

A GM Executive Talks to Car Life

GO STYLE, YOUNG MAN

MANY OF THE letters we get every day concern styling; especially those from our younger readers. The letters usually contain a lot of intelligent questions about starting a career in styling, or how a styling studio functions, and whether we think it's a good choice of careers. In most cases, we're hard-pressed for both time and space and it's always difficult to come up with equally intelligent and conclusive answers to the questions.

Recently, Charles M. Jordan, who is the executive in charge of automotive design at General Motors Styling, was in our area to recruit new talent. We decided that this was a good time to get answers for many of those questions. And if anyone is qualified to answer them, Chuck is. At 38, he is No. 2 man on automobile design to William L. Mitchell, GM's Vice President in Charge of Styling, and his own personal career is a good example of what a serious, talented, young stylist can expect out of this highly competitive field.

A graduate of MIT, Chuck won the top award in the Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild model car competition back in 1947 when he was a sophomore. In 1949, he went to work for GM as a junior stylist. At 26, Chuck was appointed Chief Designer of the Special Projects Studio. In 1957, he became Chief Designer of the Cadillac Styling Studio. Chuck attained his present position in 1962 and is responsible for the exterior design of all GM cars and trucks.

BY JIM WRIGHT

CAR LIFE: Chuck, when you interview a young man who's interested in a career in styling, are there any special characteristics that you look for in him?

JORDAN: Yes, two important characteristics. No. 1, he has to be sincerely interested in automobiles. In fact, he's really got to love cars, almost be a nut about them. I'm sure you know the type—the fellow who spends almost all his time drawing pictures of cars and talking about them. He'd rather do that than anything. If he isn't really nuts about cars, he can get awfully tired working on automobiles in only a year's time. Secondly, and most important, he must have genuine creative design talent. He must have ideas that show imagination, that have an automotive feel and have a sense of good judgment and good taste. He must be able to put these ideas down on paper so they can be clearly understood. To

become a professional automotive designer, his work has to meet high design standards.

CAR LIFE: How do you usually determine this?

JORDAN: By looking at his work. His drawings will show the type of thinking he does. His sketches give a good indication of how imaginative and versatile he is in design. His more finished work is a good indication of his judgment and design taste.

CAR LIFE: How about educational background? We understand that there aren't too many schools offering a really comprehensive course in automotive design.

JORDAN: That's true. Automobile design is a specialized area in the broad field of industrial design. We presently maintain contact with more than 30 colleges and universities all over the United States that offer industrial design courses. A few are now offering

specific courses in automobile design. Over the years one school in particular has made a significant mark in the field of automobile design by offering a major and a degree in Transportation.

CAR LIFE: That would be the Art Center School in Los Angeles?

JORDAN: Right. This is certainly one of the most important schools in the field of transportation design at the present time. Our records show that more than one third of the people currently employed on our design staff are graduates of the Art Center School. There are a number of other good schools that have trained people, but not to that degree. Pratt Institute is strong, so is the Cleveland Institute of Art and several others—we have one or two designers from most of the other schools.

CAR LIFE: You mentioned earlier, before the interview started, that you

were in town to "recruit" new designers. What is the process?

JORDAN: We talk to the graduating class, review the portfolios of graduates who are interested in automotive design and then offer jobs to those who meet our design standards.

CAR LIFE: If a student has shown exceptional talent, would there be a great deal of competition between the different companies to hire him?

JORDAN: There's always a demand for talented, imaginative designers. We hire about 20 exterior and interior designers every year. It's very important in this creative business, the business of designing cars two, five, ten years ahead, to do this. We must continue to bring in a "freshman class" to keep our thinking fresh and to keep our organization alive.

CAR LIFE: You feel they bring a little more than just raw talent?

JORDAN: They bring new enthusiasm, a new viewpoint and, most important of all, new ideas.

CAR LIFE: Getting on to something else. What could a young stylist, just coming into a large organization like General Motors, expect to be working on?

JORDAN: The graduate, when he has been hired and arrives in Detroit, begins in a studio which we call the Design Development Studio. This isn't more school. It's a regular automotive studio, but security there is not as tight as in the normal, working studios. Here, he will work on specific automotive problems for a period of one month to a year—six months on the average depending on the designer's own ability and rate of progress. This is simply an opportunity for him to

shake a little of his nervousness and get his feet on the ground in a real design environment. He finds out how we work and gains self confidence so that when he goes into a studio—gets up on the firing line—he can move right in and hold up his corner of the tent.

