

TIME TRAVELLER

Will BMW's i3 Concept Coupé, pictured here, be the electric car of the future? If so, its drivers will be looking for charging points between the glossy buildings currently under construction around Germany

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Residential towers, Berlin, by Barkow Leibinger

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European Central Bank, Frankfurt, by Coop Himmelb(l)au

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Ecocity Windtower, Hamburg, by SMAQ

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Elbphilharmonie, Hamburg, by Herzog & de Meuron



Back to the future

BMW is on an emission-free quest to design the cars of tomorrow's world

It's 2020 and BMW is the world's leading manufacturer of electric cars. After decades of lurking at the industry fringes, the electric car is now firmly established, soaking up an ever-increasing share of the global market. Legislation is helping drive things forward and many major cities have abolished fossil-fuelled transportation.

BMW's first mass-market electric car, the i3, was launched in 2013 and quickly found currency among the world's city-based opinion makers. Just as the company's reboot of the Mini brand found a global audience willing to be seduced by character over practicality, the i3 taps into a craving for cars as sleek as hi-tech goods.

The i3, now in its second generation, is still the company's best-seller, but it's been joined by the i1, an ultra-light two-seater, and the i5, an MPV-sized family car that is the longest-range electric vehicle ever built. Cities are being transformed as air quality rises, smog fades and smart navigation cuts congestion.

If all goes according to plan, the above scenario is not that far-fetched. The car maker is planning its new BMWi brand with characteristic

thoroughness, and where a global market-leader ventures, others will follow. From the start, BMWi has tapped the best qualities of electric drive - cars with zero emissions for urban areas, ideal for short hops with hi-tech integration into your surroundings. Before launching the i3 and i8 in late 2013, BMW spent nearly two years prepping the market. The i8 is something of a distraction, an elegant plug-in hybrid with an emphasis on style and performance and a correspondingly high price tag. The real test is the city-sized i3.

Setting up a battery supply chain and new factories has been a major investment, something BMW hopes will be defrayed by spreading the technology across the whole group - better batteries for hybrids, or cheaper carbon-fibre for high-performance BMWs.

But futurology is a fickle art and the above predictions are built on shifting sands. BMWi's promise of glossy future cities, free from traffic and strewn with charging points is admittedly seductive. Will the reality compete?

To date, all the public has experienced are some electrified Minis and smaller BMWs, which

the company has loaned or leased, tracking how they're being used. It has also rolled out the DriveNow electric car-sharing scheme, launched in Munich in 2011, with a mix of regular-powered Minis and BMWs and special ActiveE versions.

For BMWi to re-shape the automotive future it needs to further the century-old status of the car as an expression of individuality, rather than a communal utility. If anyone can do this, it's BMW, a company that has shown 'premium' products are no barrier to sales. But for all the preparation, the brand is still venturing into territory unknown.

And what of its rivals? No one is ignoring electric drive, but most are watching to see what happens next. Germany has no equivalents to radical outliers like Elon Musk's Tesla, but bona fide i8 rivals like Mercedes' SLS electric drive and Audi's R8 e-tron are very real, if not yet available. Audi and VW also have promising commuter cars poised for production, the Urban Concept and XL1 respectively, but neither claim to be a replacement for a conventional car. Maybe the next-gen Smart will finally make good on its original promise to electrify everyday driving.