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New Subaru flagship faces a triad of tasks

2006 B9 Tribeca pushes brand upward, seeking loyalist support while broadening the brand's base

The last time we reported on Subaru (see article: ['2004 Subaru Legacy Better, Tighter'](#)), we could barely talk about the then-new Legacy without noting the impact of the Impreza, a superlative, milestone car which has even relegated vehicles such as the Legacy sedan to also-ran status.



Innovation. Courage. Individuality. These are the cornerstones, says Subaru, of its new design approach.

While far from being a one-car manufacturer, Subaru is inextricably associated with the Impreza - the car that took it to the big time, much as Audi's A4 did for its own marque back in 1994. It is an intriguing comparison, since Audi and Subaru are so closely allied to all-wheel-drive.

The 2006 B9 Tribeca recently launched in Detroit as the company's first crossover/ SUV, and first seven-passenger vehicle.

Not only does the B9 Tribeca take advantage of trends toward more overt design in recent years, but it comes from a company whose cars once regularly exhibited rather unique style.

Yet, before the Impreza, a separate all-wheel-drive following had tied itself to Subaru.

Today, the company enjoys the attention of both the Sport Compact Crowd, and also that of more pragmatically-minded people for whom all-wheel-drive wagons make more sense than do SUVs.

Although this has been mainstreamed in recent years for export markets, Subaru is currently undergoing a design revolution that looks set to recapture some of the older, more emotive lines. Some controversy has resulted, and was expected

Automobile Editor Emeritus David E. Davis, Jr. was recently so taken with Subaru's unique positioning in the market that he cited Subaru as being teamed with Mercedes-Benz in "the end zones that mark the playing field of (his) car enthusiasm.



Subaru WX-01 Concept (2003)

"It was my belief that if the original Henry Ford had lived to enjoy the Reagan years, his car of choice would have been a Subaru. It was a car so sensible, so useful, and so iconoclastic that Thomas Alva Edison would have wept because he hadn't thought of it."



(Automobile, January 2005)

After the *semi*-SUV Forester of 1997, and ever-larger Outbacks (now classified as a truck by the EPA), the company will now field a vehicle that weighs 800 lbs more than the Outback.



Subaru B9SC Roadster Concept (2003)

This May, the first seven-passenger Subaru (and its first crossover/ SUV) will enter dealerships, marking not only a more strategically mainstream direction for the company, but also the appearance of a new flagship which will push the brand into a higher price category.



Subaru B11S Concept (2002)

At NAIAS 2005 in Detroit three weeks ago, Fuji Heavy Industries (Subaru's parent company) CEO Kyoji Takenaka delivered an enthusiastic presentation, talking of an "exciting day" as Subaru introduced this new crossover: the B9 Tribeca.

B9 Tribeca's basic form refers to the Subaru WX-01 Concept (top) which we first saw in Tokyo 2003, yet its wheel-arches have been given the power of the 2004 B9SC Concept, and the face from both that car, and the 2002 B11S Concept shown in Geneva.

The B9 Concept was Subaru's hybrid bid for more emotive design, powered by an electric motor mated to a 2.0-liter SOHC flat-four.

"We have seen the future," proclaims Subaru in its preliminary B9 Tribeca press material.

GM Vice Chairman Bob Lutz may have reportedly killed that car over its design (although some have suggested that it was more due to concerns about whether it fit the brand), but perhaps the financial case for the B9 Tribeca was simply too compelling.

It is a future as much financially-motivated as it is one that will extend Subaru's formerly niche execution of its brand values into a more traditional segment.

Subaru's partnership with General Motors dates back to 1999, and the B9 Tribeca was thus co-developed with Saab, with the intention of fielding the 9^{6X} (Saab's variant, to be launched at the New York Auto Show in April)

While fellow Japanese automakers Toyota, Honda, and Mitsubishi chase the full-size pickup truck market, Subaru – like Mazda – is turning to crossovers, a burgeoning segment that may well expand further should buyers tire of more ponderous SUVs and traditional minivans.



2006 Subaru B9 Tribeca

This is Subaru's bid for where the money is. After decades of steady quirkiness applied toward pragmatic solutions appreciated by a fanatic few, the forty-seven year old automotive division of Fuji Heavy Industries has taken its all-wheel-drive technology into the crossover segment, where it is

more commonly applied.

Many brands, no matter how well-defined, have in the past several years similarly gravitated toward the mainstream. Porsche's Cayenne is one, somewhat dubious case.

Yet more than simply a change of size and a broadening of market, this is also Subaru's bid for a more *upscale*, premium vehicle, one that Subaru has suggested benchmarks the BMW X5 for performance and the Acura MDX for comfort and convenience.

