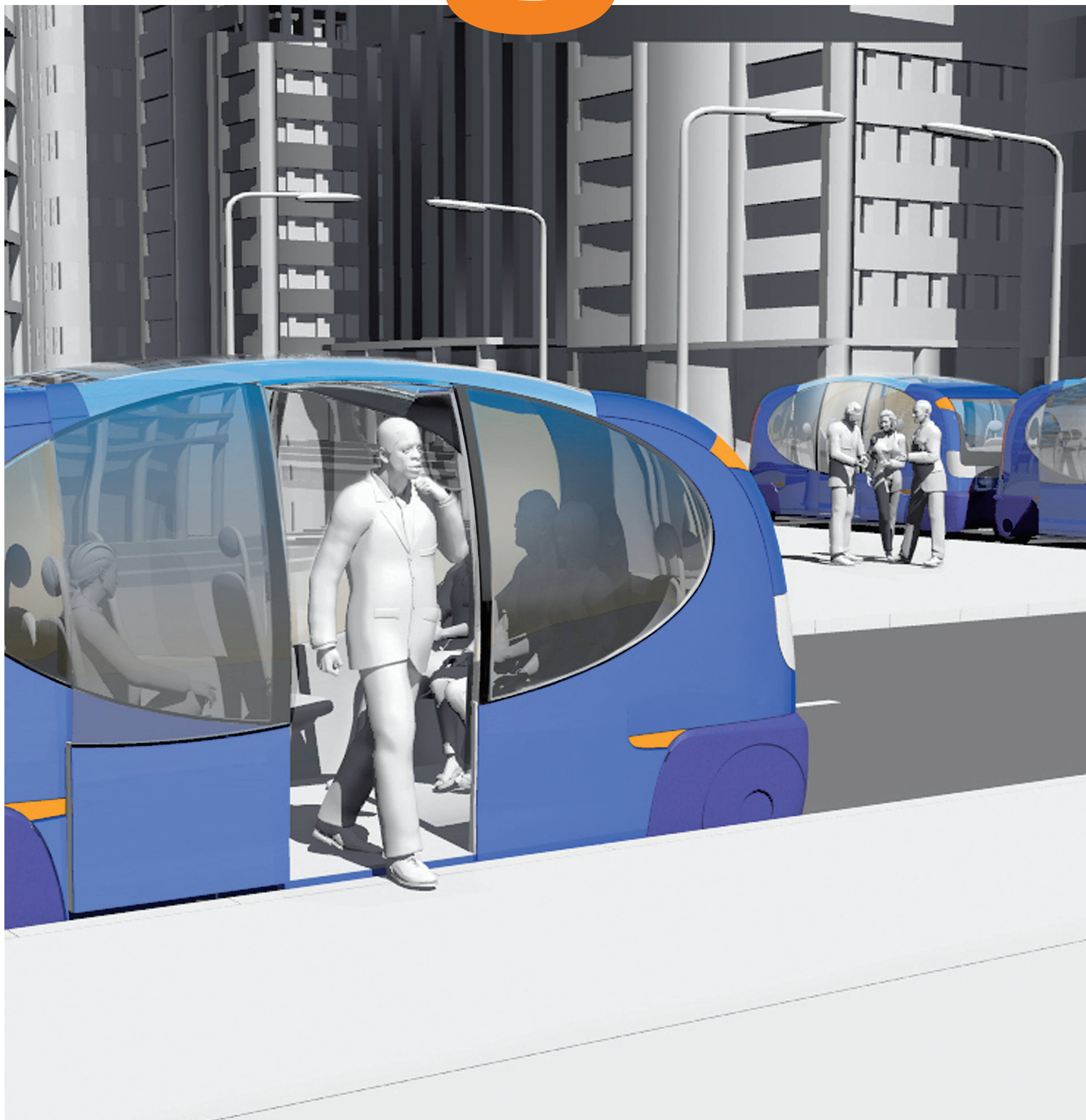


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Transport links
Alan Ponsford talks bus design

After setting up automotive design studio Capoco in the 1970s, **Alan Ponsford** found his niche in bus design. Three decades later, demand for his experience is greater than ever. John Stones catches up with a seasoned veteran



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Take a bus in the UK and chances are it was designed by Capoco Design, the specialist consultancy led by Alan Ponsford. Since starting Capoco on a shoe string in 1977, Ponsford has quietly carried on designing and engineering buses. Bestsellers, such as the Dennis Dart, means that Capoco is responsible for almost two-thirds of the buses in the UK, and buses designed by his Wiltshire-based consultancy are trundling the streets in 17 countries around the world.

