

*The American-born designer
of the Boxster talks to PANORAMA
about Porsche's new roadster*

Interview:
**GRANT
LARSON**

BJT: Please tell us a little about your background — when and how you came to Porsche.

Larson: I don't exactly know how far back you want me to start on this question, so I'll start early. I was born in Billings, Montana, in May of 1957, but grew up in Mequon, Wisconsin, sort of a suburb of Milwaukee. Being heavily influenced by my mechanically-minded father and artistically-minded mother, I mixed the two influences together and spent a great deal of my childhood drawing nothing other than cars and "moving mechanical objects," most of which were my own creation or invention.

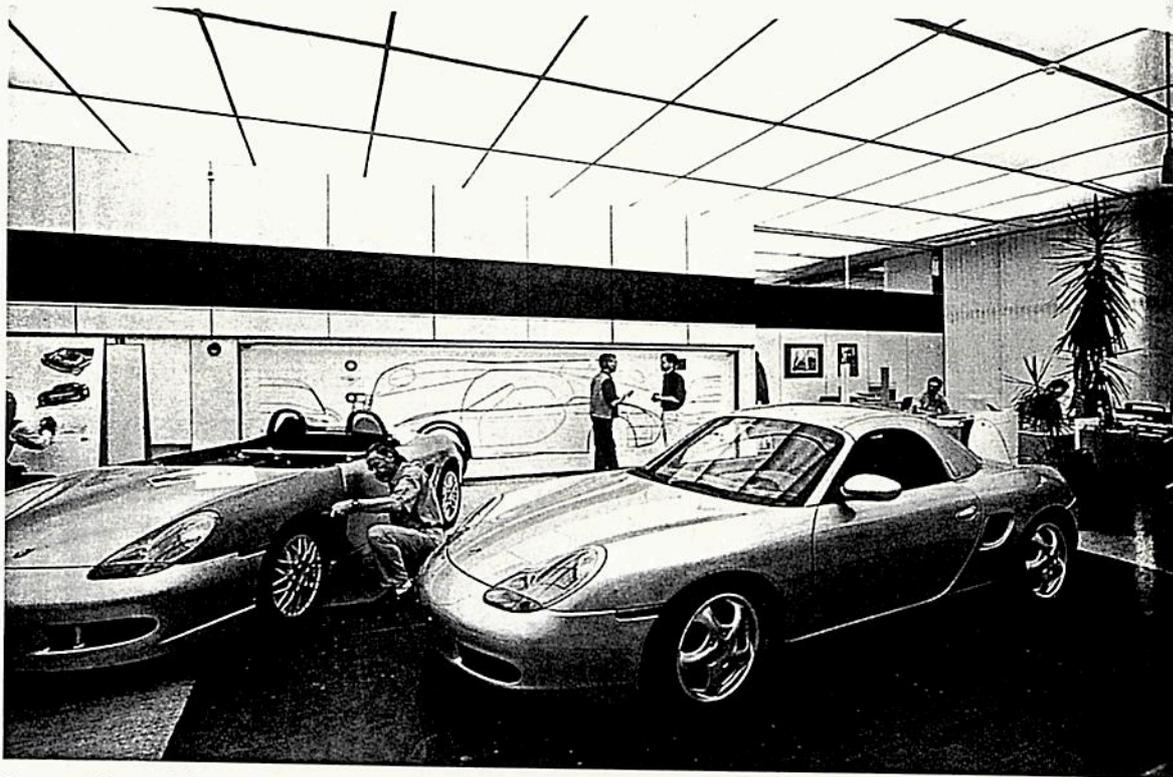
Somewhere along that path I had discovered that the Art Center College of Design in California was the place to be for anyone who wanted to make a career out of these crazy childhood dreams. During my studies, my

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Larson (at rear right) speaks with the studio engineer. Boxster with hardtop is a plastic model representing the roadster in its final form. At left is a clay model on which parts for the special equipment options program were shaped.

automotive influences had wandered from the Midwestern kid's hemi-powered, jacked up American muscle car to the cleanliness and technical precision of the European, especially German, sports cars. My new goal had been set.

