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03

USER-CENTERED DIGITAL PRODUCT DESIGN: A TRANSPORTATION-RELATED CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The term design is not limited to the appearance of the final product; it encompasses elements that justify its shape and functions. It is an escalating procedure that is heavily based on research to assess the problem properly, the use of an array of user-centred design tools, the evaluation of the proposed idea, and finally, the improvement of potential drawbacks. The above-mentioned procedure is crucial to the product design methodology, which is not linear but characterised by a repeated rhythm, providing the opportunity for more efficient products to emerge. In the present paper, a number of digital product design tools were used as a medium for developing a potential recreational concept vehicle. The project reflects a vision to design a vehicle whose design characteristics could correlate with Mediterranean tradition and summer holiday habits. As a result, it could be equipped with technical elements that facilitate motion on soft terrains. Furthermore, a series of creativity tools was used to transform the research data into design inspiration, to achieve optimal outcomes during the design process, and to prototype technologies/methods to provide insights into the form and functionality of the design solution.

Keywords: User-centred Design, Product Design, Digital Design Tools, CAD, Prototyping

I. INTRODUCTION

Design is a crucial factor in the development of new products, as it can positively affect a company's economic prosperity and corporate identity. Usually, the design team consists of several members who represent the creative section of a company–to find innovative solutions. It is a dominant belief that the perception of a product's design is limited to its aesthetic characteristics. Still, it combines functionality and modern appearance (Roper et al., 2016). A successful product design can captivate and attract prospective consumers while also distinguishing itself from competitors.

Frequently, the term “good design” is heard, but it is rather difficult to identify with quantitative elements. Generally, design success can be evaluated in different ways, which depend on the person’s perspective (Roy Robin 2010). Furthermore, the uniqueness of a product is a major factor in its success. This characteristic stems not only from new design elements but also from older statements that function uniquely. More unique products can be produced when companies focus on developing effective methods to collect and document customers’ needs and, subsequently, to transform them into design requirements (Falahat et al., 2024).

To discover worthy new products, it is necessary to use effective methods and software systems throughout the design process. Traditionally, the role of the designer is balanced between their artistic background and technical knowledge. However, as of today, changes are driven by the emergence of new technologies that can more precisely present the characteristics of a product, such as augmented reality, before it enters the manufacturing process (Eric Lutters et al., 2014). The influence of the technological equipment has also emerged in the initial stages of the design process, as sketches are depicted digitally using pen displays. Simultaneously, the emergence of computational design, which relies on mathematical sequences, can yield variations of the original 3D model and changes in the product's functional and ergonomic characteristics (Manavis et al., 2024; Manavis et al., 2021; Manavis et al., 2023). At the same time, the evolution of 3D CAD (Computer Aided Design) systems allows designers to interact more accurately with possible solutions, in particular when parametrically designing mechanical parts are involved (Mermoz et al., 2011).

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

The design process can be described as a logical sequence of steps aimed at producing effective solutions. These steps are project-independent, meaning they can be applied consistently across projects, in the same order, with as many iterations as needed, to achieve successful outcomes when performed carefully (Cheng Jinxia, 2018). This paper aims to design a recreational

vehicle, following design principles and incorporating contemporary digital tools to better understand the design language. Although Mediterranean terrain morphology and climate factors inspired the vehicle's design, it can be used in other similar circumstances, such as high temperatures, sandy terrain, and water volumes.

During design research, it was necessary to document information on Mediterranean habits, traditions, and climate conditions. A major factor that could influence the adoption of a person in a certain terrain is the temperature (Luo et al., 2024), and subsequently, people's behaviour, attitude, and willingness to be outdoors for an extended part of the day are influenced by weather conditions (Huang et al., 2016; Jianlei Niu et al., 2015). At the same time, the tonality of every colour can evoke a range of emotions and convey visual information to the observer. Since ancient times, the influence of colour on people's psychology and its ability to express the values of different cultures more effectively have been researched. Yuan Meng et al. particularly highlighted the significance of colour in architecture, where it enhances the aesthetics of each building and differentiates it from others, regardless of its spatial arrangement (Yuan Meng et al., 2025). The Parthenon is undoubtedly one of the most significant buildings of ancient Greek times, and its appearance and construction methods were proposed as the foundations for the further development of architectural science, the outward surfaces of which were abundantly decorated by elements whose colours were associated with the Greek tradition (Aggelakopoulou et al., 2022).

