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# Daumen drücken: Exploring the history of the 928's birth

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Neu: Ein echter Viersitzer von Porsche



**Der erste Familien-Porsche**

Auto Zeitung zeigt hier die ersten Bilder und technischen Details von einem neuen 2 + 2-Coupe aus Zuffenhausen. Die große Sensation: Porsche besitzt zum erstenmal einen Frontmotor. Das Pfänfungsgetriebe wird vor der Hinterachse eingebaut.




Mit einer Karosserie und einer Menge raffiniertester technischer Details ist der über 3000 Kilogramm schwere Porsche 928 GTS ein Meisterwerk der Technik. Das Schicksal dieses Autos ist mit dem Namen des Herstellers untrennbar verbunden. Seit Ende der 1970er Jahre...

Der 928 ist das neue Porsche und klassenweit über 5000 Mark wertig. Die Porsche seit 1975 ist ein Meisterwerk der Technik. Das Schicksal dieses Autos ist mit dem Namen des Herstellers untrennbar verbunden. Seit Ende der 1970er Jahre...

I thrust myself from bed in a cold sweat.

It was just before 4 a.m., Saturday morning no less. I was backed up against a wall in the car delivery hall of the Zuffenhausen plant with Dr. Ernst Fuhrmann jabbing his finger in my chest, while Herr Helmuth Bott and Herr Heinz Branitzki flanked him, asking me to make a decision — fast.

I would have been quick with a confident response while containing myself from laughing uncontrollably at his preposterous and completely out of character reaction, but I wasn't. Instead, a cold spike of fear thrust up my spine — I couldn't decide.

Only the truly demented and possessed would have this kind of nightmare. It's the cross one bears when all concerns revolve around Porsche history.

The problem here, though, is a peculiar one because Herr Ernst was asking me to make a decision that would have rewritten Porsche history. Only then could you possibly grasp the reason for waking up in the middle of the night drenched in sweat when the most influential men at Porsche awaited my answer on whether the 928 should be a proper four-seater or remain on its initial course.

After calming the dogs and reassuring my wife that I wasn't possessed, I realized right then as I sank my head back into the pillow what a difficult and unnerving task those immersed in the birth of the 928 faced — especially Fuhrmann. To understand how the 928 came to be, a comprehension of the climate both inside and outside of Porsche is crucial.

The topic of what is arguably one of Porsche's darkest periods that happened the year before my birth is one I always love to discuss with those whose insanity parallels mine. Talk always revolves around a year when the music stopped and the scurrying for chairs began: 1971.

It wasn't enough that the Kommanditgesellschaft, or limited partnership, known as Dr. Ing. h. c. Ferdinand Porsche KG became public, taking on the AG suffix; nor that Ferry stepped down from active management with the younger Porsche and the Piëch clan being told to look elsewhere for work. Now, a new boss walked into the wheelhouse at VW causing all sorts of problems.

Just before the birth of the 928 and the 924, Porsche had what seemed like a cozy relationship with VW. Wolfsburg would enlist the wizards in Zuffenhausen with some alluring projects, which included the legendary Beetle's replacement and the 914.

Unfortunately, when Rudolf Leiding took the throne at VW, he wasn't keen on the way Wolfsburg was going about things. He found his new ship had been taking on water and the bilge pump was broken; contracting Porsche to do their design work was only exacerbating the leak. He decided to pluck Porsche from the teat and dump them in a sandbox without any toys.

Fuhrmann had walked into one hell of a mess when he took the reins at Porsche. He essentially had an idle engineering and design staff twiddling their thumbs with no work, a slim possibility of losing the contract to design the 914's successor, and a growing legislative threat hovering over the future of Porsche's moneymaker that was in its seventh year of production, the 911. But not all was doom and gloom.

The professor had no choice but to take some decisive action. First, he initiated the further development and refinement of the 911 and limited racing development to using the 911 as the foundation. This move would not only improve the 911 technologically, but also enhance its image to buyers.

The second call to action was to develop a new car — this is where things got a bit dicey. You see, contrary to popular belief, the 928 wasn't the first stab at replacing the 911. All the work and development that went into Project 1966, the Beetle's successor Porsche was developing for VW, was to be the foundation they'd build upon for the 911's successor.

According to Herr Branitzki, Porsche's finance director, when Leiding pulled the plug on Project 1966, the total model program of its development had broken down leaving Porsche with nothing — *nothing*.

They needed to not only address the rear seating problem, but also new safety and emission laws, noise problems, etc., with the new car. Now, the seating issue was being studied as far back as 1951 with a design penned by Erwin Komenda — the Typ 530, which was essentially a longer 356 with four seats. But Ferry wasn't feeling the look.



