

Not-so-distant technology

KEEPING YOUR CAR ALIVE



PETER BOHR

What will they think of next? Here's are glimpses of automotive technology in the not-so-distant future:

At the recent Detroit auto show, Cadillac displayed its latest concept car — the Solitaire. A large two-door sedan with a 12-cylinder engine, the car is designed to cruise (heaven knows where) at 200 miles an hour.

The most dramatic feature of the Solitaire is an all-glass roof. A solid piece of glass extends from the base of the windshield over the passenger compartment and down to the trunk. Just like photo-sensitive eyeglasses, the car's glass roof automatically darkens in bright sunshine to reduce light inside the car by up to 80 percent. Caddy says the glass roof provides the open feeling, if not the wind in the hair, of a convertible.

On the subject of convertibles, it seems American-car buyers are eager to drop their tops. Last year, convertible output in the United States nearly doubled to 99,321 cars, compared to 54,958 in 1987. The biggest sellers were Ford's Mustang and Chrysler's LeBaron.

Proposed U.S. government roll-over safety standards threatened to kill off convertibles a few years back, though the standards never became law. Now Mercedes-Benz has developed a high-tech and aesthetically pleasing solution to help prevent injuries when a convertible goes belly up. The new Mercedes 560SL is said to have a retractable roll-over arch that instantaneously pops up during an accident.

But the price of safety comes high; expect the new SL to cost about the same as a house in a good neighborhood.

• While convertible sales are up,

turbo sales are down. American auto-makers sold only 175,000 turbo-charged cars in 1988 compared to 225,000 a year earlier.

Inherent turbo troubles, including one called "turbo lag" (a hesitation to kick in power at lower speeds), are responsible for car buyers' diminished enthusiasm.

Chrysler is the leader among U.S. automakers in turbocharged car production, accounting for more than 100,000 turbocharged cars in 1988. And now the company may have a cure for turbo lag.

The VNT, or variable-nozzle turbo-charger, uses flaps to adjust and direct the exhaust gas flow at the spinning turbine wheel. At low engine speeds, the flaps accelerate the exhaust gas flow at the turbine wheel which in turn helps to accelerate the car more quickly. Chrysler expects to equip its Daytona, LeBaron and Sundance/Shadow models with VNTs.

• "Your rollerized muffler bearing's shot, and it'll cost you a hundred bucks to fix it." Or so goes an old ruse used by con-artist mechanics to remove a few dollars from ignorant car owners' wallets.

There isn't much on a car that's simpler than a muffler. It has no moving parts — hence it couldn't possibly have a bearing, rollerized or otherwise — and it has no electrical parts.

But now that may change. Mufflers that use electronically generated equal-and-opposite sound waves to cancel noise may be close to production. And Porsche may soon introduce an electronic cabin-noise suppression system that works on similar acoustic principles.

Nothing is simple anymore. • Transmissions are getting more complex too. Only a short while ago five-forward-speed manual transmissions were considered to be exotic hardware. Now from Borg-Warner comes — what else? — a six-speed unit. The extra gear acts as a super overdrive.

A Road & Track editor tested a prototype on a Pontiac Trans Am and reported that in sixth gear the engine quieted down so much that tire rumble was the most intrusive sound at high speed.