Regarding the vehicle's technical background, it is crucial to note that electric motors are used for its development to highlight the vehicle's environmentally friendly character. The growing number of vehicles with internal combustion engines drives a significant rise in carbon dioxide emissions. For the above-mentioned reason, the car industry invested resources in further developing the electric car with solar panels to be more efficient, offering a higher mileage range (Tsakalidis et al., 2025). The climate conditions in Mediterranean countries, combined with batteries' higher performance at higher temperatures, make electric vehicles a good choice for passenger transportation (Rabih Al Haddad et al., 2025). Furthermore, the concept was to design a vehicle with two characteristics: sufficient control in a water environment, thus with low hydrodynamic resistance, and optimal driving behaviour on soft terrains like a sandy beach. Therefore, research was conducted on the direction of key design elements on amphibious vehicles (Liu et al., 2023), particularly an experimental model by Xiaolin Xie et al., which features wheels that transform into propellers. This mechanism enables the vehicle to move through water without obstruction (Xie et al., 2017).

III. METHODOLOGY AND APPLICATION

The generation of new, innovative solutions by designers is not based solely on their personal experience and mindset, but also on carefully conducted research and on transforming data into design requirements and parameters. Additionally, following a step-by-step process in which each step produces results that serve as key elements for the next, a design loop was introduced when needed. That leads to a continuous trial-and-error process in which, when a result is not technically or aesthetically sufficient or relevant to the design solution, the design team can loop back to a needed step to redefine the parameters and produce different results until a competent outcome is obtained.

In the first steps, a target is set to better understand each design problem, while the next steps focus on evaluating and testing the final solution using computer-aided design systems and 3D printers. Some of the design tools could be used in analogue, but the reduced time consumption provided by digital tools and the facilitation of communication of optical information among team members led to the adoption of digital solutions. In any case, digital tools can handle details at a higher level, enhancing design accuracy and enabling a more refined ideation process through easier experimentation.

III.1 The Sequence of Methodology

To better understand the specific roles of the various design tools, it is necessary to categorise them into four main sections based on their aims. The first section aims to summarise the collected information and transform it into design inspiration parameters, using both physical language and images. For that reason, mind maps and mood boards are powerful design tools that can motivate designers to adopt creative design thinking and, in turn, generate a wealth of ideas that can lead to innovative products. The next level's purpose is to design and represent the initial ideas in a more artistic form. Ultimately, designers use their sketching skills to transfer their thoughts onto paper or a digital canvas and to estimate if an idea can be further developed. At this point, it is important to note that the design process is divided into four stages, and the sketches in each differ in quality and detail. The third section facilitates projecting 2D digital sketches into a 3D environment. With the help of digital tools, designers can evaluate the final design from different perspectives and visualise models in a digital environment that simulates the real world. The 3D printing is the final stage of the design process, where the model can be designed in a CAD system, which provides the opportunity of creating a model in the needed size for prototyping, so the designer can physically interact with it and have a better understanding of the shape, the analogies and the ergonomics of the product.

III.2 Mind map – Mood board

The mind map is an essential design tool for helping the design team orient towards the desired design direction, properly communicate with stakeholders, and avoid misunderstandings. The design team needs to frame the design problem properly at an early stage. In the centre of the mind map, the problem definition is placed, while potential design opportunities emerge in the surrounding areas (Figure 1). Beyond documenting research information, developing a mind map also fosters the exchange of ideas and knowledge among design team members. When the team cooperates efficiently, new opportunities can be discovered, and new design areas can be revealed for exploration. In this phase, there are no “strange ideas,” and all ideas are documented without hesitation, so during evaluation, the keywords most relevant to the design direction are chosen. There are different ways to develop a mind map; the simplest is pencil and a piece of paper, but the most efficient is to take advantage of digital technologies. Digital media allow designers to use colours, lines, and shapes to highlight specific, important words and to rearrange the flow of keywords with ease.

