



COMPACT CAVALIER offers complete exterior body panel interchangeability which can cut both tooling and consumer costs.

SWINGERS ON PLYMOUTH ROAD?

American Motors May Find that Getting There is Half the Fun!

BY GENE BOOTH

UNCONVENTIONAL. THOUGH it may seem, there is a great deal of merit to be found in the plastic Project IV idea cars which American Motors has been parading about the countryside. It's not that the idea of show cars is unconventional, for that is an established way of life among auto-makers. Rather, it is the overall concept that surrounds the Project IV effort with its aura of nonconformity and, hence, excitement. Like Berkeley intellectuals and Warhol movies, it is a surface manifestation of an underground sentiment that could herald a different tomorrow.

People are "turned on" in the presence of the four cars, though three of them are merely fiberglass shells. The fourth (actually the first) is the AMX that first cast its psychedelic spell last January at a SAE convention. The AMX, too, had been a plastic shell, but now is a fully operable demonstrator built by Bertone in Italy. And, having the original AMX on the road, in the metal, is decidedly exciting in it-

self because it proves that such a car can be more than a hallucination.

It was only 10 months ago, shortly before the AMX debut, that work was begun on the three newer cars. One was to become a less radical refinement of the AMX theme, a specialty car which could be commercially feasible to build and appealing enough to sell. This was the AMX II, continuing the original's character, but without such unique features as the modernistic "Ramble" seat.

The two other cars, however, were of a differing concept. These were meant to explore an uncharted (for American Motors) area in production techniques. The basis for this investigation was, as it always must be for a mass marketing automaker, a 4-door sedan which came to be called the Cavalier. A follow-on 2-door coupe of much sportier appearance, christened Vixen, was added, once the engineering hardpoints for Cavalier had been established.

Preliminary work for the three cars

was confined to the tight little studios of Styling Vice President Richard A. Teague until the full paper program had been worked out. Then, with work on clay models about to begin, the project was presented to top management along with a budget request. Reaction to the presentation, accompanied by high hopes but none too great expectations, surprised several old hands around AM headquarters: It was approved.

SEVERAL FACTORS had to be taken into consideration, however. Foremost was the fact that the original program and initial objectives were to be a limited-cost investigation, a low-key exercise for internal assessment of potential styling and production ideas. There was only the remote thought that the program might be given public exposure.

Several pressures reached uncomfortable levels for AM management about that time. Plunging sales and disappearing profits were undermining

that elusive thing called public confidence. The corporation, in efforts to stave off such developments, already had tooled up for a new V-8 engine and was busily planning future changes for its cars. It became necessary to mortgage its plants and borrow \$50 million to pump into a greatly speeded up program of product development. And Robert B. Evans appeared.

ATTRACTED BY rock-bottom stock prices and possessed of a financier's emotionless perspective, Evans purchased an overwhelming block of AM shares to become majority stockholder. A wealthy man, he had built up a reputation of reviving companies that had found themselves skidding downhill. His appearance, coming just prior to the annual shareholders' meeting, helped generate virtual revolt against the corporate management among the small share-owners. In the space of a few short weeks, Evans became chairman of the board.

The 1967 production cars already were irrevocably committed, save for those few last-minute details that always crop up, and they would be revealed as thoroughly new cars. That part of the styling studio's job had been completed almost a year earlier. Since the deadline for completion of the '68 line was still a few months away, Teague's troops could make some time available to concentrate on the futuristic project.

By the time the Project IV clay mockups were completed, a decision had been made to expand the program. In making public the advanced work,

it was felt, confidence in the corporation's future could be restored. Beyond that, if public opinion feedback about the cars was carefully handled, it could serve as a valuable market research program. The name—Project IV—was selected and a 6-city national showing scheduled.

The successful launching of the Mustang by Ford, coming after a series of teaser cars unveiled by the styling studios, must have been still fresh in the AM corporate mind. In words recalling that bit of marketing genius, AM President Roy Abernethy would unveil Project IV as a subject for advance sampling of consumer opinion, to test the reaction of various community style-setters toward these departures from standardized design. "While these concepts are not being shown as actual prototypes," Abernethy cautioned, "we do expect that the reactions to our innovations will have substantial bearing on future design and engineering decisions."