[356 Registry](#)

The Typ 530 was essentially a longer 356 with four seats.

Then, in 1957, the Typ 754 (Technical Project 7 or T7 for short; nonrunning prototype called the Typ 695) was developed as a concept worthy of consideration for the 356's successor. Ferry hated that design, too.





[Wikipedia](#)

The Typ 754 was developed to be the 356's successor.

The Project 1966 proved Porsche's avant garde thinking, this time a water-cooled engine was stuffed under the back seats giving the car two boot spaces, one in the front and one in the back. Now they were getting somewhere.

Timing was crucial. They hadn't the time for extensive market surveys; they needed to rely on intuition, foresight and their expertise in the field. Their clientele and production capacities made the decision of pegging it at or above the 911's price point — the issue now was where the engine should live.

Engine placement and design was something Herr Bott began to take seriously. The previous summer, his group began an exhaustive evaluation of engine placement and configurations based on 40 criteria, which included aerodynamics, current and foreseeable legislation, performance, comfort, driving dynamics, luggage space, heating, noise, ease of maintenance, and as a matter of course, seating.

The study led to the conclusion that whatever new Porsche would be made, the ideal situation would be for the engine to live in the front, and the gearbox, or transaxle, in the rear with a rigid tube connecting both to give ideal weight distribution. They took this concept, built a wooden model of it, and presented to Fuhrmann on Oct. 21, 1971 — his birthday. The 928 was born right there.

They spent the next two years developing the 928 project, during which time the stillborn EA425 project — VW's contract with Porsche to develop a sport car — was bought back by Porsche and developed into the 924.

That's when the second blow came, the 1973 oil embargo. This, coupled with Europe's reactionary mandates on speed limits, Sunday driving bans, mass transit proposals and animosity towards the automobile, sent shockwaves throughout the industry. Everything came to a head on Oct. 6, 1973.

Companies like Porsche would be hit especially hard since the crux of their products revolved around pleasurable sport driving, not necessarily utilitarian cars. This forced Fuhrmann not to question the integrity of the product, but whether it was the right product for the current situation.

His logic was one to consider seriously since Porsche was set to drop around 80 million DM to tool up for the 928. Now the second-guessing began on whether to follow through with the 928 project in a market where sport cars might have no chance in hell in succeeding.

This led them to briefly flirt with the idea of pursuing alternatives like motorcycles, cross-country vehicles, luxury sedans — even streetcars were fair game. If the odds of profiting from the 928 were against them, these other ventures they considered were as big of a risk.

The way Herr Branitzki saw it, Porsche had decades of design, construction and marketing experience. He summed it up by reciting an old German proverb that went something like, "A shoe maker should stick to his job of making shoes." That's exactly what they decided to do, but not without one more consideration: Should the 928 have four seats or not?



[Wikipedia](#)

Porsche's Study H50 shows a concept model of a four-seater.

During the initial stages of the creative phase, the project group (led by the project father Wolfgang Eyb) held their first of many meetings on Nov. 8, 1971. It was at that point where the 928's "outline" began taking shape, and the concept of offering a true four-seat option was taken into consideration. They could go both ways here; the rear seats could be executed in a similar fashion to the 911, or, they could navigate through uncharted

waters and develop the 928 to be a proper four-seat Grand Tourer.

The latter option, at that point, could have proven to be fatal, here's why. Not only was it a drastic change in Porsche philosophy, engineers would have to make some pretty serious compromises on the iconic shape that defined Porsches since its beginnings.

It'd be a risky move from a marketing standpoint putting them in direct confrontation with some serious competition with far more assets. Imagine for a moment creating a car to challenge their neighbor's Mercedes-Benz 450SLC (C107 body) and BMW's 633CSi, the Italian brigade consisting of Ferrari's 400 GT and 400 Automatic, the Lamborghini Urraco, Maserati's Kyalami, and the English with their Aston Martin V8 Saloon. "Oh no, no, no" passed through lots of lips.

With the oil embargo in full swing two years later, sport cars were being treated as if born from the depths of Beelzebub's lair. Porsche's designers were busy sketching streetcars and buses on the backs of their potentially useless driver's licenses, and the thought of turning the 928 into a four-seater arose for the second time. This time, however, the skeptics in the House of Porsche listened.

The thinking went something like this: Yes, it's a bit out of character for us to make such a car, but on the other hand it might appeal to a larger segment of this new market from a shrinking pool of former sport car drivers. Off they went — Lapine's crew busy trying to chisel a car from the preformed slab of swoop-shaped granite everyone knew as Porsche's signature.