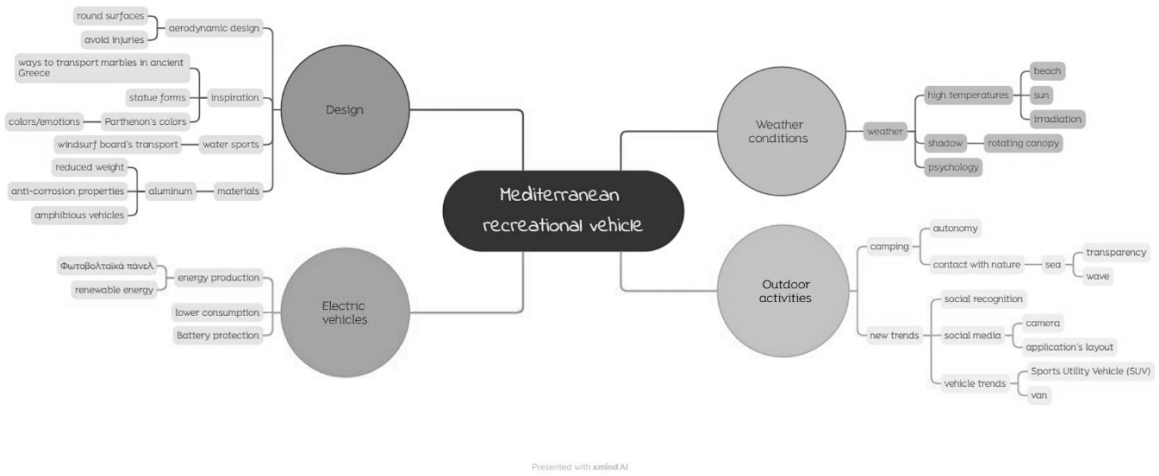

Figure 1. Mind-map incorporates data and thoughts

Source: Author’s processing

After the preliminary listing of keywords, a second design tool (a mood board) is used to motivate designers to express their emotions through pictures. At this point, different pictures are used that originate from the designers' personal collections, whereas other image collections with rich visual information facilitate the discovery of pictures that can express the designer’s emotion. Visual communication among the design team is important because it can be more comprehensive than words alone, incorporating colours, shapes, and textures that are difficult to describe verbally. Figure 2 depicts the selected images for this case study of the recreational vehicle, which also reflect the design direction followed throughout the design process.

