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The Dodge Demon, a design study for a small roadster.

By NICK KURCZEWSKI
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GENEVA — The bright lights and unfettered optimism of the auto show here cannot chase away all of the clouds hanging over the industry. During press previews this week, Ford put on a happy face as it introduced a new Mondeo sedan for the European market, even while it undergoes the latest attempt to cut thousands of jobs and turn around a business that has been losing billions of dollars.

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DaimlerChrysler rolled out a sunny roadster design study, the Dodge Demon, in the midst of speculation about whether it will sell its troubled Chrysler operations, and if so, to whom.

Still, the overall message from Geneva seemed to be that

the future looks brighter — and greener. Hybrids seem to be here to stay, even on a continent that has been slow to embrace them. The Geneva show featured hybrid concepts for sports cars, family cars and crossover utility vehicles.

The Geneva show is also known for being eclectic, and that description fit well this year. The halls of the Palexpo center were filled with electric cars, upright minivans, exotic supercars and bizarre vehicles that tried to be all of the above.

Back-to-back press conferences — often barely 10 minutes long — kept the air thick with PR spin and manufactured excitement. Here are some highlights from the introductions this year:

**Audi A5 and S5:** A battle among rich German two-doors is shaping up, and these coupes represent a salvo from Audi, aimed at the Mercedes-Benz CLK and the new BMW 3 Series. The Audis are based on an entirely new vehicle platform that will be the basis for future models. Both have strong, solid-looking lines but a fairly conservative appearance, provoking some heated debate in the press as to whether the cars are subtle and handsome or as dull as a Senate filibuster. The A5's standard engine is a 3.2-liter V-6; the S5 has a 350-horsepower 4.2-liter V-8. Both versions are due to arrive in the U.S. this fall.

**Dodge Demon:** Pity the pretty Demon. Under any other circumstances, at any other auto show, this slick little roadster would have been guaranteed star status. The Demon adopts the look and attitude of its big brother, the 510-horsepower Dodge Viper, with an economical 2.4-liter 4-cylinder and proportions nearly identical to the nimble Mazda MX-5 Miata. But with DaimlerChrysler potentially on the verge of splitting up (and the short list of suitors to buy the Chrysler, Dodge and Jeep brands growing shorter), the Demon looked like a four-wheel attempt to put on a brave face, rather than a real contender for series production.

**Toyota Hybrid X:** Flush with success — and cash from continued sales successes — Toyota can afford to have some fun. The press conference for the Hybrid X was short on technical specifics, but this Toyota concept car still provided a welcome jolt of frivolity in an environmentally friendly package. Laurent Bouzige, a designer at Toyota's Europe Design Development offices in Nice, France, was responsible for the Hybrid X's interior. Mr. Bouzige explained that crystal-like rods serve as door handles and window switches; in addition, the headlights theoretically "communicate" with pedestrians and other drivers by alerting them to any quick maneuvers by the driver. While most of the technology is decades away — and nearly all the technology in the Hybrid X is nonfunctional — it doesn't take much crystal-ball gazing to deduce that the overall shape of the Hybrid X will influence the next-generation Prius hybrid.

**Mercedes-Benz C-Class:** Depending on which model you were looking at on the Mercedes-Benz stand, the 2008 C-Class is everything from a rampaging racecar to a green machine with a fuel-sipping diesel engine. A wide range of 4, 6 and even 8-cylinder engines will be offered, though the American market will initially get only gasoline-powered V-6s. There is even an option of two different grill treatments: the traditional version has plenty of chrome and a proud Mercedes-tristar hood ornament,

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while the other is bolder but has less bling, featuring an oversize tristar at its center. C-Classes will arrive in the United States this summer with either 3-liter or 3.5-liter V-6s. A six-speed manual is available with the smaller engine, but the 3.5-liter V-6 comes only with a seven-speed automatic. High performance versions with powerful V-8s are also in the works.

**Honda Small Hybrid Sports Concept:** Honda might as well have canceled its press conference, since most of the information about its car was included in its lengthy name. No technical details were provided other than the fact that the concept has a four-cylinder hybrid engine and is based on a "small-car platform." The strange combination of a wind-swept greenhouse, blunt bumpers and chunky fenders resulted in a design study almost as awkward as its name.

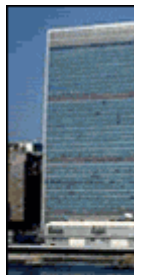
**BMW M3 Concept:** BMW must have deemed its M3 Concept a hot commodity, since it placed a spinning propeller behind the M3's position on its stand. At the least, the breeze proved welcome relief on the stiflingly warm floor of the Palexpo center. Another welcome benefit, at least from a performance perspective, is the high-revving 4-liter V-8 engine producing more than 400 horsepower. The new M3 arrives in American showrooms early next year.

**Opel GTC Concept:** The Opel nameplate does not mean much to most Americans, but it is General Motors' mainstream European brand and it has been busy updating its lineup and sharing the results with G.M.'s Saturn division. The muscular GTC Concept hints at the next-generation Opel Vectra, and possibly the next Vectra-based Saturn Aura. Boris Jacob, chief designer of advanced design at G.M. Europe, explained that the GTC Concept is meant to be "more fluid and emotional" than recent Opels. Details like the aluminum-trimmed tusklike grille openings could carry over to high-performance models. Opel's new arrangement with Saturn had no influence on the styling, G.M. insisted, though Mr. Jacob admitted that if the GTC appealed to American tastes, "that's perfect."

**Volvo V70 and XC 70:** Now that Volvo has officially sent its youth-targeted C30 hatchback onto roads (at least in Europe), the company is free to get back to its roots. Big and boxy wagons are a Volvo hallmark, and there was a palpable sense of ease in knowing that the Swedish company is back to doing what it knows best. The V70 and XC70 wagons are safe, spacious and attractive and still boxy enough to appease Volvo purists. The V70 is equipped with a 235-horsepower 3.2-liter inline-6. The XC70 is basically the same car, albeit with a higher ride height, plastic body cladding and standard all-wheel drive. The XC70 arrives in the United States late this year, and the V70 will come early in 2008.

**Maserati GranTurismo:** As the sheet covering the GranTurismo was pulled skyward, the smooth and aggressive lines — designed by Pininfarina of Italy — met with strong approval from spectators. A glance inside the cabin revealed rich red leather and tasteful applications of chrome and aluminum trim. The GranTurismo is powered by the same Ferrari-sourced 4.2-liter V-8 found in the luxurious Quattroporte sedan. Arriving in America later this year, the GranTurismo will cost roughly \$110,000.

**Bentley Brooklands:** Priced like a house and as long as a yacht, this imposing coupe



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carries a price tag of \$350,000 and has a 530-horsepower 6.7-liter V-8 under its helipad-sized hood. As you'd expect of a car in this class, the interior has more wood and leather than an English billiard club. Only 550 are to be built, and just over 100 of those will be headed to America.

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