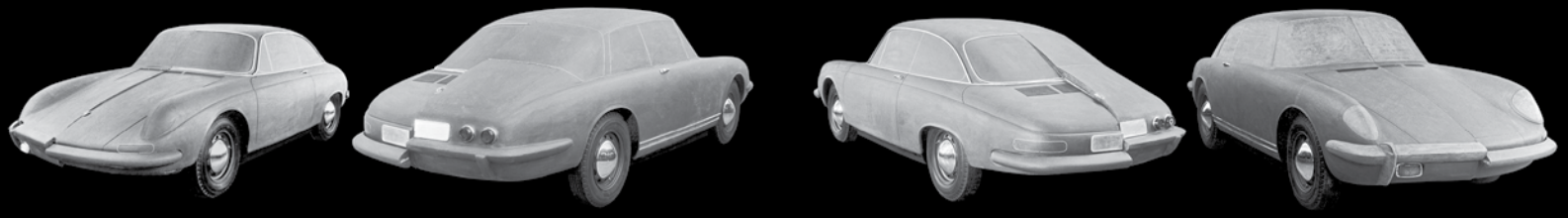
PORSCHE 911

BIRTH OF A LEGEND

By Jürgen Lewandowski



The Porsche 911 of today differs in many respects from the Porsche 901 prototype that debuted 50 years back, but the car remains the same in essence and in spirit.

The predecessor to the 911, the nimble 356 of 1948 was the first sports car to bear the Porsche name, and there is no doubt that it was an enormous success for the small and struggling Porsche factory led at the time by Ferdinand "Ferry" Porsche, son of the company's founder. Ferry Porsche would have been content to sell just the initial limited offering of 50 examples of these lightweight, two-door coupes and convertibles, built in Gmünd, Austria, before the factory moved to Stuttgart. But over time Porsche built and sold 76,303 cars of all 356 model lines.

Despite the enormous popularity of the 356, customers groused from the start about the tight two-seater cabin and their desire for more space for luggage. Yet it took Ferry Porsche until 1957 to ask the famed designer Albrecht Graf von Goertz—the genius behind the legendary BMW 507—to propose a new Porsche. Goertz's memoirs provide this account: "BMW was a very different company to the one it is today. Meals were served in the board members' dining room on a long table, to which Dr. Ferry Porsche was also invited as a guest one day. Porsche congratulated me on the BMW 507 and requested that I drop in to see him on my next visit to Stuttgart."

Left: Upon joining the design studio at his grandfather's company in 1958, Ferdinand Alexander "Butzi" Porsche began work on the successor to the Porsche 356. Two years later, the company produced a four-seat prototype based on Butzi's designs and dubbed the T7, but the notch-back rear end did not meet with Ferry Porsche's approval and was sent back to the drawing board.

Below: Finalizing the design for the Porsche 901—that was both innovative and yet bore a strong resemblance to the previous 356—established the company's inimitable brand for the next 50 years.

Goertz waited out his six-month non-compete agreement with BMW and then met with Dr. Porsche. The two men discussed the possibility of developing a full-grown four-seater to succeed the 356. And, said Goertz, "we quickly came to an agreement, which is always easier to do when you can deal directly with the boss of a company." At the time, Porsche's son was studying at the School of Design in Ulm, and Goertz voiced his doubts about "overly formal educations at design schools, which delve too much into theory." Upon Goertz's recommendation, young Ferdinand Alexander "Butzi" Porsche left school to work with Goertz in the Porsche design studio, located on the factory site in Zuffenhausen. "That was probably the most important contribution I ever made to the future of Porsche," Goertz noted.

Goertz worked with Porsche's team to draw and build a 1:1 plaster model of a four-seater, two-door coupe. Mrs. Louise Piëch, Porsche's sister, was invited to attend the model's formal presentation, and Goertz reported that the brother and sister "walked around the model several times, spoke with one another, and then came to me and said, 'That is a very beautiful car, but it is a Goertz and not a Porsche.'"

So concluded the one and only project for which Ferry Porsche solicited outside design expertise. From that day to the present, every new Porsche has been designed in-house.

