The Elusive Volvo 780 Concept Car

BY DAVIES OWENS

The Volvo Bertone 780 was first presented at the 1985 Geneva Auto Show. The U.S. was the primary intended market for this hand-built, luxury grand touring coupe, with the first cars arriving in the showrooms in the fall of 1987.

The 780 did not meet its sales targets, however, so Volvo Cars North America decided to prepare a one-of-a-kind 780 concept car for the 1990 New York Auto Show. The idea was to rekindle interest in the 780, as well as promote the Turbo+ boost kit—an accessory available for all B230FT-equipped Volvos.

This is the tale of how the concept car was created, what became of it after the show, and how I tracked it down.

From the very beginning, U.S. dealers were challenged with selling this relatively expensive and luxurious Swedish-Italian hybrid. Most American buyers of late 80s Volvos were more interested in a sedan or practical wagon in the $20,000–$30,000 range.

Few went looking for a largely hand-built coupe from Turin with a $15,000 premium, especially when more established luxury manufacturers, like BMW and Mercedes, were offering models with more features and significantly more power for a similar price. Still, Volvo was hoping to use the range-topping "halo" 780 to elevate its stature and entice more luxury-minded prospects.

Once buyers placed an order for a 780, they were in for a long wait. As few as 10 units per day were produced in the Grugliasio plant, just outside Turin, Italy (please see www.780coupe.com/factory/ for more info).

It meant some customers waited as long as a year for their car after placing an order in 1987. Even when the plant reached full capacity, most dealers received only one or two units. At the end, approximately 5,600 of the total 8,518 units produced (1986–1991) were sold in the U.S.

At the core of the challenge of selling the 780 in the U.S. was the lofty price and somewhat anemic performance. The 1987 and 1988 models were only available with the Renault/ Peugeot B280F naturally aspirated 2.8-liter V6. Thus, this $40,000 vehicle (roughly equivalent to $75,000 today) came with less than 150hp under the hood—an output easily bested by the comparable offerings from German manufacturers.

Volvo had initially planned to produce the 780s destined for the U.S. with a turbocharged version of the V6, but those plans were scrapped due to various issues with

Volvo 780 Concept Car The striking looking pearlescent white Volvo 780 has been designed to call attention to Volvo's Generation 3 Turbo engine. A new small diameter turbocharger, a more efficient exhaust manifold, and recalibrated engine management systems give all 1990 Volvo Turbos quicker response than ever before. The 2.3 liter turbo engine installed in the 780 includes a Turbo + system, which boosts the output to 188 hp from 162 hp, making it the most powerful Volvo engine ever put in a production car.

From the VCNA press release distributed before the 1990 New York Auto Show.

that engine. (It never went into production on a Volvo, although it did see duty in the Renault Alpine of the same era.)

For the 1988 model year, a multi-link rear suspension was added, but the engine program remained the same.

In 1989, the 4-cylinder turbo engine (B230FT) was offered alongside the carryover V6. This added somewhat to the car's appeal, but sales were still below what Volvo had projected.

The limited volume also meant it was more difficult for Bertone to retool for updates, as Volvo had started doing on the other 700 series (and the later 900) cars.

By 1989, customers were able to purchase a 760 with an updated interior featuring a new elegant, rounded dashboard, whereas the 780 soldiered on with its original "1985 interior."

Despite these limitations and shortcomings, the 780 remained a remarkably comfortable, capable, and elegant coupe and a satisfying driver's car. With the challenge of making it a commercial success falling squarely on VCNA's shoulders, they set out to rejuvenate sales.

Let's Build a 780 Concept Car

By 1989, VCNA didn't think the marketing support from Sweden (and to some extent Italy) to promote the 780 met U.S. needs.

The brochures showed the car in conservative, static settings, which may have helped to underscore the luxury aspects of the car, but did little to promote its driving qualities. Now that the 780 offered the more potent 4-cylinder turbo engine, VCNA wanted to find a way to illuminate the sporting, dynamic aspects of their most expensive model.

In advance of the 1990 New York Auto Show, a "concept 780" was commissioned. The hope was to bring new excitement to the buyers by using a more aggressive looking exterior and promoting the Turbo aspect of the car paired to the proven red-block B230FT.

