



The interior of an Audi RS 6 Avant. Florian Schrey says recovering one seat from a disused older version of this model yielded enough reclaimed leather to make six pairs of shoes. IMAGE: AUDI

Naturally individual

When 'no-waste' becomes the new luxury, consumers will start to accept scars in cars, says automotive leather expert Florian Schrey. The upside is that 'individualisation' is becoming more and more important in purchase decisions and, because every hide is unique, car seats with leather upholstery will, naturally, offer the cheapest individualisation possible.

The vice-president for design for Seton AutomotiveLeather, part of the GST AutoLeather group, Florian Schrey, says the world needs to find alternatives to plastic and that leather is in a good position to win business back from synthetic substitutes in claiming a greater share of the car interiors market.

"Vinyl is easy to use," Mr Schrey concedes, "and the vegan lifestyle is clearly attractive to a lot of people, but in the end they mean using plastic, and after a car has been on the road for 10,000 kilometres, vinyl in a car interior looks terrible. We have to find alternatives, and leather is a good alternative to plastic."

Blemishes are beautiful

He says that he and his team are often asked by automotive original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) to present to them on the subject of the sustainability of leather, but says this has happened in the context of designers of car interiors saying they want to move away from leather because of neck-wrinkles or small holes. "These blemishes are beautiful," Mr Schrey says. "If they want something sustainable, they should choose leather. How could plastic be better? How could petrochemicals be preferable? All we are doing with leather is to use a by-product from the meat industry."

He witnessed a prominent designer say at Milan Design Week in April this year that she had made a work of art from recycled plastic because she believes plastic will be banned and she wanted to preserve what it looks like for posterity. "I hope it will be banned," Mr Schrey says. "I hope it will become like ivory, forbidden and clandestine, something that, in future, we will only look at in museums."

Natural appeal

This, logically, takes the discussion into the familiar territory of automotive leather being so heavily finished, so thickly coated that it ends up looking more like plastic than leather. If plastic's appeal has evaporated, the leather industry ought, now more than ever, to make as much as possible of the natural appeal of leather. Broadly, Florian Schrey agrees, but he says convincing OEMs to accept scratches and other marks on hides is "very tricky". Part of the problem is that raw material is becoming worse in quality, although he speaks up loudly for the talent tanners have, and demonstrate all the time, to take that material and turn it into "something so beautiful".

He cannot see a time when automotive tanners will no longer need to correct and emboss hides, and he makes the point that there would not be enough material available for tanners to make the leather OEMs require without these



In recovery. A luggage set to accompany the Porsche 918 Spyder. OEMs would do well to recover leather from their car interiors at end of life and use the material to make branded goods like these. More branded product collections with more leather will appeal to consumers. IMAGE: PORSCHE AG



When consumers accept scars in cars, automotive tanners will be able to use 75% of each hide instead for the purpose. Until then, there is scope for using cuts of leather for interesting extras such as this beautiful pocket for road-maps in the 2019 Ram 1500 Laramie Longhorn. IMAGE: FCA NORTH AMERICA

techniques; the blemish-free hides simply do not exist in sufficient quantities. However, slapping thick coats of finish onto hides will make it harder to recycle the leather used in car interiors and this is a headache for OEMs, who, in the European Union (since 2015), have been under obligation to recover and reuse 95% by weight of all the materials in their cars at end of life.

Reclaim the wet end

Florian Schrey recalls visiting a junkyard in Germany recently and finding interesting upholstery inside a 20-year-old Audi, which was worth reclaiming, in his opinion, even if it took a long time (four hours) to strip the material from one of the seats in the disused car. There is much that OEMs could do with this material, he insists, including using it to cover new car seats, or to cover a door panel or a glovebox. They could also bring out branded small leathergoods, making old leather part of their brand identity. "One seat in this Audi A6 gave enough leather to make six pairs of shoes," the Seton vice-president says. But he adds that recycling vegetable-tanned leather is more viable than working with chrome-tanned leather at the end of a car's life. "We need to reclaim the wet end and make more veg-tanned leather," he says.

Massive savings

It is his view that it's to leather's advantage that each hide is unique and different to look at. He says: "This adds value in a way that plastic never could, but we need a change of thinking. I know of OEMs rejecting nappa because they think the grain is too big. That's ridiculous. It's time for a new definition of 'luxury'; no waste, that's the new luxury. Scars need to be accepted as part of the car. And this is at a time when everyone is talking about individualisation. Well, every hide is different and you cannot get cheaper individualisation than that; we can make every seat different. We can call them 'no-waste' seats and when the 'no-waste' approach takes root, that's when consumers will accept defects in the upholstery in their car interiors. Then companies like ours will be able to sell leather upholstery more cheaply because we'll



2019 Chrysler Pacifica Hybrid interior. Consumers want individualisation. Nothing could be more individual than upholstery that preserves the unique markings of each hide. IMAGE: FCA NORTH AMERICA

be using 70% or 75% of the hides we buy instead of the 50% we are able to use at the moment. The savings will be massive."

He says the vision his company has for car interiors is that seats will "change drastically" in the near future. Car seats will become "more furniture-like", he explains, and will need softer materials in comparison to the "quite firm" leather that's mostly in use today. "Consumers will like that," he concludes. ☺