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CAR AND DRIVER

ASC Vision

From George Barris to America's premier independent automotive-design studio, Heinz Prechter and ASC have come a long way.

BY JEAN LINDAMOOD

• For the past twenty years, ASC, Incorporated (née American Sunroof Corporation), has been firing up its cutting torches for Detroit's carmakers. Sunroofs, moonroofs, T-tops, vinyl tops, convertibles, and fake convertibles—ASC has done about everything to a car roof that can be done to a car roof. In the process, ASC's founder, Heinz Prechter, has propelled his customizing business from a back-alley chop shop to a legitimate original-equipment supplier to the automobile industry, a feat which landed him on *C/D*'s list of Ten Best Unsung Heroes in 1984.

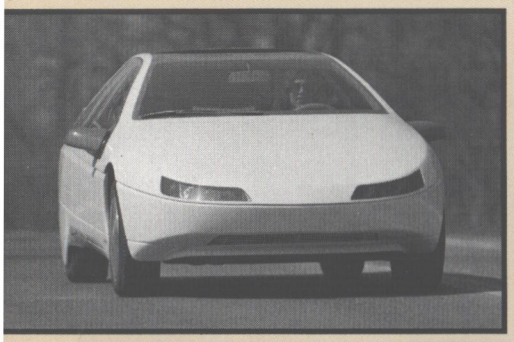
Prechter is a short man of impeccable dress. If there is a Napoleon lurking within his diminutive frame, it has manifested itself in his motivation and will to succeed, not in his personality. He is self-assured, but also soft-spoken and immensely charming; capable, he says with a twinkle, of "being anything I have to be." One thing Prechter is *not* is a grandstander. He takes just as much pride in ASC's low profile and confidentiality as he does in its quality and craftsmanship.

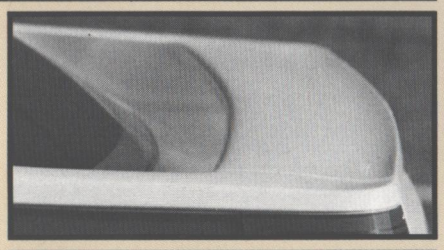
But on the occasion of ASC's twentieth anniversary, a little boasting was in order. Hence the Vision, ASC's first in-house concept car, conceived as a three-dimensional advertisement of ASC's design, engineering, and production skills. In keeping with its low-key role as support group to the big guys, ASC eschewed sequined auto-show models, revolving chrome-plated platforms, and laser light shows for the Vision's debut. Instead, the fetching four-door was quietly unveiled before a group of techno-Egberts attending the SAE exposition in Detroit last February.

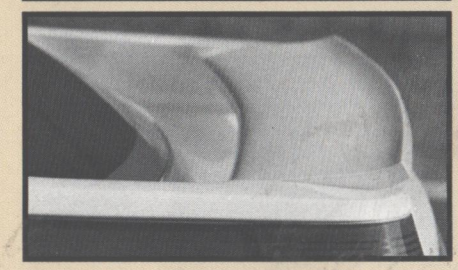
The Vision is an eye-catcher, all right, with its upswept tail, flush-glass upper, and modern-art rear flanks. As concept cars go, however, it is hardly earth-shattering news. Underneath its appealing shell (in steel, not plastic), the Vision is simply a mule car cobbled together from the bits of a half-dozen parts bins. The platform is a Dodge Charger that's intact from the fire wall forward and heavily modified in the passenger cell. Chrysler also built the Vision's turbocharged 2.2-liter four, automatic transaxle, and front suspension, though alterations were necessary to achieve the low hoodline. AMC is the source of the keyless entry system, and the climate-control apparatus came from an Olds Toronado.