The 1989 780 came with the Turbo+ boost kit as standard equipment. The system, which enabled higher boost pressure for a short duration, was designed to enhance acceleration through an approximate 20hp power increase when the accelerator was fully depressed. The result was a peak output of 188hp, the highest output of any Volvo engine at the time.

The more focused marketing tone and the vision for promoting the concept car were initiatives that VCNA was able to push through, since the U.S. market was Volvo's largest outside of Sweden. ▷

Few photos of the 780 Concept Car at the 1990 New York Auto Show still exist. This one taken by a 16-year old Mark McCourt, now senior editor at Hemmings Motor News, who was at the show with his father.

Volvo 780 Concept Car at the 1990 New York Auto Show.

From the February 26, 1990 issue of Autoweek.

Making of the Concept Car

Bill Hoover was VCNA vice president of marketing at the time. Bill had strategized with Bjorn Holthe, head of product planning for VCNA, to create a concept car for the show. The actual implementation fell to David Scheinberg, a junior member on Holthe's team.

David expended considerable time and effort overseeing the development of the concept car. In a phone interview, he explained:

"The idea was to find a relatively inexpensive way to breathe new life into the car. The N.Y. Auto Show was deemed a good place to make the presentation, since the N.Y. Metro area was such an important market for us.

We wanted to use our so-called *Generation 3 Turbo* to enhance the performance and image of the car. It was a terrific solution that spooled up quickly and made great torque at low- to mid-range RPMs—just right for the American market. And since the factory had—somewhat begrudgingly, I believe—given approval to make Turbo+ standard on the 780 B230FT, this enabled us to promote the car with the higher peak output.

Turbo+ was, strictly speaking, an accessory and that kind of product was not usually approved for factory installation. But it was deemed not to affect certification, since it only came into play at wide-open throttle, and we certainly did not believe it would compromise durability in any way."

Bjorn Holthe, Scheinberg's boss, was a tough, hard-driving Norwegian, who expected long hours and high standards from his team. If there was ever a question of a project finishing on time, Bjorn would squint with one eye and say, "The last time I checked, there were 24 hours in a day." Holthe had a longtime friend and acquaintance, Gerald Jusco, who was second in command at American Sunroof Corporation (ASC). They were a highly respected company in Southgate, just outside Detroit, with a strong track record of pioneering aftermarket sunroofs and producing high-quality custom designs and one-off concept work for manufacturers, such as Porsche.

Volvo chose ASC to do both the design modifications and to build the 780 concept car. In late summer of 1989, they shipped a brand new, white with tan interior, 780 Turbo to Southgate.

Over the next several months, Scheinberg made several trips from New Jersey to Michigan to oversee the project. In those pre-Internet days, this type of design project required regular in-person reviews of the progress.

He would often return to New Jersey with the latest renderings in hand, to review with Hoover and Holthe. It was a time-consuming process that ended up taking more than six months from initial drawings, to clay modeling, to hand fabrication of the fiberglass body-extension components.

Even though it was a fairly modest exterior redesign, many parts of the car were altered: the front and rear fascias, an addition of a small decklid spoiler, blacking out all chrome (including on the grille), tinting of the windows, replacement of the stock alloy wheels with a more dramatic design, etc. There were no significant changes made to the interior.

One of the most dramatic, and expensive, aspects of the concept car was the paintjob. It was a show-quality sparkling white with blue undertones and a three-stage pearlescent finish. Pearlescent paint was still considered exotic in the late 80s, as it required each of the three paint layers to be evenly applied by hand—a very time-consuming process that only a few top-quality painters were capable of. PPG was the supplier of the paint.

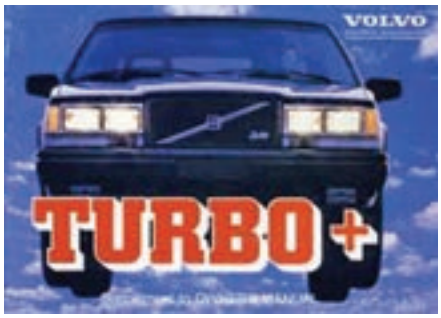
Scheinberg's primary contact at ASC was their renowned design chief, Mark Trostle, who was also part of the executive management team. Mark assigned a young designer, Oluf Bendixen, the job of conceiving and sketching the renderings of the concept car.

