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BEHIND THE WHEEL

Way, Way Off Broadway, New York Auto Show Will Go On

By LAWRENCE ULRICH

THE cars and the styles may change and the fortunes of automakers may rise and fall. But one tradition remains sacrosanct at the New York International Auto Show: out-of-towners cracking jokes about how the only cars that matter to the locals are yellow taxicabs or black Town Cars.

This year's show, which opens to the public on Friday after two days of media previews, will feature the latest in DIY designs — that is, drive-it-yourself — in a city better known for back-seat and below-ground transportation.

In fact, New York's ubiquitous yellow cab will play a bigger role this year than simply hauling showgoers to and from the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center. Coinciding with the 2007 centennial of the modern taxi in New York, the "Taxi 07" exhibit will include eight cars and showcase prototypes for taxis of the future. The fare includes two Kia Rondo taxi prototypes, including one that could reach production within a year, with features including an integrated child seat, a motorized access seat for people with limited mobility, high-visibility roof lighting and easy-to-clean floors.

Also on display are a [Toyota Sienna](#) minivan taxi with a motorized seat and a [Chrysler PT Cruiser](#) taxi prototype powered by a lithium-ion battery pack. A taxi from Standard Taxi of Troy, Mich., is functional if not pretty — it has all the styling élan of a Soviet-bloc truck from the '60s. It has seating for four in the rear along with space for a wheelchair, walker or stroller.

Minus the meters, roughly two dozen cars and trucks will make their world premieres or American debuts during the show's media previews on Wednesday and Thursday. Many will go on sale by year-end, and will help to determine whether the industry can rebound from a sluggish 2006. In auto show exit surveys, roughly half the attendees say they plan to buy a new car within a year.

This year's contenders include the Infiniti G37 coupe, a stronger 330-horsepower follow-up to the popular G35. The 2008 model goes on sale in August, with technology options including four-wheel steering and a hard drive for music storage. For Nissan, whose sales have slumped in the United States and Japan after several years of breathtaking growth, the G coupe and sedan are important and profitable, accounting for half of Infiniti's American sales.

Ford will unveil the Flex, a three-row crossover based on the Fairlane concept of 2005. Ford is calling the version in New York a concept car, but a production model is expected to reach dealers in 2008, with conventional side doors rather than the center-opening doors of the Fairlane.

Chevrolet will show three concept minicars from its South Korean design studio, including the Trax, a boxy bulldog-faced crossover with a frugal 1-liter 4-cylinder engine.

A larger 2008 [Mercedes-Benz C-Class](#) will also make its first United States appearance. Mercedes hopes the redesigned sedan will offer tougher competition against the [BMW 3 Series](#) in the compact luxury class. Two distinct versions, called the Luxury and the Sport, will reach dealerships in August.

In addition to the latest four-wheel art, showgoers can see the two-dimensional variety at nearby Drive-In Studios on 18th Street, where a series of Mercedes paintings by [Andy Warhol](#) will be exhibited from Friday through May 4. Commissioned by the automaker in the mid-1980s, a few years before Warhol's death, the subjects include the 1955 Streamliner racer and the 300SL Gullwing.

A grittier exhibit will be found in front of the Javits Center, in the form of a giant 45,000-square-foot outdoor sandbox: Camp Jeep will let showgoers ride shotgun in Jeeps to demonstrate their off-road ability, including fording water and climbing an 18-foot hill. Jeep hopes to guide more than 35,000 riders through 220 cubic yards of dirt and mulch trucked in for the course.

A committed subway-and-train rider might wonder what S.U.V. hijinks have to do with urban transportation needs. And for a city that has begun to debate whether to mimic London's congestion pricing plan — charging drivers to enter heavily trafficked parts of Manhattan, on top of existing bridge and tunnel tolls — the show itself highlights a simultaneous dependence on, and ambivalence toward, the automobile.

That relationship has led some out-of-towners to call New York a city of car haters. But the opposite might be true: New York motorists must be the nation's most ardent car lovers, considering the hardships they accept — the scarce and exorbitant parking, the gridlock, the inevitable tickets and some of the nation's highest insurance rates — for the pleasure of driving a car and the freedom to escape the city on a whim.

Los Angeles may have its freeways, Detroit and Chicago their treacherous winter ice, but those cities remain relative paradises for owning and maintaining a car.

And contrary to the stereotype, the New York area does embrace millions of car owners, hundreds of dealerships and a sizable contingent of car-crazy types who read about, buy, collect, customize, race or restore automobiles.

First held in 1900, the New York show is the oldest and best-attended auto show in the nation. While the Detroit and Los Angeles shows feature more high-profile debuts, New York has had some historic unveilings, including the 1954 Mercedes 300SL Gullwing; the original 1964 [Ford Mustang](#); and the United States debut of the 1961 Jaguar E-Type.

The nearly 1,000 vehicles on the show floor will range from the ethanol-driven Saab BioPower 100

concept to the new heavy-duty Dodge Ram pickups, whose Cummins diesel engine, using Mercedes's Bluetec emissions technology, has achieved 2010 federal truck pollution standards in all 50 states, three years ahead of schedule.

Highlights among production and concept vehicles will include:

The Maserati GranTurismo, a Pininfarina-designed four-seat grand-touring car that will cost roughly \$130,000 and take on the [Bentley Continental GT](#) when it goes on sale in September.

The 2008 [GMC Yukon](#) Hybrid, which introduces General Motors' two-mode hybrid system, developed with DaimlerChrysler and BMW. The full-size hybrid S.U.V. goes on sale late this year.

The 2008 xD from Toyota's Scion division. The five-door subcompact goes on sale in August, along with the second-generation of the xB, a less angular take on the trendsetting boxy design of the original.

Subaru's redesigned all-wheel-drive WRX and a new version of the car it is based on, the compact Impreza.

The Lexus LX 570, the third generation of the full-size luxury S.U.V., which adopts the mighty 5.7-liter V-8 from the new [Toyota Tundra](#) pickup.

The ultraexclusive Bentley Brooklands coupe — only 550 will be made starting in spring 2008 — offering a twin-turbocharged 6.75-liter V-8 with 530 horsepower.

The Hyundai Genesis, a concept version of a rear-drive premium sport sedan that Hyundai intends to produce, continuing its move toward more upscale cars. The Genesis will have Hyundai's first V-8.

The Dodge Demon concept, shown in Geneva in March, which could presage an affordable rear-drive 4-cylinder sports car in the vein of the Mazda Miata and Saturn Sky.

Infiniti's EX concept, a crossover wagon to go on sale by year-end. The production version is expected to feature front, side and rear cameras to reduce blind spots, along with an advanced lane-departure warning system.

The Callaway C16 Cabrio, a \$120,000 supercharged sports car based on the sixth-generation 'Vette.

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