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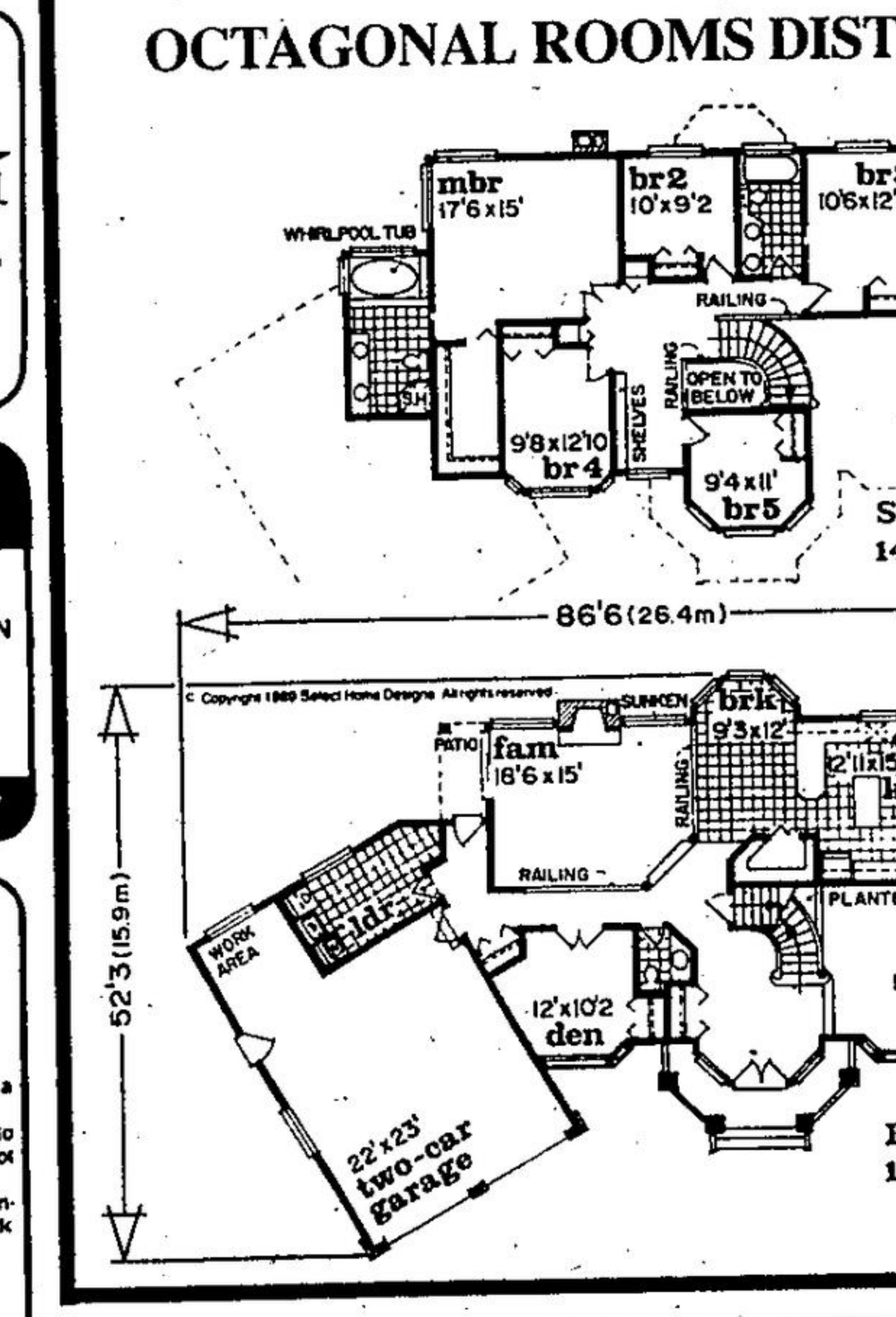
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Home Post Scripts

By Glenda Hughes, Sales Rep. **873-0300**

Well, if I was ever under any illusions that this column didn't get much readership, I was certainly corrected this past week! It is rewarding to know that the hours spent hovering over my typewriter each week are not in vain, and some of you follow my thoughts with great interest.

Since writing last week, and leaving you hanging a little, I think I had better clarify my closing paragraph for you for I don't want you to think I am a sensationalist or something tacky like that. If you have been an avid reader of mine, you know that we are moving to a newly constructed home next month, and it has not been without its frustrations. Having gone through this process, I would like to point out a few pitfalls that others might run into, like we have, and try to make you aware of what is in your contract and what is not. As we have quite a bit of new building starting up in town over the next year, a lot of you will be going through some of the same things I have just encountered, and I would like to help you be an informed purchaser. My headaches need not become your headaches and it would be nice to have you purchase a home and go through the process of watching it being constructed, and being happy.

Naturally, not all builders are the same, not all developments are the same, and many of you will be very accepting of your finished product — and that's the way it should be. However, it would be wise to check out some things before you sign that new home purchase. As most of you will be buying from blueprints, you will probably not get a chance to see a model home, so it is important that you find out about "upgrades" — the cost and quality, what is "standard" in your home, and what is included and what is not included. Some of the biggest things you will probably have to deal with is carpeting, floor coverings, cabinets, furnace and things like central air, and windows. If you are good at being able to sort through your schedules, understand blueprints well and can see the samples of your cabinets and floor-coverings etc. you won't have any problem. If you are like me, and have trouble reading plans and leave a lot to trust, you might share my headache. There is a lot of wallow through, so take your time, get someone to help you understand the schedules, and then you won't be in for any surprises.

Buying a new home can be an exciting experience, and the finished result should match up with your preconceived idea of your dream house — and it will, if you tip toe through the tulips carefully.

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