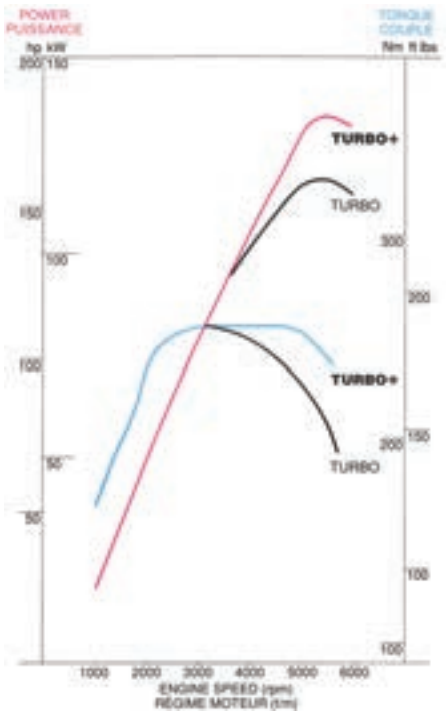
"Our intent was to make the car more visually dynamic without violating the essence and soul of the car from either a Volvo or Bertone perspective. There was a lot of political sensitivity, as you can imagine, with us tinkering with the design of this top-of-the-line car," Scheinberg said.

One of the contentions between Volvo and Bertone, when the 780 was initially designed in 1983 to 1985, was that Bertone wanted to push for a more aggressive look, whereas Volvo wanted something more conservative and in keeping in line with the existing 700-series models.

"It was a bit daunting for us in VCNA

The Turbo+ accessory boost kit fit all B230FT vehicles back to 1990, including automatic transmissions. It increased output by 20hp to 188hp at 5400 rpm. Boost pressure rose from 10.5 psi to 14 psi while torque increased to 187 ft.lbs. at 2900 rpm.





The Designer

Oluf Bendixen was assigned the job of creating the renderings for the concept car.

"Back then, we did our artwork on a special paper called vellum. The process was such that you would draw the basic car lightly with a pencil or pen, and then work in the dark and core reflection colors with markers. All the gradations were done with powdered chalk mixed with baby powder. Both sides of the paper were used, and a lot of spray fixative.

Then Prismacolor pencils were used to put in the cut lines and give more detail. At the very end, some white highlights were added with Gauche. After the rendering was finished, the car would be cut out with a sharp knife blade and stuck onto a big presentation board, about one meter wide, using spray adhesive. For a bit of contrast in the background, I used to mask off the car and use some spray paint, speckling it a bit for effect. This is what I try to simulate today when working digitally. The young designers I now work with call this technique old school.

As far as the proposals to Volvo, we presented one sketch, went directly into clay on the car, and worked out the design details there. When it was finished, fiberglass molds were taken to make the actual parts that were prepared and fitted on the car. Finally, the paint was applied. ASC had some really good guys back then. The car looked perfect for the show."

Today Bendixen is senior designer at Changan Automobile Co. in Turin, Italy. He has had a very successful career, working for many manufactures. Back in 1989, the 780 Concept Car was one of his first designs and he remembers it fondly. ■

Product Planning to take on a project with this kind of design sensitivity. We had done things like in-port installation of Volvo-approved body kits to create the 740 SE models, but this was significantly more profound," Scheinberg recalled.

The plan was never to put the body kit into production, like Volvo had done with the 700-series. The concept car was built just for the N.Y. Auto Show. Scheinberg explained that even the brackets that held the body kit were just made of rough strips of cut metal. It was all done simply for the one show.

When opening day arrived, their hard worked paid off. "It really came to life on the turntable, under the bright glare of the lights. That paint absolutely popped. We were all pretty pleased with just how good it looked," he recalls.

The most frantic part of the entire project may have been trying to get the concept car from the loading dock at the Javits Center onto the show stand itself. Scheinberg remembers:

"There were forklifts spinning around, with their blades swinging within inches of the car. It was a real-life lesson in terms of working with the guys for whom that chaotic scene was home turf.

Their policy was that one union guy had to drive the car, and one had to flank each side, walking with their hands on the car. It took them forever to come and move the car from the dock. All the while, I'm panicking that the car was going to be skewered by an errant forklift.

