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BY LARRY EDSALL

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Recreating -- and updating -- the horseless carriage

By Larry Edsall

Jason Wenig and his team at The Creative Workshop are known for restoring and, on occasion, for mechanically updating classic sports cars. Their skills are considerable. Consider, for example, that they created -- from scratch -- the BLS1 Sport Speciale, a modernized tribute to the famed Ferrari TR60, or that they currently are getting a rare 1955 Ghia-Aigle Alfa Romeo 1900 CSS ready to roll onto the fairway this summer at Pebble Beach.

But for all Wenig's expertise with post-war sports cars, "this' is the coolest project I've done," he said.

What's "this?"

"This" (see photo of the model) is a brand new interpretation of the brass-era electric car. Wenig and the workshop are working on the prototype for what would become a fleet of around 70 such vehicles to carry passengers through and around New York's Central Park.

"I want people to have the feeling I got the first time I walked up to a 1910 Pierce Arrow at Amelia Island and got goose bumps," says Wenig, a native New Yorker who moved to southern Florida to open his automotive restoration workshop.

"Personally, this era, cars of the brass era, the turn of the [19th] century, is my favorite era of car, hands down," Wenig said.

"The main reason why it tugs at me so much is the forensic aspect of recreating a car that doesn't exist anymore," he explained. "The day before these cars, people are on horses. The day after, they have a car. It's not really that anyone knew this was going to work. At the time, this was a crazy idea."

And once that idea was established, Wenig added, everything else was and basically ever since has been just a matter of adding "bells and whistles."

"This was the era of trial and error, to see if this idea would work," he said, adding that it also was an era of creative craftsmanship.

"You can see the hammer marks on the metal."

The "21st Century Horseless Carriage" project is being backed by New Yorkers for Clean, Livable and Safe Streets (NY-Class), a non-profit, animal-rights and political-action group which has been working since 2008 to find a way to replace the horse-drawn carriages as New York tourist attractions.

"It is cruel to have animals working in midtown traffic and then go back to stalls," said Allie Seldman, NY-Class director. "People think they live in Central Park. But they actually live in a worn-down tenement building by the West Side Highway, and have to turn onto the highway to get back to those stables."

The horses' working conditions include exhaust-polluted air and a surprising number of carriage-car collisions. Even after they are finished pulling carriages, "many end up going to slaughter plants," she added.

Activists have been trying to halt the horse-drawn carriages for at least two decades, she said. What makes NY-Class different is that it has worked with, not against, the carriage drivers. The plan is to retire the horses, but to keep the drivers employed, just trading reins for a steering wheel.

"I'm a native New York and I happen to be an animal lover," Wenig said, adding that he and his wife have two dogs they rescued from the pound. "But," he added, "I'm trying to focus on the car aspect of it."

And there's plenty of that to consume Wenig's focus. Not only does he have to create a vehicle that looks like it was built a century ago, he has to make sure that vehicle meets Dept. of Transportation and NHTSA regulations and is sturdy enough to carry as many as nine people and survive the abuse of New York streets and traffic (see CAD image).

Both are reasons why Wenig needs to build new vehicles rather than try to find and restore old ones, which, he notes, were built to carry only a couple of people, people who were much smaller than people tend to be today.

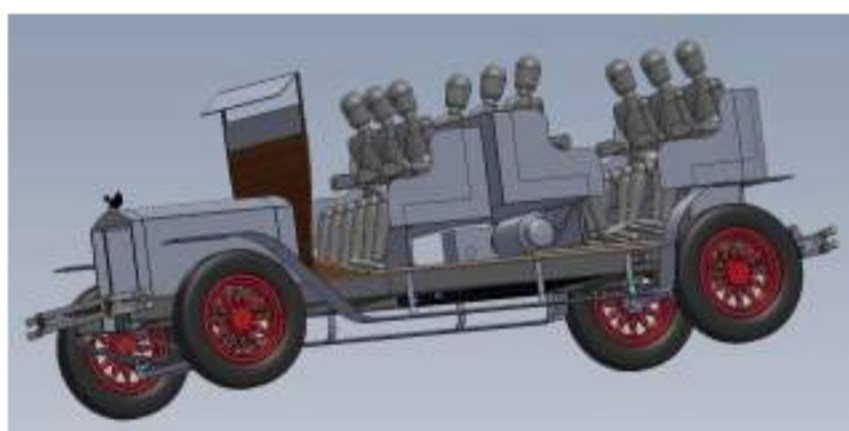
In the process, Wenig has become something of an expert on electric propulsion systems.

"I'm not trying to impress that I'm the smartest guy or an MIT electrical engineer," he said. "I'm just trying to deliver a car that works."

He's not trying to re-invent the wheel, or to develop new electric vehicle technology. He notes that his vehicles only need to be able to cruise the park at 5 miles per hour and reach a top speed of around 35 on regular roads.

"Golf carts, mining carts and fork lifts work every single day," he said. "They don't catch fire. They do their job. That's the theory behind the technology we want to use," albeit with lithium-ion-phosphate batteries rather than lead acid cells.

As in the olden days, the wooden floor of The Creative Workshop will serve as a surface plate for the prototype build (see photo). The outline of the frame and the position of some major components already have been laid out on the floor. Wenig anticipates having a prototype ready for dynamic testing sometime next spring.



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