

Lamborghini Bravo

Text: Gautam Sem (with Branko Radovinovic) / (this is a short version of the text from the book: "Lamborghini - At the Cutting Edge of Design" by Gautam Sen, Kaare Byberg and Branko Radovinovic)

Since the presentation of the Lamborghini 350 GT at the 1964 Geneva Motor Show, the Swiss Salon had become a fixed presentation date in the agenda for the carmaker from Sant'Agata. However, some of Lamborghini's new models were also presented at the Turin Motor Show, starting with the very first car to bear the brand name, the 350 GTV, which was officially unveiled at the Italian show in 1963. The promising Urraco was also unveiled at the 1970 Turin Motor Show. When it came time to relaunch the Urraco in its latest, heavily revised form - as the more powerful P300 and the more fiscally efficient P200 - the decision was made to introduce both at the 1974 Turin Motor Show to serve the important Italian market.

Although production of the Lamborghini Urraco was finally ramping up in early 1974, feedback, teething problems and newer competition forced Paolo Stanzani and his technical team to develop a more powerful version of the car, the P300 Urraco. Design-wise, the P300 Urraco is no different from the P250, except for the vents on the hood (which were expanded from two large ones to six narrower ones). "However, the larger engine had significantly more power and the potential for much better performance if it were housed in a much lighter body," Marcello Gandini believed, since the Urraco was decidedly heavy at 1.3 tons. "So when we were considering what to develop as a concept car for the 1974 Salone dell'automobile di Torino, Nuccio Bertone and I discussed that a smaller, pure two-seater derived from the Urraco would be an interesting concept," Gandini recalled. No doubt Bertone and Gandini had also noticed that Ferrari had two models in the junior league of supercars: the Dino 308 GT4, which Gandini himself had designed at Bertone, and the modestly successful Dino 246 GT/GTS.

It is also possible that the idea of developing a two-seat concept version of the Urraco served to impress and tempt the new owners of Automobili Ferruccio Lamborghini, Georges-Henri Rossetti and René Leimer, to develop another model to complement the 2+2 Urraco, a model that was perhaps lighter and faster and perhaps a bit cheaper, a step down the market ladder in those difficult times immediately following the oil crisis.

When Paolo Stanzani was approached by Nuccio Bertone, he was immediately willing to supply Bertone's Centro Stile with a unit of the new 2996cc engine. The technicians even seem to have gone a step further: they specifically tuned the engine to produce more than the production version, an estimated 300 hp, if Bertone's official press release is anything to go by. It is also possible that this figure was more theoretical and that the concept car was (in reality) equipped with a standard 3-liter engine.

Be that as it may, Lamborghini supplied a considerably shortened chassis, with the wheelbase shortened by 17.5 cm. The area where the (limited) footwell for the rear passengers of the 2+2 coupe was located was omitted, reducing the length to 2.28 meters.

With the opportunity to showcase Pirelli's brand new P7 tires - wider and with more grip than anything approved for the road at the time - Gandini opted for 195/50 VR15 tires on the front axle and wide 275/40 VR15 tires on the rear. As a result, the tracks had to be widened and the overall width of the concept prototype grew from the 1.74 meters to 1.88 meters. Gandini also managed to lower the overall height of the vehicle to an astonishingly low 1.035 meters.

Once the key technical data had been defined, Gandini drew an amazing design for this concept car, which was christened Bravo. This name is the popular Spanish nickname for a particularly brave fighting bull. The car was unveiled at the Bertone stand in Turin in November 1974, at the same time that the P300 and P200 Urracos were presented at the Lamborghini stand. The Bravo - Gandini and Bertone's third Lamborghini concept car after the sensational Marzal and the stunning Miura Roadster - was another show stopper.

The design, an evolution of the Countach, was similarly wedge-shaped but stockier, conveying a sense of power without being aggressive or offensive. The car's wedge profile featured vertical louvers in both the front and rear and a short comb rear. The front set of louvers directed air toward the windshield to keep out rain. This explains why the car had no windshield wipers - a very innovative solution indeed. The rear louvers served to ventilate the engine compartment while allowing a view to the rear - a similar solution to the Miura.