AS IT TURNED OUT, Teague's stylists and the body engineers barely managed to finish the fourth car, Vixen, in time for the unveiling. Although additional duty, it was work that generated an unusual level of pride and sense of accomplishment. The task was tackled with so much gusto that, Teague later reported, "we had trouble getting people to go home and get some rest." By the time the show cars went out the door, however, it was time for the final wrap-up on the 1968 production cars.

Such a sequence of events invites speculation about just how remote the

cars—Cavalier in particular—are from being prototypes. The forthcoming '67 American is little more than a face-lift because it will be only the third year of the body cycle for that car. An all-new American normally shouldn't be expected before the '68 model year, despite the domestic sales decline during the past year. And the American maintains a good sales position in the world market, AM officials claim.

ABERNETHY ADMITS the Cavalier "offers interesting possibilities for the world market," having the compact dimensions and trimness "ideally suited" for overseas buyers. Along with size (108-in. wheelbase, 175-in. overall), Cavalier is an approach to realizing complete exterior body panel interchangeability while achieving a pleasantly appealing appearance. In some underdeveloped world markets (and marketing systems), such a concept could be most attractive. Where parts inventory and body repairs are a consideration, it is an obvious advantage. And, Abernethy suggests, initially there is the potential of slashing body tooling costs as much as 25%.

Fender panels are interchangeable, left front to right rear and diagonally opposite. Hood and rear deck lids are identical, as are front and rear bumpers. All four doors are produced from two sets of dies, instead of four, and switch diagonally. As packaged by Teague's modelers, the resulting car is visually reminiscent of the current Corvair, which could hardly be considered drab. Cavalier's vinyl-covered roof is 50 in. from the ground, contains an integral rollbar at the door-

VIVACIOUS VIXEN uses quarter panels identical to Cavalier's, but 1 ft. in length is added at front during stamping process.



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latching center pillar, and displays a curtain-side rear quarter which drops the rear window to the deck sufficiently short to allow the long deck lid.

Of particular interest in the Cavalier is the unique rear deck lid mounting. Dual scissor-type hinges permit it to either hinge open normally or to lift horizontally to the height of the roof panel to allow the carrying of bulky objects. This novel design, like the AMX's resurrected rumble seat, testifies to some original thinking on the subject of vehicle adaptability.

THE NEXT STEP from Cavalier is the much sportier Vixen, which utilizes the same chassis and dimensions and is an extension of the interchangeability idea. Windshield and cowl are relocated 12 in. farther back and an interesting Porsche-like tunnel roof is grafted to the lower body. Front quarter panels are identical to Cavalier's, except for an additional 1 ft. accomplished by the simple technique of "long-sheeting" on the same stamping equipment. Rear quarter panels are unchanged. Similarly, the front hood

is 1 ft. longer—and carries an air scoop which could be functional. The Cavalier rear deck lid is carried over. Doors also are long-sheeted to fill the gap.

It is the distinctive roof that changes Vixen into a traffic-stopper. Large louvers in the wide rear quarter pillars, cut at a 45° angle, effectively de-blind that area for the driver. Inside, a sliding glass cover opens the slots for cabin ventilation. For the show model, a deeply concave rear window makes sun glare nonexistent and, with the rear deck colored a nonglare black, seems to disappear completely.

AMX appears to be the most diminutive, though it is, in fact, longer and wider than either Cavalier or Vixen. The one-off sportster, little altered from the original show model (*CL*, April), is finished with Old World craftsmanship in supple leathers and polished walnut. It is powered by AM's 290-cu. in. V-8, which could just as easily be installed in any of the Project IV cars, should they ever reach production.

More feasible for actual production, AMX II is somewhat larger. Wheelbase, at 110 in., is 12 in. longer and overall length is stretched 8 in. to 197 in. Width is the same 72 in., but height

has been raised 3 in. to 51 in. A full size trunk is more practical (and less costly) than the Ramble seat and front end sheet metal is greatly simplified.