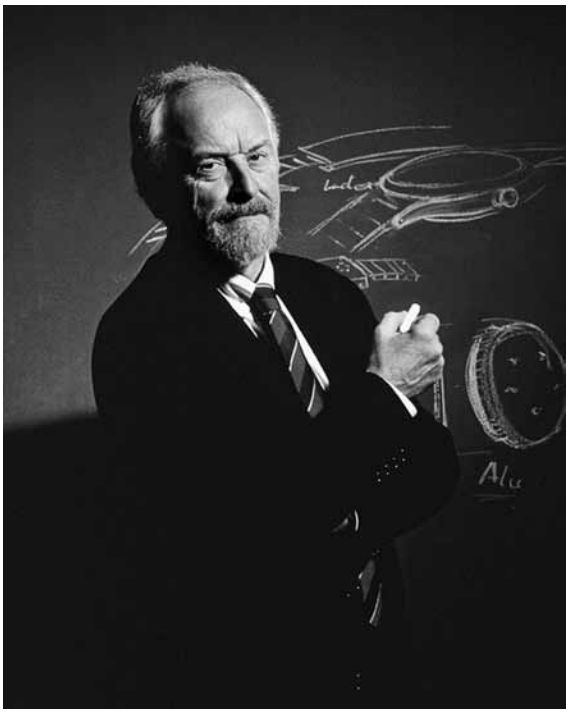
It was obvious that Porsche needed a new car. The 356 was becoming dated, and other manufacturers were starting to build sedans with equally fast speeds and horsepower.

So Ferry Porsche issued a precise edict: He wanted a larger car because his customers wanted more space, but the next Porsche was to be a 2+2 coupe, remaining in its existing niche rather than entering into competition with the saloon cars offered by the larger marques. The car obviously would need a new engine; the 4-cylinder engine with 2-liter capacity was at the end of development, and the Fuhrmann-designed DOHC design was much too complicated and expensive.

Even in those days, Porsche was very successful as a consulting company; accordingly, in 1958, Ferry consulted with each of his department heads, asking them to create an initial wish list for the 356's successor. A recent search of the Porsche archives has yielded exactly such a handwritten list of suggestions for the Type 695—at that time the project number for the new car: The sales group

Three generations of Porsches: (top) company founder Ferdinand Porsche with son, Ferdinand "Ferry" Porsche; (left) Ferry and his son, Butzi, at work on the final details on one of the 13 Porsche 901 development cars built between 1963 and 1964.

When the family stepped aside from day-to-day company management in 1972, Butzi Porsche launched Porsche Design, marketing a variety of chronograph wristwatches, including a line for Porsche drivers to be sold by dealerships. "Design by F. A. Porsche" became a leading brand in its own right and the label was used until Butzi's retirement in 2005.



expressed their desires: "Not a fundamentally new car. Sporty character. Significantly larger for two people than at present. Better entry. Better rear view." The engineers lobbied for practical improvements: "Better visibility. Larger and more vertical headlamps. Better bumpers." And Ferry Porsche made his requirements perfectly clear: "2-seater with 2 comfortable jump seats." (Input is missing from Mr. von Rücker, the Head of Technical Development, so perhaps he did not get the request or see the list.)

These handwritten notations, preserved from 1958, offer a pretty clear definition of the initial concept that birthed the 911. But as is so often the case, the story is

After intensive development efforts, the Porsche 901 premiered at the 1963 Frankfurt Motor Show, where it famously caught the attention of Peugeot. Although the Porsche prototype had always been known by the internal design number 901, Peugeot claimed the rights to three-digit car names with a zero in the middle, so Porsche changed the name and the 911 legend was born.

more complicated: alongside the development of the Type 695, a second and related project—the Type 754—seems to lead even more directly to the concept car, the one-off officially named the T7.

Newly unearthed drawings now appear to shed light on this mystery. The various technical renderings clearly indicate that the T7 was known as the Type 695 until the end of 1960. However, in that same year, work commenced on the construction of the first drivable T7, and this vehicle was afforded the Type 754 designation. This explains why the T7 was so often associated with both model designations, and why there is so much confusion in this regard. Apparently, the 695 never attained the status of a drivable prototype—that was reserved for the 754. And the construction of the drivable and functioning Type 754 most likely began in parallel with the development of the Type 695, or at least on an only slightly offset timeline, once the planning and modelling for the Type 695 was already underway.