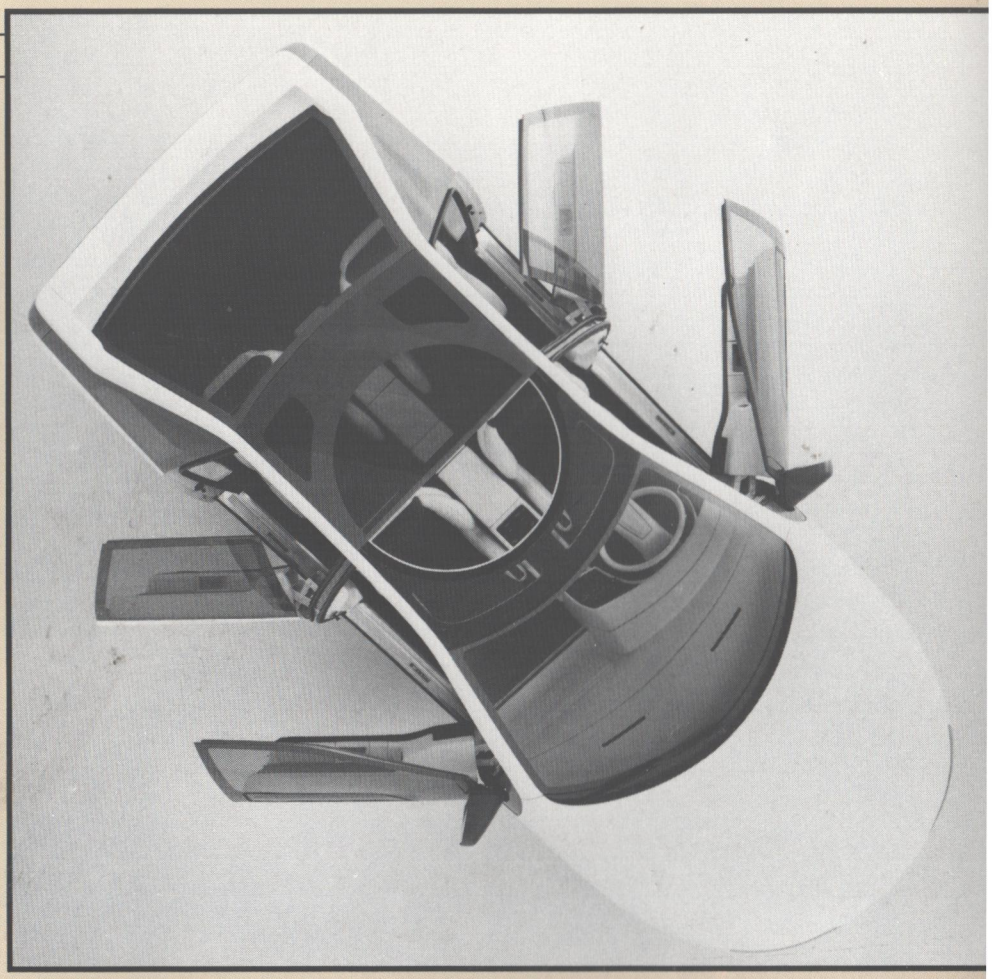
The Vision's seats are Lear Siegler Corvette specials (the two in back have the thigh supports removed). The controls include push buttons and rocker switches