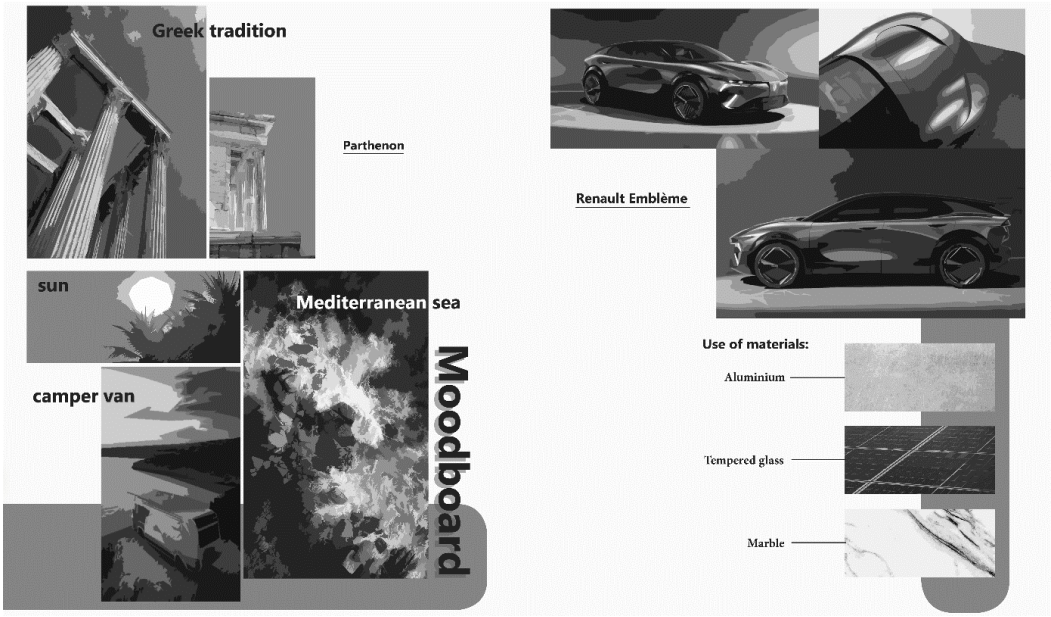

Figure 2. Mood board, expression of feelings via photographs

Source: Author's processing

III.3 3D Digital Sketching

Sketching is the creative section of the design procedure and the key element that allows information to be transformed into design elements. During this process, various sketches are created, whose external form and functional parameters reflect the design requirements recorded in the previous stage. The key feature, and the most time-consuming, in this procedure is experimentation, while drawing a plethora of sketches plays an important role. During the sketching phase, the most suitable sketches are explored in depth, and, finally, with tools such as a 3D CAD modelling system and physical prototyping, the design solution is chosen and evaluated. New technologies, such as pen displays, allow designers to sketch with high precision and effectiveness. With pen displays, sketches are more realistic, and the ease of adding and manipulating colours, backgrounds, reflections, and textures creates no boundaries for creativity. Simultaneously, these devices allow creating sketches with a 3D sense because the user can control the pen's precision, resulting in bold front surfaces and faded remote points.

Four stages complete this procedure, in which the quality and precision of sketches differ on each stage, and are the following: procedural sketches, ideation, final solution, and colour rendering. In this case study, all sketches are created digitally with a Huion™ Kamvas™ 22 and Affinity Designer™.

In this stage, the main purpose is to conceive the vehicle's main body without focusing on secondary design elements; for this reason, all sketches are drawn from the side view to ensure the vehicle's overall shape is as comprehensive as possible. Additionally, light colours are used on the positive surfaces, and darker colours on the points where negative spaces or holes exist (Figure 3).

