

Evolution of cars from 1970s-2010 essay

[Business](#), [Industries](#)



The automobile industry is known for its constant remodeling and change from year to year. While there are not generally drastic changes, there are societal and cultural changes that affect the styling of the automobiles that companies produce. Beginning in the 1970's there were drastic changes in society that completely altered the products' car companies were distributing, such as the change from muscle cars to smaller fuel efficient economy cars. As time progressed the evolution of popular cars such as the station wagon, minivan, and SUV, were influenced by social, political, and economic factors that inevitably dictated the progression of the automobile industry. The 1970's were an era of fuel price increases, and increased awareness for the many facets of the automobile such as safety concerns and emission control.

The 1973 oil crisis was the most affecting instance in the 1970's to the automotive market, as well as the first real market crash since the Great Depression. The oil crisis occurred when the members of Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries, or OPEC, proclaimed an oil embargo in response to the U. S. decision to resupply the Israeli military during the Yom Kippur war.

In response, OPEC members agreed to use their leverage over the world's oil price setting to raise world oil prices. This action followed several years of steep income declines after the failure of negotiations with the major Western oil companies earlier that month. (State. ov) This had a profound effect on the world economy, because industrialized economies relied on crude oil, and OPEC was their predominant supplier. The 1973 oil crisis renewed emphasis on economy of vehicle operation, especially in the United

States with its greater distances, arguably the nation hardest hit because of the prevalence of large, fuel thirsty cars. At the same time, new emissions and safety regulations were being implemented requiring major and costly changes to domestic vehicle design and construction. Attempts were made to manufacture electric cars, but they were unsuccessful because of the lacking technology.

The energy crisis was the largest energy crisis Americans had experienced at that time, causing restrictions on when people could fill up their tanks.

Depending on the ending letter or number of a person's license plate correlated with days in the week which they were allowed to fill up; this limit on gasoline caused lines at the gas station that would go on for miles. Those who also used oil for other things, such as heating, felt the rising cost to live by the same standards that they were accustomed to.

In response to the lack of fuel consumers began purchasing smaller cars. New emissions and safety regulations were also being implemented, requiring major and costly changes to domestic vehicle design and construction. The first response by domestic American car makers included the FR layout cars, the AMC Gremlin, Chevrolet Vega, and Ford Pinto. AMC was determined to have the first subcompact offering and 1970 AMC Gremlin sales began six months ahead of the all-new 1971 models from GM and Ford. (How Stuff Works) The Gremlin used the AMC Hornet's existing design with a shortened wheelbase and "chopped" tail, and had an important low price advantage (Sagert). The Chevrolet Vega was introduced in September 1970 which was GM's first subcompact, economy car. Nearly two million were sold

over its seven-year production run, due in part to its low price and fuel economy. The Ford Pinto was introduced one day after the Vega.

It was small, economical, and a top seller; however, it was proven to have design and safety issues. The editors at Consumer's Guide say that The Pinto made Time magazine's "The 50 worst cars of all-time list" because it tended to erupt in flames when involved in rear end collisions. Several Ford company memos presented as evidence during civil trials revealed that discussions regarding fixing this problem occurred, but it was decided that to shut down production and retool would be too expensive. Most damaging to Ford were memos found and published by author/researcher Mark Dowie in the magazine Mother Jones that detailed a cost analysis of corporate liability in the event of having to compensate crash victims. The "Ford Pinto memo" ruthlessly calculated the cost of reinforcing the rear end, \$121 million, versus the potential payout to victims, \$50 million (Worst Car's of All Time). In the United States, imported cars became a significant factor for the first time, and several domestic-built subcompact models entered the market. European car design underwent major changes during the 1970's due to the need for performance with high fuel efficiency.

Designs such as the Volkswagen Golf and Passat, BMW 3, 5 and 7 series, and Mercedes Benz S-Class appeared at the latter half of the decade. The designs of Giorgetto Giugiaro became dominant, along with those of Marcello Gandini in Italy. These smaller more streamlined cars took over the market because of their fuel efficiency as well as its innovative design for the time (Volkswagen). The Japanese automobile industry also flourished during the

1970's compared to other major auto industries. It took off during this time as its popularity and market exponentially increased within a short amount of time. Japanese vehicles became internationally renowned for their affordability, reliability, and fuel efficiency, which had a high appeal to American customers due to the oil embargo. Japanese car manufacturing became proficient in its computerized robotic manufacturing techniques as well as lean manufacturing, a production practice that considers the expenditure of resources for any goal other than the creation of value for the end customer to be wasteful, contributing to a target for elimination and this contributed to high-efficiency and low production costs.

