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20 October 2008

I have a dream

Thabo Mboneni is aiming to join the elite – and small – group of fellow South Africans to have made it in the heady world of international car design.

By Hannes Oosthuizen

"It all started with this book," says Thabo as he picks up the book on design by Dick Powell, one of Great Britain's leading product designers.

"Of course, I had always loved drawing, and from a young age spent my time making wire cars, but this book really opened up a new world for me," he says.

"I was always aware of my interest in car design, but no one in my immediate environment could guide me."

Times were hard, but Thabo was determined, borrowing the book almost permanently from the library, and buying his own drawing material with the little money he had available to him. Today he calls the book his "Bible".

Now, many years later, Thabo is on the brink of hitting the big time. His entry project for the prestigious Coventry University's Automotive Design Mdes degree is nearing completion, and it's a very impressive one.

CAR got a sneak preview of the 3D clay model of the futuristic hydrogen-powered BMW sports at XYZ Design in Cape Town, where Thabo is working/studying and being mentored by the company's Byron Qually and Roelf Mulder. The model incorporates many BMW design cues (Thabo is a big fan of BMW's Adrian van Hooydonk, Chris Bangle and Boyke Boyer), but he admits to being inspired by nature's forms when he conceptualised the design.

"Seeing as it is a hydrogen-powered car, I was inspired by water animals when I did this design," he explains. "Animals such as Great White and Hammerhead sharks, and even a duck, from where the design of the gull-wing doors comes."

But the radical-looking car also has details that step away slightly from BMW's current design language, and includes elements of Bauhaus, once the domain of Audi.

If Thabo's design impresses the course director at Coventry University, he will embark on an intensive four-year course at one of the most prestigious automotive design institutions in the world.

Merely being accepted is already a huge achievement, as there are only 20 seats available, and more than 100 entrants each year. There's also the question of funding, with course fees alone being in the region of R60 000 per year.



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But Thabo's battled the odds to get this far for a long time and is not giving up on his dream, having done everything from working as a barman to doing accessory design work for Volkswagen SA, where he designed a spare-wheel container for the Touran.

Thabo pulls out some of his design sketches, all of them showing a fine eye for detailing and even the importance of different materials, when designing an interior, as an example.

"I want to create designs that stop people in their tracks," he enthuses. "They must think, 'wow', I've got to have that car, and inside it must be like their second home."

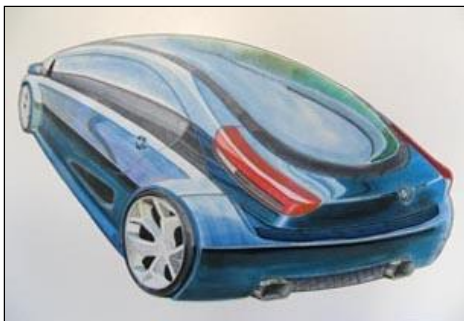
Ask him about his dream job and the answer comes quickly. "I want to work for BMW," he says as his hand glides over the beautifully-sloped roof of his model.

And according to people that have worked with Thabo thus far, sheer determination has got him this far.

"He's doing it," says Byron Qually of XYZ, as a matter of fact. We're all holding thumbs...

If you want to get in touch with Thabo Mboneni, he can be contacted via Mariann Shinn on e-mail or 021 788 5011.

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