



LANCIA STRATOS ZERO

The earthbound science fiction
that launched a generation of spacecraft

The age of wedge design began and ended with the 1970 Lancia Stratos Zero. So extreme was Marcello Gandini's design that every concept that followed seemed to pale in comparison: with perhaps the exception of Pininfarina's Ferrari Modulo, the Lancia Stratos Zero was the be-all and end-all of this design movement, right at its beginning.

Gandini launched the era. Working for Bertone, his Alfa Romeo Carabo prototype pushed mid-engine design into the future; whereas the 33 Stradale it was based on featured luxuriant curves, rising and pinching like an insect's thorax, the Carabo was a knife blade that cut across the limits of design.

As Nuccio Bertone courted Lancia's business, Gandini used the remnants of a crashed Fulvia HF1600 rally car and envisioned an ultra-futuristic concept named after the stratosphere. Its roofline is less than three feet (90 cm) tall: allegedly, Nuccio Bertone drove the car underneath the closed entrance barriers at the Bertone studio to introduce the final design to Lancia staff. They were impressed. When the Stratos race car debuted two years later, Bertone was behind its wedge-forward look.

What seems like an otherwise simple design is full of details. Up front is a row of trapezoidal lights that are so narrow you might not notice until they're activated. Split horizontally down the middle, the side treatments jut sharply outwards with the top line arcing and bowing out before the rear wheels, and the bottom line matching the rear wheel arch—the start of Gandini's signature

shape. It resembles a raised eyebrow over the beefy rear wheels. In the rear, the bodywork falls away to reveal the Fulvia's V-4 engine, left exposed as a reminder to onlookers that this is still a roadgoing vehicle.

To get inside the Stratos Zero, occupants need to enter through the front window, being careful not to step on the fiberglass panels. Somehow Gandini was able to incorporate a vestigial trunk behind the engine, and room for a pair of racing helmets. Inside, advanced digital instrumentation appeared on a gridded screen, green like the color of a radar screen. The spherical steering wheel tilted up for ingress, its only practical consideration.

Photographed next to jet aircraft, contemporary architecture, desert formations, and alongside a moonwalking Michael Jackson: in any setting it's in, the Stratos Zero is otherworldly. A period photo shows the concept car on a crowded street in Milan and surrounded by traffic, next to gawking cyclists and Alfa Romeos; its roof hardly reached the bicycle handles.

The Stratos Zero became a milestone immediately upon its debut at the 1970 Turin Motor Show. It showed designers that the future was theirs for the taking, that the Space Age for the automobile was finally here, and that the wedge form held so many new possibilities. While translating these to production was trickier—Gandini's Lamborghini Countach was the most faithful—the concept cars offered futuristic dreams throughout the 1970s, an era that would never live up to such optimism.