

Final winter Detroit auto show a shadow of its former self

January 16 2019, by Luc Olinga



The transitional auto show this year has been a subdued one

As row upon row of automakers' latest models gleam in the bright lights of the Detroit auto show, the exhibitors ready to greet industry insiders and journalists are looking down—into their smartphones.

They surf social media to kill boredom in a mostly empty convention hall.

Swaths of valuable real estate—once occupied by sports cars and German luxury vehicles—are filled with cafe stands and pop-up restaurants.

This is the solution organizers came up with to fill space vacated by automakers who this year skipped what had once been the flagship US [auto](#) exhibition.

The Cobo Center, a concrete and glass bubble on the banks of the Detroit River, sheltered exhibitors this week during the final January edition of the auto show.

Starting next year, the show will be held in June, avoiding the frosty Detroit winter.

The transitional auto show this year has been a subdued one, more lightly attended by press and industry than in the past, with fewer new car announcements.

A quiet hall

Mercedes, BMW, Jaguar, Land Rover, Volvo, Audi, Lamborghini, Ferrari, Rolls Royce were all conspicuous in their absence.

The cavernous exhibition hall had an unusual amount of space occupied by refreshment stands, food booths, and tables and chairs, even as appetizers and glasses of Champaign sat wilting.



'It's run out of gas now,' said analyst Michelle Krebs of Autotrader

In the past, a spectator may not even have found a place to sit down—unless it was inside a car—much less find food inside the hall.

At the Infiniti display, a striking new electric vehicle concept car filled with technology, stood unadmired, deserted on a riser. Had this car been introduced two years ago, there would have been a torrent of selfies.

South Korean automaker Kia Motors turned part of the showroom into a tree-lined country road to demonstrate the features of its new Telluride SUV but few were scrambling to try the experience.

The absences of Sergio Marchionne, the former CEO of Fiat Chrysler who died in 2018, and Carlos Ghosn, the jailed chief of the Renault-

Nissan-Mitsubishi Alliance, were strongly felt in the media room.

The two industry captains with big ambitions could set the tone of the show or change the conversation in the blink of an eye.

'Running out of gas'

"It's run out of gas now," said analyst Michelle Krebs of Autotrader, adding she was hopeful the event would reenergize in June.

The famous Detroit auto show, which took on international importance in 1989, has been increasingly eclipsed in recent years by Silicon Valley.



The cavernous exhibition hall had an unusual amount of space

Over the years, Detroit has been relegated to being the place to learn about big cars (pickups, SUVs and crossovers) that will be driven by American consumers in the near term.

But the future of the industry—innovations in autonomous driving and electric propulsion—is being discussed in Las Vegas at the Consumer Electronics Show.

Meanwhile, luxury and upscale cars are being introduced at shows in New York, Los Angeles and Miami—even Pebble Beach in California.

In 2008 at the Detroit Auto Show, Dodge rolled out a big new SUV with bulls and cowboys on downtown streets. The spectacle stopped traffic.

The purpose of the change in schedule from winter to summer was to bring back some of that magic and put the show once again at the center of the global automobile scene.

"Warmer weather, ride-and-drives, hill-climbs maybe, all sorts of kind of exhibitions, dynamic opportunities for people to be in and out of the cars, ride in them, for the manufacturers to show what they couldn't previously do inside," said Doug North, co-chairman of North American International Auto Show—the official name of the Detroit event.

'Opportunity to re-imagine'

Many were rooting for the show to succeed.



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"The influence of the Detroit auto show remains significant," insists Yu Jun, president of the Chinese group GAC Motor.

"The show is going to be able to try new things and deliver new experiences that it simply can't now," says Ford Chairman Bill Ford, while GM spokesman Patrick Morrissey said it was an "opportunity to re-imagine the auto [show](#)."

Detroit could appeal to tech companies, which have so far been a symbolic presence in the capital of the US car, even as their ambitions in transport are large.

Philippe Schricke, project manager at Velodyne LiDAR, which develops laser technologies used in sensors for autos, said that, while the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas remained the "priority," his company now had more time to prepare for Detroit.

"Detroit was an afterthought for us but since now it will happen six months after CES, instead of a few days after, we can think of new products to display," he told AFP.

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