

Latest Electric Car Will Be a BMW, From the Battery Up

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BMW lifted the veil this week on its planned battery-powered car, in an indication that it is serious about building a new class of vehicle and delivering substantial numbers to showrooms by 2013.

BMW, the German carmaker, created Project i in late 2007 with the goal of building a car for urban areas where more than half the world's people live. But, as with many corporate green projects, it was sometimes hard to tell whether the effort was sincere or just a way to generate sustainability credentials.

During two days of briefings for journalists at a garagelike BMW plant outside Munich, the company devoted major resources to proving that battery-powered cars were practical. The demonstration was also intended to allay doubts about whether traditional carmakers were innovative enough to make the leap from gasoline.

Auto industry specialists said they were encouraged by the developments.

"It's not just a marketing project," said Ferdinand Dudenhöffer, a professor at the University of Duisburg-Essen who studies the auto industry. All the major carmakers have realized that they need electric vehicles to succeed in China, a crucial market where the government is keen to promote emission-free transport, Mr. Dudenhöffer said. BMW is taking a different path than competitors by designing the so-called megacity vehicle around its electric drive system from the start.

Daimler will beat BMW to showrooms with a mass-produced electric vehicle, due in 2012. But Daimler's e-car is a battery-powered version of its two-seat Smart car.

"I don't know of any other manufacturer that has conceived of a car exclusively as an electric vehicle," Mr. Dudenhöffer said. "The rest are based on conventional cars."

BMW says it also plans to put its own name at risk, creating a subbrand that will probably contain the initials BMW. Daimler has always kept a distance between its Smart line and the Mercedes brand.

The megacity vehicle takes advantage of the fact that an electric motor is much more compact than a gasoline engine and does not need a transmission, exhaust or muffler. The electric motor will go in the back of the vehicle. The batteries, the heaviest and bulkiest part of the drive train, will go under the floor in the aluminum chassis.

BMW is still being quiet about how the car will look. But it showed journalists an impressionistic sketch of a four-passenger vehicle that looked a bit like a streamlined, low-slung Mini. BMW's design chief, Adrian van Hooydonk, said that his team was still tinkering with the look of the car but emphasized that it would be a sporty, stylish vehicle worthy of the BMW name.