

# Octane Magazine: June 2024 - Keith Helfet



The June edition of Octane includes an interview with Keith Helfet, the designer of the infamous XJ220 along with other notable designs. By journalist Richard Heseltine.

Being a car designer is not an easy occupation. It could be considered alongside other design professionals such as architects and Formula 1 design engineers, where a designer may have to defend their work; experience a lack of creative control; or have their profession disrespected.

Car Designers, or at least the ones with staying power, soon learn that it's best not to focus on the false starts, dead ends and lost causes. They would go mad otherwise, a point not lost on Keith Helfet.

*"Whenever a large corporation is looking to create a new model, multidiscipline board members decide what the brief will be. A design committee is formed, which will convene maybe once a month to review the process. The winning design has to be bought into by everyone, the key players being sales and marketing.*

*The least important people in the process are the designers. If a rival firm has a successful product, the default position is invariably the same: copy that."*

And yet Helfet is the exception to the rule. This likeable designer has shaped everything from supercars to MRI scanners. He enjoyed a 25-year stretch at Jaguar, during which time he was responsible for styling five cars, often without anyone looking over his shoulder. The South African is quick to smile and even quicker to dismiss his career as being one long lucky streak.

*"I am probably unique among designers in that I have never been a great artist. What changed everything for me was discovering clay modelling after I joined Jaguar in 1978. That opened my eyes to all sorts of things."*

The once-proud marque was by then fighting yesterday's war under British Leyland.

*"To me as a foreigner, if you will, it was amazing. I was aware that I was on hallowed ground, and there were reminders everywhere of the glory days. The styling studio, for example, had formerly been the race shop where they made the C- and D-types. There was also a sense that Jaguar hadn't moved with the times. I mean, there were five different canteens based on your status and function within the company. It was very hierarchical. It also looked like it was going to go under at any moment."*

*"There was a meeting with the board and the Government, BL being state-controlled, and the business case was put forward for the XJ40. Jim Randle, the chief engineer, suggested that it might be prudent to suggest something else to give the impression that this wasn't all we had. That was the start of the XJ41*



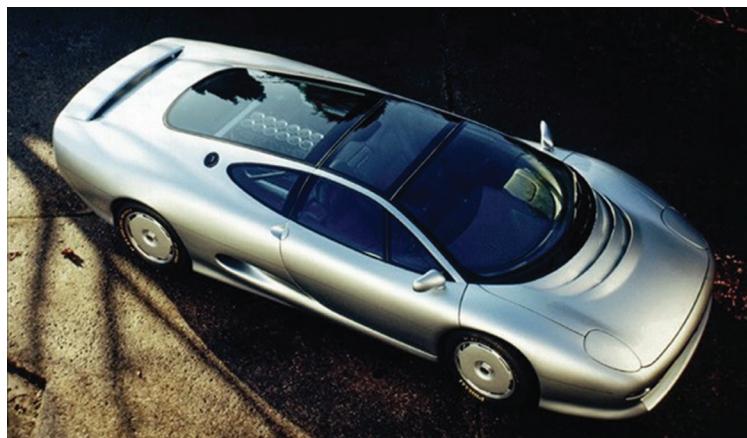
Helfet with concept models.

*sports car. There were competing designs and I produced renderings showing a car as a coupé along with Targa roof and convertible variants. Mine won. It was then a case of making a 1/4-scale model out of clay. I was fortunate enough to be helped by Roger Shelbourne, who was an experienced modeller. He guided me."*

Tasked with shaping what was in effect a new E-type, Helfet found himself in the unlikely position of being protected from outside influence by marque founder Sir William Lyons.

*"Can you imagine? He chose my design and I worked with him one-on-one every week from some time in 1980 until he died in 1985. He was like me, a frustrated sculptor. He knew instinctively what I was trying to achieve and I was shielded from all the politics that usually dilute a design. Nobody was going to tell Sir William how to design a car. The project started under BL, continued after Jaguar became independent, and was killed off under Ford's ownership."*

***"I WAS SHIELDED FROM ALL THE POLITICS THAT USUALLY DILUTE A DESIGN. NOBODY WAS GOING TO TELL SIR WILLIAM HOW TO DESIGN A CAR."***



1998 XJ220 supercar quad cam V12, as originally envisioned.



1990 XJ41 ultimately formed the basis of Aston Martin DB7.



D-type-inspired XK180 show car was built in 1998 to honour 50 years of the XK engine.

Jaguar had spent £50m and the tooling was in place, but a clash of egos among the higher-ups ultimately put paid to Jaguar's halo product in 1990.