The premium market is growing crowded with intenders, however. For a Subaru seeking distinction, its reputation is something to cherish, rather than shed, as it seeks to push its prices upward. If you were expecting a more mainstream vehicle to represent the company's push for a more mainstream market, then, this is not the case. Even some of the [preliminary marketing](#) has been quite unconventional.

B9 Tribeca's alphanumeric name (uncharacteristic for Subaru) and its New York-inspired moniker both indicate that, for the first time since the late-'60s, Subaru's export market is again guiding a re-think of its position. Once upon a time, two-stroke minicar Subarus which met stringent Japanese standards designed to conserve materials were hardly suitable for an American market accustomed to muscle. The company enlarged its cars, producing Japan's first front-wheel-drive vehicle in the 1965 1000 before finally homing-in on four-wheel-drive as a basic *raison d'être*.

The 2006 B9 Tribeca, displayed recently in Detroit and going on sale in May, is yet another re-think.



There are a few Alfa lines in the B9 Tribeca, particularly around the rear.

We thought the vehicle looked much better up close than it had in spy shots released on the Internet days previous to NAIAS.

That said, the "dynamic instrument panel," a unique 'wave' across the dashboard, is perhaps its best aspect



Subaru 360 (1958)



Subaru R1 (2005 - Japanese market)

"It is intelligence," boasts Subaru of its new entry.

Intelligence, to Subaru, is still defined by a boxer engine – here, a 250hp @6,600rpm, 219lb-ft @ 4,200rpm, 3.0-liter six-cylinder, coming on the twentieth anniversary of Subaru boxer six-cylinder engines (having first appeared on the '85 145hp XT). *Symmetrical All-Wheel-Drive* is another sign of acumen, as are standard side and curtain airbags.

If it all sounds quite apt so far, this is largely because these aspects – **boxer engines**; **all-wheel-drive**, and **safety** – are what Subaru has been about since the Leone (the world's first *second* production all-wheel-drive car - **corrected**, **thanks to Roger Dana, who points out that the Jensen FF was the first. Thanks!**) was launched in 1971. While Subaru's first water-cooled boxer engine actually debuted in the front-wheel-drive 1000 in 1965, the *all-wheel-drive* Leone was its first successful vehicle in the U.S., uniquely appealing enough to have found 30,000 homes in the U.S. by 1974.

All-wheel-drive and safety are both aspects that are now desirable in the mainstream – and both have been regularly associated with Subaru both in and out of enthusiast circles.

Whether the crossover crowd truly appreciates boxer engines, on the other hand, is a separate question. Traditionally, the configuration has enabled Subaru to feature lower hoods, helping aerodynamics. Yet both the co-development of the B9 Tribeca with Saab, and the existence of the large grille and scoops on the front (which increase the frontal area), may negate this feature here.

For an intriguing look at just how intriguingly offbeat Subaru's appeal in Japan has tended to be, despite its engineering-led marketing (*The Beauty of All-Wheel-Drive*) in the U.S., note the rather charming marketing for the company's new R1 compact.

These days, the Japan-market R1 coupé and R2 micro sedan – both of which spiritually succeed the little two-cycle 360 which Malcolm Bricklin unsuccessfully tried to import here - use a 660cc, water-cooled inline-4



Subaru FF (1969 - note grille)



Subaru Leone (1971)



Subaru Leone (1978)



Subaru WRX (2000) - pic: '01 WRX STi

Even without mentioning niche cars such as the XT or SVX - Subaru coupés of the '80s and '90s whose designs raised eyebrows - it is easy to illustrate that Subaru design has regularly been questionable, and questionably overt.

From the *bug-eyed* Impreza WRX

That said, perhaps might be one of the first crossovers since the BMW X5 that can realistically be driven hard, given the lower center of gravity that a boxer engine enables. Indeed, our favorite dynamic aspect of the B9 Tribeca is its double-wishbone rear suspension, Subaru's first, and sandwiched under the rear seats despite the odds and cost. This *will* bring in converts, if Subaru can advertise its existence (the media appears to have already overlooked the feature in preliminary reports).

Yet that same rear suspension may have enforced a lower tow rating that, at just 2,000 lbs., is well under that of the Outback and Forester. Considering that Subaru has indicated a hope that some of its traditional customers will embrace the B9 Tribeca (important, since they will bring their preference for boxer engines with them), one wonders about this aspect. Towing can be optionally boosted to a slightly improved 3,500 lbs., and so the question becomes whether the improved ride and handling characteristics of the double-wishbone will prove to be a worthy payoff to the faithful.

On a final note about this vehicle's dynamic layout, the brakes on recent Subarus have been bereft of both feel and ability; B9 Tribeca's will need to be well above par to stop the 4,245lb vehicle.

"It is inviting," the company entices.