The base of the windshield began in front of the front axle line. With a very pronounced slope, the hood and windshield formed almost a straight line, which merged with a fairly short hood into the front of the car.

Viewed from the side, the Bravo's sloping rear wheel arch stands out, a shape that became Gandini's trademark since the Stratos HF Zero and Countach. The magnesium rim introduced the theme of five round holes like telephone dials, which was adopted by the Silhouette, the Countach S, the Countach 25° Anniversario, the first Diablos and, much later, the Murciélago. The hinged headlight flaps were cleverly integrated into the geometric patterns of the louvers.

The windows, flush with the pillars, were also a first, giving the front section the impression of a glass, wrap-around unit - like a helmet visor.

The interior was also rather plain, with a flat brushed aluminum fascia that was a thin horizontal strip that reduced the overall volume of the dashboard, and the clean rectangular instruments connected by a slim line. The Bravo's seats, door panels and dashboard top and bottom were covered in Alcantara.

The Bravo was another surprise premiere at the Turin show and most of the press and public were enthusiastic about the car. One of the first reports on the Bravo appeared in the November 9, 1974 issue of The Autocar, the English weekly: "One had the impression that Pininfarina and Ital Design think of the passenger first in their dream cars and then build a beautiful shape around him - while Bertone creates the shape and then thinks of the passengers. "

The Italian Motor was also impressed. In their November 15, 1974 issue, they wrote: "With Lamborghini's new three-liter engine, Bertone has created a sporty coupe that stands out for its bold stylistic solutions. The front and rear hoods are interrupted by a series of louvers that not only contribute to better cooling of the radiator and engine, but also allow rearward visibility. "

In the November 9, 1974 issue, Motor magazine, which had always been rather critical of Lamborghini, wrote: "To get into the interior, you have to contort yourself quite a bit, and all the upper halves of the instruments are covered by panels. "

No doubt we can count on CAR's Doug Blain to give a far more favorable review of the Bravo concept: "It's really kind of a mini-Countach, and with a few modifications it will probably go into production as early as next summer. In the meantime, its engine, an enlarged (to three liters) four-cam version of the original, has become standard equipment on the regular-bodied Urraco, finally giving it the performance to match its amazing road manners and handling. "

The Italian magazine Intrepido devoted an entire page to the Bravo in its January 23, 1975 issue. Journalist Mario Poltronieri not only raved about the exterior design, but also pointed out that "the car's interior trim is made of a new and soft fabric called Alcantara, already widely used in the clothing industry but a novelty in the automotive sector."

Although the Bravo was essentially introduced as a show car, it was, like all Bertone concept cars of those years, a real hit. While making its rounds at auto shows, the Bravo was also tested and reviewed by a few car magazines. One of the first to get its hands on the Bravo was Sweden's Teknikens Varld. In the September 22, 1976 issue, Teknikens Varld writer John E. Bech pointed out that you literally had to "lie down" behind the vertical steering wheel, so low was the seating position. "Turn the ignition key," the Teknikens Varld article says, "and you'll be amazed at the sound of the 2995.8 cc central V8. Looking at the car from the outside, the design is almost reminiscent of an advanced spaceship powered by a silent energy source, as you can hardly hear any engine noise. A low profile, characterized by a wedge shape, large dark glass surfaces, many originally solved air intakes, a very advanced design for the rims. The appearance of the Bravo leaves no observer untouched - whether the person perceives the car as a visitor from outer space or as a sports car. "

A year later, in the July 7, 1977 issue of the German Rally Racing, we were reacquainted not only with the Bravo, but also with a young Valentino Balboni: "On the Lamborghini factory floor, you have to get used to looking down when you look at a car," the article in Rally Racing said. "None of the cars built here are much higher than a meter."

Around 1979, when Automobili Ferruccio Lamborghini was under Italian state administration, the Bravo was made available to several magazines with the indication that the car was being considered for mass production. This was possibly done to attract potential buyers to Lamborghini. It is possible that the article in the March 7, 1979 issue of Auto Zeitung contributed to Hubert Hahne and potential German investors coming on the scene later that year (though ultimately unsuccessful).

