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This is what happens when the X Games meets Generation Y, when concept meets (nearly) instant reality and practicality meets pavement.

Honda Accord owners hide your eyes. Honda Odyssey owners, hide your children. The Japanese automaker that once dared you to think energy efficiency is about to ask you to think out of the box — even its latest creation for 2003 is, in fact, a bit boxy.

Welcome to a whole new *element* in the automotive landscape. Welcome to the Honda Element.

It's a pickup truck. It's an SUV. It's a great place to chill as you wait for the perfect wave . . . dude.

Inspired by the spirit of ESPN's no-holds-barred X Games, Honda's Model X concept (the basis of the Element) was expected to appeal more to a frame of mind rather than an age group when it was first introduced at the 2001 Detroit Auto Show. Honda imagined the X as a lifestyle choice — offroad adventurer or weekend warrior. Two years later, imagination and angular oddity have met the open road.

So what is it?
 According to Honda, anything you want it to be. Versatile, reliable, multi-functional.

The Element is designed to maximize passenger and cargo space while throwing caution to smooth exterior lines. In a world of look-alike sport-utes, the Element is rolling individuality — its pentagonal headlamps and sharp edges point to a whole new way of thinking.

Based on the current Civic platform, and built at the Civic plant in East Liberty, Ohio, the four-passenger SUV (that's Surf Utility Vehicle) is powered by Honda's new 160-horsepower 2.4-liter i-VTEC four-cylinder engine and will be offered with either front-wheel drive or Honda's on-demand all-wheel-drive system called Real Time 4WD.

A five-speed manual transmission and four-speed automatic will be available.

So how cool is it?
 Step inside the Element and you can chill out in its "open-architecture" interior that was inspired by the airiness of lifeguard stations and college dorm rooms. (So, who

says college had to be the best time of your life?)

Honda calls it a "combination dorm/base camp." It fits. In creating the open concept, Honda essentially did the equivalent of a home renovation. It knocked down walls, readjusted the pillars. In car terms, the designers created the Element without a B-Pillar, then installed side doors that open wide.

On the outside, its two-tone paint scheme includes a durable dull finish around the fenders, bumpers and roof, giving the Element a worn, rugged look.

So what can you do with it?

With a low, flat floor, loading and unloading is a snap. Without a center pillar between the front and rear doors (and with rear side doors that open toward the rear) there is a large opening for entry/exit. There's also a lift-up hatchback and a separate drop-down tailgate. More good loading.

Crud up the inside of the Element all you want. It's washable. The floor is made of textured resin and the two-front buckets and rear bench seats are tough and durable.

Talk about versatility. The front passenger seat can be made to face the rear. And both rear seats fold up sideways against the walls.

The Element is tall enough to swallow a mountain bike — with the wheels left on. There are even tie-down hooks that secure it upright in the bed. The rear of the roof opens to allow long items, such as surfboards, to peek their way out.

You can even hook up to the Internet with a wireless connection. And, of course, you can play video games or watch DVDs. There's an available MP3 player, digital satellite radio and a seven-speaker system with a cassette and a six-disc CD changer. Nothing has been overlooked.

So when can you ride? And for how much?

The Element is expected to hit dealer showrooms by December. Pricing has not been announced yet but will likely begin in the \$25,000 range.

Grab your surf board and wait.

According to Honda, there's a whole new generation of buyers, 71 million strong, entering the automotive market.

And they just got a lot happier.

Rules? What rules?
 Honda builds its college-dorm-room-on-wheels for an active new generation of buyers.

Element

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