Although visibility is not quite up to the standards that Subaru owners have come to expect, fit and finish - even on the pre-production vehicles we sampled in Detroit - is truly beyond reproach. Virtually every control has been damped and

of 2000, back to the FF of 1969 (note the grille, now carried forward on the B9 Tribeca), Subaru's vehicles have often been described as dumpy.

Yet the Leone of 1971, resolutely brash and growing progressively more *dist-inctive* into the early '80s, was a resounding (relatively) success in the U.S. market



Unlike older Subarus whose designs were questionable in every aspect, however, the *detailing* on the B9 Tribeca is exquisite. Although we are not entirely convinced by the way the car fits together, the projector headlamps; chrome, wing-like door-handles; damped controls, and etched lines at the rear are inspiring, and they fit the upscale market Subaru is seeking

styled to standards unheard of in a Subaru (even the new Legacy, itself an improvement), whose interiors have generally been merely functional.

Meeting the higher-end B9 Tribeca's seven passengers are not only pleasant materials and warm colors but, also, vibrant forms. A wave extends across the dashboard, housing both a navigation display and two chrome-ringed dials Alfa-like in their concentric presentation. Make no mistake, this is an inspired position in which to travel.



"It is stylish," they suggest.

A strategic and dynamic discussion has led us to the most controversial aspect of this vehicle: its exterior.



To understand from whence the B9 Tribeca's looks have come, we must consider:

- the history of Subaru aesthetics;
- the nature of its most popular models,
- and the strategy upon which the company has embarked.

The 250hp, 219lb-ft 3.0-liter engine continues Subaru's tradition of horizontally-opposed, lightweight motors, and all-wheel-drive (long a Subaru trait) is now applied to a segment in which it has been more traditionally featured, albeit in forms that have often been less capable

To wit, not only does the B9 Tribeca take advantage of trends toward more overt design in recent years, but it comes from a company that has regularly pushed the boundaries of automotive style. Moreover, considering that the Legacy sedan's marginal acceptance and visibility has somewhat illustrated a 'limit' to the number of segments Subaru might wish to enter, the company now seeks to reinvent itself beyond the Impreza's power and the practicality which its wagons offer.



Despite room for seven, B9 Tribeca manages to fit a double-wishbone rear suspension at the rear (in something of a break with Subaru tradition).

This, and care over the center of gravity, should help with Subaru's claims of agility

Thus Subaru has launched a design-led approach



to revitalizing its product line. As president and CEO of Fuji Heavy Industries (Subaru's parent company), Kyoji Takenaka recently promised a change in Subaru design.



As well as boxer engines and all-wheel-drive, safety has long been a Subaru virtue. So B9 Tribeca gets standard side and curtain airbags, with Subaru emphasizing its stiff structure

"While continuing to enhance our core technologies, including the horizontally-opposed engine, the key to building brand equity will be to lay claim to world-class design," noted Takenaka recently.



The Forester will be facelifted for 2006 with the basic form of the B9 Tribeca's grille, a feature that debuted on the FF in 1969

"It is expected that such a comprehensive transformation in automobile design will require from three to five years. The approach encompasses more than just 'improvements' and must come from a commitment to fundamentally re-think Subaru's design culture from its very foundations." (Fuji Heavy Industries Annual Report 2003)



Tribeca, incidentally, is an acronym for Triangle Below Canal, a name bestowed upon this historic area of lower Manhattan by the Landmarks Commission in the 1960s.

"One aspect of this initiative will include reassessing our design vision from a new perspective through a global infusion of new blood," he concluded.

The "new blood" in this case was, in part, provided by the 2002 appointment of former Alfa Romeo designer Andreas Zapatinas. The cornerstones of his approach are, he has suggested, *innovation, courage, and individuality.*

Subaru calls it "a vibrant New York City neighborhood with many distinctive boutiques, galleries, and restaurants, where young artists work and cutting-edge trends are created that attract worldwide attention."

Gradually, Zapatinas' ideas have been played out in public. B9 Tribeca's basic form refers to the Subaru WX-01 Concept we first saw in Tokyo 2003, yet its wheel-arches have been given the power of the 2004 B9SC Roadster Concept, and the face from that car, and the Geneva 2002 B11S Concept.

Production of the B9 Tribeca begins this Spring in Indiana, with Subaru planning to export the vehicle to other markets sometime in 2006

The B9SC Roadster Concept was Subaru's hybrid bid for more emotive design, powered by an electric motor mated to a 2.0-liter SOHC flat-four. GM Vice Chairman Bob Lutz may have reportedly killed that car (on the basis of either its design, or on

whether it fit the brand), but perhaps the financial case for the B9 Tribeca was simply too compelling. Subaru's partnership with General Motors (which owns 20% of the company) dates back to 1999, and the B9 Tribeca was thus co-developed with Saab, with the intention of fielding the 9^{6X} (Saab's variant, to be launched at the New York Auto Show in April).

