

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/chi-0704040946apr05.1.540339.story?ctrack=1&cset=true>

NATION

Bells and whistles for a better taxi

A quest for more rider-friendly cabs leads to innovative designs at NYC exhibit

By Stevenson Swanson
Tribune national correspondent

April 5, 2007

NEW YORK -- Imagine a taxi that's easy to get into and out of. Imagine a taxi with an extra-large sunroof to let light stream in. Imagine a taxi that runs on electricity.

Those aren't impossible dreams. They could roll down the streets of New York -- and other American cities -- in the near future.

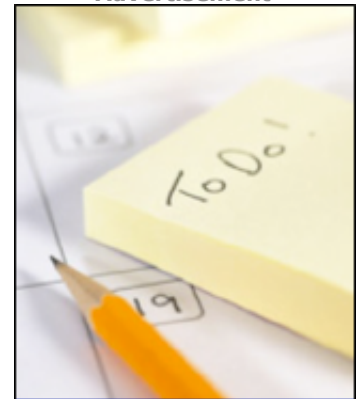
It may be a stretch to say that the taxi prototypes on display outside the Jacob Javits Convention Center here would make a cab ride fun. But at a minimum, a trip in one of these remodeled taxis would no longer be the knee-squeezing, teeth-gritting undertaking that it is currently, whether in New York, Chicago or almost any other U.S. city.

"It's time to have a cab that says where we are in 2007 as a city," said Deborah Marton, executive director of New York's Design Trust for Public Space, which organized the exhibit of innovative taxis as part of the New York International Auto Show opening Thursday. "The taxi is already an icon of New York, but it could also stand for sustainability, access for all and great design."

NYC has 13,000 taxis

The exhibit, called "Taxi '07," is part of the celebration of the New York taxi's 100th birthday and is the latest installment of a project started two years ago by the non-profit Design Trust to "re-imagine" the taxi system, from the design

Advertisement



Shorten your to-do list with the leading email marketing solution for small business.



of the vehicles to much more far-reaching proposals about how taxis could be dispatched to high-demand areas or routed around traffic jams and accidents.

Try it Free for 60 Days

New York has about 13,000 taxis, the largest fleet in the country, followed by Chicago with about 7,000 cabs. Some 80 percent of New York's cabs are Ford Crown Victorias, a model that is nearly 30 years old and, as Marton diplomatically put it, has "reached the limits of its potential." The vehicles reportedly get about 10 miles to the gallon in taxi use, and are driven without passengers about 50 percent of the time.

"How we think about sustainability has changed," Marton said. "It's past the point where we can let 13,000 cars run around with low mileage."

The taxi designs on display range from simple modifications of existing vehicles to a complete redesign, a "purpose-built" taxi designed from the wheels up to be a cab.

A Toyota Sienna, a mini-van that is already in limited use as a New York taxi, had a motorized seat that swings out of the vehicle and lowers a rider to the sidewalk. That change addresses a common complaint about the vehicle's higher floor, which makes it harder to get in and out of, especially for elderly passengers.

The hood of a Chrysler PT Cruiser was propped open to show off its lithium-battery-powered engine. The zero-emission vehicle, which has a projected range of 120 miles between charges and a top speed of 80 miles an hour, is being tested on New York streets.

A small SUV, the Kia Rondo, underwent a more thorough transformation, with a pushed-back rear seat to give passengers more leg room, a flip-down child seat, a rear-facing front passenger seat, and a large sunroof that takes up almost all of the roof. Unlike the Toyota and Chrysler models, the Kia is strictly a design exercise at this point.

'An improved taxi experience'

"We're hoping that people are inspired and see the opportunities for an improved taxi experience," said Tim Kennedy, director of industrial design at Smart Design, the New York firm in charge of the Kia makeover.

The Kia and Toyota designs are relatively straightforward compared to the Standard Taxi, a boxy vehicle that resembles a yellow Hummer.

Designed with suggestions from taxicab fleet operators and municipal officials from a variety of cities, the Standard Taxi features a spacious interior that almost feels like the inside of a stretch limo, with the driver sitting in a partitioned enclosure to provide room for a wheelchair or stroller in the space usually occupied by the front passenger seat.

The large trunk is designed to hold four golf club bags -- requested by Las Vegas cabdrivers who have to haul large parties of golfers -- and still have room for a full-size spare tire, to comply with an Atlanta taxi regulation. A retractable ramp pulls out from the back passenger entryway for wheelchairs.

Despite its radical appearance, the Standard is in some ways highly conventional, according to Marc Klein, president of the Vehicle Production Group LLC, a start-up company headed by Patton Corrigan, chairman of Chicago's Yellow Cab Co.

The Standard was designed with interchangeable door panels, many readily available standardized parts, and a widely used General Motors engine and transmission that can run on gas or be modified to use natural gas. Those features are meant to make repairs easier and more affordable for owners of large taxi fleets.

Futuristic customized cabs might be thought-provoking, but they're not necessarily practical.

"You don't want a newfangled anything," said Klein, who says the company hopes to start producing the cab by fall 2008. "You want something tried and true."

soswanson@tribune.com

Copyright © 2007, [Chicago Tribune](#)