*"I can be philosophical about it now, but I was upset with how it ended at the time because I had spent nine years working on it. It did make it into production but it did so wearing an Aston Martin badge! Tom Walkinshaw manufactured the XJ220 and I gave him the overlays for the XJ41, which included all the XJ-S base points. The next thing we hear is that there will be a high-price, low-volume Jaguar - but "Project XX" subsequently became the DB7. Within Jaguar, it was known as 'Project Double Cross.'"*

**“PROJECT XJ41 SUBSEQUENTLY BECAME THE DB7. WITHIN JAGUAR, IT WAS KNOWN AS “PROJECT DOUBLE CROSS”**

Mention of the XJ220 inevitably leads us to the story of how it was created within the out-of-hours Saturday Club.

*"That was another project in which I got to style a car without interference because it wasn't officially sanctioned. It*

*was originally meant to be a racing car to compete in the Group B class of the World Endurance Championship. It was referred to as Project Group B. The XJ220 name came later. However, there wasn't much take-up for this class of racing. It didn't amount to much so we made a road car. It was my interpretation of a modern XJ13, and I was keen to make it appear sculptured, just like Jaguars always had been."*

**“PEOPLE SAID THE E-TYPE LOOKED LIKE IT WAS DOING 100 MPH STANDING STILL. I WANTED TO INSTIL THAT SENSE OF MOVEMENT.”**

*"I was nervous when the prototype was unveiled at the British Motor Show in 1988. I wasn't sure how the Jaguar faithful would receive it. Of course, eleven inches were removed from it by the time the production car was made, but the overhangs remained the same. I am proud of it, though."*

More so than the XK8.

*"The prevailing attitude within Ford at the time was "edge design", so everything was very angular. None of the various designs, most of them from within Ford, did well in customer clinics. I ended up being asked to 'do a clay' and themes established there were ultimately chosen."*

Helfet declined the offer to oversee the design, but the XK8 in turn spawned a concept car that was entirely his; one that was much-garlanded after it was unveiled at the 1998 Paris motor show.

*"The XK180 was built to honour the 50th anniversary of the XK engine. I was given eight weeks in which to come up*

*with something and I envisioned a car that borrowed from the D-type."*

*"Again, I was left to my own devices. A second car was made for Jaguar North America, but that was it."*

He subsequently created another showstopper, one that briefly appeared set to enter production. The F-type Concept was, to some, among the great missed opportunities in Jaguar's storied history.

*"Back in 1993, I fell in love with the Porsche Boxster Concept. It was exquisite, but everything I liked about it was lost by the time they made the production version. I was tasked with creating a car for the 2000 North American Auto Show. Again, I wasn't given a brief so I made the car that I wanted and based its size on the Porsche. The prototype was built with an AJ-V6 engine. After it was unveiled, Ford CEO Jacques Nasser was asked by a journalist what would stop it from entering production. He replied: 'Stupidity.' Fifty thousand people placed deposits, but again there was a changing of the guard. The new design management wanted to do their own car."*

Helfet departed Jaguar in 2002, having established his own standalone consultancy.

*"Career-wise, I did everything wrong but somehow it came out all right."*

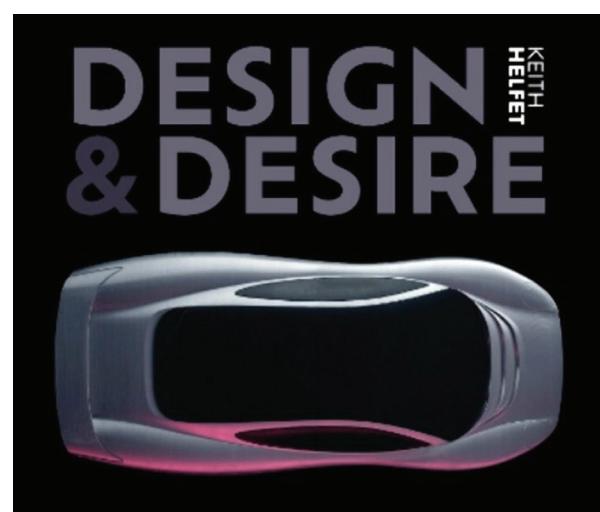
Keith Helfet's autobiography 'Design & Desire' is published by Porter Press International at AU \$121.95. ■

**RICHARD HESELTINE.**

*For the entire interview, Octane Magazine is available online via 'Pocket Mag' or as hard copy from newsagents or by subscription.*



2000 F-Type concept sports car - a 'missed opportunity.'



"Design & Desire" (Hardback) AU \$121.95.