(Bailey) Popular cars include the Honda Civic, which was introduced in 1973, and sold at record numbers due to its high fuel efficiency, as well as the Toyota Corolla, still a very popular car. Other companies that became prominent during this time Subaru, Mitsubishi, and Mazda. The influence that the political aspects of the 1973 oil crisis as well as the increase in imported cars effectively caused cultural changes that allowed the common car to progressively change from the hatchback station wagon, to a minivan, to the present day standard the SUV. Many station wagons were actually high end models, with numerous options. By the end of the decade, the station wagon was firmly ensconced as the family vehicle of choice. By the early 50's, wooden wagon bodies had disappeared and were replaced by the more practical all steel body that were built on a truck chassis.

This meant the body of the car was bigger and resembled more of a truck than it did in the 1960's when the bodies of the cars that were being

manufactured were longer, lower, and more powerful. These compact station wagons, such as Ford's Falcon and the Chrysler Valiant brought new options to the market. Almost immediately following the introduction of the compact wagon was the mid-size wagon such as the Ford Fairlane. The last of the popular station wagons, was the 1972 Oldsmobile Vista Cruiser, which introduced a unique raised roof with a fixed glass sunroof and glass side panels. The station wagon represented a period in time which was known for its counterculture, and when the station wagon originated it was the essences of counterculture with the VW station wagon, but as time progressed and the more popular it became, it morphed into the family car of America. Naturally, as most things do, when the switch from a counterculture car that embodied the notions of drugs and free love, to a family car, the station wagon lost its counterculture market, but held on to the middle class traditional American family. This market carried over into the 1980's with the emergence of the minivan. In 1984 Chrysler's minivan put a stake into the heart of the wagon market; it instantaneously became the vehicle of choice family transport.

Its popularity grew because customers were attempting to escape the "mom mobile" station wagons they were brought up with. As all cases the upcoming generation wants to lead their own lives with as little carry over from their lives growing up to the new lives they are trying to build on their own. Because cars are a standard in the American image, this was one thing that this new generation of the 1980's needed to have their own staple car. It was now seen as less of a purely functional purchase and more of a blend of function and image statement. Ironically, the backlash against station

wagons that started with the minivan is now hitting back at the minivan - now the minivan is the 'mom-mobile', and style-conscious buyers are swarming to SUVs or sporty station wagons instead. The wagon died out as a result of the growing popularity of the minivan and increasing truck sales. The minivan became accepted as a far more practical vehicle to move people than a full-size wagon and the sales levels reached a level that the manufactures lost interest.

This coupled with the manufactures need to increase the rear wheel drive capacity to build trucks meant the end for the full size, rear wheel drive wagon. The '80's also marked the era of the front wheel drive car. Chrysler switched over almost entirely to FWD, and rear-wheel drive, the previous standard, became a much smaller section of the market (Manning). While the full & mid-size wagons faded, the imports came on strong. A large variety of wagons were available in almost every imported car line. You could get a compact Honda Civic station wagon, for example, or a Nissan Maxima. As the decade progressed all-wheel drive became a common option on station wagons during the 1980's.

Available on most Subaru, the wagon version of the Honda Civic, the AMC Eagle, and others; this shift in preference was almost a foreshadowing of the four-wheel drive SUV craze of the 1990's (Manning). The 1990's also produced the first inklings of the 'hybrid' wagon/SUV; more wagon like in styling, but with a car chassis, four-wheel drive, and a tougher off-road stance. It was first popular as the Subaru Outback, but as it proved a viable investment other companies such as Volvo and Audi jumped on the

bandwagon with crossover vehicles. Buyers were drawn to SUVs' large cabins, higher ride height, and perceived safety. Full-size SUVs often offered features such as three-row seating, to effectively replace full-size station wagons and minivans. Wagons were seen as old-fashioned. Additionally, full-size SUVs have greater towing capabilities than conventional cars, and can haul trailers, and boats. Increased ground clearance is useful in climates with heavy snowfall.

