



# ZETA!

*Alfa Romeo killed the beautiful Zeta, arguably Zagato's best-looking sports car since its Aston Martin DB4GTZ. But two survived and this one escaped to London. Report by Giles Chapman, pictures by Mick Walsh*

**A** bitter irony surrounds the ultimate demise of Zagato's Zeta, and it manifested itself at a time when Alfa Romeo's leaders were at an all-time low of competence. The car was vying for attention with an Alfasud-powered Nissan Sunny, and lost. Had the Zeta been adopted, new sponsor Fiat would doubtless be lauding it as a paragon of the image it perceives to be right for its new division. In other words, a truly classic Alfa Romeo.

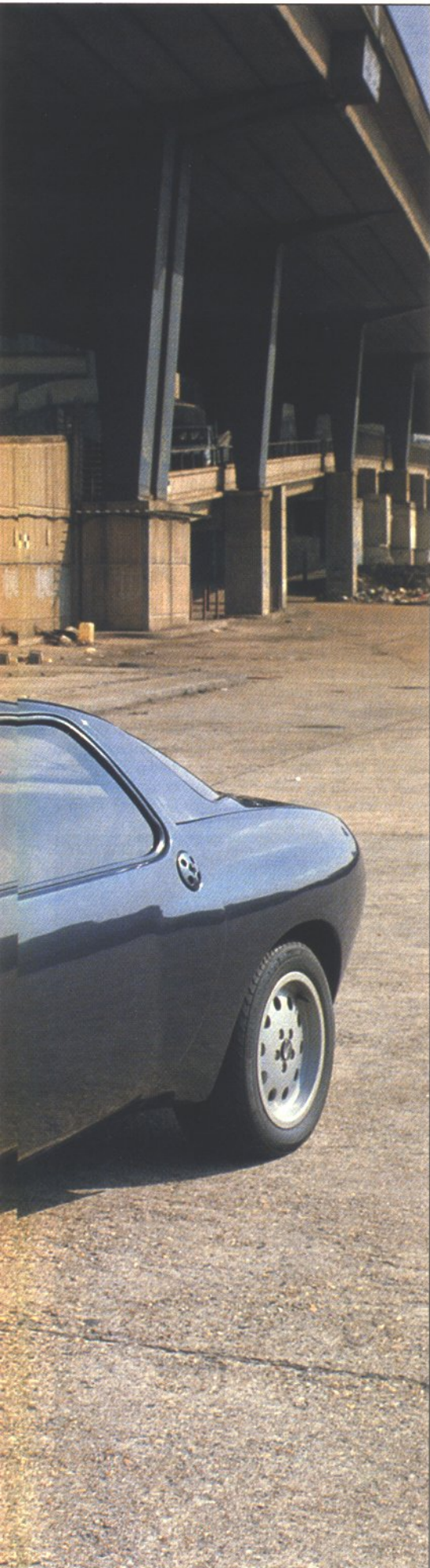
The ingredients were there, the superb Alfa Romeo V6, fuel-injected engine, the beautiful idiosyncrasy of a Zagato body. It was a traditional, selfishly-Italian mixture of those symbols of Alfa Romeo which have always been craved by devotees. How unjust that a mere brace of Zetas was to be hand-made at Zagato's Milan smallholding. Yet how lucky we were to sample one of them, a mournful stowaway that now lives a somewhat morose life in a secret underground car park in central London. The other has a more vaunted position – it's an exhibit in Alfa Romeo's own museum in Italy.

The seed for the Zeta was sown, curiously, during one of Zagato's least fertile periods, at the end of the seventies. Production of the mini-exotic Junior Z for Alfa Romeo had finished as 1976 dawned, and the old-established coachbuilder was merely ticking over with Pininfarina sub-contract work (Lancia Beta Spider) and its own low-volume activities like armour-plating and limited manufacture of an aus-

tere electric car called the Zele. The two Zagato brothers Elio and Gianni, whose father had founded the company in 1919, wanted to re-establish their links with Alfa, the local Piedmontese manufacturer. The combination of the former's sporting two-seater bodywork and the latter's brilliantly-engineered 1750 and 2300 chassis in the twenties and thirties had immortalised the links between the two. They didn't want to break the chain.

As important, though, was Zagato's bedraggled profile among the Italian design houses. Its design proposals of the preceding few years constituted a bizarre line-up of Volvo, Lancia and Fiat one-offs that had avoided acclaim to a man. An image fillip was sorely needed. At the end of 1977 the brothers made up their minds to build a car that brought all the revered Zagato styling hallmarks – rounded form, lots of glass and a balanced profile – right up to date. This was at a time when sharp edges and heavy detailing characterised virtually everything from Bertone, Italdesign and Pininfarina, production and concept cars alike.

