The CALTY Time Traveler: Four Toyota Vehicles That Defined Their Time

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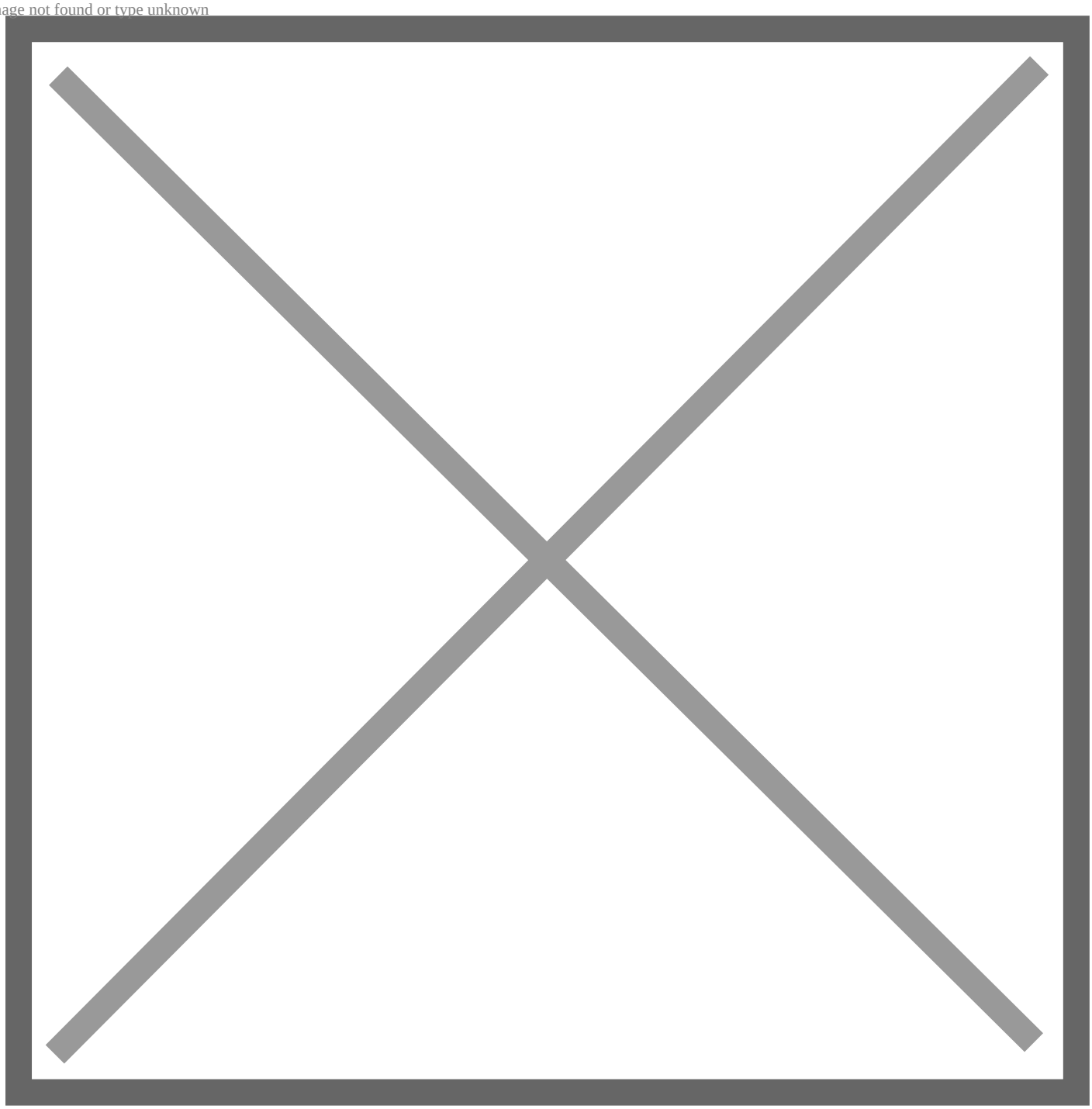
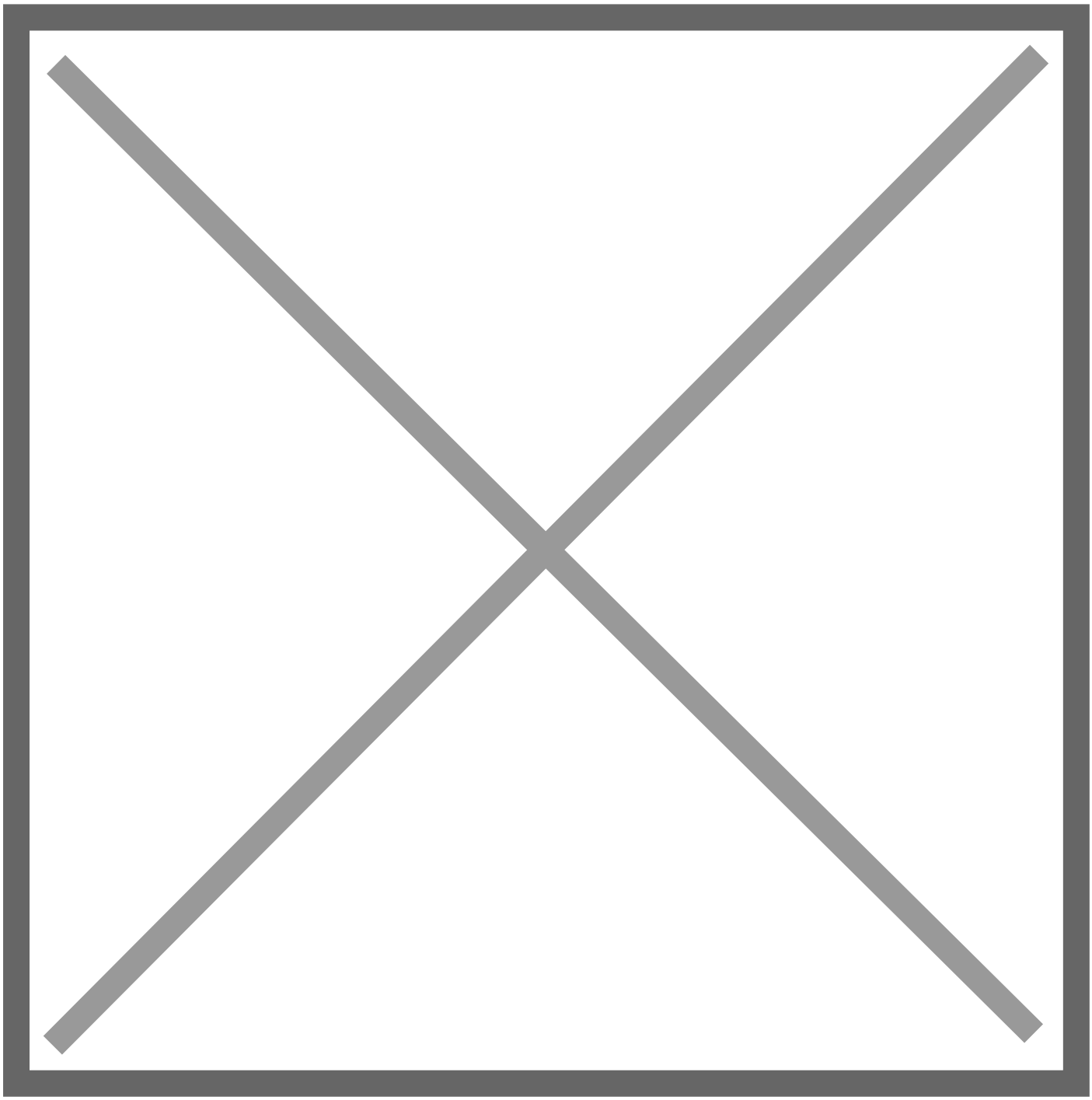