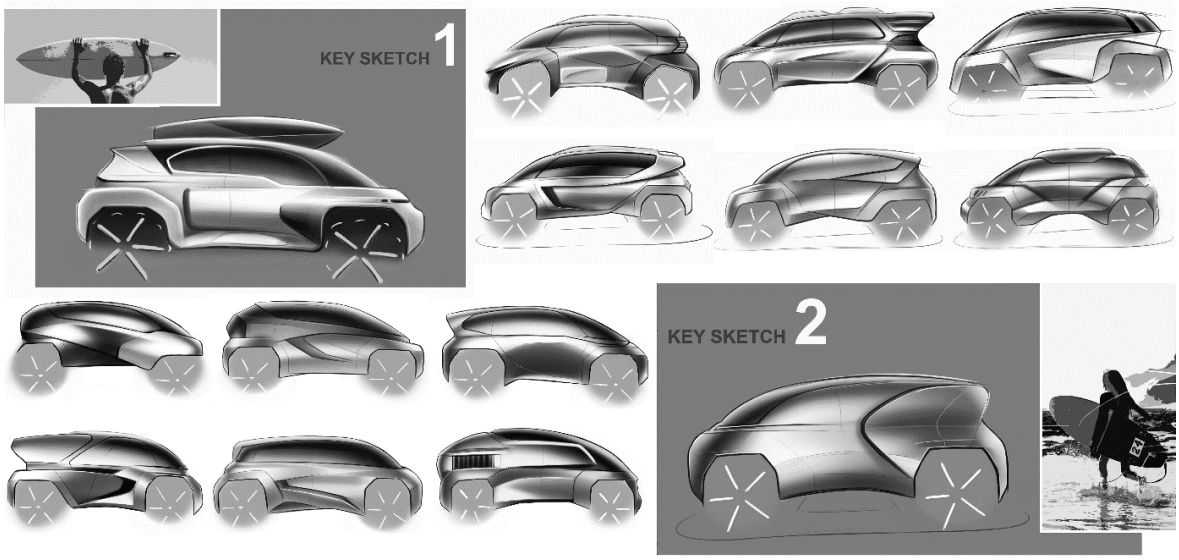

Figure 3. The procedural sketches encompass 2D initial forms

Source: Author's processing

Ideation is the second level of the sketching process, in which the designer aims to showcase their creative spirit. The variables documented in previous stages are taken into consideration to successfully incorporate all parameters into rough sketches for future design proposals. The sketches at this stage are presented with enhanced perspective and from various angles, making it easier to represent the concept in three dimensions. Among the above-mentioned vehicle sketches, our design team has selected two models for further development with greater accuracy: the front and rear parts of the vehicle (Figure 4).

