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A Starck-Looking Electric Car for Fun

By David Pearson

Paris

French designer Philippe Starck hates cars.

They're noisy, dirty, anti-social, masochistic and they bring out the worst in people, he says.

He recognizes, though, that people sometimes need locomotion. To that end, he has created an electric vehicle, which is on display this week at the Geneva Auto Show and will retail for about $40,000.

The pared-down design of the V+ Volteis by Starck—it resembles a golf cart more than a car that could withstand urban use—seems to prioritize form over function.

"If you look at the electric vehicles on offer today, they're unbelievably bad. The designers are taking out the engine, putting an electric motor in its place and don't really think about what it should look like," says Mr. Starck.

The designer has tinkered with everything from water bottles and a two-euro coin to hotel interior design, but he is best known for the clever style he brings to functional products such as a transparent arm chair and a three-legged citrus juicer.

Electric vehicles currently on the market look like regular cars and that's partly because of marketing executives' wariness to introduce new concepts that might turn off car buyers.

"An electric vehicle doesn't go at 240 kilometers an hour [about 150 miles an hour], and doesn't have to look like a car that does, says Mr. Starck. "It's depressing that [car makers are] wasting an opportunity like that."

Designer Philippe Starck

Volteis (3); Agence France—Presse/Getty Images (portrait)

The V+ Volteis by Starck has 'spaghetti' seats and no windows. Left, a basket in the front, made of wicker or plastic, takes the place of trunk space. Above, a rear view of the car. Below, a flat-screen speedometer shows how much charge is left in the battery.

The V+ will be marketed through 15 stores in France and eventually through others in major cities in the world. Typical customers will be private individuals with vacation homes and hotels in island resorts that would offer the runabouts as a service to hotel guests.

The designer wanted to make a more environmentally friendly car.

"You can understand why people venerate the automobile, it's an extraordinary reflection of the intelligence of our civilization," says Mr. Starck. "Except that we don't do anything good with them. The damage caused by cars is tragic."

One day in 2010, Mr. Starck was fetching oysters from his local fishmonger at Cap Ferrat on the French Riviera. He spied the shop owner's utilitarian electric vehicle that resembled a jeep, tried it out and fell in love with it.

He realized there was potential to use the runabout as a basis for a fun, well-designed vehicle for people to use in sun-soaked resorts. "It's zippy, it's clean, it makes no noise, and you have a little bell to warn people you're coming," he said.

The designer set about redesigning the car with Volteis, a tiny company in central France, using his trademark minimalist approach. The open-sided result on display this week at the one of the car industry's biggest events may look like an upmarket golf cart, but the designer has no problem with that.

The all-round vision means the car's occupants are visible to all. "You're out in the open where you can see and be seen," he says.

With no engine, no oil to change and few moving parts apart from the wheels, the car is virtually maintenance-free. Inspired by the barebones engineering of the iconic Citroen 2CV, Mr. Starck jettisoned anything that he considered superfluous.

Out went automatic window technology—and windows, for that matter—air conditioning, sophisticated electronics and fancy seats. In went: four "spaghetti" chairs made with PVC cord; a textile roof for protection from the rain and sun; a wide, wicker-type basket instead of a trunk for oysters and other baggage; a sleek steering wheel; a big windshield; seat belts; and not much else.

Instrumentation is basic, too. A flat-screen speedometer with a bottle-shaped gauge shows how much charge is left in the battery. "It's not a space rocket; it's more like a kid's soap box cart with four wheels," he says.

The car has a top speed of 40 miles an hour and a range of about 37 miles before the battery runs flat. It clearly isn't designed for transcontinental trips. It recovers 50% of its charge in two hours by plugging into any socket; a full charge takes six hours.

"You visit a friend's house and recharge while you're having dinner," Mr. Starck says.

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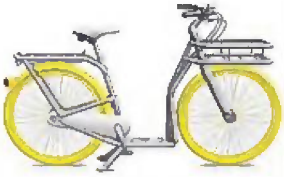

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