A POWERFUL TRIBUTE TO FERDINAND KARL PIËCH



The visionary through the eyes of Christophe Piochon and Frank Heyl. Few figures in automotive history have reshaped the boundaries of engineering and design as profoundly as Prof. Dr. Ferdinand Karl Piëch. His uncompromising vision gave rise to the Bugatti Veyron, a hypercar conceived to unite extremes, delivering record-breaking performance on the racetrack while remaining refined enough for an evening at the opera. On the occasion of Prof. Dr. Piëch's birthday, the marque celebrates his unstoppable pursuit of this ambition. Two influential engineering and design minds who worked with him through years of vehicle-development thus now reflect on their journey alongside him, recalling how a vision that challenged the limits of physics became a reality that redefined an entire era of the automobile — staying with them and the marque through to the present day.

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The impact of Prof. Dr. Piëch's engineering genius on Bugatti design extended back to Frank Heyl's first days with the marque. When the today-Director of Design joined Bugatti in 2008, the Veyron was already rewriting the rules of performance — yet the pursuit of perfection remained unchanged. His first project, the Veyron Super Sport, aimed to push the boundaries even further, with targets of 1,200 HP and 430 km/h; objectives Prof. Dr. Piëch held a deep fascination for, pursuing an ever-deeper understanding of how the car could be refined further.
In September 2009, as the Super Sport's immense specifications and design neared completion, Heyl began to explore a new direction for the tail lights — investigating the idea in depth, seeking perfection in the smallest of details. Each and every possibility for bringing the concept to life was explored, brainstorm after refinement pursued, but ultimately a concept that wasn't fated for the Super Sport design.

Prof. Dr. Piëch's response was quintessentially considered, laser-focused on the future — speaking volumes about his visionary mentality: 'At the next opportunity.' Bugatti has perpetually looked forward, yielding innovation that transcends generations and time — and Prof. Dr. Piëch's pioneering spirit carried that legacy forward. ''No matter the project, he was always looking ahead — always ensuring that no idea was lost in the quest for innovation.''

And in the 2020s, the next opportunity eventually arrived. 20 years on from the conception of the Veyron, that enduring influence came to shape the creation of an exquisite tribute to his genius, and the manifestation of his vision: the F.K.P. Hommage. For Heyl, the project had a particular resonance — with many of the design avenues explored for this Solitaire project having been broader ideas discussed with him through the years. ''Such as with those studied for the Veyron Super Sport, the concepts we implemented hadn't found their place at the time, but they stayed with us,'' recalls Frank.

When those ideas were brought together in the F.K.P. Hommage, they embodied a sense of continuity. ''When we presented the car, it felt as though he was still part of the process,'' Heyl reflects. ''His spirit of innovation was present in every detail.''

That same mindset bore into the early stages of the Chiron in 2013, where Prof. Dr. Piëch was intrigued by the possibility of upward-opening, dihedral doors, creating a more dramatic entry into the car. ''We investigated every possibility,'' Heyl says. ''And once again, when it couldn't be achieved at the time, he chose to keep pushing the idea for the next step.'' It was an approach of continuous evolution, where design innovation was never confined to a single moment, and allowed to mature across generations. His vision found an echo in Mate Rimac's approach to the Tourbillon, where the dihedral door concept finally came to life — honoring the spirit of Prof. Dr. Piëch and his design genius through the new era of the marque.

For Christophe Piochon, now President of Bugatti Automobiles, the driving force powered by Prof. Dr. Piëch's expertise was apparent even from the earliest days of the marque's rebirth. Those profound memories began in Wolfsburg in the 2000s, at the Volkswagen Group prototype workshop, where his first encounter with Prof. Dr. Piëch revealed a personality as distinctive as his ambitions; effusing calm and poise, using only the necessary few words to express his precise and concise ideas.

That serene authority was matched by an extraordinary depth of engineering understanding. ''He knew exactly what he wanted, and when he asked for something, it had to be achieved to the highest possible level,'' Piochon explains. ''Every possible solution had to be explored; there was no other way, and that brought the best out of all of us.''

That same philosophy would come to define the development of the Veyron, as Piochon's work brought him closer to Prof. Dr. Piëch and to Bugatti itself. ''Bugatti was his passion; it was nothing short of his ultimate dream to make it the pinnacle of the automotive world,'' he explains.

The work that unfolded was driven by a shared understanding that they were realizing a vision that was simply unprecedented. ''For him, the most important thing was always the final product.'' Piochon reflects. Their collaboration was most tangible during the testing phases, meeting most often when driving prototypes, where discussions were grounded in the reality of the car itself. ''We would exchange feedback on what felt right and what needed improvement. It was always about the details: the behavior of the car, the power delivery, the overall balance.'' These insights were then brought back to the wider development teams, shaping everything from power curves to drivability, ensuring that the Veyron would achieve a level of completeness never seen before.

Piochon recalls how this relentless curiosity extended beyond development milestones, as Prof. Dr. Piëch came to visit the Molsheim Atelier twice a year, engaging directly with engineers and designers, seeking to understand their progress while encouraging them to go further. ''He always wanted to learn more; always wanted to push the teams to exploit their incredible capabilities, and build on the thought process that allowed the Veyron achievement to materialize.'' says Piochon.

The Veyron project required the whole team to transform standards, to move from mass production to something entirely new for Bugatti. And thus, it represented a challenge that demanded more than technical expertise. ''He inspired people to go further than they thought possible,'' Piochon adds. ''He found ways to motivate teams; to push them to the limits of what was possible.''

In doing so, Prof. Dr. Piëch's vision gave birth to the concept of the hypercar — creating something completely new; something no one believed could be achieved. Through the combined power of his expansive knowledge, inspiring demeanor and endlessly curious mindset, he perpetually proved the timeless adage of Ettore Bugatti himself: ''If comparable, it is no longer Bugatti''.

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[1] F.K.P. Hommage: This model is currently not subject to directive 1999/94/EC, as type approval has not yet been granted.