

headlines

Passion, opinion and backchat from people who make cars their life

Shareen Rapaport wanted to design furniture, but took a job with Ford Australia's Colour and Trim department instead. Now she's working on cars for 2002 in Detroit

Why aren't more women involved in car design?

I think a lot of reasoning behind it is an inherent culture that says things to do with cars are male, and it is a male-dominated industry. People are unaware of the opportunities and possibilities for females in the car industry. When I tell people what I do they are shocked. They can't believe it.

When do you think it will change?

When we get more exposure, and that is happening now. When people understand there is such a thing as automotive design and colour and trim, there are going to be more females in the industry. But I also believe that if women want to be in it, they have to be competitive.

Of the products out there now, which have you worked on?

The Ka, Fiesta, Escort, new Mondeo, and here it was the Falcon EA and EB. In America I am working on new models and also the next generation of Mustangs and Jaguars. And about three months ago I started this advanced role. Concept cars are a very small part of (the new role), and the other part is future model years. We are working on production for 2001 and 2002.

You also worked on the Indigo concept car. What did you learn from it?

It was a vehicle where the materials were very important because of the durability and the functionality of it. What I learnt from that, as well as the types of materials that are useful, was working within a very short time frame.

Ford is trying to reduce its lead times and Indigo was something that we had six months to complete and get on the road. We had Reynard's help, that was another thing. Working with Reynard was incredible. I have never been involved in working with race car builders before so that was a fantastic opportunity.

In terms of what?

The speed at which they could do things, the fact of having material or some idea and seeing that come to fruition. Working with such a short lead time there was no room for error, there was no way we could take chances with it. Because of the type of vehicle it was, it had to meet a hell of a lot of test requirements, and it had to be feasible right there and then.

Are you working on trim and colour for those cars to come in 2001 and 2002?

Yes. I am working with the designers so we can incorporate new things in both colour and trim, not just into the fabric but into the design. A good example is the Ka, where the door trims carry the metallic paint from the exterior. That concept was developed because colour and trim were involved from the beginning. I can see in the future the concept of seating will totally change. If the concept of seating is going to change, then the materials that make up the seat will, too. The materials will direct the design; the design will not direct the materials.

How is it going to change?

The size of it, the weight of it, the components in it – lighter. At the moment a seat is made up of so many different components. It's got the springs, it's got the hardware, it's got the foam, it's got the fabric. It is nothing new in the automotive industry, but everybody is trying to reduce the number of components in the seat to allow more room in the rear seat. The only way to do that is to change the concept of seating. And that could also mean changing the instrument panel and the door trim.

How do you decide which colours will be 'in' five years from now?

Tracking trends, attending international shows, international seminars and conferences, and we also subscribe to organisations with information all around the world. We get colour forecasting information and we attend so many shows. Personally, I am always watching people. If you understand why people are purchasing things today, it becomes much easier to make educated guesses on what they will be purchasing in the future.

So your position at the moment is designing cars that will appeal to everyone in the world?

Yes, that is part of what I am doing. Any of Ford's projects are to be considered global. And I am always considering things globally. If you go to Brazil, they are buying exactly the same things we are buying here.

Why do you think that is?

Because of the information and access to technology there is now and because it is so easy to jump on a plane and be on the other side of the world inside 24 hours. What people are buying in Japan yesterday, we are buying today. Everybody in every industry is looking at the world, they are not just looking at their own market.

Does it give you a real thrill when you see one of your products out on the street?

Yeah. It's fantastic. That's why there is no industry like the automotive industry. Ford, because it is all around the world, the concept of having one car for the world, seeing it in all the different countries, is incredible. I have people ask me here every day "is the Ka coming to Australia?". If it came to Australia I would be very proud, because it is a fantastic car.

What is the difference between working on a car for Australia versus one for the rest of the world?

Australians are much more open to change. With colour and trim they are more accepting than the Americans, but

less accepting than the Europeans. Australians have the balance between the two. Working at Ford Australia, I feel that experience fits in between my European and American experiences.

So what happens if your workmates make a bad remark about Ford Australia?

Well they don't actually make bad remarks. Believe it or not, Ford Australia has always been recognised as one of the stronger design studios. People always talk about "when I worked at Ford Australia". Everybody (who worked there) loved Ford Australia and the Falcon is recognised throughout the Ford community as being one of the best-designed cars on the road and one of Ford's best products. I am always making sure people know what models are being sold here in Australia, (because) I am very proud. I don't feel ownership, but a pride and a connection.

The impression is people who are into design view cars as dirty smelly things. Is that right?

I look at it as a piece of design. I have to admit that I have become much more knowledgeable about cars now, and much more interested than I was. Obviously by learning more you feel more confident with it and more comfortable with it, and you understand more and you want to understand more. I never really thought of it as smelly or dirty, it was just something I did not know much about. If you ask a lot of the designers, car designers, they don't love cars, they love car design. 