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEN OSBURN

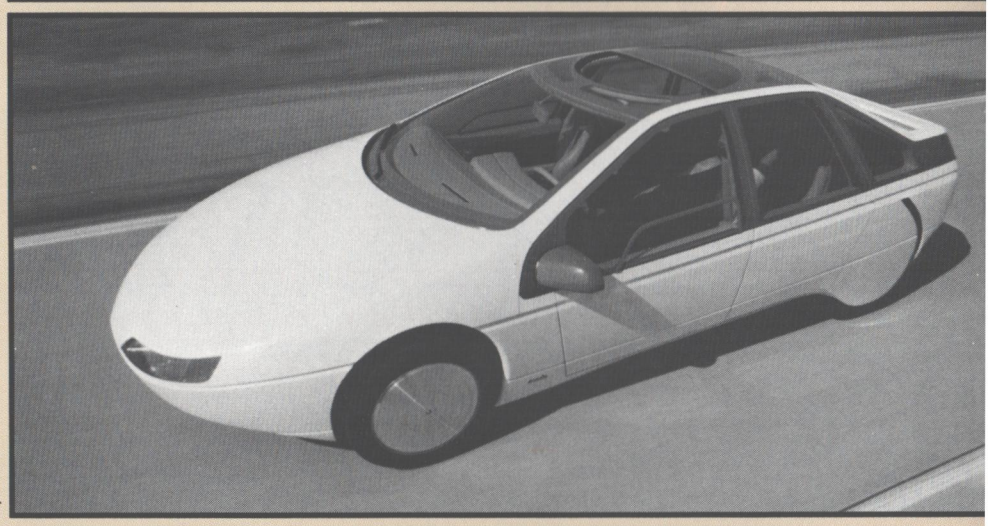








The Vision's rear-deck spoiler can be raised or lowered by a console-mounted rocker switch.



from Torrix, a Renault and Saab supplier, and a turn-signal switch from the Isuzu Impulse. Chrysler's electronic instrument panel was chosen because it's already in sync with the engine's computer.

ASC's design engineers worked a couple of their own tricks into the package. One console-mounted rocker switch can vary the deck-mounted spoiler's position by about three inches. (Whether its position affects anything is anyone's guess, since the Vision has yet to be wind-tunnel- or road-tested.) Another rocker switch electrically slides the license plate to the left, revealing the fuel-filler cap.

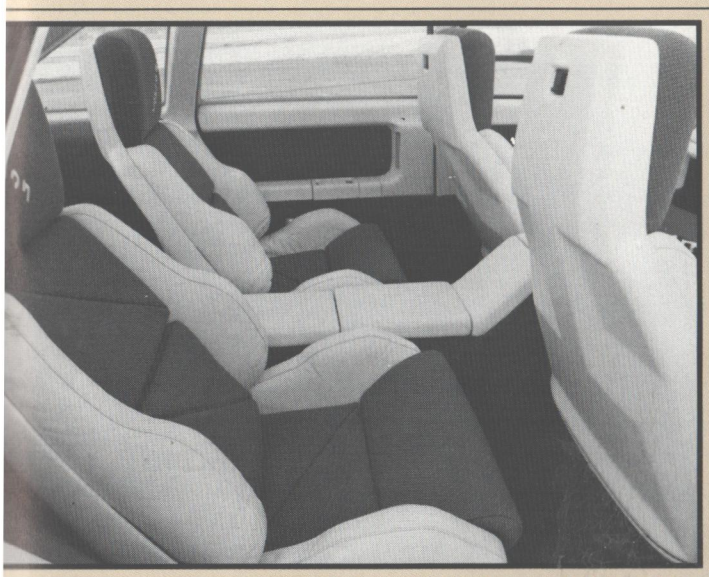
Gizmos and salvaged gadgets aside, the Vision's main attraction is a huge circular sunroof that operates much like the top of a Parmesan-cheese dispenser. The front half of the glass circle drops down and rotates clockwise at the touch of a switch, stowing itself neatly under the rigid rear semicircle.

If you think the glassy Vision sounds like the perfect medium for growing cacti, you're not far off. "We had Corning photochromic glass in mind when we did the initial renderings," says ASC chief designer Mark Trostle, a thirteen-year veteran with the company. "They had a problem manufacturing glass that size, but they had a potential program using that glass in an office building. Had the program come about, they would have been producing it in large enough sheets." The deal never materialized, however, and the sunroof's panels were eventually made by the Ford Glass Division and coated with an ultraviolet-screening laminate.

