

Darienite

News for Darien

<https://darienite.com>

Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion Car, Produced in Bridgeport in the 1930s: Cameron on Transportation

Author : David Gurliacci

Categories : [Opinion](#), [Transportation](#)

Tagged as : [Buckminster Fuller](#), [Cameron on Transportation](#), [Cameron on Transportation 2019](#), [Cameron on Transportation History](#), [Cameron on Transportation History 2019](#), [Dymaxion Car](#), [Jim Cameron's Transportation Column](#), [Jim Cameron's Transportation Column 2020](#)

Date : December 26, 2019

Did you know that Bridgeport was once the home of “the car of the future?” It was the Tesla of its era, but only three were ever built.

This mystery vehicle? The Dymaxion Car. The designer? Buckminster Fuller.

Best known for pioneering the 1940s architectural design of the geodesic dome, Fuller was already inventing other things a decade earlier. It was the 1930s and the country was struggling through the Depression. Fuller saw the need for innovation, for “doing more with less,” and conceived of a mass-produced, pre-fabricated

circular house modeled after a grain silo.

Built with aluminum, Fuller only saw two prototypes of the dwelling constructed, and even they weren't actually built until 1945. Fuller called his design [The Dymaxion House](#) — Dy for dynamic, Max for maximum and Ion for tension. It was a major flop.

Next, Fuller moved on to transportation, conceiving of the Dymaxion Car, an 11-person, three-wheeled vehicle that he hoped could fly using what he called "jet stilts." And this was decades before the invention of the jet engine.

Indeed, the Dymaxion Car looked a lot like a stubby zeppelin with a forward-facing cockpit and tapered, aerodynamic tail. Equipped with a rear-mounted engine that could run on alcohol, it could go 90 mph and get 30 miles to the gallon. The car had dual-steel frames while a wooden lattice work held the outside aluminum panels in place. The single rear wheel could pivot 90 degrees, making parking a breeze.

Bankrolled with \$5,000 from wealthy investor and socialite Philip Pearson of Philadelphia, Fuller needed a place to build a prototype and ended up at the old [Locomobile](#) plant on [Atlantic Street](#) in Bridgeport's [Tongue Point](#) neighborhood. Don't bother looking for this piece of history; it's long gone as the land is now home to the PG&E power plant.

When Fuller set up the auto workshop in March 1933, he hired naval architect [Starling Burgess](#), who recruited 27 workmen, many of them from Rolls Royce, from the 1,000 applications he received. In just three months, the first prototype was completed and rolled out onto the streets of Bridgeport on Fuller's 38th birthday. The car was immediately shipped to Chicago for display at the World's Fair.

This video on YouTube is labeled "at the Ford Museum in Detroit, MI on 1/06/08."

Sadly, the prototype was totaled after it was involved in a crash, flipped over and killed its driver and left VIP passengers injured. Initial orders for the Dymaxion started to evaporate over safety fears, even though it turns out the Fuller car had been sideswiped.

A second prototype emerged from the Bridgeport plant six months later. Fuller hoped to display the Dymaxion at the 1934 New York Auto Show but pressure from Chrysler locked him out, literally. Not to be outdone, Fuller parked prototype No. 2 [right by the front door](#) of the show and got more attention than he might have on the exhibit floor.

Posted on YouTube by the Wall Street Journal: "Buckminster Fuller's 1933 foray into automobiles gave us the Dymaxion Car, and enthusiast Jeff Lane has one of the only working replicas in the world. WSJ's Rumble Seat columnist Dan Neil takes the road zeppelin for a spin...or should we say wobble?"

Fuller even brought the car back for the last year of the Chicago World's Fair in 1934 but public curiosity didn't turn into sales. Fuller eventually sold this second prototype to his plant workers while a third model, this one equipped with a stabilizing vertical fin, went to conductor Leopold Stokowski.

Only one of the three Dymaxions survived: Car No. 2, which is now at an auto museum in Reno, Nev. But Bucky Fuller fans have built replicas, some of which are still on the roads today 80 years later.

Find Out More

- [Buckminster Fuller Institute website on the Dymaxion Car](#)
- [A Web page](#) about the National Auto Museum's information on the Dymaxio
- [A Test Drive of the Death-Trap Car Designed by Buckminster Fuller \(Wall Street Journal\)](#) (April 2015)
- [Dymaxion: How this radical 1930s car changed vehicle design](#) (CNN, Oct. 30, 2019)
- [The Adventures of Buckminster Fuller and the Dymaxion Car: A Book Excerpt](#) (Arizona State University, March 23, 2016)

Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for more than 25 years. He is the founder of the [Commuter Action Group](#), sits on the [Merritt Parkway Conservancy](#) board and also serves on the Darien RTM and as program director for Darien TV79.

Darienite

News for Darien

<https://darienite.com>

*The opinions expressed in this column, republished with permission of Hearst CT Media, are only his own.
You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com.*