While vehicle design and manufacture – be it cars, trucks or trains – has all drifted away from the UK, bus design has remained in this country, largely due to Ponsford and his small team of five full-time staff (and a stable of ten or so experienced contractors). It's a niche, he volunteers, that's 'not particularly glamorous'. But, in the past few years, public transport has soared up the political and social agenda, and people have started to take notice of buses again. 'The game has come our way,' says Ponsford.

As the reaction to the forced retirement of the venerable Routemaster bus from regular service in 2005 showed, there is more emotion invested in bus design than many would have credited. When motoring weekly Autocar decided to propose a modern redesign of the Routemaster, it was Ponsford they called on to come up with the RMXL design.

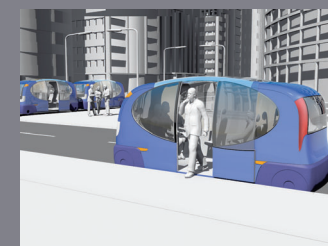
This design relies on hybrid technology, with the combustion engine at the front acting as a generator for the electric motor under the rear staircase. Ponsford maintains that the RMXL is a thoroughly viable and practical proposal. 'It's not built out of "unobtainium",' he jokes.

The idea of a new Routemaster was jumped upon by the media and received wide coverage. Unwittingly, Ponsford found himself in the middle of a political fuss, with Tory mayoral challenger Boris Johnson in favour, and London Mayor Ken Livingstone, who introduced the controversial Mercedes-designed 'bendy-buses', against the design.

Another futuristic public transport proposal was mired due to controversy of another sort. To celebrate Capoco's first 25 years, it set up a research programme with the Helen Hamlyn Centre at the Royal College of Art, looking into sustainable public transport of the future. The project's name, Mobility, incurred the ire of oil giant Exxon Mobil, which sued and then had to back down and pay damages. But the proposal that has been developed, for automated 'on-demand' small vehicles, which use navigation



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systems instead of expensive drivers for journeys of the traveller's choosing, has been very well received. It is most likely to be trialled at a large expo, or what Ponsford cryptically refers to as 'a major sporting event'. Full commercial backing is still being sought.

On-demand transport and the hybrid bus are the two most important prizes in public transport design today, says Ponsford. But, for the time being, demand for conventional buses remains strong, and his services are used around the world. When it comes to public transport, there are 'the same problems in Shanghai as in Mannheim', he says. A cold call to Greyhound led to Capoco working with the iconic US bus company for five years. And in Las Vegas, of all places, Capoco's double-deckers have proved an unexpected hit, partly because of the lucrative advertising deals of 'full-wrap' decals.

At 61, Ponsford remains a committed hands-on designer, or 'mouse-wielder' as he prefers to call it, and he still puts in long hours. 'It's the only thing I am good at,' he says. 'I am not a natural manager.'

Ponsford trained as an engineer, doing a sandwich course at Imperial College and Leyland, tempted by the £112-a-year grant in 1969. Yet he describes his work as design. 'It's all design as far as I am concerned,' he says. 'That is why I talk about total design. You get a benefit from working on all aspects, and it makes it easier to optimise things.'

Ponsford now lives near London Bridge, which means a daily commute of four hours, for which he relies upon his comfortable Volvo. But his work means that many more of us are happier to forego a private car and take the bus.

1 Las Vegas double-decker bus, covered in 'full-wrap' advertising
2 Alan Ponsford
3 New Routemaster proposal for Autocar magazine
4 and 5 Mobility public transport of the future concept, developed with the Helen Hamlyn Centre

All work by Capoco