was chosen as the main venue.

We started by visiting the National

Automobile Museum, with its tribute to the coachbuilding tradition of the Piedmont region of Italy. Afterwards, the group travelled back to the hotel for a three-course Italian lunch, complete with appetizers and local wines, but not before having our photo taken with a 780.

It turned out to be harder than you’d think to find a 780 in Turin. Only 1,250 780s were produced for the Italian market, the majority with the much-appreciated D24TIC turbo diesel and M46 manual transmission. Ultimately, more than 5,600 of the 8,500 or so 780s ended up outside Europe.

Thanks to the diligence of Mario, a local

Mario looking down on the area outside of Turin where the Stile Bertone SpA design studio is located from the Sacra di San Michele (Saint Michael’s Abbey) high atop Mount Pirchiriano, altitude 962m.





Our last dinner together at the Al Gufo Bianco Ristorante.

780 was eventually found and Gaetano Benedetto, the owner, brought it in for all to see. He had no idea there was such a following of his 35-year old car and was overwhelmed by the excitement it brought. We quickly adopted him as a member of this special group.

I've been researching the history of the 780 together with Sven-Gunnar and Mario for several years and have written a number of articles, published in *Rolling* and *Jakob's* in Belgium. At the reunion, I gave a presentation on the history of the car, following a few words of gratitude by Mario for the lasting friendships and everyone's effort to attend the event.

Thanks to Volvo's archives, I showed many photos and documents. For most, it

The cake with the special logo, created by a Turin graphic designer (a former Bertone employee) to commemorate the event, served at one of our luncheons.



was the first time in 30 years seeing all the photos of the car and their co-workers. It was actually a bit challenging to give the presentation, since folks would stand up and take pictures of the old photos. I also presented a 20-second clip of what is likely the only remaining video taken inside the 780 factory.

Mario and his team had commissioned a Turin graphic designer to commemorate the event with a custom logo. It combined the Volvo and Bertone logos along with one of the early design drawings of the 780, as well as an image of the Mole Antonelliana landmark. It decorated the delicious cake that was served for dessert. Everybody was also encouraged to sign a large 780 photo with their name and job position before they left.

The next day, Mario, his wife Pia, Roberto, and the members of the Volvo delegation spent the day exploring Turin sites, including the Mole Antonelliana—the towering 550-foot landmark which overlooks the valley and the city. We also toured the Museum of Cinema, housed in the base of the tower. Lunch was at the famous Pastificio Defilippis restaurant, known for its beef ravioli. The afternoon was spent in the Museo Egizio, the world's oldest Egyptian museum with over 30,000 unique artifacts.

We also visited the original Fiat building, with its test track on the roof, where they raced Mini Coopers in the 1969 movie

The Italian Job. The 1929 building is now a bustling shopping mall, as well as home to the Gallery Lingotto Torino art museum.

Our last night together concluded with dinner at the Al Gufo Bianco Ristorante, where we dined like Italian kings and queens. Between the courses, the group gave toasts and expressed gratitude to Chief Event Organizers Mario and Roberto, whose choice in this grand last meal no doubt was an effort to make sure we come back to Turin. Sven-Gunnar presented them each with a beautiful Orrefors crystal bowl.

The 780 Project Legacy

One thing is certain, the joy and friendship among these people, who were brought together to build this unique automobile, are as strong as ever and will continue to last for decades to come. The group will surely be meeting again, perhaps as soon as next summer in Gothenburg. ■

Interested in learning more about the 780? Have something to add to the story? Own a car you want to learn more about? Parts you want to sell or need to find? Join us at www.780coupe.com.



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