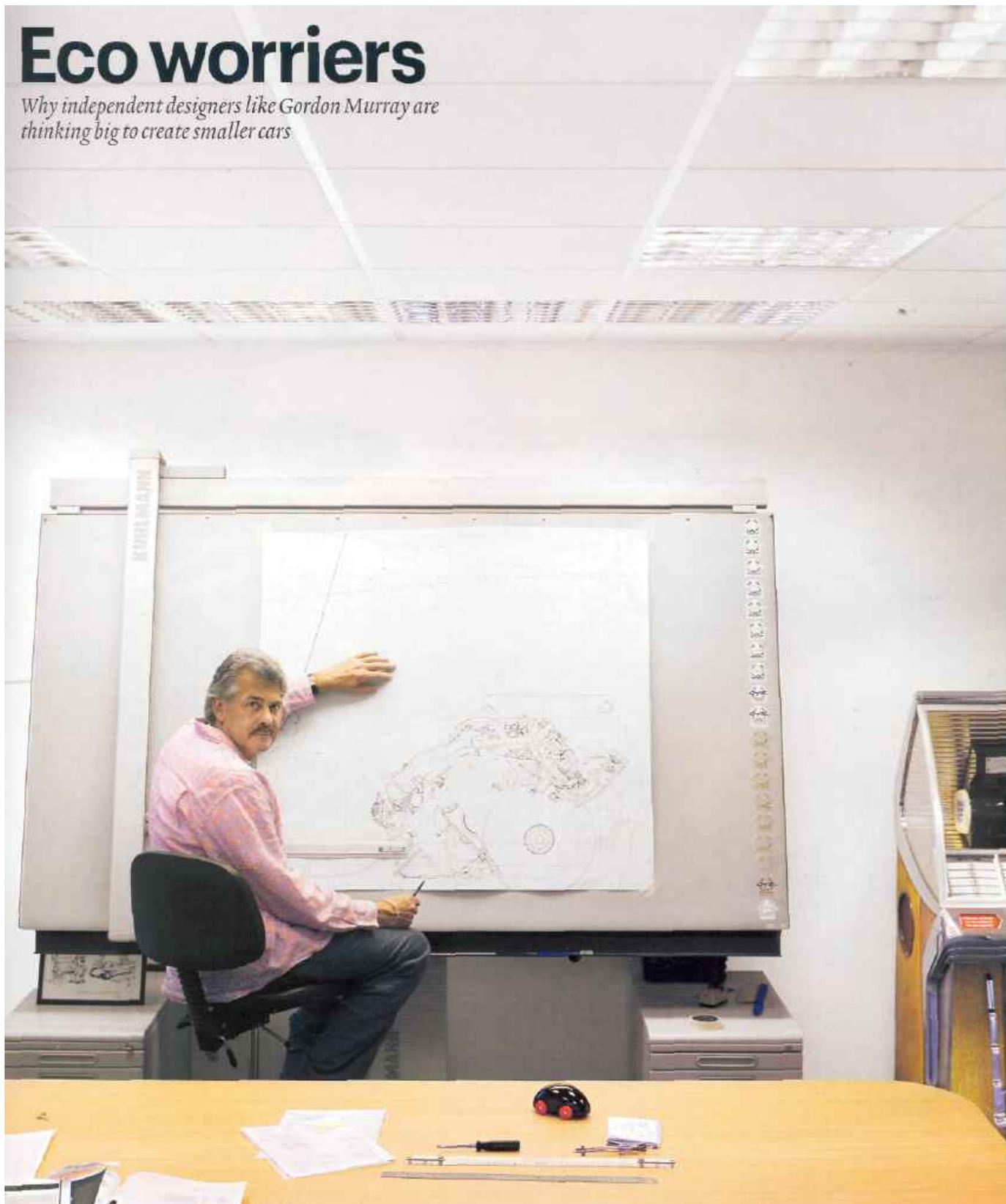


Eco worriers

Why independent designers like Gordon Murray are thinking big to create smaller cars



Is the time finally right for the low-impact automobile? Just ten years ago, the ultra-compact sector was barely considered by the big car companies, bar the occasional concept car and grudging viability study. The customer wanted bigger cars, and the market dutifully provided. It took the former DaimlerChrysler, creator of the revolutionary Smart car, to give the small sector a much-needed boost. Sadly, that kick came at a cost; the development of

the Smart brand ran into billions of euros. Yet the Smart car is now on its second, much-improved, iteration and is poised to enter America, land of the automotive giants. So, could the public finally be ready for something even more extreme?