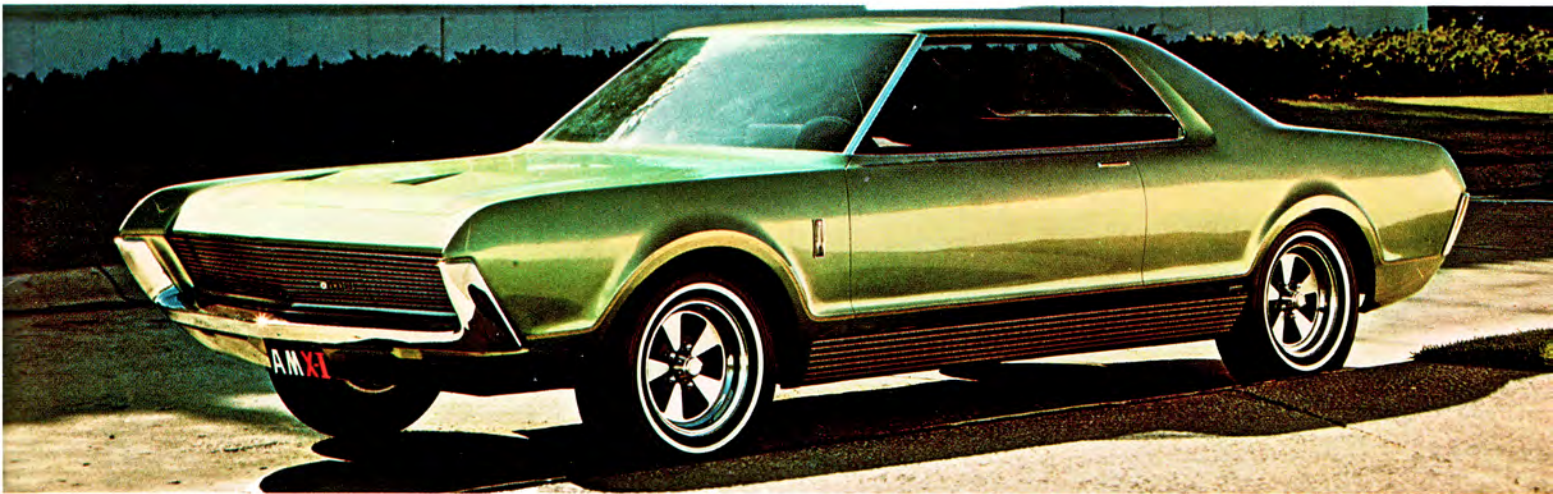
WHETHER OR NOT Project IV turns out to be the '68 production, the cars have accomplished a great deal for American Motors. During the six showings, all were greeted with great interest and enthusiasm. Cavalier in particular drew an unexpectedly warm reaction for a 4-door sedan, and AM marketing analysts would seem to have a wealth of response with which to work. The public tour is expected to be expanded to encompass college campuses and auto shows through the fall of the year, adding still more cross-section to the opinion sampling. But the overwhelming aspect of Project IV is its tangible evidence of a change of direction at AM, a turn back onto the road to progress. Now the company seems to recognize that cars should be fun, have a little mystique, really swing. And while it is encouraging to find out that people in the Plymouth Road general offices of AM are beginning to have a little fun, it's most heartening to know that they recognize that, on this particular trip, getting there also is half the battle. ■

AUTOMOTIVE CREATIVITY is expressed in the AMX, transferred from plastic proposal to metal reality by builder Bertone in Italy.





LARGELY AN exercise in engineering and cost analysis, the Cavalier has a good chance to reach domestic and foreign markets.



CONTINUING THE original's sporting flair, AMX II represents a commercially feasible, ultimately salable automobile.

AMC'S SLEEPLESS nights, enthusiasm and limited funds for product development paid off handsomely in the sleek styling of the Vixen.

