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“Taxi of Tomorrow”: It’s a Nissan

Posted by [Paul Goldberger](#)



In 1976, the architect Emilio Ambasz, then a design curator at the Museum of Modern Art, mounted an ambitious exhibition called “The Taxi Project,” for which he commissioned several prototypes for improved taxicabs for New York. Ambasz got Volvo to design one of his ideal taxis, and Volkswagen to do another. The American car makers all declined to participate. Why should they bother? They planned to go on selling Chevrolet Caprices, Ford Galaxies, and Plymouth Furies to taxi fleets until the end of time. Their only real competition was the Checker—remember that?—which, beloved though it was, was never as ubiquitous on the city streets as its iconic status would suggest. And Checker went out of business in 1982.

Now, thirty-five years later—about ten generations in taxi time—the seeds planted by Ambasz have finally grown into something: the announcement by Mayor Bloomberg that within the next few years, all new taxis in New York will be a special model, manufactured by Nissan, called the NV200. Nissan won an official city competition to design a new prototype to replace the Ford Crown Victoria, the banal, inefficient, and uncomfortable sedan that for the last decade or more has been the vehicle of choice for most taxi-fleet owners. The competition, officially called “The Taxi of Tomorrow,” was largely the result of a five-year campaign by a non-profit organization called Design Trust for Public Space, whose director, Deborah Marton, and chairman, Paul Herzan, understood the basic fact that a car is not a taxi, that the two things have entirely different functions, and that you don’t get a good taxi by painting a plain vanilla sedan yellow. The Trust found a sympathetic ear in the Bloomberg

Administration, which in 2009 issued a call for proposals for specialized taxi designs, and promised a ten-year contract, worth roughly a billion dollars, to the winner. A few months ago the city winnowed down the entrants to three finalists.

I was getting ready to celebrate the notion that New York would at last have a standard taxi that might, just might, rival the *ur*-taxi of the world, the great London cab. And then I looked at the [Nissan](#). It's a warmed-over minivan. That's pretty much what it looks like, however much Nissan is jiggering the interior and the mechanical systems. I'm sure that it will work better than the clunky things we ride around in now, and it will have nice things, like more leg room and plugs for charging your phone and a sunroof and a G.P.S. so that the driver can't claim to be lost. But it's a minivan, all the same. For this, we have waited all of these years? To have thirteen thousand minivans prowling the streets of New York, so that Fifth Avenue will look like the parking lot at a suburban soccer game?

Of the three finalists in the competition—the other two were Ford and a Turkish company called Karsan—the Nissan was the dullest, the most conventional by far. The [Ford](#) did look something like a delivery truck, I admit. But it felt more urban, more New York, than a minivan. And it had a spiffy front, and a door height that would have been welcomed by everyone who struggles to get in and out of today's cabs.



The [Karsan](#) was far and away the best piece of design: a sleek, glass-enclosed vehicle that had just the right futuristic, Buck Rogers-y spin to it, as if a New York taxi had been bred to a spaceship. It somehow looked as if it belonged on the streets of New York. The front ends of cars are always like faces, and the Karsan taxi's face was friendly. It made you want to jump aboard. And once you got inside, you would find an interior that looked more or less like the London taxi. The mayor said that there was some concern that Karsan, which is not, to say the least, a global power in the auto industry, would have the stuff to deliver a billion dollars worth of taxis, and to build them well enough to hold up in New York. And Bloomberg rightly dismissed the company's promise, made fairly recently, to build the taxis in Brooklyn as far-fetched. It would take years just to get over the planning and political hurdles of getting a factory built. Still, the Karsan was the only one of the three that made you smile, the only one that looked and felt as if it had been designed from the ground up as a taxi, and only as a taxi. It would have been something new, and something that would have made the streets of New York look better, which is what I thought this whole "taxi of tomorrow" business was about.