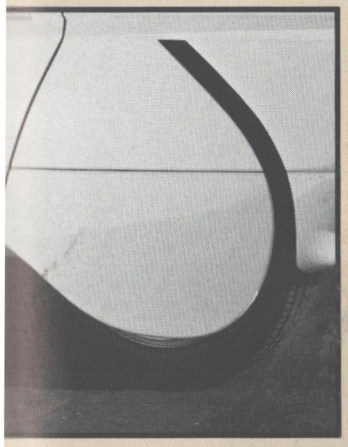
One advantage of the Vision's use of off-the-shelf components is that this 3-D advertisement can actually be driven, and we had the rare treat of taking a priceless show car out for a real-world spin. Not being completely heartless, we kept our joy-ride speeds below 50 mph. The aero skirting over the wheels seemed to work fine at these low velocities, and the sunroof worked beautifully in both the "shake" and "pour" modes—no buffeting, no hair-raising downdrafts.

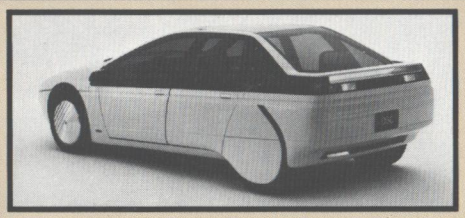
You'd think that driving a car with an all-glass roof would be like riding in Amtrak's observation car, but the Vision's low roofline, high instrument cowl, and bulky A-pillars and door framing (necessary to support the heavy glass structure) combine to crowd the driver's peripheral vision. The best place to appreciate the view is from the back seat. Unfortunately, the back seat isn't big enough for anyone bigger than Heinz

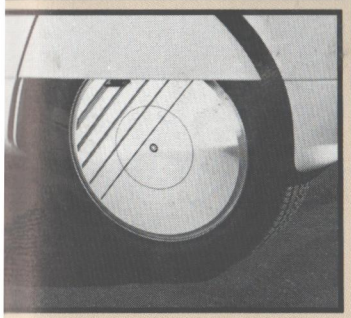
Vehicle type: front-engine, front-wheel-drive, 4-passenger, 4-door sedan
Engine type: turbocharged 4-in-line, iron block and aluminum head, Chrysler electronic fuel injection
Displacement ..... 135 cu in, 2213cc
Power (SAE net) ..... 146 bhp @ 5200 rpm
Transmission ..... 3-speed automatic
Wheelbase ..... 100.0 in
Length ..... 170.0 in
Width ..... 67.5 in
Height ..... 48.0 in
Curb weight ..... 2850 lb

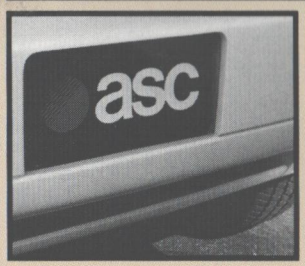


Impractical but eye-catching, the interior is swathed in white leather, accented by a blue-violet fabric. Below: Half of the circular sunroof rotates like a giant Parmesan-cheese dispenser.









Above left: Rear wheel skirts are slotted halfway down to vent underbody pressure. Skirts remove easily for tire changing. Above right: Electrically operated license plate hides gas cap.

Prechter, and he's the first to admit it. "That's for minis like myself," he jokes, as we sit with head bent at a 45-degree angle.

Says Trostle in the Vision's defense: "We really didn't intend for the Vision to be a trendsetter in that it's going to blow away the auto industry or anything like that. We are showcasing a design philosophy, the use of glass, the rotating sunroof."

Adds Prechter: "It made good sense to promote the Vision as a statement of the company to demonstrate our full-line capability from idea to reality."

Although Prechter's showpiece is far from ready for market, it represents a considerable advance from the days when he was a newly arrived German immigrant installing sunroofs in a two-car garage on the West Coast. Back then, he was also building one-off Hollywood kitschmobiles with George Barris. It was at Barris's shop where Chrysler's current design vice-president, Don DeLaRossa (working for Ford at the time), discovered Prechter.