First sign that something was afoot at Terrazzano di Rho was an artist's impression of a car entitled Alfa Romeo AZ6 *Sperimentale* in 1979, followed by a chalk/plaster model shown at a Milan trade show. Both interpretations showed a lean, squat, highly aggressive but starkly unadorned shape, with not a sharp edge or abrasive aberration to be seen; no



*Left: The lean, aggressive lines of Zagato's Zeta, stretched around an Alfa Romeo GTV6 base, have overtones of Porsche 928 while avoiding the German car's styling gimmicks. Right, above: Oatmeal leather covers the simple contours of the interior – driving position is good, rear seats token gestures. Right, below: Zagato's 1979 rendering of the AZ6 Sperimentale, the sketch that became the car*





*Above: The Zeta in glorious action – performance is very like the GTV6’s – but noisier. Left: The other example built, now in Alfa’s Arese museum. Below: Squat rear haunches, wraparound window*



add-on spoilers, pop-up headlights to ruin night-time aerodynamics, bumpers or sill extensions.

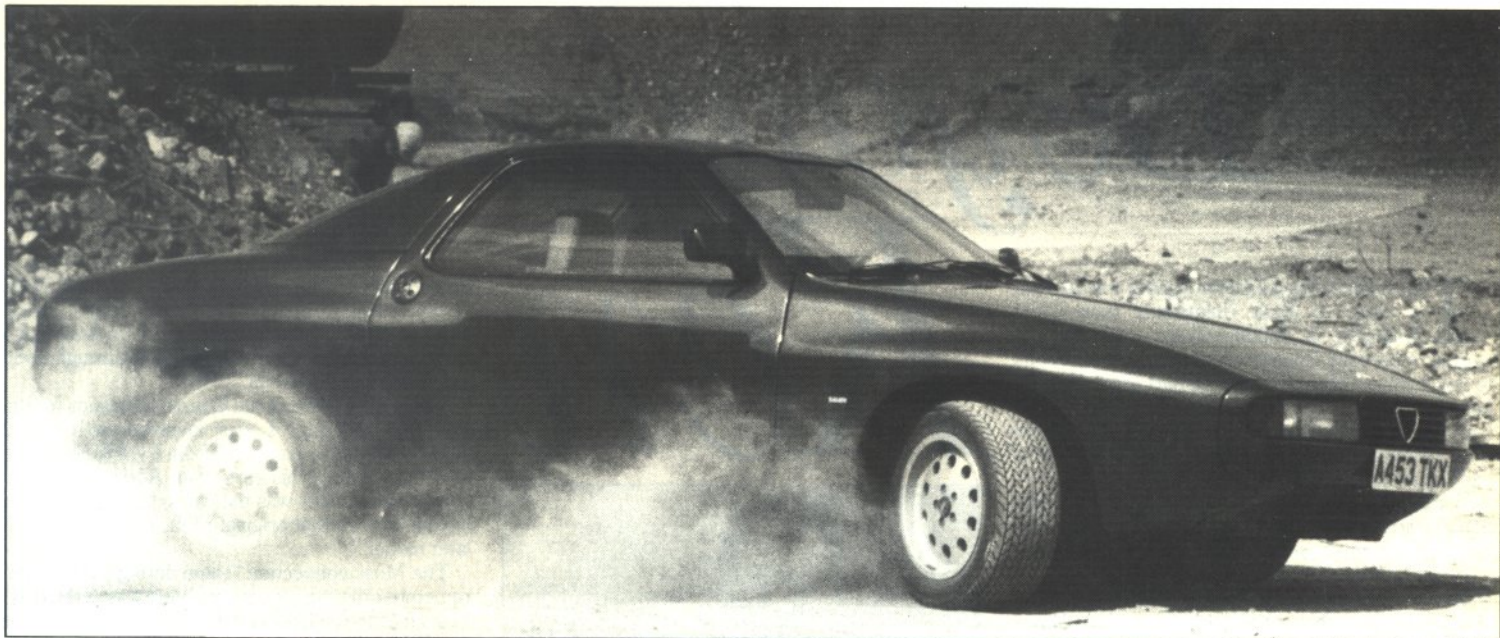
Alfa Romeo management responded favourably to this courting and gave Zagato the backing to build two prototypes for assessment. Covering itself, it also commissioned Bertone to do its stuff on the same basis – the fine chassis of the just-launched but, bodily, old-hat GTV6. Three years later, at the Geneva Motor Show in March 1983, both cars bowed.