At one point, I pulled two twenties out of my pocket and pressed them into the hands of the guy who seemed to be in charge. That seemed to speed up the process almost immediately. Within minutes, the car was moved the final 250 feet from the loading dock to the display turntable. The final challenge was get the car up on the stand itself—a delicate process due to the lowered front valence."

The body had been lowered for the show using sandbags—a low tech, but effective solution. The special 17-inch wheels, which had been modified to fit over the large front brake rotors, gave the car an aggressive stance and were highlighted by the Goodyear tires.

The Goodyear representative arrived shortly before the show opened to make a few enhancements to the tires. He wanted to make sure the Goodyear logo on the sidewalls was clearly visible, so he outlined the letters by hand using a small orange paint pen. Scheinberg was concerned it would look tacky, but in the end it he thought it looked really great.

After the Show

When the show was over, the car was transported back to Volvo's warehouses in Rockleigh, N.J. Scheinberg recalls there was never much in terms of feedback—either positive or negative—from Bertone and Volvo Sweden regarding the modifications to the car.

"We were wringing our hands. What would they say, what would they think? We had, after all, refinished the egg-crate grille and even blacked-out the diagonal stripe. That was blasphemy!"

In hindsight, Scheinberg thought the body kit should perhaps have been offered for the 780, but it was only built for the show, with no production plans. It was a hand-laid, one-off fiberglass set, and it wouldn't have been easy to reproduce.

It was also impractical. You couldn't drive it on and off a car carrier due to the low lip in the front, so it would have been impossible to transport.

Time moved on—it was now 1999 and almost a decade had passed. Bill Hoover insisted that something be done with the car. It was gathering dust and taking up space. So the market value of the car was assessed by an independent appraiser. It has less than 200 miles on it and was in pristine condition. Volvo had put the stock brakes and the original factory 15-inch Multi-X wheels back on to ensure it was according to factory specs for the sale. The custom show wheels were put in a corner of the warehouse and forgotten about.

In 2000 Volvo sold the car and Tricia, an American Airlines flight attendant, bought it and shipped it to her home in San Francisco. She used it as her daily driver for three years, putting about 18,000 miles on it.

She wanted to sell it in 2003, asking $32,000. I was contacted by her since I

After the show, the 17-inch custom wheels were removed from the car and placed in a back corner of Volvo's warehouse in Rockleigh. I found them in an obscure online posting from a guy named Peter, who had bought them.

This photo of the concept car with BBS wheels was taken by the third owner shortly before listing the car for sale on Craigslist. I found it in a Turbobricks forum discussion on 700 series body kits.

was in the early process of organizing the 780 Registry, which eventually became www.780coupe.com, as she was looking for potential buyers.

I met Tricia at the San Francisco airport and drove the car, thinking I might want to buy it. But I already owned a 1991 780 and was underwhelmed with the lack of customization to the interior and engine, especially for $32,000. I lost contact with Tricia and the car for the next 14 years.

The Search

In 2014, I was doing research on the development of the 780, including unique models that are part of its history. But finding the concept car, without an owner's name or location proved difficult.

I came across an old car site posting referencing a Craigslist ad from several months earlier, where someone was trying to sell the car in 2011. A guy named Peter said he had the wheels that were on the car at the N.Y. Auto Show and was trying to find the current owner. I got in touch with him and he told me the journey of the wheels.

They had sat in a corner of the warehouse for another five years and were then sold to Peter by a friend of his who worked at Volvo, along with some 850 racing equipment, including roll cages, dating back to the Rydell racing period. Peter, in turn, sold the wheels to someone who repainted them and drove on them for a while. When this person decided he didn't want them any longer, Peter bought them back. Two center caps were missing and there was extensive curb rash, but they were not lost!

The wheels were a limited production that Volvo had modified. According to Scheinberg, they were never meant to be driven upon as the modifications to fit the brakes had potentially compromised the integrity of the wheels. Peter's friend obviously proved otherwise.

I purchased the wheels in 2013 and put them in storage on the rare chance that I would find the car and the owner be willing to sell it or he might be interested in the wheels. A long shot for sure.

The search for the car continued. I found another random set of photos of the car in an obscure thread on turbobricks.com from 2011, discussing various body kits on 700-series cars. The person who posted the photos was no longer around to indicate where he got them. Could it have been the owner? It appeared to be a dead end, but a helpful clue was a photo of the tag on the car, locating it three years before in California. The other good news was that it looked to be in remarkably good shape!