Automobiles play a prominent role in American history, often portrayed as symbols of the American dream itself — and for good reason. They represent mobility. However, there isn't one vehicle that captures every facet of our culture. Nor should there be. Our history is as diverse as our society is today.

Still, there have been a handful of vehicles over the years that stand out and rise above the rest, acting as time capsules for their respective decades. Behind every make and model is a story — one of a design studio that helped turn a concept into a cultural icon; another of a time and place that served as the backdrop.

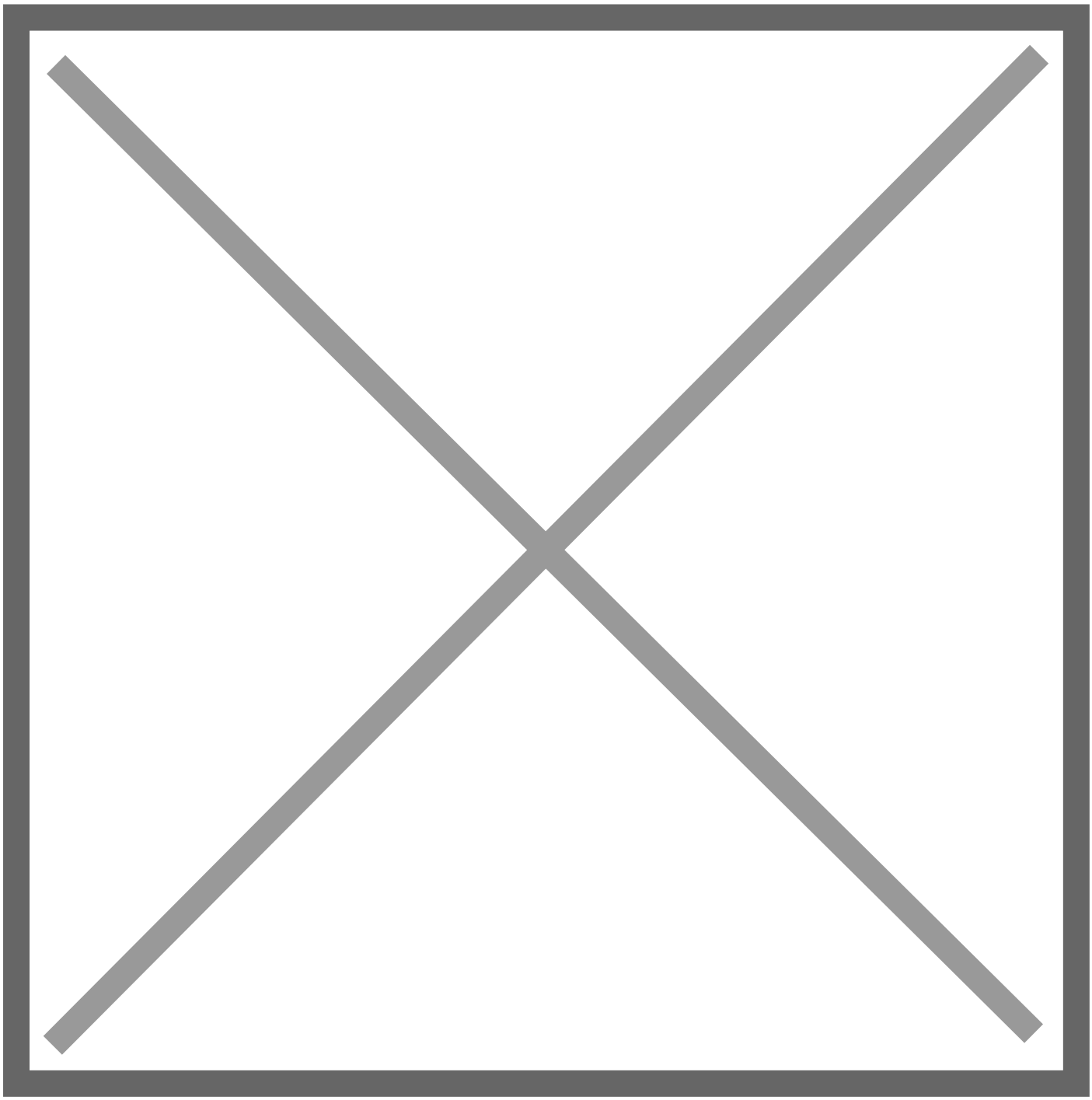
And so, let's take a trip back in time to see how one studio — CALTY Design Research (Calty) — created vehicles that have not only defined their era but also stood the test of time.



