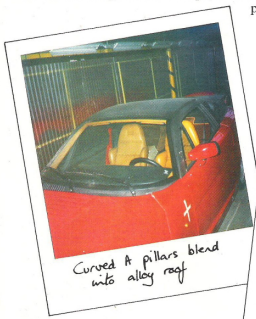
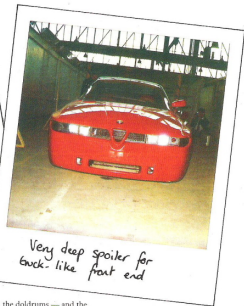


ENTER THE ARMADILLO

Alfa Romeo's Zagato-built 75 coupé, to be launched next March, promises an exciting blend of performance and exclusivity that could make it the affordable collector's car of the decade. Russell Bulgino goes to Milan for a sneak preview



Curved A pillars blend into alloy roof



Very deep spoiler for buck-like front end

JUST DOWN THE ROAD — JUST down the Viale Tasso Nuvolari, in fact — from the Alfa Romeo headquarters at Arese on the outskirts of Milan, is the dusty concrete box that is the base of bodybuilder and styling house Zagato. The Alfa guys say that Zagato is busy. Perhaps, but the workers move slowly in a grubby facility crammed with unfinished Maserati Biturbo bodyshells.

You are led through the surprisingly big factory — machines are silent, a few guys fettle panels on unpainted Aston Martin Zagato convertibles — to an area cordoned off by corrugated plastic panels. There it is. The Alfa guys turn and smile a paternal smile. They want your reaction.

Hell, it's . . . somewhere between ugly and hideous. Definitely not pretty. Here is project E30, the car intended to work in concert with the 164 and the ProCar racer to shout that Alfa

Romeo is back from the doldrums — and the thing looks like a ski-boot on wheels.

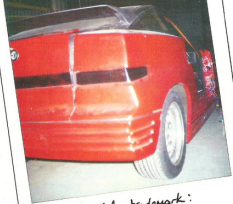
The front spoiler is full and low and reminds you of the sub-bumper shaping of a Fiat Tipo. That clamshell bonnet swoops and flows and then tucks in hard ahead of the doors — big doors, too — to form into a sharp, hard, nastily exaggerated wedge which cuts high and hard into a bluff, solid-looking tail. If nothing else, the profile is resolutely functional. With just one door mirror in place, the Cd is under 0.30 and lift is minimal.

But this is an Italian car, so even if the shape is utterly wrong perhaps aesthetic solace can be found in the details. The rear end is big and bluff and the bumper is clumsily ribbed horizontally. The thin band of rear lights

echoes the 164 and suggests that this is a future Alfa styling cue, like the front air intake which falls between a triangle and a heartshape. There's a massive scallop let in behind the door handles, presumably so that you can gain access to the car while wearing mittens.

Then Alfa PR chief Rinaldo Herculani points to the NACA duct on the bonnet. This, he says, will be erased on the production car. Because it has no purpose. But the armadillo vents on the bonnet top will be opened out. And, Herculani asks, what do you think of the lights at the front?

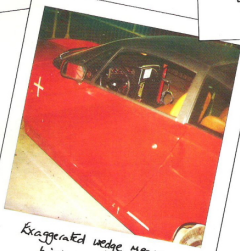
Six new-generation Carcellos, four main-beam, two dip, each no more than five inches square. Should they, poses Herculani, be



New Alfa trademark:
164-like rear lights



Good seats and plenty of
room up front



Exaggerated wedge means
high waistline

glassed in? Why ask me? (Because, apparently, I'm here to add some input into the final design and take some pictures on an Alfa-supplied Polaroid camera. I couldn't figure this one out until I had seen the car: if Alfa wants sneak-style illustrations of the car in *Autocar & Motor*, chances are that the graininess of the instant prints will, quite literally, gloss over the heavyhandedness of the car's unappealing skin).

Glassing in the lights on the Alfa is the automotive equivalent of worrying about what colour to paint London's TV-AM building: talk about gilding a dud. Herculeani asks me what I think of the car. I say that I need more time to think. I do.

If you can ignore the demented looks of the E30—an Italianate noun rather than a string of numbers will become the car's official title once in production—it begins to make strong sense. Indeed, one of the reasons for the E30's ungainly stance is that it is based on the platform of the American 75 model. This coupe is built around high-scuttle saloon underpinnings which account for its hefty bulk around the hips. According to chief engineer Luciano Chideli, portions of the Alfaud Sprint are also used in the roof and pillar area.

What all this means, of course, is that for an

aspirant supercar, the Alfa E30 is almost perfectly sized. This will be a wieldy sports machine. And when you sit inside the unfinished cockpit of prototype one, the E30 begins to make sense.

The cabin is as good as the exterior is awful. The seats are deceptively small-looking buckets, wrapped in butterscotch-coloured hide, as is the headlining. And there is room in here—saloon room up front for big people. Slim pillars meld into an aluminium roof panel—the flush glazing and the integration of a big windscreen into some curiously-shaped A-posts is the neatest part of the car—and you can see ahead easily over that broad bonnet. Rear vision is pretty good, save for a cute carbon-fibre spoiler hugging the rear window. Although it's difficult to tell without seeing the rear seats installed, the accommodation in the back looks spacious, too.