In 1986, my first position fresh out of college was at the Audi Concept Studio in Munich. I had gathered a lot of experience in the three years that I was there, but the biggest problem was that most of my proposals highly resembled the sports cars from Stuttgart. It was around late 1988 that I noticed big changes taking place at Porsche through the arrival of the new chief designer, Harm Lagaay. I informed him that I would like to join the Porsche team, because I knew that they were onto something big. I began in April of 1989.

BJT: What was your first assignment at Porsche? What other projects have you worked on?

Larson: The first project which I worked on was the 989. Other various projects included early 911 successors and future Porsches.

BJT: How did the Boxster assignment come down? A memo, a meeting? Was it clear from the beginning that the show car would ultimately be produced?

Larson: The Boxster show car began as a team formed to produce an "object" for auto shows, to give the public a peek into what Porsche was up to. I was the designer on that team, and through the approval of

Harm Lagaay, we decided to produce a show car as sort of a marketing tool or testbed to find out if we were on the right track. Parallel to that, early brainstorming was taking place for a partner to the 911.

BJT: Was it difficult changing gears so suddenly from the 989, a four-door car that was so emotionally different?

Larson: Changing gears is easy, as long as it is a Porsche. We are constantly doing that anyway, from project to project. The transition to the 989 was not any emotionally different than any of our other products, it only had two more doors.

BJT: Was anything learned in the work on the 989 that was applicable to other Porsche projects?

Larson: Of course we learned a lot. Any time you reinterpret the philosophy of Porsche in a new form, you learn something. Regardless of what projects we work on, there are constantly new discoveries that can be applied to other projects.

BJT: There is a strong visual resonance between the Boxster and the 911. Is the mandate for family resemblance in all Porsche models driven by philosophy or by need for shared parts or both?

Larson: Both, but of course the strong family resemblance which is part of our philosophy that we have developed over the years takes priority.

BJT: What does "simultaneous development" mean in



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"Our company has a glorious past when it comes to sports cars, and we didn't want to let people forget that."

practical terms? Were production designers involved even from the beginning of the Boxster show car design?

Larson: In practical terms, we could say that the Boxster best describes this. The later phases of the show car paralleled the early development of the production car. During this process, engineers, suppliers and production people were lending their experience at this early stage.

BJT: Is there tension between design people and production people?

Larson: I guess we could say tension on a professional level. Both groups were challenged to come up with solutions for the various problems that had arisen; this often ended up with a decision that both sides agreed on.

BJT: What was your contribution to the Boxster design?

Larson: My contribution to the show car Boxster was the complete exterior design, and for the production car I was the primary designer leading the team. Input from other designers was of course necessary considering the time pressure we were under.

BJT: How do you feel about the production car's relocation of the side air intakes — high now rather than low?

Larson: I feel that we made the right decision in the relocation of the side air intakes, probably be-

cause I know very well the practical reasons for the higher placement. The lower intakes, as on the show car, entered a very important structural member of the chassis on the production car. This is what contributes to the overall stiffness and handling characteristics of the Boxster, which are very good. Besides that, the lower intakes caught a lot of snow and road grime.

BJT: Was looking at old spyders part of the preparation for this project?

Larson: Yes, of course, but mostly Porsche Spyders! Our company has a glorious past when it comes to sports cars, and we didn't want to let people forget that. There is a lot of heritage there to play with.

BJT: It seems that more optional things are available right from the start with the Boxster than ever before — an aero kit, "Spyder rear" and other style modifications. How do you feel about these alterations of the original concept?



Porsche Chief Designer Harm Lagaay with Porsche's first totally new car in nearly two decades. Lagaay directs a staff of 36 at Porsche's Weissach Design Studio: ten designers, a dozen modelers, four design engineers and various support personnel.

"Our goal with the Boxster 'face' was an unmistakable Porsche identity."

Larson: We feel good about the options that are immediately available, and they have gotten a very good response from our dealers. I personally prefer the car the way it is, but I believe it is good to give Boxster owners the possibility to personalize them the way they wish.

BJT: Porsche hasn't made a car yet that didn't evolve over time. In what direction will the styling of the Boxster evolve?

Larson: You didn't think I was going to give out our future plans, did you? Looking at Porsches past, I think you can only guess correctly! There's a lot of good stuff in the works.