1970s: Celica
During the 1970s, the Ramones blasted high-voltage static throughout basement bars while the Bee Gees ushered dancers into discotheques. Moviegoers discovered a galaxy far, far away, and the world witnessed a sport's legend float like a butterfly and sting like a bee. The pants were flared, the tops were cropped, and a new, multifaceted culture was taking shape.

It was at this time that Toyota and Calty gathered some of its greatest minds and built a design studio where American and Japanese designers worked together on a cutting-edge new concept: the Celica (A40).

This second-generation vehicle broke the mold of conventional Japanese car styling. The design abandoned the three-box theme for a fastback shape whose silhouette was significantly more fluid. After a rapid sprint with an experimental model, the Celica eventually went on sale in 1978. It quickly became Toyota's bestselling American model with more than 167,000 units sold in its first year. Even critics were impressed—the car claimed Motor Trend's 1978 Import Car of the Year honors. The Celica's success not only proved the power of collaboration but also created a foundation for the innovation that would follow.



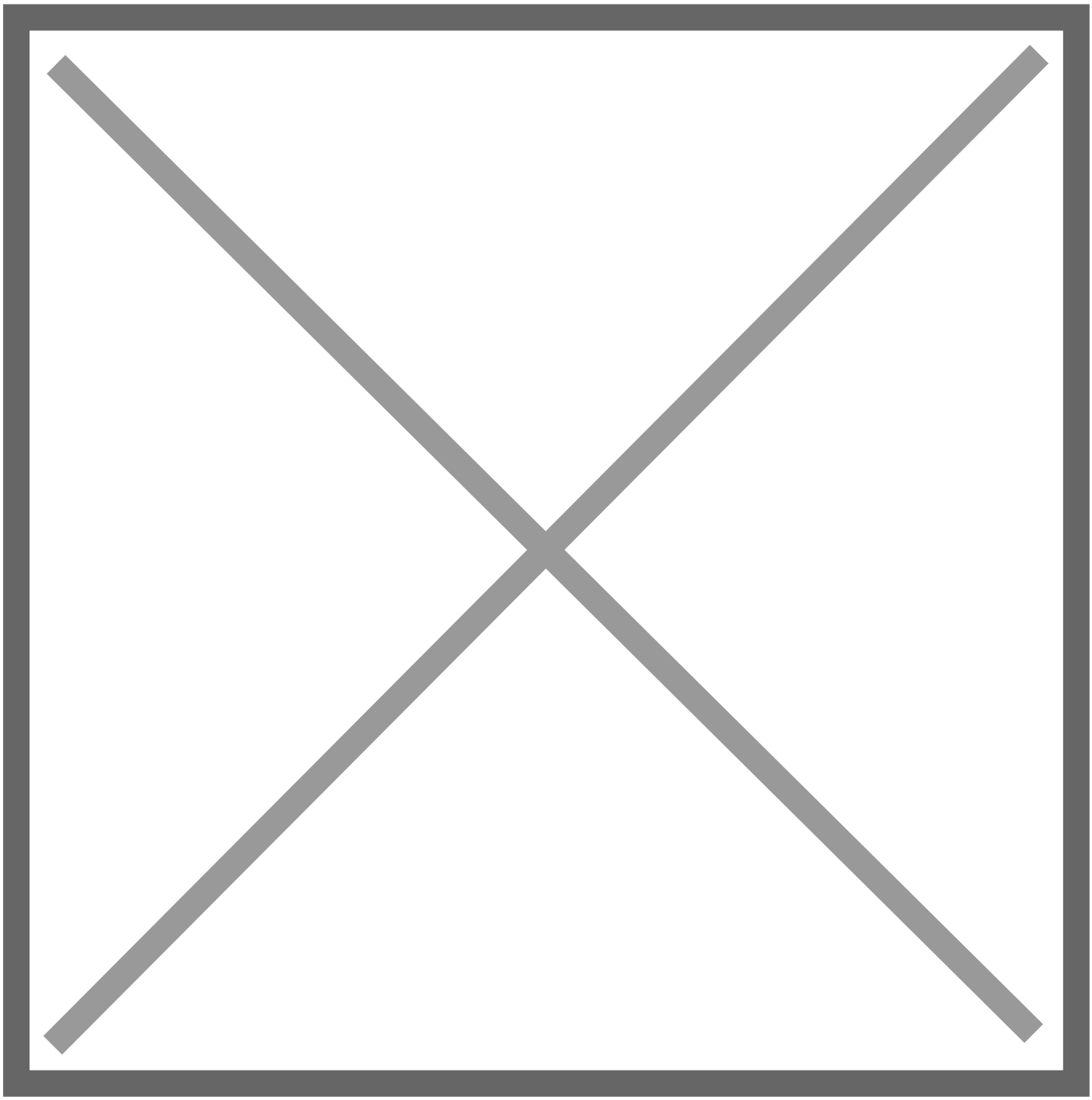
1980s: Supra

In the 1980s, pop culture thrived as MTV dominated television screens. Michael Jackson and Madonna could be heard blaring from boomboxes as people paraded down the street in bright neon jumpsuits. At home, people questioned whether it was worth investing in a personal computer.

For the second-generation model of the Celica coupe (which would eventually be called the Celica Supra), the vehicle adopted its own unique look, complete with pop-up headlights that gave it an exuberant flavor.

By the third generation, the Supra had become its own brand, sporting a powerful twin turbo front engine with rear-wheel drive. A longer hood and linear bulge allowed the engine bay to fit a large inline-6 engine, while strong shoulders and a full contour surface with wheel flares gave the Supra an aggressive sports car stance. True to that era's fashion, functional elements like the wheels, door handles and mirror mounts were enlarged, heightening the Supra's already distinct DNA.

In the late 1980s, Calty designers talked about the idea of creating a performance variant of the popular Celica coupe. Little did they know they were on the cusp of crafting the company's halo sports car: the Supra (A80). Calty created an advanced concept design to influence the look of the next Supra. The overall design theme of the Calty A80 can be described as simple, clean, and fluid with "pure sports car" quality.