Bertone’s car was called the Delfino. Although fully finished down to wipers and mirrors, it looked like a late seventies dream car that had slipped into the Show through a back door, with its ruler-and-set-square lines, and slatted lights and grilles; the rectangular shapes and forms of the interior added to the user-unfriendly aura that the car exuded. Its muted drama was so underwhelming that neither Zagato brother, when quizzed for their opinions on it recently, could even remember what it looked like.

Zagato’s car was called the Zeta 6, and it looked just as you see it here.

The similarity to Porsche’s 928 is quick-glance superficial, mainly because both have chunky snouts with separate panels for grille and minor lights, and blisters to the front wings that accommodate the wide track and put emphasis on the size and visual importance of the wheels. From there the parity begins to fade as the Zeta avoids the gimmicks of the German car – the unsightly pop-up headlights, the clumsy side moulding. Only the Alfa’s door handles, little sprung discs with fingertip-sized hollows, suggest a stylist’s daydream.

There are blisters over the rear wheels too, while the tail has a matching ‘function’ panel to that at the front, lights and number plate framed in one curved, full-width slot. All the classic Zagato trademarks have been woven in too, like the buxom ‘double-bubble’ roof bulges, and side windows that extend up into the roof, down below the waistline; the rear window, with its wide curvature, could have come from a fifties effort, the incongruous wiper for it a



tribute to recent thought. From most angles the Zeta looks lithe and purposeful, a skin stretched around four fat wheels.

Settle into the firm driving seat with its solid side bolsters and decent lumbar support, and the panoramic view is striking. The deep glass and thin A-post pillars ensure that, and the two humps on the roof don't intrude into headroom one bit. The dip in the middle of the screen top is the giveaway. The interior is certainly show-car, with its bold and simple shapes in soft beige leather. The dials and vents stolen from the Alfa 33 don't err, but the main instruments are next to useless behind their flat glass, engulfed in shadow and reflection.

Overall the seating position is far more civilised

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than in modern Alfa Romeos, in terms of the seat-to-pedals relationship, although the pedals are all offset to the right with the throttle hunched up against the transmission tunnel. You are given the impression of sitting well forward in the chassis for a front-engined car, like a sophisticated Lancia Stratos, and the top of the windscreen is within easy bruising reach of your forehead.

On the move the Zeta is pure GTV6 – it's urging you to forget that it's a rare prototype, and to push it into some exciting corners. The wide P7s and well-balanced chassis encourage fine grip, with little of the 'plough-on' found in powerful front-engined cars with less poise. The gearbox, too, wants to be used and it's less notchy than that of the standard GTV6, with improved linkage and a shorter throw.

The car is noisy; the growl from the engine is welcome, but less pleasingly the tyres roar and the big wing mirrors create a drag-induced din. At 70mph you could almost be in the middle of a bustling factory.

Worse, the steering feels quite alarming. It's light and appears well-balanced, but on the street it is enormously woolly, with excessive play. Only when returning the car to its subterranean lair did I discover the wide spacers on the front wheels, a legacy from the looking-good days of the motor show circuits.

Back in 1983 the Zeta toured the Salons, while the

disparaging civil servants at Alfa Romeo debated whether to put the Zeta into production. This might have appeared more easily said than done, because although the prototypes were beautifully finished with the coachbuilder-perfect fit of their aluminium panels, mass-prod steel items would have been costly and difficult to make and assemble.

Eventually, however, the board decided against it for Alfa's own range. For a short time, Zagato considered building the Zeta itself, but realised that it would be a commercial impossibility. Anyway, the car had partly served its purpose already: to show that Zagato was still capable of designing and building exciting cars. Perhaps it helped to persuade Maserati to give the Biturbo Spyder manufacturing contract to the company, and Alfa Romeo itself had been impressed enough to give Zagato further, albeit also ill-fated, prototype work – neither the Z33 Freetime nor the mid-engined Alfasud Sprint 6C were taken up for manufacture. Could the Zeta have been contributory to Aston Martin's (viz Victor Gauntlett's and the Livanos family's) decision to buy into Zagato? No-one will say.

But Michael Bowler, Aston's engineering chief, drove the car from Italy to London:

"It was a very good working prototype still with a few development details to sort out, like its air-conditioning system. It actually needs a bigger engine, as the chassis seems well able to take it."

Intriguing words from the man who is designing much of Aston Martin's new 'small' sports coupé for the nineties.



*Top: More proof that the 'British' Zeta is a fully working prototype. Above: Had the car reached production, this fitted luggage might have been included. Below: Bertone's less successful Delfino*