The Auto Zeitung article states, "Ferruccio Lamborghini sought and found a partner in Swiss businessman Georges-Henri Rossetti, to whom he sold a 51 percent majority stake in the car plant at the end of 1971," the Auto Zeitung article continues, "Together, they managed to increase production figures for Espada, Jarama, Miura and Urraco to around 400 to 500 cars per year. But with the global energy crisis, Lamborghini sold the remaining 49 percent of its shares to René Leimer of Switzerland in 1974. Since then, Cavaliere Lamborghini has been trading in wine. And the Rossetti-Leimer team has been fighting for the survival of the car company."

"The first impression in the cockpit of the Bravo: Where are the gauges? ", comments the Auto Zeitung. "Design and styling took precedence over functionality - the gauges are tiny. The second impression: Bravo drivers are lonely. From the outside, heavily tinted glazing protects the pilot from prying eyes. Inside, the man at the wheel has only one line of sight: forward, because there are no rearview mirrors on the outside. "

According to French Lamborghini specialist and historian Jean-François Marchet, the Bravo, which Automobili Ferruccio Lamborghini referred to internally as Progetto 114, covered around 70,000 kilometers between tests and inspections. This figure is disputed by several Lamborghini insiders, and Gandini also believes that "the Bravo could have been driven a few thousand kilometers at most. In fact, one of the new owners - it was probably René Leimer - used the car quite a bit for his personal use. " Lamborghini test driver Bob Wallace was quoted as saying that the car was indeed very good to drive and that with the appropriate modifications to make it more practical, the Bravo could have been an important addition to Lamborghini's model range.

But the carmaker did not have the financial resources at that time to prepare for the production of another model. At the same time, it is interesting to note that in the April 29, 1978 issue of British Motor, Bravo appeared on the cover, and in the article it contained, Lamborghini's Ubaldo Sgarzi was quoted as saying that a production version still had about three years of development ahead of it.

But times were not favorable. Neither was the financial situation of Lamborghini, which slid from one crisis to the next and finally went bankrupt in 1979. Needless to say, all plans to put the Bravo into production were abandoned long before then, although Gandini says it was possible to "transform" the concept car into a practical production model. "The Bravo was conceived from the beginning as a pure concept vehicle, with no plans for production," Gandini explains. "This allowed us to explore the possibilities of flush bonding of the windows and creating an almost homogeneous shape. Changing all that for a more practical car for production would have been possible, but would have required a redesign. Of course, the overall look and shape of the design could have been kept. "

In Arnstein Landsem's book about the Lamborghini Urraco (published by Veloce Publishing, March 15, 2011), the author quotes Lamborghini's evergreen marketing chief, Ubaldo Sgarzi, as saying: "Ahh, the Bravo. It was the most beautiful car Lamborghini ever built, but it didn't make it into production. It was initially thought of as just another dream car, but when we saw how beautiful it was, there were talks about putting it into production. Unfortunately, that wasn't possible because there were technical problems that made production impossible. But it was such a beautiful car. "

Originally painted in an experimental golden yellow color by the American paint manufacturer PPG, the Bravo was used often enough and needed a paint retouch in the late 1970s. This was not possible, however, as PPG could no longer supply the same color, so the car was repainted a metallic green. Possibly in an effort to keep it fresh, it was later treated with a coat of champagne color.

Although co-owner René Leimer used the car and journalists drove it extensively, the Bravo was a Bertone-financed concept and therefore remained the property of the coachbuilder. Until the 1980s, when the likelihood that the Bravo would ever go into production became increasingly remote, Carrozzeria Bertone kept the concept car as part of its historic collection housed at Stile Bertone in Caprie. At the start of the new millennium, the Bravo underwent a restoration that gave it a pearlescent white hue that Stile Bertone employees said they felt was more appropriate than the original. When Stile Bertone ran into serious financial difficulties in 2010, the Bravo was also sold at auction along with five other Bertone concept cars. RM Auctions sold the car on May 21, 2011, and it now resides in a private Lamborghini collection.

It's a pity that it remained a concept car. Because thanks to Gandini's timeless design, little would be needed to turn the one-off show car into a functional road vehicle that would still look modern and attract attention today.