I was able to use the plate to get a CarFax report on the car. It appeared the photos were from the third owner after Tricia. The report also revealed a repair had been made at a Sacramento Volvo dealership two years earlier! But the dealership, after reluctantly agreeing to help in the search, said that they had purged their database of old records only a year before, including the repair record and owner's name. Another dead end!

I then made an inquiry with a family member who works in law enforcement and had access to the DMV records. The plates confirmed the last name of the present owner, but no contact numbers were available. Various inquiries were made to the California DMV, but no meaningful information was released, given privacy regulations. I finally located the father of the registered owner, but unfortunately he was an elderly man, struggling with dementia, and unable to provide a phone number for his son. He did confirm, however, that his son had purchased the car a few years ago.

My search continued, including mailing physical letters to the potential past addresses of the son. Still I got no response, until I finally located the owner in a random social media comment. Eventually, I was able to get hold of him by phone. But just as it looked like the search was over, it turned out he had sold the car to a woman just six months earlier. She never filed for new tags, however.

The other discouraging news was that he reported the car had sustained a good bit of rust damage. A door panel and the custom-made body panel from ASC were also missing on the driver's side. Interestingly, he was

A friend of mine, Todd Crouch, flew to Sacramento and helped negotiate buying the car from an impound yard. He then drove it the 500 miles to Eagle, Idaho, where I live, without any problems.

unaware of the unique history of the 780 and assumed it was some dealer body kit. He was glad to help me contact the new owner, but the challenges were not over.

The lady, who was now in possession of the 780, finally called him back after a month's effort. She had paid $500 for the car and just wanted reliable transportation. She eventually agreed to sell me the car, but a few more weeks went by without a returned phone call. When we finally connected, she had some bad news.

She had been arrested for DUI, the car was impounded, and she had lost her driver's license. During her reckless driving, she had also hit a curb and torn off the passenger-side fiberglass front fascia. The interior showed neglect and was filled with garbage, but was otherwise undamaged.

I negotiated on her behalf with the California DMV and law enforcement with little success. The impound yard was adding fees to her account daily. It was beyond her means to pay off the debt and get the car back. She had basically given up on it and didn't have much interest in being helpful. Most distressingly, the impound yard's policy was to crush the car in just a few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The original appraisal commissioned by VCNA in 1997 was found in the back pocket of the passenger seat.

The 780 Concept Car today. The picture was taken on the drive from California to Idaho. The missing body kit parts and the rust around the windows will be major challenges during the awaiting restoration. Notice the mismatched wheels.

weeks and get some of their money back from the scrap metal.

A good friend of mine flew to Sacramento to try and work out a deal. He ended up successfully negotiating with the owner for the tile, with the DMV to pay off the tickets, and with the impound yard for their fees.

After two days of effort, the car was released from behind the chainlink fence. And remarkably, with only a few adjustments and an oil change, the weary concept car with some 140,000 miles on it, made the 500-mile journey to Idaho, where I live, with its missing panels and mismatched front and rear wheels and tires.

What's Next

Finally, the concept car had been found and reunited with the wheels after 20+ years. The crazy whirlwind search was over.

Some unexpected finds in the passenger seat back pocket were many of the maintenance records from previous owners, previous sales ads, and even the first appraisal from 1997 with photos.

Plans are underway to restore the car back to its show condition. The biggest challenge lies in repairing the broken parts of the ASC body kit and re-fabricating those pieces that are missing. Hopefully, a skilled fiberglass expert, or even a 3D printer, can use the existing panels to replicate what's needed.

Another challenge is the rust. The car was parked outside for many years and exposed to the salty air along the Pacific Coast, causing significant rust around the front and rear windows. The bare metal brackets holding the body kit components are also in sad shape.

The car now has 140,000 miles on the odometer. The interior is in decent shape, thanks to the dark tinted windows, and can be restored without any significant issues.

Progress on the restoration will be documented on 780coupe.com, once efforts begin in earnest.

If you have comments or questions about the car, or want to join the 780 Registry and learn more about these unique pieces of Volvo history, check out 780coupe.com or send me an e-mail. ■

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