BJT: In translating the show car into the production Boxster, what was the biggest compromise?

Larson: I think you mean biggest "challenge." It would probably be in the front end. Due to cooling requirements of the now and future versions, we had to fit two large radiators underneath the headlamps. For crashworthiness, the length of the nose had to be extended, which at the same time gave us extra trunk space.

BJT: Of the things that have changed radically on cars in the last 30 years, perhaps headlights are the most immediately visible. Headlight technology has permitted manufacturers to run the gamut from old style round headlights to virtually burying the headlights in the body. Certainly a strong style element of the front of the Boxster is its headlight configuration. How does a designer look at lights — this sounds overly dramatic, but do they provide special access to the soul of a car?

Larson: Correct. Somebody once said that "the eyes are the window to the soul," and as true as it is for people, it can also apply to cars. Most of a car's features can be compared with parts of the human body, so if the front is the face, the headlamps are the eyes. Porsche has had a certain corporate identity or "look" since the company began building sports cars, and as more time passes, the stronger it becomes. Our goal with the Boxster "face" was an unmistakable Porsche identity.

Headlamp technology, as with any, has made radical leaps in the last years, allowing virtually everything possible. Designers now have freedom that was unheard of just five years ago. We used this to large degree with our module system in that the various functions could be combined, the angle could be more extreme, weight could be reduced, and more efficient light produced.

BJT: Tell us a little bit about the studio. How many people work at Style Porsche? I assume they aren't all

designers — what other skilled workers are involved?

Larson: At the moment the studio staff numbers 36; ten designers, 12 modelers and four design engineers. The rest are

graphic design, color and trim, secretarial and organizational people.

BJT: We know very little about the process in a design studio. What happens when the studio gets an assignment for a complete car? How is the work divided?

Larson: The decision for new projects begins at the Board of Directors. Those decisions come from various sources, usually from Marketing or Product Planning, and sometimes the comments from our dealer or customer base are very influential. A "Goal Catalog" is then assembled which describes the project in detail. To help a new project along in its early phases, the studio prepares the initial ideation in two-dimensional form. These are color sketches and renderings, either on paper or in a paint box computer system.

Once the go-ahead is given, we work closely with the department that is preparing the mechanicals underneath to come up with what we call the "package." This is more than just a set of hard points or outlines to follow, as it also contains information for air intakes, opening panels, crash protection, ergonomics and aerodynamics. The package serves as our basis on which to prepare a four-view working drawing, either in our computer system or as a full-size tape drawing with X, Y and Z coordinates.

A full-size clay model is then sculpted (with a lot of love, emotion and work!) from this information. Because the clay is an awful brown color, a silver film is applied to the surfaces to imitate a painted body. This model is then rolled out from the measuring plate and into the studio yard where we can stand back, review it in natural light as it rotates on a turntable. After a bit of back and forth with the deciding members, the clay model is then cast off and a fiberglass model fabricated. All this while, feasibility studies are taking place to make sure everything is manufacturable. This starts early in the program and goes until the car rolls off the production line, and is about 80 percent of the work.

BJT: How much of the Studio's human resources are committed when you design a completely new car like the Boxster or 989?

Larson: Generally, a complete car requires three designers (one exterior, two interior), two to three design engineers and four to six clay modelers.

BJT: Does everybody know what everybody else is doing?

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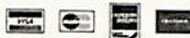


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Larson: Yes. Our staff is small enough to keep in touch with one another. Even if it is not required of us, we're always looking around anyway, just because it is so dang interesting.

BJT: What is the proportion of Porsche versus outside design work?

Larson: The proportion varies from either 90 percent Porsche to ten percent outside projects to a 50-50 balance.

BJT: Of the cars which you had nothing to do with, which of Porsche's designs is the most appealing to you?

Larson: Of the Porsches past, my favorite is the 718 RSK, and from our current lineup I like the Carrera 4S, the all-wheel-drive with the wider fenders.

BJT: What do you drive?

Larson: As I anxiously await the Boxster I ordered, I am zinging around in our family car, a Renault Twingo, a wonderfully designed little box with a happy face. I have a restored 1961 Alfa Romeo Giulietta Spider for summer, but am on the lookout for my next restoration project, an early Speedster! ☺