The very low oil prices of the 1990s helped to keep down running costs. The SUV's image of utility may partly explain its popularity, not least among some women, who constitute more than half of all SUV drivers. SUV was one of the most popular choices of vehicle for female drivers in the U.

S (Bradsher). Sales of SUVs and other light trucks fell in the mid-2000s because of high oil prices and declining economy. In June 2008, General Motors announced plans to close four truck and SUV plants, including the Oshawa Truck Assembly (Krisher).

The company cited decreased sales of large vehicles in the wake of rising fuel prices. The business model of focusing on SUVs and light trucks, at the expense of more fuel-efficient compact and midsize cars, is blamed for declining sales and profits among Detroit's Big Three automakers since the mid-late 2000's. The Big Three were slower to adapt than their Japanese rivals in producing small cars to meet growing demand. This was due to inflexible manufacturing facilities, as well as the higher wages of unionized workers in the U. S. and Canada, which made it unprofitable to build small cars (Krisher).

The rise of the SUV was halted by the sudden popularization of the Hummer. Originally a military vehicle, it was popularized by Arnold Schwarzenegger, one of the first people to roll around in a street legal model of the military vehicle. Due to celebrity and professional athlete backing the Hummer became immensely popular in a very short amount of time. The Humvee got between 10 and 12 MPG, which damaged the environment terribly. Its cultural takeover was halted by the rising gas prices due to the political problems in the Middle East. The cost of owning a Hummer became too high, and the popularity of SUV's rebounded and increased until the media attention to living ecofriendly, sustainable lives took over all venues. It seems as if society's needs have come full circle.

Presently our need for smaller fuel efficient cars mirrors the nation's needs from 1973. The high gas prices we are facing now, are very similar to that of the oil crisis in '73. Our country's views have grown and shifted with the country's newfound commitment to the green movement. In today's market, it is not good business to manufacture large gas guzzling automobiles.

With the green movement in full swing, the conscious consumer is not looking for something that gets 10 miles to the gallon, as they once did with the Hummer; they are looking to reduce their carbon footprint. This is affecting the current market, and is propelling the alternative fuel and energy source search that companies are developing now. Hybrids are the next evolutionary step in the common car. As the green movement gained momentum, eco-friendly living became the new fad.

The first mass produced consumer popular hybrid, the Toyota Prius, became wildly popular with its “ sponsorship” from progressive celebrities in 2002. (Washington Post) The Prius first went on sale in Japan in 1997, making it the first mass-produced hybrid vehicle. It was subsequently introduced worldwide in 2001. There have been a number of governments with incentives intended to encourage hybrid car sales.

In some countries like the U. S. and Canada, some rebate incentives have been exhausted, while other countries such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, Belgium, and the Netherlands have various or alternative incentives to purchasing a hybrid vehicle.

Several U. S. companies offer employees incentives. Bank of America will reimburse \$3, 000 on the purchase of new hybrid vehicles to full and part time associates working more than 20 hours per week.

(Hybridcars. com) Google offers employees a \$5, 000 credit toward their purchase of certain hybrid vehicles including the Prius. (Business Week) Integrated Archive Systems, a Palo Alto IT company, offers a \$10, 000 subsidy toward the purchase of hybrid vehicles to full-time employees employed more than one year. (Hybridcars. com) The progression of automobile design has forever been influenced by the consumer and interests of the era. If automobile companies did not take this into account when manufacturing a product, no one would buy them. The industry would become stagnant because the drive to buy something new and different would be dead because the creativity needed to push forth the industry would be severely stifled. The external factors such as the oil crisis in 1973,

and present day, political strife, and environmental issues, provided the need for change.

Without these factors there would be no differences between cars, no outlet for individuality, which is the most American aspect of owning an automobile. Bibliography: [http://auto.howstuffworks.com/enlarge-image.htm? terms= Classic+Cars&page= 0&gallery= 1](http://auto.howstuffworks.com/enlarge-image.htm?terms=Classic+Cars&page=0&gallery=1) Bailey, David. "Automotive News calls Toyota world No 1 car maker".

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