

What does COVID-19 mean for car design? We ask Jaguar's Julian Thomson

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- Jaguar recently moved into a massive new design studio packed with advanced technology. But currently, everyone's forced into working from home because of the coronavirus pandemic.
- Some design work is relatively easy to do at home.
- But can teleconferences really replace this kind of in-person creative collaboration?
- Full-sized clay models are the work of multi-axis CNC machines, but also human sculptors.
- The design studio can display multiple full-size clay models at once.
- An outdoor viewing 'garden', hidden from prying eyes.
- Pictured left to right: Adam Hatton, Exterior Design Director, Jaguar; Alister Whelan, Interior Design Director, Jaguar; Julian Thomson, Design Director, Jaguar; Siobhan Hughes, Colour & Materials Chief Designer, Jaguar

Adapting to the coronavirus lockdown and the move *en masse* to working from home has been easier for some professions than others. We've been doing it since day one here at Ars, because typing at a computer is just as easy to do at home as it is a crowded office. That's less easy if you're, say, a car designer. "The design studio is a big workshop; it's a big

collaborative workshop,” says Julian Thomson, Jaguar’s director of design, who like the rest of the organization now finds himself working from home in the UK. We spoke with Thomson this week to see how that’s affecting his 300-strong team, what legacy this pandemic might leave on the cars that get designed in the future, as well as what to look for in the recent F-Type design refresh and the forthcoming XJ electric sedan.

The last few weeks have required a little adaptation for the Jaguar design studio. “In an organization like Jaguar Land Rover there are a lot of people who do just stand at a computer screen all day. But it’s very unnatural for a designer or a modeller to do that” he explained. Pre-pandemic, Thomson says he’d hardly ever be found in his office. “I[‘d] spend the majority of my time just wandering around looking at models, talking to people, seeing what they’re doing. If I have a question, more often than not, I walk over on the person’s desk,” he told me.

Thomson—whose design credits include the original Lotus Elise and the first-generation Range Rover Evoque—has had the top design job at Jaguar for a little under a year, replacing his former boss Ian Callum last July. A couple of months later, he and the rest of the company’s designers moved into a new design studio in Gaydon, England, a 130,000 sq ft (12,000m²) space with state-of-the-art CNC clay modeling equipment, VR caves, and an 36-foot (11m) 4K display wall. “A whole new studio was built around a very collaborative communicative space. And so now to be stuck in my attic tied to an iPad is pretty strange for me and has had its moments,” he said.

Enlarge / Jaguar's director of design, Julian Thomson, stands in front of a gargantuan display at the company's new design studio.

Each new Jaguar design is the work of hundreds of people, but needs to look as if it's a singular vision, not the product of a committee. "That's why we need to have such good communication and in such a close-knit team. So it's difficult to copy that situation when we're all separated like this but it's working out all right," he explained.

His biggest frustration is not being able to see or compare designs as full-size, 3-dimensional clay models. "And that's frustrating because then the ultimate realization of what we do. I can review animations and 3D models at home. We can review final production data at home, we can sign off tooling and final surface. So we can do all of that stuff very

effectively. You know, we have quite collaborative meetings where we can review the same material, and it works okay. The clay model is the part of the process where you're really refining surfaces and honing designs and getting them right—that's a bit we can't really do at the moment. That's a bit of a bottleneck in the process," he told me.

But like many, it's not being able to spend the days with his coworkers that stings the most. "The social interaction and the discussion is very, very important. I really miss that," he said.

Will COVID-19 change the design of our cars?

One of the main requirements of being a car designer is being able to think ahead, envisioning the vehicles you think people will (or should) be driving in the coming years. I asked Thomson if he thought the pandemic might leave its scars on future cars?

"I think we're interested in how it's going to change people's attitudes. I was just watching something on TV last night which had a scene set in Grand Central Station and two people going onto a train, just pushing past each other—it looks so alien to see people in a big crowded station or running around each other, you know, and it's amazing how quickly people's attitudes change. And so, people's views of getting on a bus, or shared transportation—how are they going to feel about that? The whole thing about the general rat race, and people's values in life and family and work life balance. All these things are being questioned," Thomson told me.

