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[Detroit Auto Show: Design Overview by Chris Hrabalek](#)



Porsche's return to the 2011 North American International Auto Show, after an absence of four years, suggests that the global economic crisis is finally under control; and with the US car market regaining its pre-slump high, Detroit once again marks the beginning of the automotive design year.

Porsche's 918 RSR – arguably the most anticipated show car at Detroit – seems, perhaps, a bit of a visual let-down, proving only that last year's birthday-present sweater looks as nice buttoned-up as it did unbuttoned. Clichéd detailing, such as the 917 engine fan, also makes one wonder whether Porsche's design department has been relocated to the Porsche museum. This is a theory that's also supported by the 911 Sport Classic and Speedster models. No question, the 918 RSR is a tasty concept, but so it was at Geneva last year. Call it a new model if you like, Porsche, but please just put it into production and let's move on...





Munich's finest arrived with two new cars: the BMW 6 Series convertible and the BMW 1 Series M Coupé, the latter looking very much like an automotive 'Mini-me' that has just returned from a steady diet of Olympic-grade steroids. Never before has a small car shown so much muscle. One cannot help but smirk at this pumped-up midget, ready to enter the ring of an automotive Ultimate Fighting Championship. This will be one hell of a driver's car.



If one were to wonder how 'jetlag' can be interpreted in car design terms, then look no further than Volkswagen's 'US Passat'. Visually, the car feels as though it was designed while sleepwalking on a melatonin overdose. VW Design is choosing to sleep though current design trends, in the hope that it wakes up to a market craving the conservative styling of yesteryear. Rarely has a car been this well executed – but also this stale: then again, Mercedes and Audi are not much better. Both the facelifted C-Class, as well as the new A6, feel like a TV movie on the fourth re-run.



Mini's Paceman concept, on the other hand, is a different matter. It marks the final effort of recently retired Mini design boss Gerd Hildebrand, and the 'Sport Activity Coupé' signifies an interesting trend, one that is also targeted by the recent Range Rover Evoque, towards a premium, urban all-roader. Although the Paceman was only shown as a non-driveable concept, it featured a number of well-executed details and further opened up the possibility of a growing Mini model range.



Taken as a whole, this year's NAIAS is strong enough to make one re-consider travel plans for next winter: it reinstates Detroit as the annual prelude to a new year of automotive concepts and styling.



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