

Philosophical Choices

Defining Your Approach To A Restoration Or Build



One of our objectives is to develop a philosophical context to help you:

- Define your restoration or fabrication and design objectives and quality standards — standards which are consistent with your use of the completed project
- Economic reality
- Your technical means

Too often a project starts down the path of a “driver” then evolves into a project with higher expectations. Costly rework and delays are the consequence. Then too, some projects turn into parts cars, which sometimes may be a wise decision, when during the early stages of a project a candidate with “better bones” is acquired.

If you have an original collectible car in very good unrepaired cosmetic condition, and it is relatively rare, most of the time the best decision you could make is to not restore it. Rather, you could repair everything necessary very carefully with an emphasis on preservation. If you want the brand new look of a freshly restored model, trade or sell your original to buy or restore one to as-new condition. This advice is offered because in the last 10 to 15 years car collectors have evolved to a level of sophistication approaching that of art and fine furniture collectors. A premium is now placed on an original unrestored example of a model for its originality. Cosmetic imperfections or deficiencies on such cars are now valued for their “wonderful patina of age.” But mostly it is every restorer’s desire to inspect an original example to use as a guide for the many decisions which have to be taken during a restoration project. The down-side of owning and maintaining such a car is its value greatly depreciates with mileage unless only a handful of original ones survived.

If your decision is to restore your car and your project is economically viable, you will need to identify your goals and whether they make sense in the long-run. Do you want your car to be a show car, a driver, or both? A driver is a car that runs trouble free with cosmetics that look good from twelve feet. A show car is an object of art, reaching a level of cosmetic perfection rarely delivered by the manufacturer except for very expensive low-volume models, or if it was prepared for marketing, auto shows, and promotion. A show car is used to display and collect trophies. On the other hand, a restored and commissioned car is one that faithfully attains and incorporates the performance, usability, and fit and finish of the original and can be driven with confidence, just like when it was a couple of months old. Such cars can and usually are also show cars, at least during the early years of their restored condition.

Car shows vary in geographic reach, prominence and prestige; their organizers vary from generic or marque car club or show-specific organizers. The stars of the show vary when the cars displayed are “by invitation” compared to registration by owner. At some, the judges are technical experts on your type of car and they perform a detailed inspection, typically by deducting points from a perfect score of 100. Some shows judge your car based predominantly on its design and character or beauty. This is in fact the tradition of the Concourse d’Elegance.

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Decisions, Decisions...

And at some car shows awards are based upon popular choice by attendees or a delegation of organizers. A step up from this ad-hoc judging are shows where the owners of similar models do the less formal judging within their class of car.

The first decision you have to make when facing a prospective restoration project is whether to:

- “Dive-in” or more accurately disassemble it in order to fully restore it from the ground-up, or
- Refurbish and repair it to the point that it is fully commissioned as a safe and roadworthy automobile



The latter approach allows you to learn about your project and participate in club events, establish a network of resources, collect parts, and begin to enjoy the car before you reach the point of no return. Although this approach takes more time overall, usually less mistakes are made, money is saved, and your eventual ground-up restoration will not take your project off the road as long. Naturally your subjective decision depends on your inclination, age, and current collection of cars. Your objective decision should be based on your project's condition, your experience, support network, and your depth of knowledge about your project.

When you do decide upon and commit to a ground-up restoration, your first goal upon completion should be to take your car to shows on a trailer, unless the show is not far away from your home. This goal will keep you focused on authenticity and high quality. Your project will never again be as “fresh” or in such perfect cosmetic condition. Therefore this is the best time to collect trophies and gain recognition for your hard work and financial investment.

Very likely a freshly restored for show project will generate a long punch list of details which still need attention. These details can include among others; faulty replacement parts; coolant, oil, grease, air, or weather leaks; brake adjustment, wheel alignment and balancing; electrical gremlins; ignition timing, fuel supply and/or metering; and of course engine and drive-train break-in. Such faults and conditions become apparent only after considerable driving experience with the usual risks of minor cosmetic damage from stone chips, glass chips or breakage, and stains caused by leaks or birds. Proper mechanical break-in and correcting the other details is often referred to as “commissioning” the project. The sophisticated appraiser or buyer places a premium value on commissioned cars. This is primarily because minor cosmetic damage is easy to detect and assess, whereas many unknowable faults can be hiding in a very low mileage and fresh restoration project. A low mileage (couple of hundred miles) fresh restoration is likely to be an inconvenience on the road, it could be doing damage to itself, or be down-right dangerous for the occupant to operate as an automobile. Naturally these same problems and considerations apply to a fresh hot rod.

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More Decisions



After a few years concentrating on car shows you will want to begin using it as a driven show car and as a driver for pleasure trips. What kind of driving do you envision? Local cruising, club touring, rallies, autocrossing, track or drag racing?

Do you want your car to be authentic as originally manufactured, and to what level of detail? On some aspects of restoration OEM (original equipment manufacturer) authenticity is not possible nor necessarily desirable. Known design weaknesses or deficiencies could be addressed by applying lessons learned by enthusiasts of the model or which the manufacturer incorporated in later models of your car. Safety, maintainability, durability, and drivability, are some of your most important considerations as you make your many restoration decisions (separate session/handout on *Modification and Upgrading*).

You will need to research the evolution of manufacturing standards from your car's period to the present. Elements to consider include: paint system, metal preparation, rust prevention, textiles, tires, electro-plating, non-visible mechanical aspects such as lubrication, bearings, etc. Other aspects to consider involve operating safety, such as laminated safety glass, seat belts, and lighting. Unfortunately unoriginal safety features will detract when your project is strictly judged at a show. Therefore your best decision may be to incorporate these safety modifications as your project transitions from a strictly show car to a commissioned restoration.

Will resale value or pleasure of ownership determine your many restoration decisions? Restoration standards vary greatly with the relative cost, age, rarity, and support club of your car. Research the restoration standards that apply to your type of car, then balance your restoration costs with your asset value and pleasure of ownership and operation when you are finished. Important factors to consider are the many practical aspects of operating your restored car in modern traffic. Usually an antique car (pre 1927) is not commissioned as thoroughly as later models because their handling, braking, and power are insufficient to safely operate in modern traffic, except under the more controlled condition of an organized tour.

Exceptions exist, however. For example, Rolls Royce and Bentley owners are famous for driving their antiques long distances for pleasure and adventure. This is because their car's performance and reliability far exceeded their contemporaries. Most classic cars (1928 to 1945) are more usable in modern traffic, possibly not on interstate highways for long stretches at a time, but they are perfectly usable on secondary roads provided your brakes are capable of panic stops without severe pulling to a side when cold, and that they are well bedded-in.

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Or would you rather spend your time and money on a custom car, hot rod, or a race car? This implies an automobile that is vastly different from the intent and design of the manufacturer, or a car that incorporates significant components from other cars, or any derivative of a car model that has been extensively stripped and modified for racing but not built by or for the original manufacturer. Some of the latter are still historically significant and valuable enough to justify restoration. However, reproduction race cars usually cost more to build than they are worth. This may yet change and is dependant on the eligibility rules of vintage racing sanctioning organizations.



The bottom line is that your project will be as good as your knowledge, preparation, financial resources, skill, and determination — and, yes, timing. It's your time and money. Its value is what the "public" will pay you for it when you want to sell.