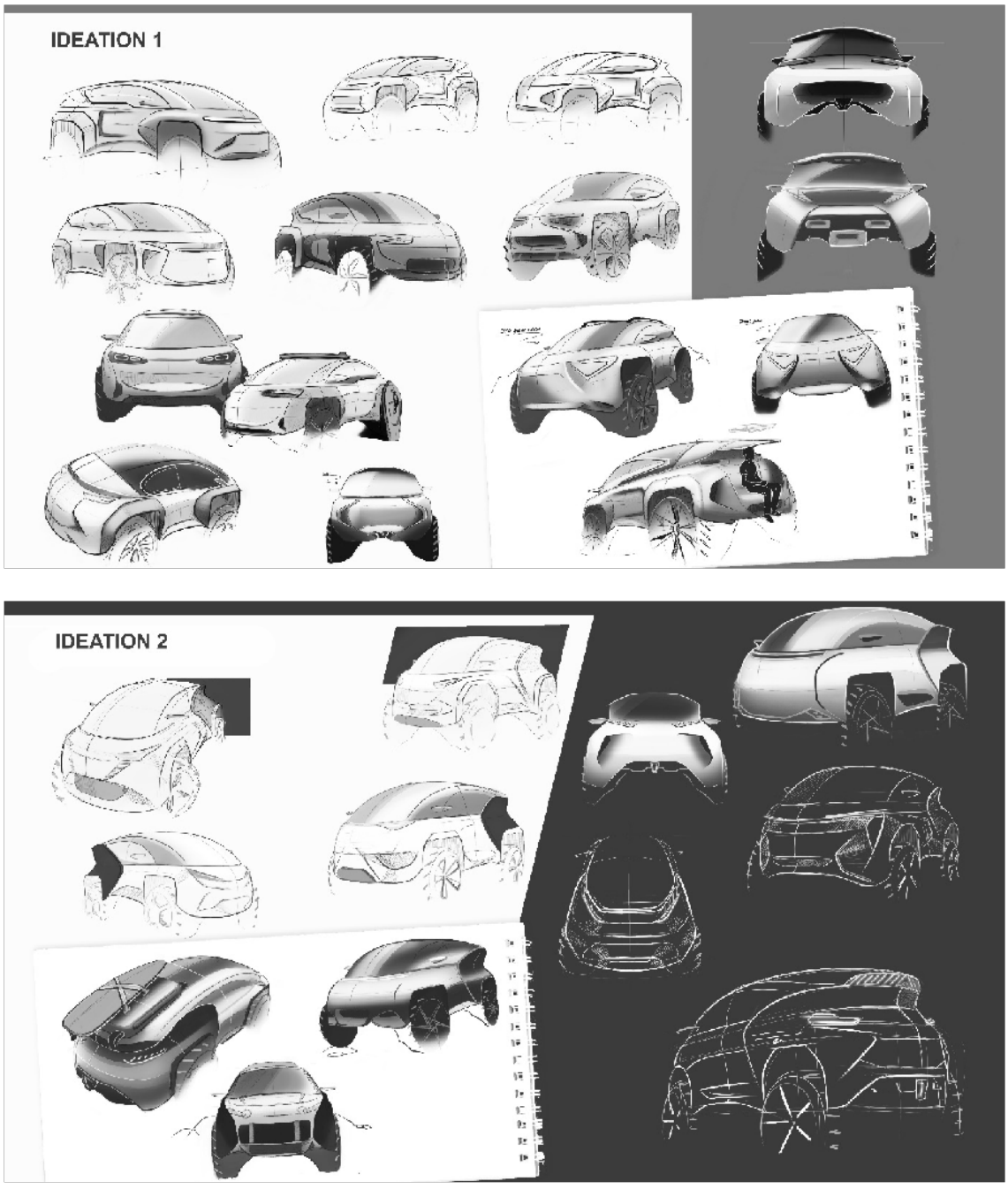

Figure 4. Ideation sketches

Source: Author's processing

After the sketches have been thoroughly analysed, the solution that best meets the essential requirements is chosen. In this stage, all the details are shown in the sketch as the final design of the idea, while the sketch's lines and analogies are drawn precisely to provide a more realistic result. To achieve this, the sketch is rendered with the addition of colours and a background (Figure 5). The brighter colours are used in the nearest part of the sketch for the viewer, to increase the observer's attention, while darker tones are used for larger areas and shadows. The extremely saturated colours are not the right choice for the sketches because they increase the contrast between the colours and lead to unusual results and artefacts. Undoubtedly, 2D digital sketches are more realistic than analogue sketches, as modern digital design systems offer tools and colour systems that better represent the real world.

Figure 5. Final solution - realistic approach

Source: Author's processing

III.4 3D CAD modelling and rendering

High-quality sketching can provide potential solutions with enough realism and detail, but it cannot quickly showcase a product from every angle. There is often insufficient and systematic sketch development to support the evaluation of all product models within a company. Time-consuming processes should be avoided to maintain cost efficiency and ensure that the product is launched during a period of high consumer demand. In a product's lifecycle, 3D CAD systems can assist designers in digitising their final ideas promptly and easily, and in changing parts that do not match the final design. These state-of-the-art programs facilitate creators' sketching in a 3D environment, with powerful commands that enable the modelling of unusual and interesting shapes.

Regarding the 3D modelling of the proposed recreational vehicle, the Blender™ system is used for its powerful capabilities to shape, transform, and adapt complex forms. At the same time, this program provides two powerful rendering systems (Eevee and Cycles) that can render the 3D model in a digital environment with a realistic feel. To ensure maximum flexibility during 3D modelling, the vehicle's components are independently developed and integrated in the final phase. In this way, each part of the model can be evaluated and modified without affecting the car's main body structure. In addition, the initial renderings are produced in white colour and on a plain background to better assess the model's characteristics without distraction from vivid colours or digital scenery (Figure 6).

