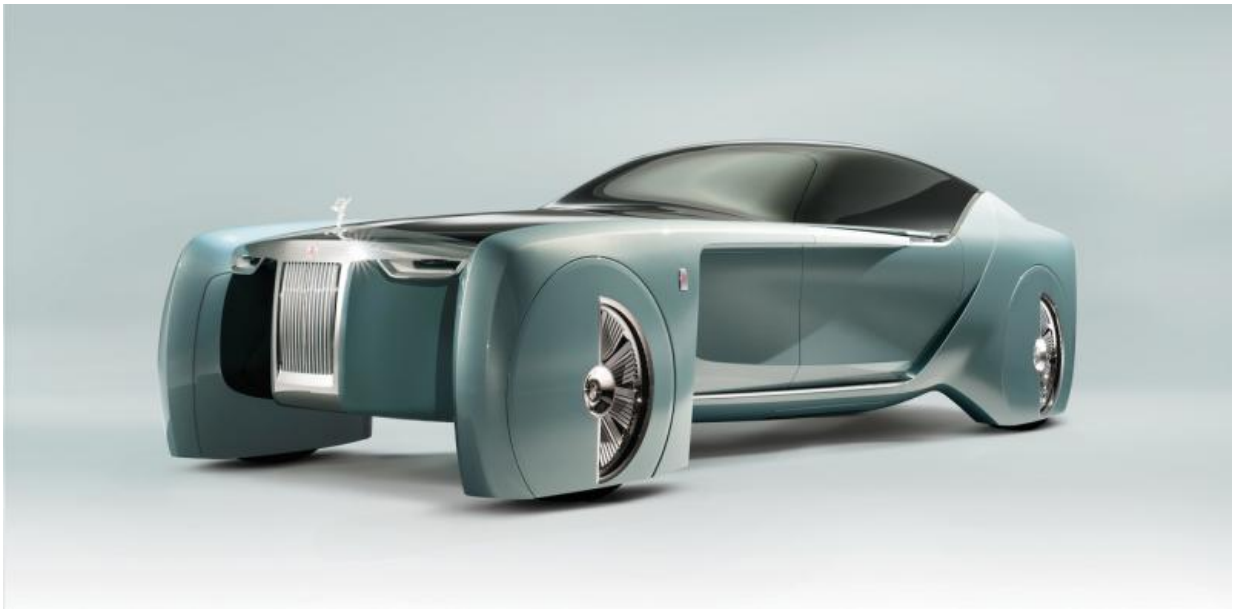


Rolls-Royce's luxury vision of the future tells us more about ourselves

June 20 2016, by Chris Ebbert



Credit: Rolls-Royce Motor Company

Rolls Royce Motor Cars has unveiled a [concept car](#) that showcases what the firm thinks luxury vehicles might look like in 100 years' time. The "[Vision Next 100](#)" is a 5.9 metre-long zero-emission, self-driving car complete with an artificial intelligence virtual assistant and a silk sofa – but no steering wheel.

Concept cars are one-off designs that have two purposes: to show the

world what a brand has to say about the future, and to show the brand what the world has to say about its ideas. Somewhere between these two poles, the company will harvest the impulses for the development of new cars.

While [concept cars](#) rarely get made into the real thing, they are still a foreshadowing of things to come. Car manufacturers don't make decisions lightly and they know that putting something out into the public domain under their good names may be perceived as a promise. But they often tell us more about the present than they do about the future.

With the Vision Next 100, Rolls-Royce has undertaken the eyebrow-raising feat of forecasting transport solutions a full century ahead. This is most unusual, as these vehicles usually only try to test the waters for up to a decade ahead. But, like all concept cars, this vehicle is also merely a projection from today's perspective. While it might be possible to make educated guesses about future technological advances, it is impossible to accurately predict things like emerging styling preferences, tastes, or social changes that could affect the actual outcome.

Concept vehicles can teach us something about our present time – our dreams, fears and our vision of what the solutions will be. Unfortunately, we won't know exactly what these things are until years later when we look back at them. Cars predicting the future tend to become monuments to the aberrations in taste of their time. I predict we will one day be smiling at the Vision Next 100 as much as we do now at the concept cars from the 1960s, few of which actually ever came close to hitting the mark regarding predicting the future.

We smile because we recognise the good old times in those vehicles, which become time capsules of the era that created them. And the same will most likely happen to this vehicle. It will become a museum of our

time's aspirations, and one day, perhaps a hundred years from now, people will say: "Wow, look at that – this is so 2010s!"

Few concept cars have successfully predicted the future. Some were ridiculously far off, such as the 1962 [Ford "Seattleite"](#). Its downfall was the lack of justification for the solutions it presented, such as four front wheels, giant rocket-engine style protruding taillights, and a glass cupola roof. Others were interestingly close to what later did become relevant concepts, such as the [1970 Ghia City Car](#), which is not too far removed from what we now know as the [Smart Fortwo](#).

Mini prediction

What may be the most successful predictor in automotive history comes from the opposite end of the spectrum from Rolls Royce: the original 1959 Mini. [Commissioned as](#) a radical British alternative to the German bubble car, it carried particular importance because it managed to solve a large number of poignant problems society and manufacturers actually had at the time.

In contrast to its contemporaries, the Mini made astonishingly good use of the available interior space, seating four passengers in a way normally only found in much larger cars. It was built low to the ground, with a low centre of gravity, and its four wheels were situated as close to the chassis's corners as possible. This design made it more nimble than even the most highly regarded sports cars and even enabled the small vehicle to [win rallies](#).



Surprisingly accurate vision of the future. Credit: Mark Brown/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA

Its overall body construction and package was also revolutionary in its efficiency, as it no longer used a chassis frame and was able to use 80% of its floor space for passengers and luggage because of the position of its engine. As a consequence, more and more manufacturers more or less by default started resorting to the solutions outlined by its designer Sir Alec Issigonis. Sixty years on, today's average vehicle still mirrors his vision. Front-wheel drive, front mounted engine, independent suspension and efficient interior space use can be found in pretty much all compact and even most mid-sized cars on the market.

In contrast, the Rolls Royce Vision Next 100 is blissfully lacking reason. Not that Rolls Royce cars have ever been particularly famous for being rational anyway, but the extent to which its latest concept focuses on glamour is exceptional even for the famous British marque. It comes with an artificial servant and provides no driver controls of any sort. It is the ultimate, elitist vision that we can conjure up from today's perspective.

And yet this grandiose idea is probably in line with developments in the fields of robotics and artificial intelligence. It may even turn out to be as visionary as Issigonis's Mini was. Who says artificial servants are really all that far off? Just because 1950s science fiction literature promised them and our society has so far failed to deliver them, robotic servants may well become commonplace within another hundred years.

A projection of one century into the next is likely to be more poetry than proposal, and this concept in particular, as it banks on technological developments that are yet to take place. But a company like Rolls-Royce doesn't need to be accurate every time. It is the brand whose motors used to eschew horsepower ratings in their brochures, supplanting them instead with assurances of "sufficient power". It is nice to see this aloof spirit return.

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