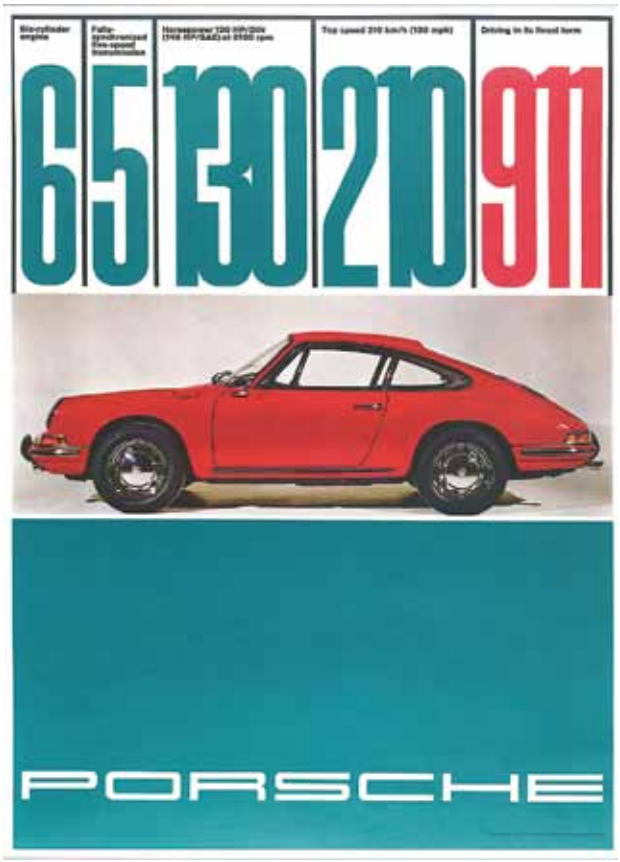
In the meantime, working at a remarkable pace from initial sketches thought to have been created at the end of August 1959, Ferdinand Alexander “Butzi” Porsche completed an initial 1:7.5 clay model for the T7 on October 9 of that year. This model immediately received so much positive feedback that a decision was made relatively quickly to build a 1:1 model,

Bottom left: The launch of the 911 captured the imagination of the motoring press, and journalists and photographers lined up to take one for a drive. Here an early 911 Coupe 2.0 is road tested on a country road in Germany in 1964.

Middle: Of the four originally built, the only remaining 901/911 factory prototype known to exist. Factory engineers nicknamed the red Porsche "Barbarossa," and after it served its time as a development and show car, it was given to Richard von Frankenberg, Editor of the Porsche newsletter *Christophorus*.

Bottom right: Fifty years of changes to the car that debuted in Frankfurt can be glimpsed in this lineup—including the Targa and the Turbo—yet all are unmistakably Porsche 911s.

Right: A 1965 poster sums up the Porsche 911's 6-cylinder engine, 5-speed transmission, 130 bhp and top speed of 210 km/h.



a task also completed in a very short amount of time. Just under three months later, on December 28, a full-size T7 mounted on a wooden frame was unveiled. Interestingly, Butzi Porsche had already so clearly defined the front end with his first design that it subsequently appeared on the 901 with just a few minor modifications. The rear end, on the other hand, was still very different from the later series-production version.

Alongside the design effort, a team led by Helmuth Bott, then Director of Test Driving and later Board Member for Technical Development, had constructed a new 6-cylinder, 2-liter engine, which was ready for the first test drive of the T7 on November 1, 1960. But during the test drive, much to the astonishment of the group waiting expectantly for some affirmation, Bott stopped the T7 after driving just a few kilometers, climbed out and delivered these words: "We can forget that car!"