"He saw me cut a hole in a Porsche 356, and I metal-finished it meticulously with no Bondo. He just couldn't believe that this could still be done. We became friendly, and he was my introduction to Detroit."

Prechter's first heavy-metal Motown job was the installation of 300 electrically operated steel sunroofs in 1968-model Cougar XR-7s. He made friends quickly, and within two years American Sunroof was cutting holes in GM and Chrysler roofs as well.

Prechter's stock rose another notch in early 1972, when he installed the industry's first all-glass moonroof in a Lincoln Mark III. "When it came out," remembers Prechter, "we could have sold the moonroof on the black market for twice its value. People would come with cash because they wanted a glass roof, and we only had so many to go around."

Vinyl roofs and T-tops were a natural progression, and Prechter's little company spawned several custom-roof treatments. Many of them were so wildly successful that the manufacturers eventually added them to their regular production lines.

In 1978, American Sunroof processed 110,000 cars through its various manufacturing facilities and sold about 70,000 sunroofs. Heinz Prechter was a 36-year-old golden boy.

A year later, American Sunroof Corporation dropped to its knees.

"I don't think I had a failure really until 1979," he says. "In 1979 I went through hell and came back. We never went bankrupt. We were *close* to going bankrupt. I, in my mind, was very close to going bankrupt.

"The failure was simple. I thought I had it made and I should look for other avenues. I started chasing girls," he says with a laugh, "and I didn't pay attention to my business. I gave up a lot of the control of the company, and we nearly derailed. By the time I came to the realization that it wasn't working, the economy went down, and we lost a lot of money."

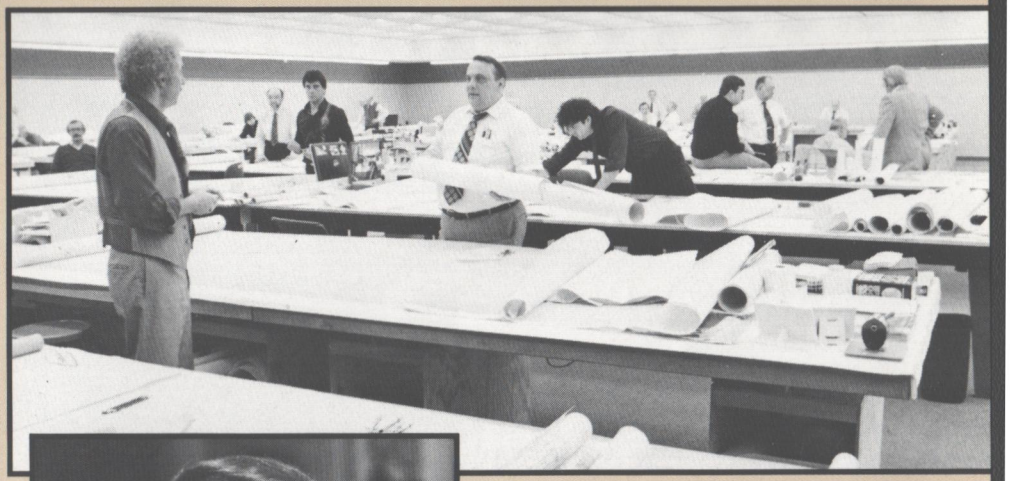
Prechter pulled back, regrouped, and got married. In the spring of 1981, he changed the corporate name to ASC, Incorporated, with three separate operating

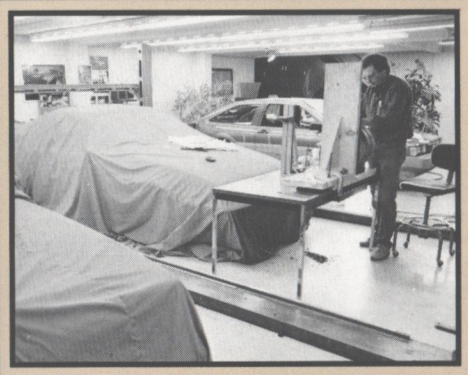
An epoxy-resin-and-cloth mold is cast of the clay model; a wooden framework prevents mold from warping. A fiberglass shell is then made and cut into individual panels that become the templates for the final sheetmetal parts.

