

## **Hail, Hail! 'Taxi Of Tomorrow' Arrives In NYC**

by **Joel Rose** ©National Public Radio 2012  
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The "Taxi of Tomorrow" has arrived in New York City. On Tuesday night, officials unveiled the Nissan-designed cab that, over the next 10 years, will gradually replace the country's largest taxi fleet. It's the first New York taxi to be designed for the job since the city's iconic Checker cab.

For Nissan's designers, the process of putting the new cab together involved months of riding in taxis and talking to cab owners, drivers and passengers about what they did and didn't like.

"We heard a lot of things about dirty smell[s]," says Francois Farion, the new taxi's design manager.

According to Farion, most cars only have to satisfy one person — the driver — but a New York City cab redesign has to work for a lot of different stakeholders.

"We needed [it] to be reliable, to satisfy fleet owners and the drivers, but also to be really cleaner, more comfortable, offering more views to the city, more open," he says.

The Nissan NV200 (aka the "Taxi of Tomorrow") will eventually replace all 13,000 or so cabs currently on the road in New York. Nissan won a city-sponsored contest to build the new taxi, beating out two other carmakers for a contract that could be worth \$1 billion. Joe Castelli, the head of North American operations for Nissan, says the company had a leg up because the other two finalists were already in production when it came time to choose the winner.

"We were still baking the cake, and so our timing worked very well for us," Castelli says. "We could adapt a lot of the vehicle to what New York wanted."

The NV200 looks like an undersized minivan. It's smaller than Ford's Crown Victoria — the most common cab on the road today — but it has more legroom, special anti-microbial seats, a window in the roof for gazing up at skyscrapers, and even outlets for recharging your cellphone. The design has already earned the approval of one important constituency — the cabbies.

Cabbie Beresford Simmons of Queens says he's impressed that Nissan actually listened to what drivers like him wanted. "I've been doing this for 40 years, so I know what I'm talking about," he says. "A comfortable driver is a safe driver."

But there have also been some complaints about the new design. The first batch of cabs is expected to get about 25 miles per gallon, not enough to satisfy everyone. And Jean Ryan of the Taxis for All Campaign calls the new design the "Taxi of Yesterday" because the basic model can't accommodate riders in wheelchairs. Nissan says the cab can be modified to fit a wheelchair, but that might add upwards of \$12,000 to its regular sticker price of \$29,000.

"We want all the cabs to be accessible," she says, "and the 'Taxi of Tomorrow' is inaccessible. Nobody with a disability can ride it. And we call that segregation and discrimination."

The new taxi has yet to face what may prove to be its toughest critics — passengers. Dave Finger of Brooklyn objects to the cab on purely aesthetic grounds.

"Now our taxicabs are bright yellow minivans," Finger says. "What's happening? The suburbification of New York City?"

But Amani Farid doesn't mind the new look.

"I actually would ride ... in one of these over the other ones," she says, "just for space reasons when you pile in at night."

And appearance doesn't matter at all to Steve Phillips.

"If the cab driver knows where he's going, if he can speak a little English," he says, "what do I care what the cab looks like?"

The first cabs are expected to hit the streets in October 2013.