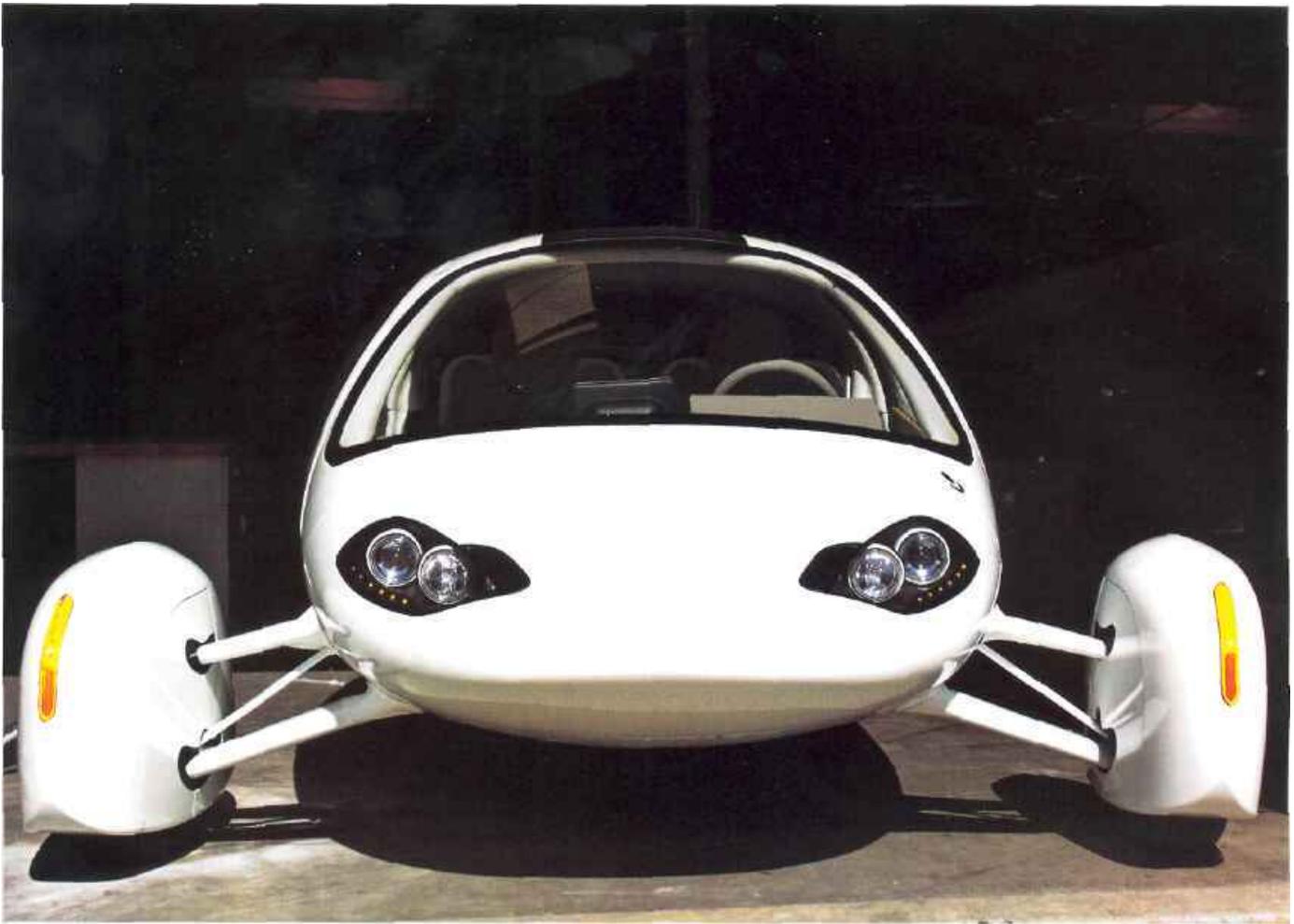
Conventional wisdom has it that if we're going to drive in the future, then we'll use cars that are pretty much the same size and shape as what we have now. But small companies, untrammelled