CAR LIFE: What would his particular corner of the tent be? Is he going to get lost in among the door-handle designers, or will he have a chance to really do something?

JORDAN: Hold it right there. You just mentioned a widespread and popular misconception many people have about this business of automotive design and the number of designers we have. We don't believe in masses of designers. We don't have boards and boards full of designers turning the crank with new ideas and having them collected and sorted out. And we don't have specialists, for example, in door handles or windshields—this is all part of the designer's complete responsibility. He works on the total car. In a typical studio—our Pontiac Studio, for example—we have four designers, an assistant chief designer and a chief designer. And it's this 6-man design staff that's responsible for the exterior design of the Pontiac car, under the direction of Styling management.

CAR LIFE: Getting back to the recent graduate. Where, in Styling, would he probably be placed?

JORDAN: That would depend a great deal on the individual. We take a lot of pains and spend a lot of time to make sure that all our designers, particularly the ones with little or no experience, go to the studios that seem best suited to their talents, based on our observations made during his stay

in the Design Development Studio. He may be an Advanced Design type of guy, or he may be more interested in production designing—either interior or exterior. All through the designer's life at our place, we try to make sure that the individual is moved in the direction that will help him and further his abilities. This helps him gain more experience in areas with which he's least familiar. At the same time, we're stimulating and developing our studio thinking. It's important to make sure that the individual designer is considered above all else.

CAR LIFE: Then he does have freedom to explore his ideas and capabilities?

JORDAN: I'd say to a large extent. If it weren't for the contribution of the individual designer, we might as well close the doors of our operation. All the other areas, such as the fiberglass model room, woodshop, accounting and other departments, would have no meaning. There are more than 1400 people in our place, but everything hinges on the abilities of a relatively small team of creative designers.

CAR LIFE: What, exactly, is the function of General Motors Styling and how does it relate to the separate division activities?

JORDAN: GM Styling is a staff function in the corporation under the direction of Bill Mitchell, who is Vice President in Charge of Styling. We service the individual divisions through their own particular studios. The divisions actually are our clients. They visit their studio often and we work very closely with the divisional engineers and divisional management, in particular. The divisions as a group also are concerned with another studio

GM STYLING vice president William L. Mitchell (left) and his executive in charge of automotive design, Charles M. Jordan, confer on advanced-concept models during an exhibition at the General Motors Styling Center in Warren, Mich.



GO STYLE

in our organization called the Body Development Studio. This is where the basic architecture of the body is established and where the important elements of interchangeability are considered. In addition to divisional studios and the Body Development Studio, we also have eight Advanced Design Studios. This is where, behind closed doors without anyone looking over our shoulders, we really look ahead in design.

CAR LIFE: Tell us a little more about Advanced Design. This sounds like an area where the designer can really go.

JORDAN: Because of the locked doors, we're not afraid to try any really unusual vehicles that make sense. Our Advanced Design Studios are next door to our own Styling Research Group. This group of creative engineers and designers develop new architecture for advanced vehicles. Then the Advanced Design Studios take this architecture and develop completely new designs that fit the purpose and geometry of the vehicle. These designs are developed, refined, and turned into significant vehicles which fit a new portion of the market or influence the direction of our production design program.

CAR LIFE: How does an Advanced Design Studio work; is this sketching?

JORDAN: The sketch always comes first of course. We'll try a number of ideas in sketch form and the most promising we'll work out in scale model form. Some of them look pretty

weird at first, but we'll leave them in the front of the studio so we can have a look at them every time we walk by. Sometimes they wear well; sometimes they're freakish and we tire of them.

CAR LIFE: How about the ones that wear well; what happens to them?

JORDAN: We'll continue to develop these ideas until we're ready to build a full-size clay model. Every so often, one of these designs turns out to be a "theme car." This is not a specific car in that it's a Chevrolet, or a Cadillac, but it is a design which will be the new direction for our next major change for a series of cars.

CAR LIFE: Is a styling study, or development, like this a group effort or is it the work of a single designer?

JORDAN: We believe very strongly that the individual designers within the studio must work as a team toward a common goal. As I said, we have a small number of designers in each studio, so we encourage the individual designer to stand on his own two feet and develop his talent, his thinking and his opinions, and be a strong designer. One designer may have pinned up the sketch upon which the new front end is based, so he'll follow that part of the development. But the overall design effort, to answer your question, is that of a small, close-knit team.