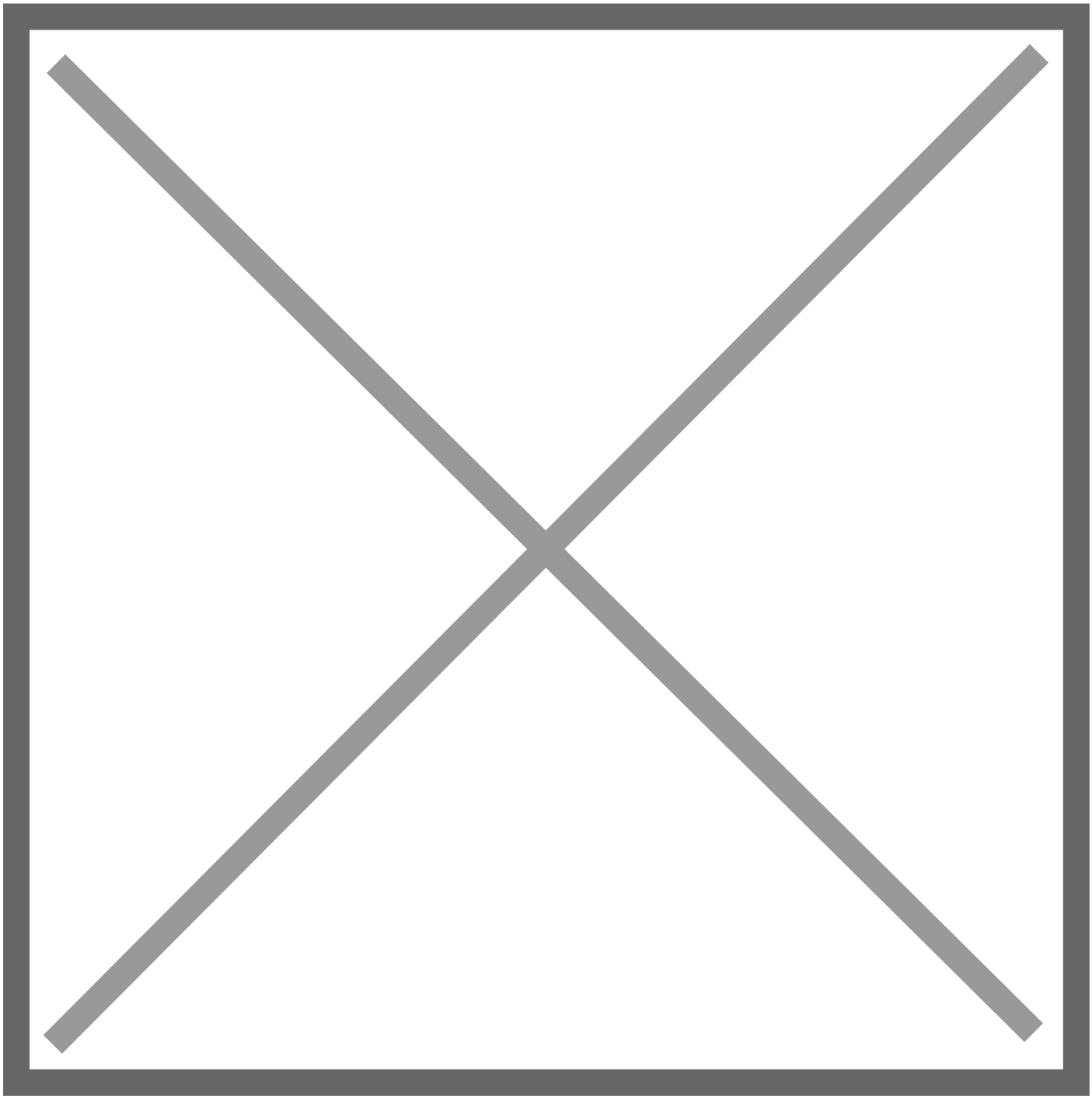
1990s: Tacoma

In the 1990s, radio stations played everything from Nirvana to Wu Tang Clan to Backstreet Boys and beyond. It was common to see oversized flannels, baggy jeans and crop tops all being worn at the same venue. Meanwhile, the internet began to play a more significant role in people's lives, paving the way for an interconnected digital age.

For Calty, this was a significant growth period. One of the first projects taken on by Calty during this time was the design of the Toyota Tacoma. Before putting pen to paper, the design team studied the trends of pickup truck

customers throughout the country. What did they learn? Toyota patrons were more lifestyle oriented than the typical domestic pickup truck buyer. Often, they'd use their vehicle not only for work, but also for fun personal activities.

Following this insight, the design team set out to express the agility and strength of the 4×4 Tacoma's capabilities by modifying the front fender to be more muscular. This helped reflect the vehicle's extreme off-road prowess while retaining the Toyota truck's unmistakable profile of a lifted, lean body, large wheel flares and big tires — the perfect blend of relaxed and rugged.



2000s: FJ Cruiser
The 2000s continued to be a time of interconnectivity and were defined by the widespread adoption of social media platforms and online culture.

For Calty, the question became: How do we bring in a new millennium of buyers? That's when the studio received a request for a rugged off-road concept that could attract a younger crowd. The designers chose vehicles from different eras in the Land Cruiser timeline for inspiration, but in the end, it was the one modeled after the FJ40 that was selected. This decision would lead to the creation of the FJ Cruiser.

The designers took several styling cues from the original FJ40, including a narrow grille, round headlights and offset combination lamps. But what made the FJ Cruiser a true product of its time was a moment of serendipity.

While working on the computer-aided design program, the designers noticed that the default color of the program — a medium shade of blue — made the vehicle "pop" as it highlighted all the right parts of the body. They were even more impressed by how the color exuded a youthful, energetic vibe, which was something the designers sought with their concept vehicle. In the end, they went with the "default blue" and unveiled the vehicle at the 2003 North American International Auto Show, where it instantly resonated with a younger off-road audience.

Looking Ahead
In the last two decades, Toyota has continued to push the boundaries of what's possible, creating vehicles that perfectly encapsulate their era.

Today, Calty remains on the cutting edge with concept vehicles equipped with AI assistance, airless tires, lunar navigation and more. So, while we may not know what society will look like decades from now, it may be safe to believe that when the time comes, Toyota drivers will arrive in style.