companies (all with the ASC initials) underneath its umbrella. The American Sunroof Company now sticks to the job of making and marketing sunroofs, the Automobile Specialty Company handles vehicle modifications on a grander scale, and the Aeromotive Systems Company, still in the planning stages, will eventually be the long-range planning and R&D arm of ASC, Inc., looking at transportation projects that are not necessarily automotive-related.

Today, more than a thousand ASC employees work in 21 facilities scattered around the country. The compact sunroof-manufacturing plant in semirural Southgate, Michigan, where Prechter first started, is now a cluster of four modernized buildings on 34 acres, housing ASC, Inc.'s, design, engineering, technical, and computer centers. The design center, staffed by four young stylists and six clay modelers under Trostle, boasts three workshops, a surface plate (a large, perfectly flat platform used for measuring body surfaces), and a viewing area. In the technical center, top-secret works in progress from various American, Japanese, and European car companies can be quickly isolated from one another by sliding garage doors when company representatives come to call. Within six months, computer-aided design and an environmental-testing chamber will be installed in the engineering facility. Finally, Prechter recently bought a piece of McLaren Engine's engineering expertise and reputation.

"In the past four years, we've tried to head ASC in more of a total-design-house direction," says Trostle. "In the past, everyone has gone to the Italian design houses for that type of capability."





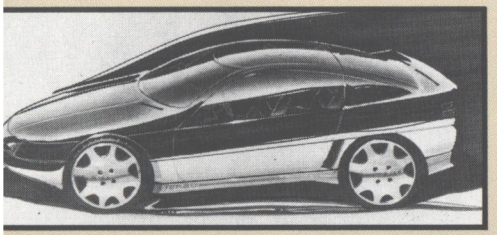
Daily rounds of Heinz Prechter (left) include a conference with chief designer Mark Trostle (upper photo), a visit to ASC's technical center (middle), and a stop at the design studio.

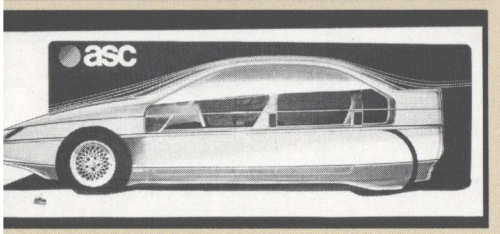
Is Prechter trying to be the Pininfarina of North America?

"No, not at all," Prechter insists. "Not at all. We don't have the ego of a Giugiaro or a Pininfarina. We don't want to scoop our friends in the industry. We want to be a more pragmatic design and development organization than they are. I think we know our role very well: as a facilitator. We do things for our customers on a volume basis which is below a level that is efficient for them to produce. That's my role, it has always been my role, and we want to be in that supportive role on an ongoing basis."

Given a second chance, Prechter is not about to let success slip through his fingers. He comes in at 6:15 a.m., studies reports from ASC's various plants, then tours the development stalls, conferring with technicians, engineers, and designers. He ends the day in his office at 7:30 p.m.

"I find it very easy to delegate responsi-





Slot in front of rear wheel would have caused too much turbulence and was moved back.

bility," he says. "All in all, I think I'm a rather hands-off manager till things don't happen. I only get involved when I sense from my little excursions that things don't happen. Then I can be rather demanding."

Prechter spends most weekday nights at dinner meetings and other business functions and puts in another half-day on Saturday. "Sunday is my family day," he says, reserved for his wife, Waltraud (Wally), and their five-year-old twins.