Plans were drawn for a generously sized 2+2, sketches were rendered, and 1:5 scale models gave way to a full size 1:1 plasticine model for some hard critiquing. This crisis made engineers, project managers, designers and all involved in creating Porsche's next generation of models go absolutely bonkers on ideas that might have bordered on lunacy to the outside world.

911s sprouting new technologies, exteriors and even front-wheel drive, right down to turning the 928 into a 911 technologically — what they were doing was taking Mr. Potato Head and plugging ears where noses should've been, noses where the eyes used to live, and lips where ... well, let's leave it there, shall we?

Some order had to displace the chaos, and this came in the form of market studies and a prognosis of what potentially lay ahead. A new board member, Lars Schmidt, spearheaded the analysis, and the marketing people listened and showed cautious optimism since they knew deep down that this dark cloud over the world would soon blow over. They weren't foolishly euphoric, though. They reckoned the exclusive sport car market would take a bit longer to come around but promised to show a respectable bottom line.

The official nod came from a guy named Dr. Berndt Spiegel, a market analyst and an outsider, to confirm what everyone wanted to hear — build the 928 as a sport car and not a four-seat job. He opined that sport cars would make a comeback, as everything revolved around the economy is wont to do.

Furthermore, Spiegel added that Porsche was in the business of producing these sport cars and should continue a straight path in doing so. This was a nice way of saying, "Don't be daft, stick with what you know."



It must be remembered that Fuhrmann made history with the Typ 547 Vier Kammer engine, introduced the Turbocharger to the street 911, and with the 928.

This poor car, which seemed doomed from the start, proved not only to be one of the best and most sound decisions a small company could make, but also the most important one. Rising above doubts, fears, critics, an oil embargo, a recession and even pricing increases, the 928 demonstrated that Zuffenhausen could remain true to its origins without compromise.

If at any moment you were under the impression that Fuhrmann was frothing at the mouth, wooden stake in one hand and hammer in the other, ready to ram it in the 911's heart, you'd be wrong. It must be understood that Porsche, first and foremost, was a small company with limited funds.

With the U.S. as Porsche's most important market, any changes in safety and emissions regulations made a huge impact on the cars Zuffenhausen produced. The problem was no one knew what they were going to be in the future. When your product is a performance car with unorthodox design and engineering, *and* it was the primary source that kept lights on and bills paid, this posed a serious threat.

What Fuhrmann did was what any responsible captain of industry would do, have a solid back up plan; this was the 928's *essendi ratio*. They were hedging their bets that noise, crash and emission regulations might suddenly swing and be unfavorable to the 911, causing financial aggravation to Porsche along with producing a performance-compromised car that no longer appealed to enthusiasts.

His logic was sound. Let's put the engine where all of the others have it, and when regulations change, we'd have to solve the same problems they do in order to meet the new demands. With a rear engine, air-cooled design, you'd be going it alone in this predicament. Development of the 911 never ceased, though, even during the 928's design phase; one need not look further than the 911 Turbo giving proof of its commitment to evolution.

A thought that keeps resurfacing in my mind is a provocative one: What if Porsche was dead certain that the 911 could continue on like it did? How different would the 928's design be? I'm willing to bet that a much needed four-seat concept would have been aggressively pursued and executed with such aesthetic perfection as to leave those south of the Alps breaking their pencils in utter defeat.

In the end, the 928 set out to become what those behind its creation intended; some consider its 18-year lifespan to be respectable, remarkable even. I don't; in fact, I find it ridiculously short. The reasons why this car didn't share the 911's iconic throne become clearly evident as we unearth and reexamine its history.

By "supplementing" instead of "replacing" the 911, the 928 became a threat to it unintentionally and that cut its life far too short, never mind that it was poorly marketed, or expensive. Porsche wanted to redefine the sports car, challenge the concept — and it did by creating something far better. What Zuffenhausen had done, with full intention, was produce a car that wasn't too dissimilar to the 911.

But neither that nor the lack of four seats be construed as a flaw of the 928's character. These weren't reasons

why it fell short of the 911's longevity. No, the problem was an elementary one. Porsche had groomed a new kind of clientele — the sybarite — and they couldn't continue enticing them.

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#### About the Author



A dyed-in-the wool, air-cooled 911 junkie, Pablo Deferrari doesn't discriminate against other Porsches. Want further proof? He's in love with Porsche's early water-cooled models and is dedicated to the celebration of the 924, 928, 944 and 968 series. Pablo is one car away from having all four of these models in his own collection: the 924.

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