CAR LIFE: Do you, more or less, just let your imaginations run wild on the advanced styling studies?

JORDAN: Of course, we're always

designing with a purpose, but at the same time one thing we've got to do in this business is have fun. This keeps it exciting, keeps the adrenalin flowing. Whenever designing cars becomes work and not fun, you might as well quit. The excitement of our business is seeing a new wild idea nurtured, developed and finally emerge as an important, influential car design.

CAR LIFE: How far ahead do you work?

JORDAN: The production studio assignments are the yearly changes to the production car. These studios work a minimum of two years ahead on these. With the basic Advanced Styling conceptions we sometimes are working as much as 10 years ahead or more.

CAR LIFE: GM used to have a traveling show called the Motorama and you always had a lot of advanced design models—show cars—in it. Whatever happened to that idea?

JORDAN: Well, we still build the show cars. A few of them are still shown to the public for their reaction, but most of them are "show cars" for ourselves, the car divisions and the corporate management. We usually keep these vehicles behind closed doors. When these vehicles are finished and right, many of them influence our production design direction. They are also used to pre-condition divisional and corporation management so that when we develop new designs for production these men have been educated to our latest design and are prepared to "buy" them. In this connection, we have developed and are developing some pretty far-out vehicles. A lot of good comes from this. We may not literally build any one of these for production, but they have a tremendous influence on what we do as far as focusing in on a specific current design problem. Here's an example. Recently we were working on a 1970 type of car in one of our advanced studios. We had gone through some things that were pretty wild until we brought them into focus. When we arrived at a point where we started to finalize our 1967 designs, we found we had borrowed so much from the 1970 approach that we had to start over on it. This is the way it should be.

CAR LIFE: Have any of the far-out concepts that Advanced Styling has done ever seen the light of day in their entirety?

JORDAN: Every once in a while. The most recent dream car turned into a reality is the Oldsmobile Toronado. Neither corporation nor division management asked us to undertake this one. It started out as a hot, full-sized rendering that our designers in Oldsmobile Studios worked out for fun. It caught everyone's imagination so we went ahead and developed it into a full-sized clay model. When the Olds-

THE MEN behind the GM cars: From left are chief designers David R. Hollis, Buick studio; Stanley R. Wilen, Oldsmobile studio; Irvin W. Rybicki, Chevrolet; Stanley F. Parker, Cadillac studio; Paul W. Gillan, advanced automotive and overseas programs; Jack N. Humbert, Pontiac studio; and Charles M. Jordan, executive in charge of Automotive Design.



GM PHOTOGRAPHIC

mobile people came to us with their front-wheel-drive concept, we were all ready for them with a design that we felt was right and we sold the design to Oldsmobile with little change.

CAR LIFE: You had to sell the idea?

JORDAN: We certainly did. When you talk about a new car, you're talking about a great deal of money and production facilities, so the design has to be right. Divisional and corporate management must believe there is a need for this car and that the design is right. The best way to do this with a really new concept is to design in full-sized clay over the right architecture, cast it in plaster and finish a fiberglass model in paint and chrome, just like a real car. We take the car outside (in our secure viewing yard), look at it and compare it with vehicles we know. This gives us a chance to evaluate our

design and when we're ready, we show it to the right people. There are many checkpoints along the way, but this is the best way to sell a styling design because it's complete and it's understandable. We've done a lot of advanced vehicles of this type and are doing more of them right now. Some will never see the light of day; some will, but we always try to be prepared to meet a new design opportunity and to keep our design direction steady and moving in a logical, clear direction.

CAR LIFE: Chuck, do you have any advice for the young man interested in this fascinating field?

JORDAN: We were talking earlier about a young designer and what he could expect in a big organization like General Motors. The young designer is limited only by the scope of his own thinking. Lots of people think,