All was not lost, though; Bott's harsh reaction focused not on the car as a whole, but purely on the engine, which had a rather bulky and antiquated camshaft control system: two central camshafts used long pushrods to control the overhead valves, which were arranged in a V formation. These two camshafts were driven by shafts rotating at half the speed of the crankshaft, with the upper camshaft controlling the intake valves and the lower camshaft controlling the exhaust valves. This engine was a more than strange development—and an obvious failure. And so it was that famed Porsche engineer Hans Mezger offered up a new proposal that ultimately led to the 6-cylinder Boxer engine we know today.

Conflict ensued within the company soon thereafter: Butzi Porsche started development of the T8, which became the true model for the 901, while designer Erwin Komenda, who had worked for the Porsche family since the 1930s, opted to create his own proposal, called the T9. Ferry Porsche preferred the T8 as the basis for the new car, but Komenda was insistent on the merits of the T9 design. At the end of the day, Ferry chose his son's design, a decision Komenda needed some weeks to accept. The internal strife caused delays but eventually led to the completion on April 16, 1962, of an initial, although not yet drivable, 1:1 model. Made from metal, wood and glass, this model would serve as a reference for all of the decision makers.

Time was now short, as Ferry Porsche had planned to present the new 901 at the Frankfurt Motor Show in September 1963 and to start production the following month. It quickly became obvious that an October production date wasn't feasible, as the creation and further development of prototypes would take more time than expected. Meanwhile, Ferdinand Piëch, grandson of founder Ferdinand Porsche, was put in charge of the series production engine. Piëch, who would go on to head the supervisory board of Volkswagen Group, had started working for Porsche in April of 1963 and had done the design for the 180-hp race engine before taking over the 130-hp street engine.

In the 1960s, Porsche used printed media to spread the word about the 911, boldly promoting the brand with slogans such as "Go ahead. Drive it. You'll never forget it"—an invitation eagerly accepted by glitterati the world over.

On November 9, 1962, the first prototype 901 was completed, with a platform built by Porsche and a body shell built by Reutter. The white car was nicknamed "Petrel," but the new "baby" still had to learn to walk. It was as yet unclear whether the 901 would be able to fulfill all the expectations of its parents. But this time around, Helmuth Bott, the first engineer to sit behind Petrel's wheel, heaped on the praise: "The vehicle handles well and has fully retained the character of a sporty car."

Nonetheless, Petrel had its faults, but the Porsche engineers worked day and night to get the 901 ready for its 1963 Frankfurt debut. Production would not start until more than one year later, but when the first cars arrived to customers in November 1964, the response was unequivocal—they loved it. Those first owners wholeheartedly accepted the difficulties and appreciated the fun—and the sound—of driving one of the finest sports cars in the world.

Of course, they bought a 911 instead of a 901. This was due to the fact that Porsche had, in the meantime, agreed to avoid using a zero in the middle of their three-digit production model names, acquiescing to Peugeot's expressed desire to keep that nomenclature for itself. (Peugeot had used model names like 202, 302 and 404 for decades.) There was never a formal court case as has been claimed in so many books; Porsche simply acceded to the wishes of Peugeot in this respect—and they did so only for the street cars. Porsche race cars like the 904 GTS, the 906, 907, 908 and 909 retained their numbers.

While the last 50 years of Porsche design have witnessed myriad changes in the 911—from air- to water-cooled and from 2-liter to 4-liter engines, from 130 to 620 hp, from rear-wheel drive to four-wheel drive, from Solex to fuel injection, from Coupe to Targa, Convertible and Speedster—the essence of the car and the enthusiasm shared by those who drive it remain undiminished.

The 911 may be a different car today than the 901 of 1963, yet it remains much the same. It retains its great sound, offers hundreds of horsepower, has remarkable roadholding ability, and is of excellent quality. It also has racked up 50 years of successful racing—and continues to set the pace for sports racing cars today.

Jürgen Lewandowski began his career in the sports racing world by serving as organizer, timekeeper, and handling many other duties for the Jägermeister Max Moritz Race Team while still attending university. From 1979 to 2000, he was senior motor editor for Süddeutsche Zeitung, *a large daily newspaper based in Munich, and he has written 80 books on cars. He wrote the books* Porsche 901 *(Delius Klasing, 2013, available in both German and English) and* Fifty Years of the 911 *(teNeues, 2013).*