The more streamlined and professional the ASC operation has become over the past four years, the easier it's been for carmakers to hand their overflow and problem cases to Prechter. In addition to domestic programs, ASC has been working with Saab, Volvo, BMW, Lotus, and Toyota. Prechter's new plant in Long Beach, where Celica two-door sedans are turned into convertibles, is a major step forward for ASC, considering Toyota's renowned quality standards. With one foot in the door of the Japanese car industry, a budding clientele in Europe, and the domestic automakers sewed up tight, ASC is well on its way to carrozzeria status.

"My greatest satisfaction," says Prechter, "is that I'm still around and coming to work every morning. I'm proud that I could be the one stubborn enough to survive long enough to make the conversion business a legitimate part of the industry."

Prechter rests one hand lightly on the Vision. In less than an hour, all of ASC's salaried employees will assemble in this design studio for his quarterly state-of-the-company address.

"In the beginning, it was very much a question of 'What do we need these guys for? We can do it better ourselves.' But with perseverance, we overcame that stigma. Today, at all levels, the industry believes we are a most useful nuisance."

Heinz Prechter smiles in contemplation of this thought, surveying the massive renovation work being carried on around him.

"Don't you think I have an interesting business?" he asks with a grin. ●

Roof Renderings

An ASC portfolio.

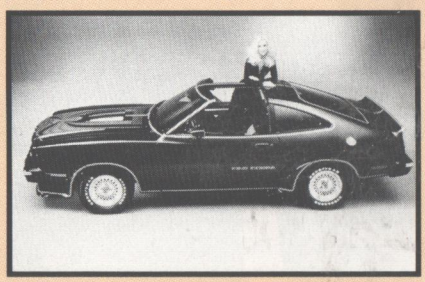
• Call it kitsch or call it cash, ASC's roof renderings over the past two decades have firmly established Heinz Prechter's design firm in the automotive mainstream. More than a million cars have passed through ASC's capable hands, representing so many projects that even Prechter can't remember them all.

Proud though he is of ASC's success, Prechter is loath to blow his own horn. "I have a lot of great ideas," he says, "but I don't want to take credit for them. Why should I? I'm not going to get anything for it. If I do a project in context with one of my good customers and he gets half the credit, I'm much better off."

As ASC embarks on a path destined to establish itself worldwide as a full-line design facility, *C/D* looks back on some of the more notable ASC projects . . . —*JL*

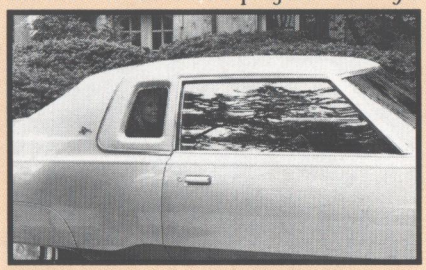
Heinz Prechter came to Detroit in 1967 to install 300 steel sunroofs in 1968 Cougars.

Prechter parked his idea of a 1979 Lincoln Versailles (front) in Ford design veep Gene Bordinat's driveway with parking lights on. When Bordinat saw the car, he bought ASC's proposal and sales tripled the first year.



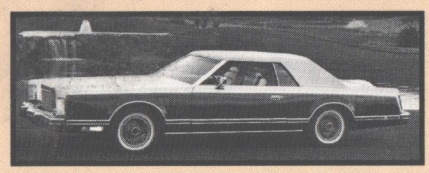
Ford designed the 1978 King Cobra package, and ASC provided the removable roof panels.

ASC builds about 2200 31-inch-stretched Chrysler limos yearly in its St. Louis factory.

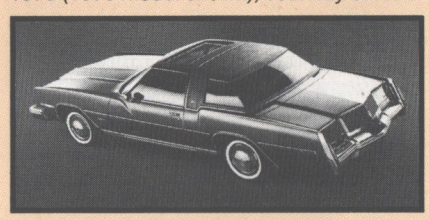


The unusual reverse half-vinyl roof treatment of the Chrysler New Yorker St. Regis was an ASC program from 1974 through 1976.