We have, certainly, had time to get used to what the B9 Tribeca might look like. Even the grille, cited in some reports as somewhat questionable, first appeared on the '71 Leone - and its basic shape will feature on several Subarus in the future, starting with the Forester.

Yet, although the car looked better on the show floor than it has in pictures, we are not entirely convinced. The strategy behind the aesthetics is more sound than is their visual appeal, at least in the vehicle's basic form, which mixes blobularity at the front with sharp creases in the rear. You can see where they have tried for agility with the curved wheel frames (which house similarly sport-minded 18-inch 7-spoke alloy wheels as standard), yet the flanks themselves work against this by being resolutely square, with low-effort surfacing.

That said, the detailing itself is beyond reproach. Although we are not entirely convinced by the way the car fits together, the projector headlamps; chrome, wing-like door-handles; damped controls, and etched lines at the rear are beautifully done, and they fit the upscale market Subaru is seeking.

A final point about the B9 Tribeca's emotive lines: Subaru's slogan in Japan is *Think, Feel, Drive*. For an intriguing look at just how intriguingly offbeat Subaru's appeal in Japan has tended to be, despite its engineering-led marketing (*The Beauty of All-Wheel-Drive*) in the U.S., take a look at this rather charming [promotional website](#) for the company's new R1 compact. These days, the Japan-market R1 coupé and R2 micro sedan - both of which spiritually succeed the little two-cycle 360 which Malcolm Bricklin unsuccessfully tried to import here - use a 660cc, water-cooled inline-4.

In summary, it was the 1971 Leone that laid down the basic tenets for Subaru: all-wheel-drive; boxer engines, and low centers of gravity. Despite its homely looks, the car rewarded Subaru with its first real taste of success in the U.S. market, and with global production figures that more than doubled to 202,000 by 1980. Today, Subaru produces half-a-million cars annually at 9 plants (5 in Japan).

Subaru occasionally let its inherent quirkiness interfere with its pragmatism, placing all-wheel-drive even on its little Justy hatchback, and on the Japan-only Domingo

minivan. With the B9 Tribeca, all-wheel-drive technology has been mainstreamed.

We have heard rumors about a potential turbocharged B9XT Tribeca. This should be of no surprise. When Subaru's boxer engines looked a touch underpowered, if charismatic, back in 1982, turbocharging began. It sounded an enthusiast drumbeat that would culminate in a collaboration with British *Prodrive* in 1990, and in Subaru's first participation in racing (winning the Safari Rally with a Group N Legacy that year). The Impreza was born in 1992 and, by the middle of the decade, no longer were Subarus merely pragmatic, all-wheel-drive transportation for American snow-belt dwellers and British farmers.

Subaru's market share in North America today is 1.2%. The company's sales have been level across 2003 and 2004, at just over 180,000 vehicles. For 2005, the brand wants to move 200,000 units, on its way to 250,000 for 2006.

B9 Tribeca Brand Manager Dave Sullivan is upbeat about the vehicle's prospects. In its lower-end forms, expected to start at approximately \$32,000, it will compete with Honda's Pilot and Nissan's Murano. As the prices climb toward \$40,000 for a fully-loaded seven-seater B9 Tribeca, Cadillac's SRX; Volkswagen's Touareg, and Volvo's XC90 come into the picture.

Last year, seventeen years after the venture opened, Subaru terminated its production enterprise with Isuzu Motors. Unlike Honda, which rebadged Isuzu's Rodeo as the Passport and the Trooper as the Acura SLX, Subaru never sought SUVs from its partner merely to fill a gap in its range. No, Subaru wanted to get into SUVs in its own way.

The close of the Isuzu deal has left Subaru with excess capacity at the formerly joint-venture Lafayette, Indiana plant. Part of the reason for the B9 Tribeca is to account for 40,000 production slots at the plant, which also builds the Legacy, Outback, and Baja. More will follow as the new vehicle is exported from Indiana to other markets.

Tribeca, incidentally, is an acronym for *Triangle Below Canal*, a name bestowed upon this historic area of lower Manhattan by the Landmarks Commission in the 1960s. Subaru calls it "a vibrant New York City neighborhood with many distinctive boutiques, galleries, and restaurants, where young artists work and cutting-edge trends are created that attract worldwide attention."

The trend that the B9 Tribeca is following has already been set, and its expectations are established. Subaru must hope to have accurately targeted and met those expectations, adding to them sufficiently to charge a premium price; bringing its loyal following with it, yet attracting a wider, more mainstream audience – and

hoping that the two do not offend each other while the result presents itself as the brand's flagship.

Subaru is, at least, aptly named for the task; *Subaru*, in Japanese, means *to unite, to gather together*. FHI CEO Takenaka has often spoken of "bringing Subaru's aesthetics into balance with the other elements of its uniqueness." The question is, will the market go along with the approach?

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