SKETCH SHOW

Ex-Formula 1 designer Murray in his south-of-England studio with plans for the T25, a compact car designed to have minimal environmental impact

by the crushing weight of shareholder pressure and brand expectation, think otherwise. 'We're in a very privileged position,' says car designer Gordon Murray from his studio in the south of England. 'We're starting with 3 totally clean sheets of paper. This never happens in the motor industry.'

Murray is a legend among automotive designers. As the man behind the McLaren F1 - still rated as one of the >>>



most efficient, extreme and iconic supercars ever made - and the ultra-lightweight Rocket sports car, he has acquired a reputation as a perfectionist, designing and refining until only the most functional, and elegant, solution remains. Born in South Africa, Murray spent his early career engineering Formula 1 cars, first for Brabham, then McLaren. In 2004, he left McLaren, with its £300m hi-tech, Foster-designed Technology Centre, to set up on his own.

Gordon Murray Design has a large consultancy portfolio, but the studio's core project is a compact city car, known only as the Type 25. It's been a long time coming. 'I started this at the end of 1993, as I was driving back and forth to McLaren, staring at people in their huge one-and-a-half-ton cars,' Murray recalls. But rather than sit down at the drawing board, he took another approach. 'I wrote down a list of the problems,' he says. 'I spent years looking at average car use and then thought, "What sort of vehicle would solve all these problems, not just one of them?" The T25 is designed to be small and flexible, with six different layouts between which 'you can change in 30 seconds', and to take whatever kind of power plant works best.

'We can't go on making huge cars and expect the roads to cope,' says Murray. 'This is 3 holistic approach - not just a new car, but incentives, traffic measures.' He even considers the lifecycle of a car.



He admits that the proposal is 'more radical than what the car industry could do', adding that the big manufacturers 'have really tied their own hands - they're 3 victim of their own system'. Murray's plan is to create a 'turnkey' operation, allowing a major manufacturer to simply step in, build a production line and go. 'It's all about architecture and cost,' he explains, 'not just the money, but the CO2 cost and energy use, all the way from digging the ore out of the ground to running the car.' Murray is in talks with leading manufacturers - he is cagey, but adds that they don't necessarily need to be in the motor industry - and we won't see his designs realised until 2009 at the earliest. But the buzz is already strong. 'If it's big, it's going to go very big.'

The car industry is immune to accurate predictions. While Murray will stop at the blueprint stage of his design, San Diego-based Steve Fambro plans to

CALIFORNIA DREAM
Top, the Apera commuter car, designed by Steve Fambro, who expects it to do over 200 miles to the gallon, has futuristic looks and green credentials - which extend to an eco-friendly design for the dealership (above)

go the whole way with his new commuter car project. Like the T25, the Apera is about packaging, not power plant. Fitted with a modest -- and already available - diesel-electric hybrid system, the little teardrop-shaped three-wheeler, suggests Fambro, will do more than 200 miles per gallon. While the final form of the T25 is being kept under wraps, the Apera is out and about, an all-white apparition that seems to have stepped out of the pages of a 1950s sci-fi comic, or a Cessna shorn of its wings. It is a two-seater commuter car, pitched at California's smog-infested highways, rigorously trialled to ensure it meets the needs of a demanding market. Interest is high, especially on the energy-conscious West Coast, but ingrained prejudices still have to be overcome.

The major players are gradually encroaching on these small-scale innovators. October's Tokyo Motor Show brought the usual rash of Japanese automotive eccentricity, but now the public is far more receptive to odd-shaped city cars and 'personal transit systems'. On the other hand, while current thinking may favour the small car, the motor industry is a fickle thing and automotive history is littered with failed and discarded prototypes. One thing is for sure: for those who get it right and rewire our automotive desires, the rewards are plain to see. ★
www.gordonmurraydesign.com,
www.apera.com