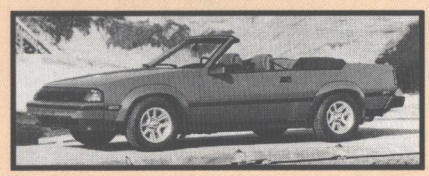
One of Prechter's most successful projects, the Cadillac Eldorado Custom Biarritz, was built by ASC from mid-1976 through 1978 and was eventually moved in-house by Cadillac.



The Lincoln Continental Mark V sported America's first simulated convertible top in 1978 (1979 model shown), courtesy of ASC.

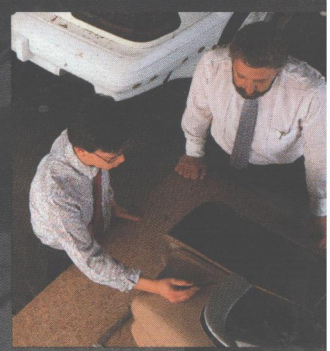


Collector's item: Only about 5000 of these 1978–79 Olds Toronado XS models were built with ASC's interesting wraparound backlight.



Toyota turned to ASC for the design and production of its 1985 Celica GT-S cabriolet.

Ideas to Reality.

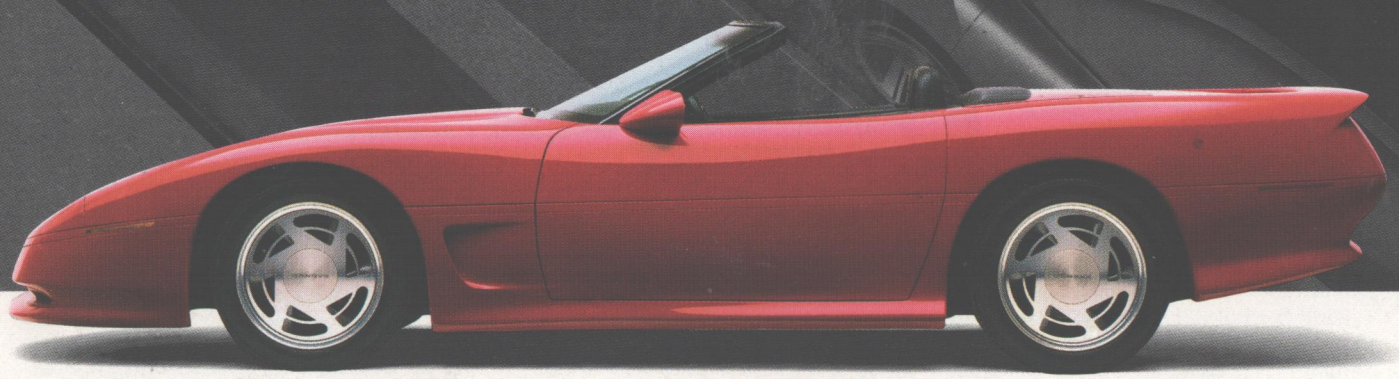


Ideas that sell cars. For nearly 25 years ASC has worked in partnership with original equipment manufacturers around the world to make exciting new ideas a reality. From the first glass-panel sunroof to the first production pickup truck convertible, ASC has opened the door to a variety of profitable new products.

ASC can integrate its international resources into your product development plans. Our specialized technology centers provide the right resources for the task. The result: clear cost and timing advantages for you to meet your market demands.

ASC is a total systems supplier with expertise in developing everything from components and subassemblies to convertibles, sunroofs, special roof treatments, limited editions, interior trim systems, and performance modifications.

New ideas sell cars. Experience and production expertise make them a profitable reality. Delivering both the idea and the reality of specialty automobiles and component systems is easy. It's as easy as ASC.



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