One possibility is a greater acceptance of electric vehicles. "People are going to be really thinking about health, they're seeing that suddenly the streets are quieter, the air is cleaner. You know, everyone's seeing the world in a different

way. I think for the car industry it will encourage electric vehicles; I think it will probably encourage the health element of cars as well about how healthy cars are, and the damage they do but also how they look after their occupants in terms of air quality. I think that'll be important," he said.

As for whether there's still an appetite to spend tens of thousands of dollars (or more) on a new car, he's as unsure as the rest of us. "I think it'll also affect people's spending power—how they actually measure success and how they measure the value of having stuff. So we could either see people being more modest and withdrawn, wanting to have simpler lives. Or we could see them doing complete opposite of just going mad, going crazy and saying life's too short," he said, pointing out that the Hermès store in Guangzhou, China, took \$2.7 million the day it reopened in mid-April.

The new F-Type, and how headlights are changing the game

The midlife refresh of Jaguar's F-Type sports car is his team's most recent work. That car's original design has met with near-universal praise, so was it hard breathing a little new life into it, I wondered? "I think it was always a car which was all about a very compact proportion, being very elegant, he said. But advances in headlights gave the designers more freedom to hone the sportiest cat's face. "So, with the technology afforded by the new lamps, we were able to do these much slimmer pixel LEDs," he explained.

Enlarge / The biggest change to the F-Type is a new headlight. "it basically has the effect of making the bonnet look longer, because your eye doesn't read a lamp going up the fender. And it also allows you to visually widen the car, and when the car comes towards you, you see the lights flow down and they pull your eye right out to the edges of the car. It's very, very important for a sports car particularly that it looks very very planted and low at the front. So that's really what we're trying to do with that vehicle," Thomson said.

Those advances in lighting might be one of the most important technological changes affecting the way cars look these days. "When I started out in this industry all lamps were round, and you could just add more than one to the car. And then through the years, they've got more sophisticated. Obviously that

thing about having a light signature at the front of the car—people very much equated that with technology and brand identity. That was okay for the people the first time around, but then everyone else did it, so it's less distinctive. I think what's more interesting for us is now you could perhaps hide the whole headlamps with body color or chrome—we can make it so small you can't see it. But then you get cars which don't have eyes anymore," he muses.

"Now, headlamp developers come to us with terribly small lamps and say "look, you can have it as small as you like" but you're in danger of developing these very bland faces which don't have any character. And in a world where everyone's trying to have very strong corporate identity front ends, you know, headlamps are very, very important that they do signal something. So that said, that's a challenge for us to really see where that goes," he told me.

What about that forthcoming electric XJ sedan?

Next up, we're expecting a replacement for Jaguar's venerable XJ sedan. Only this one will be a battery EV, building on the lessons the company has learned from the I-Pace crossover. The I-Pace's form factor was dictated in part because of the height of its battery pack, which translated into the taller profile you expect with an SUV. But the XJ doesn't have that luxury, and spy shots taken last month show a proper low-slung sedan, a Jaguar trademark since the 1950s. "Jaguars don't like height. We never want to do tall cars—I don't think any designer actually wants to do tall cars, unless they're designing a Bronco or a Defender," he said.

"We're actually obsessed with the height of batteries and how we package the floor, and how we managed to keep the car reasonably close to the ground. There was a lot of talk about doing modular battery packs, but you know, it's a very

expensive, very complex solution. I'm not sure we're going to get to it until batteries actually change into something much more flexible and modular. I think the dream with electric car designs initially was being able to put the components anywhere you wanted. The reality is a big, heavy slab which needs to sit for the handling of the car centrally in the car, and in between the wheels, and as low as possible; and that will add height to the car, so that's where we are at the moment," Thomson explained.

That said, he sounds pleased with the shape of the new battery XJ, which we expect to be revealed and then go on sale later this year. "I think with XJ we've managed to do a car which still has a very, very good proportion. It does have very, very big wheels. But it's a very beautiful looking car," he said.

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