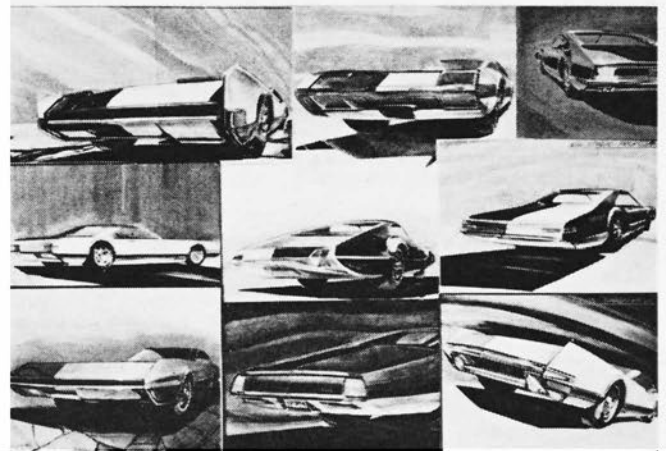
boy, you get into a place like GM Styling and you immediately become lost, or you're put off in some corner working on details for five years. Obviously this is not the case. We are particularly zealous about maintaining the caliber of operation we have, where the individual is important. We have *esprit de corps* at GM Styling you can't buy with money. It has been developed over many years. I believe this spirit helps make ours the most exciting business in the world.

In reality, car design takes a lot of hard work, but it never seems like work. The individual can progress in this business of automobile design as rapidly as his education and talent will let him. We offer a lot of opportunity and financial reward for the guy who'll step up and take responsibility; the guy who'll grab the ball and run with it. ■