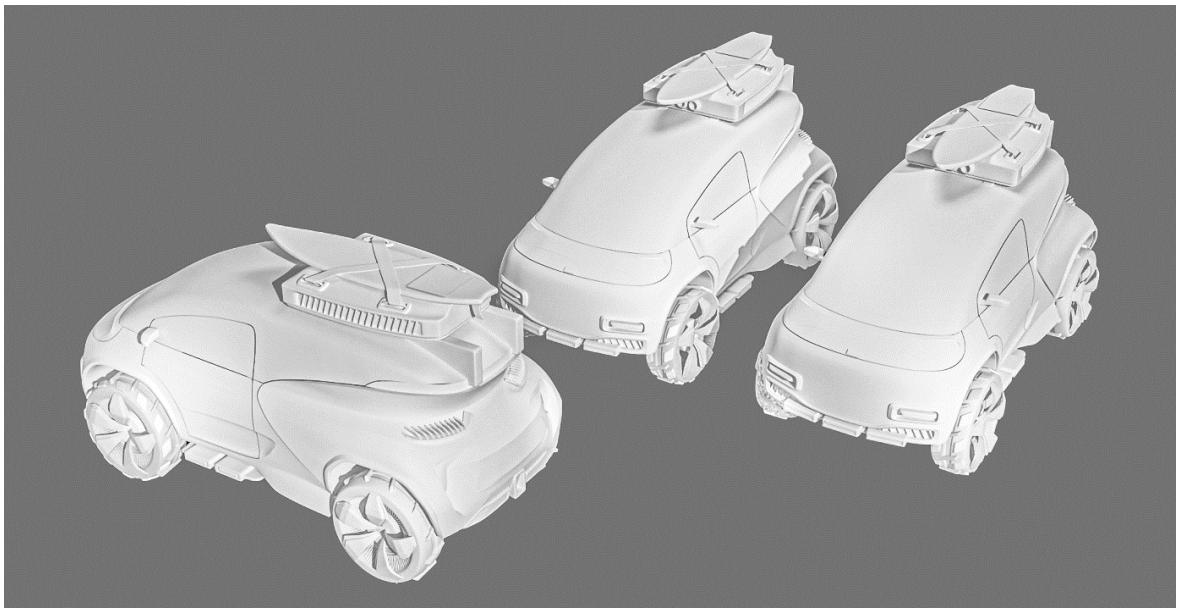

Figure 6. Colourless 3D CAD model

Source: Author's processing

While the colourless renderings help expose potential flaws in the final model and lead to reexamining some of the design's parts, the final rendering in full colour and background aims to showcase the product in a realistic way (Figure 7). To achieve high-quality renders, the "Cycles" rendering engine in BlenderTM is used, which can render the model as realistically as possible, with proper colour balance, high-quality surface reflections, and seamless integration with the 3D environment. Each material is distinguished by its roughness, metallic quality, and transparency, so selecting the right textures is essential for clearly perceiving the different parts of the product.

By applying HDRI (High Dynamic Range Imaging) environments, the model is rendered with natural lighting and reflections, offering a clear, convincing presentation to stakeholders. Another method is to use two digital programs (in our case, BlenderTM and Affinity DesignerTM), where the model

is rendered at a favourable perspective angle with a transparent background, then placed in the selected photo. These digital programs offer immense capabilities, enabling continuous interaction between them to achieve the best possible result.