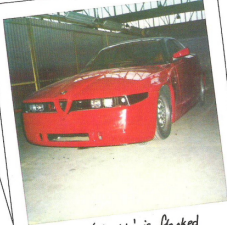
Then again, it has to be. The boot opens low, which suggests easy loading, but it's hinged from the bottom and crammed with a fuel tank. This will be, at best, a squishy bag car for luggage space. The dashboard is terrific. Six dials—rev-counter, clock, speedo, oil pressure, oil temp, water temperature and fuel—plus three rotary heater controls and generic-Fiat air vents are all angled to the driver. The instrument faces are orange on black for prototype one, but white on black on the second car.

Engineer Chideli explains the technical side of the car quietly. The 75's front torsion bars have been junked in favour of coaxial spring-damper units. At the rear, the de Dion axle remains, with revisions to the Watts linkage. Weight distribution will be "within one or one-half per cent" of the 75's 53/47 front/rear split.

Chideli lays great stress on two areas of the car's specification: the Pirelli P Zero tyres. ▶



Fine dash angles dials towards driver



Alfa 'shield' is flanked by six headlights

◀ fat at 225/50 16 rear and 205/50 16 front, and the fact that most of the suspension joints will be race-style rose joints rather than noise-insulating rubber bushes.

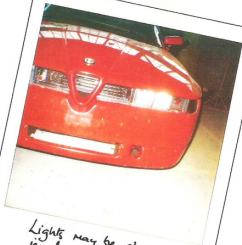
In the E30, the wonderful 3-litre Alfa Romeo V6 engine receives a gentle warming over. New pistons up the compression ratio to an unspecified figure, the exhaust is more free-flowing and a reprogrammed chip is housed in the Bosch Motronic engine management system box. The resulting power output, says Chideli, is between 205bhp and 210bhp. Performance will be, he reckons, 0-62mph in around 7secs and a flat-out maximum in excess of 152mph. Alfa also reckons that the car will weigh just 1150kg, 100kg less than the smaller, nimbler BMW Z1.

So the Alfa will be quick and it will sound gorgeous. But how does it drive? What does Chideli and his team want the E30 to resemble in its on-the-road characteristics? The question throws him. A Porsche, he says quietly. (You presume he doesn't mean a 924). More thought. A Ferrari, for sure. His answers are heading for the anodyne when one of his engineers grins and says three little words. *Tour de Corse.*

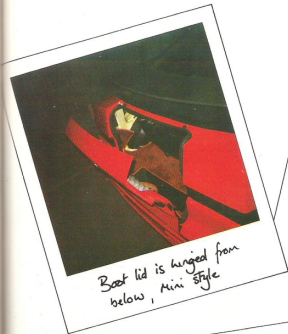
And that's it. Chideli opens up. Yes, that's the E30: it is designed for rampaging around the kind of roads which make up the Corsican round of the World Rally Championship. Tight, twisty and unforgiving; terrain which insists that a car be fluid and faithful and utterly responsive. This car is intended to forget the autostradas and concentrate instead on all the road-rat switchback stuff. Chideli then says,

very deliberately, that he wants to make this car feel like a racing car on the road: the lack of bushes in the suspension, the instant engine response, the quasi-tarmac rally twin-tread pattern P Zeros: each element is intended to add to that no-nonsense character.

There are still grey areas. Alfa's marketing division has, for some unfathomable reason, decided that anti-lock braking is somehow out of keeping with the car's driver-satisfying



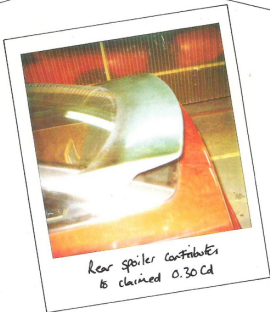
Lights may be glassed in for production



Boot lid is hinged from below, Mini style



Chunky: car's rear is unfortunately square



Rear spoiler contributes to claimed 0.30 Cd

concept. According to Chideli, there is no technical reason why the E30 should not have ABS. When Herculani asks my opinion, I just say that such warped logic suggests that Alfa's marketing people must be both morally dubious and disturbingly macho. He smiles.

The timetable for the E30 should see the car announced at the Geneva Motor Show next March, with production starting up for a sale date of June or July. The car will be built at Zagato — and this is the key for perhaps the most important aspect of the whole E30 programme.

No more than 1500 cars will be built. Herculani reckons 1200 and says that Alfa will announce the exact figure soon. That means, in the investment-analyst ways of the late '80s, the car is a collectors' piece notwithstanding the looks. The price for left-hand drive only will be around £40,000, which is piffingly small change compared with the penthouse apartment prices demanded by previous limited editions such as the Porsche 959 and Ferrari GTO. With the E30, Alfa has eased a little design socialism into the increasingly silly-money zone of low-production cars.

And, while the rest of the mass-production world can explain how the flexibility of robotic assembly lines can allow limited run high-tech cars to be assembled fairly easily, the E30 will be assembled by hand alongside Astons and Maseratis. It even has Zagato design badges sewn into the upholstery.

But Zagato didn't design it. This is an in-house Alfa mistake. What makes it doubly

sad is that, if Ing Chideli and his men achieve their aim, for Porsche 911 money you could have a handbuilt, limited edition, Italian supercar oozing soul. The key question, of

course, is do all those virtues, unavailable elsewhere for even twice the price, make up for the completely loopy looks of the E30? Only Alfa Romeo, and its order book, will be able to answer that. ■