The Toronado Takes Shape

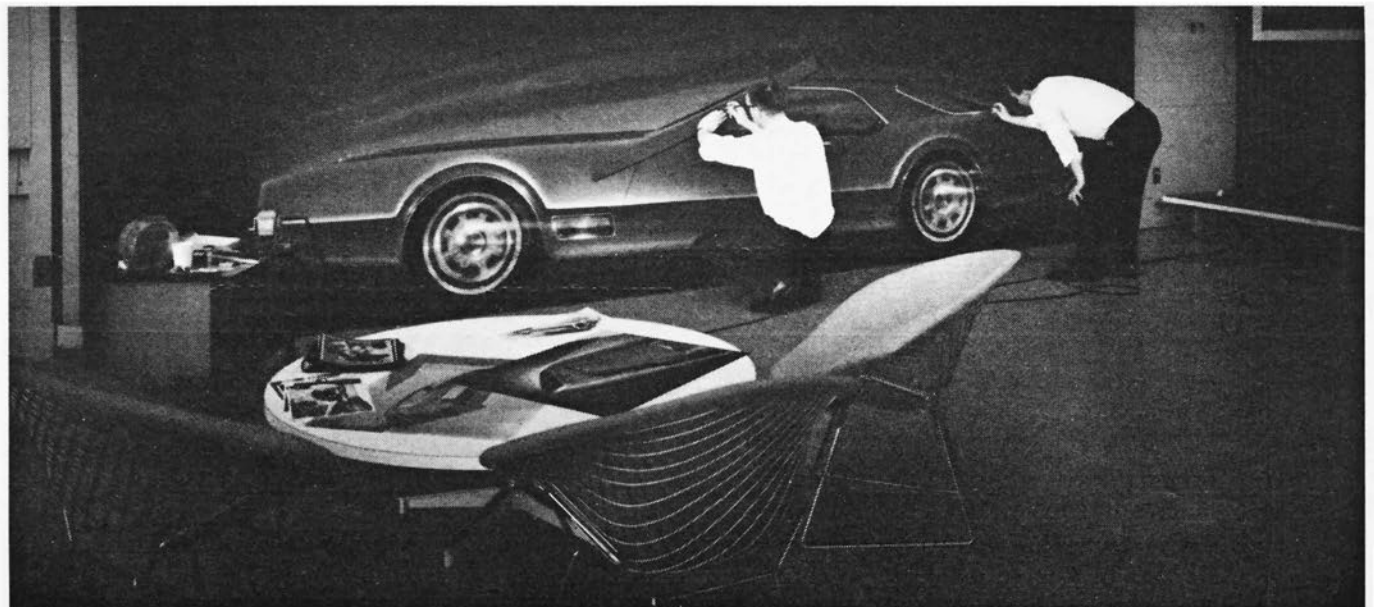


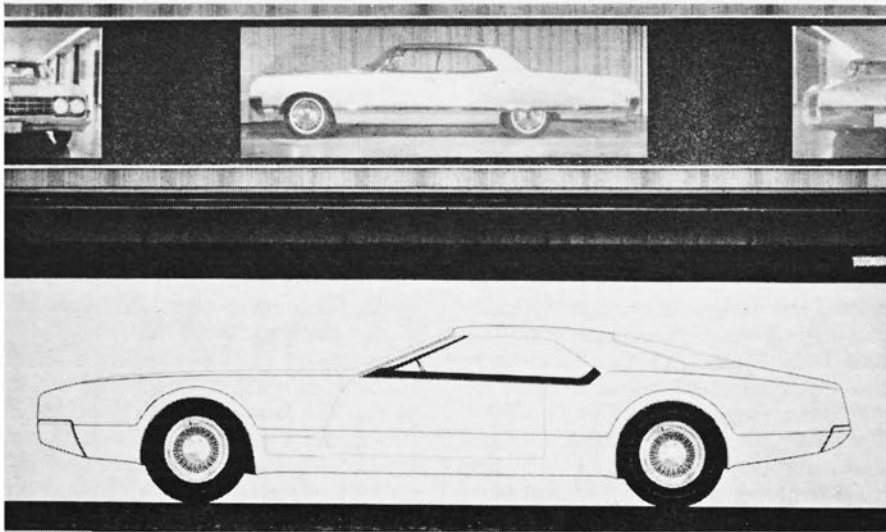
TORONADO BEGAN as a "dream" car in early '62 in Oldsmobile studio; preliminary sketches gave it direction and shape.



OLDS STUDIO stylists submitted varied treatments of front and rear ends for the "sophisticated sports car" project.

FULL-SIZE "red rendering" of yet-to-be Toronado earned admiration and go-ahead from GM Styling management.





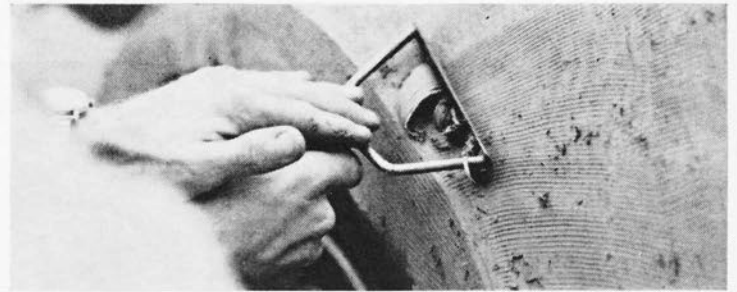
ARCHITECTURAL DRAWING came off the red rendering, gave engineers and modelers their first definite dimensions for arrangement of seating, mechanical packages.



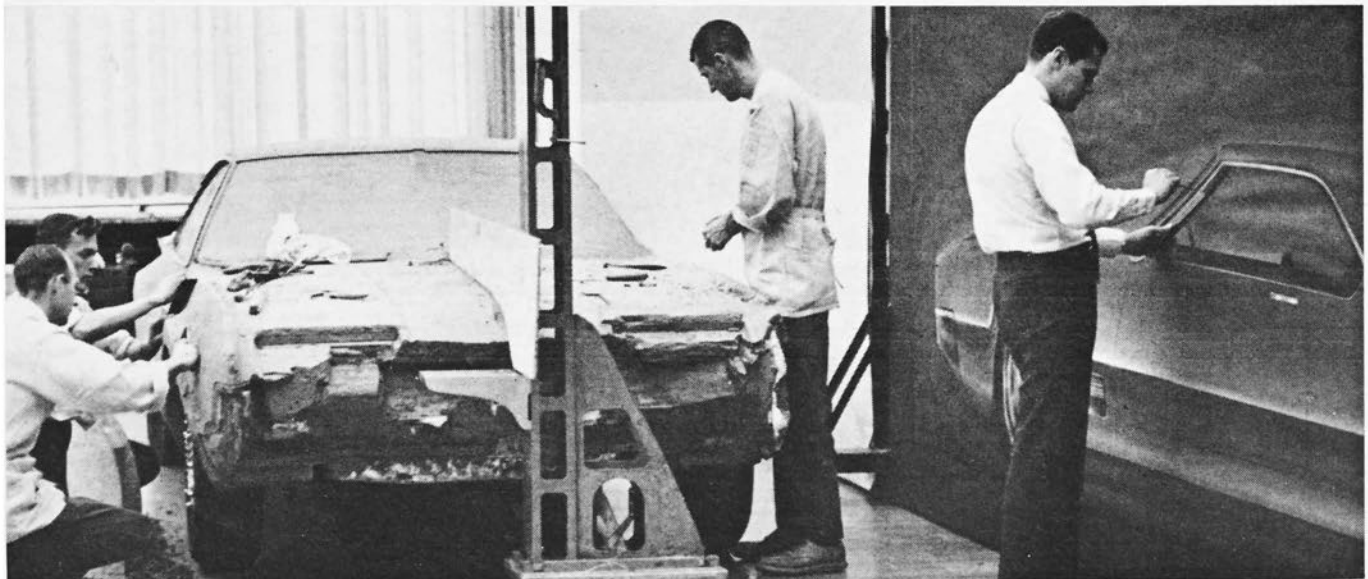
HUMAN ELEMENTS were carefully checked for proper headroom and legroom.