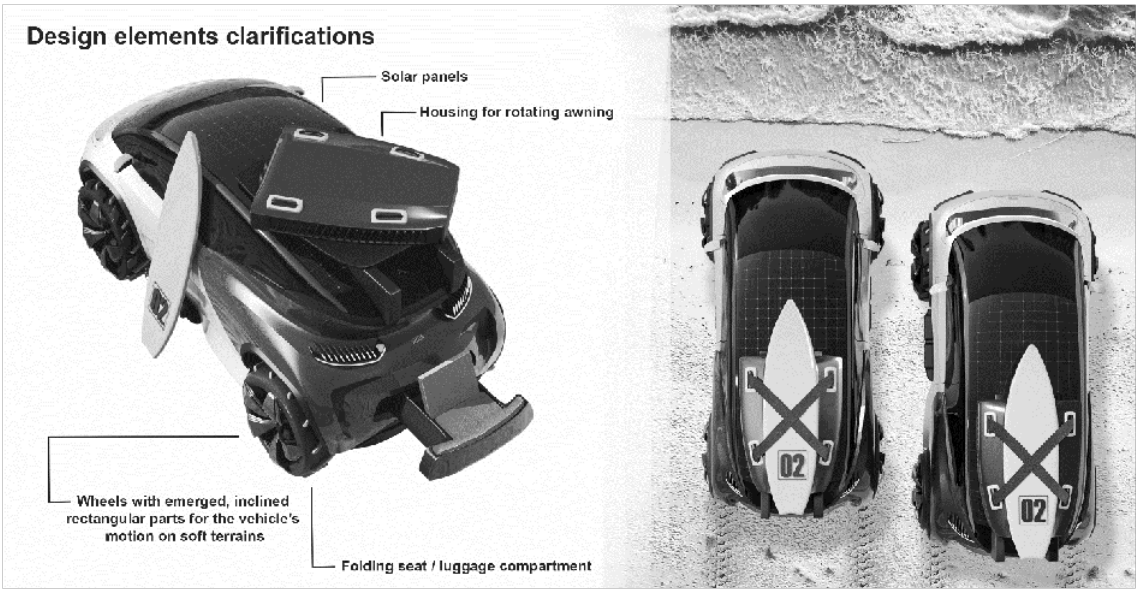

Figure 7. Realistic renderings of a 3D CAD model

Source: Author's processing

III.5 Prototyping

In the final stage, a thorough evaluation of the 3D CAD model is essential. While digital visualisation is an efficient way to communicate the design and its parameters, physical interaction with a tangible prototype offers deeper insight through tactile feedback. Furthermore, prototyping helps understand the model's geometry, allowing the analogy to be examined and dimensions and measures to be verified, ensuring that the product aligns with the initial design requirements. Using 3D printers enables fast prototype production. This makes 3D printing a valuable evaluation tool, as it enables the team to produce multiple physical models as the 3D design evolves. (Figure 8).

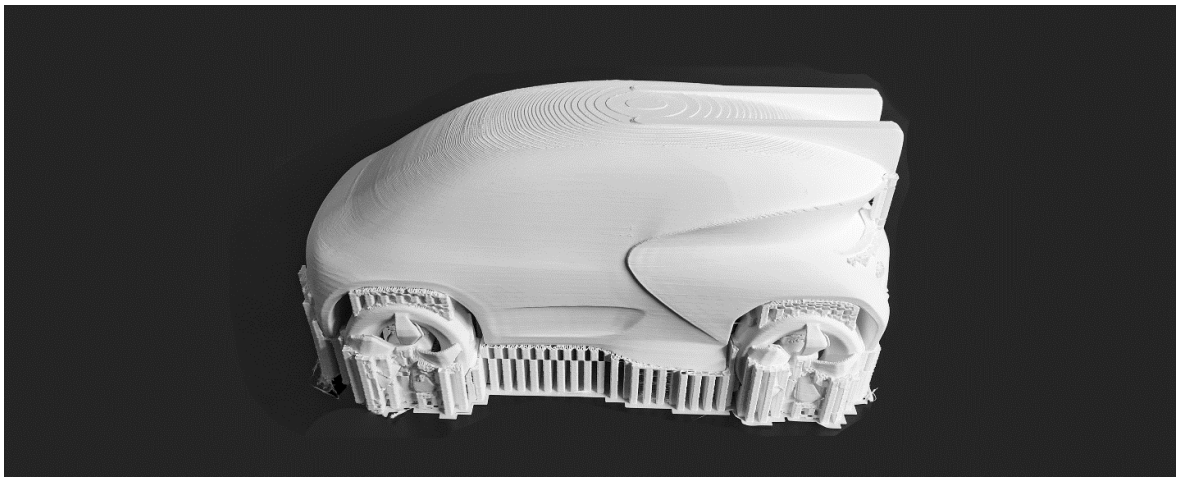

Figure 8. Prototyping with the use of a 3D printer

Source: Author's processing

IV. CONCLUSION

The contemporary design process is increasingly grounded in systematic methodologies rather than subjective judgment, with digital tools playing a central role at every stage to enhance speed and efficiency. The rapid evolution of digital media technology brings many changes to how products are designed, while the methodology of their development remains unchanged. Finally, alongside the presentation of certain digital tools, particular emphasis is placed on the vehicle itself, which, on the one hand, is used as a means of illustrating the design process, and on the other hand, is developed with particular care as an alternative proposal for the development of a recreational vehicle. The design language of this vehicle features elements that ideally express its general use, primarily on coastal routes and terrains, and also reflects Mediterranean culture.

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