FIRST CLAY model was in quarter-scale, gave first complete look at the original contours.



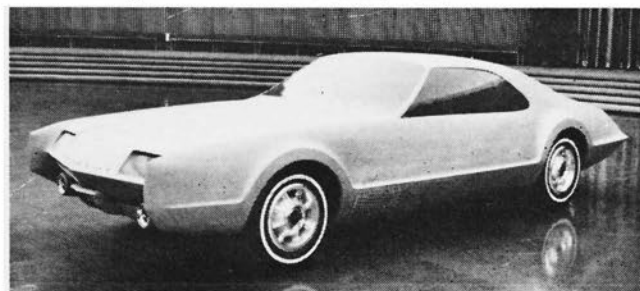
STYLING STUDIO clay modeler uses a scraper to rough out wheelhouse humps on Toronado's exterior.



MODELERS AND stylists take measurements directly off rendering and transfer them to full-sized clay.

FIRST FULL-sized clay presentation had many features changed in later Toronado development.

FINAL CLAY model also underwent changes. At this point the car carries "Starfire" nameplates.

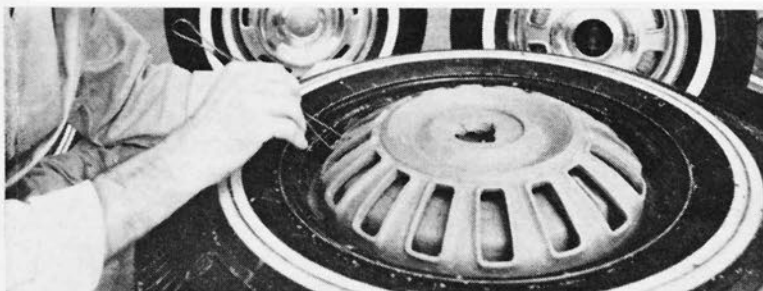




ENGINEERING considerations were checked as front-drive Tornado took shape.



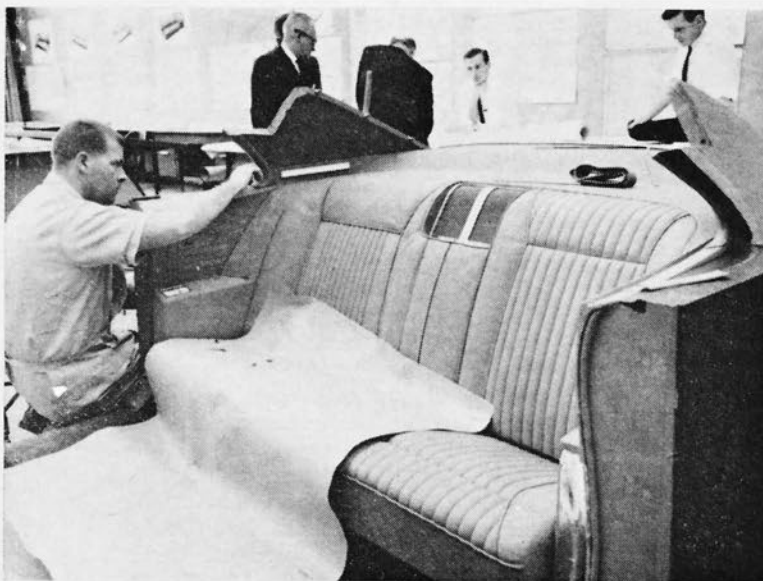
OLDS STUDIO designers discuss Tornado developments with Stan Wilen, left, chief designer, at one of the many evaluation conferences.



EVEN WHEEL shapes are first modeled in clay. Visible are three variations; one at right rear was chosen.



MODELER details stoplights in first full-sized clay version of the Tornado. This design was rejected.



SEAT AND upholstery styling also are done in clay, even to wrinkles in the material.

FIBERGLASS fabrication of body panels was done on dummy chassis, reviewed in mid-'63.



DOOR PANELS are styled, too. Chromed parts are simulated by foil-covering the clay.

FINAL FIBERGLASS version of Tornado still had several variations from production model; note radial-spoked wire wheels.

