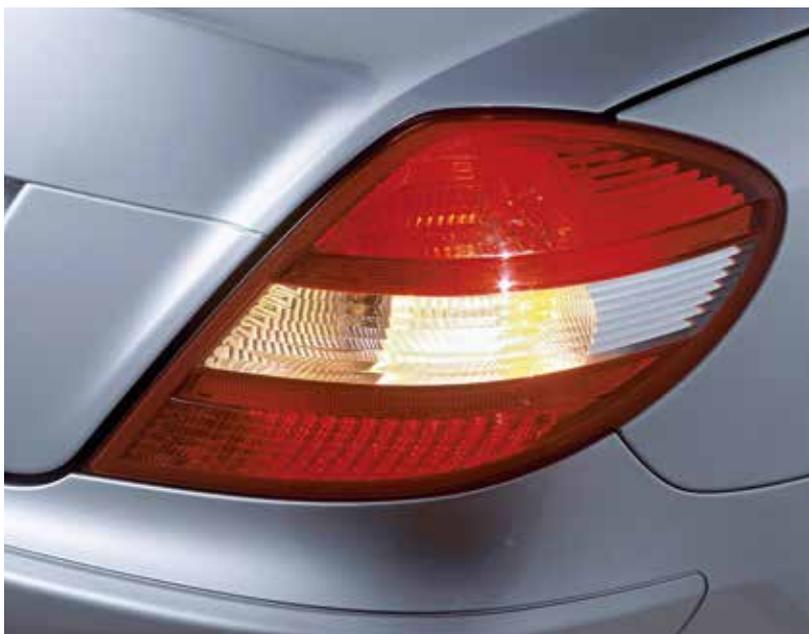




The strong rear flanks of the R171 SLK, with this sunset providing ideal light to show off the car's lines.



Close-up of the latest rear combination lamp, which used LED technology for enhanced safety.

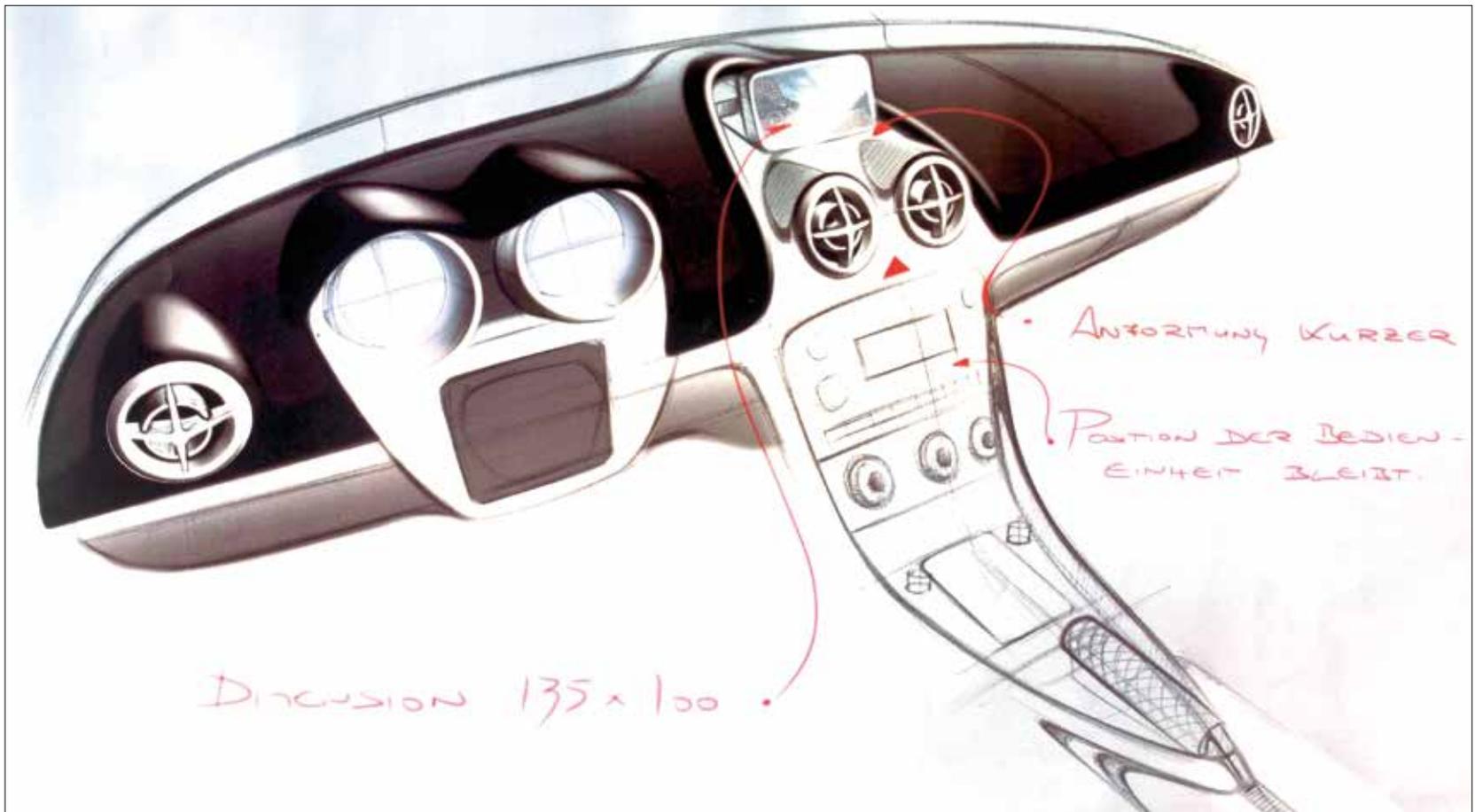


This shot of an SLK350 (chassis designation 171.456) on the move gives a perfect view of the tail-end styling. Note the twin exhaust pipes.

times when the explosive force of early airbags actually did more harm than good whilst trying to protect occupants, but this new system helped avoid this problem, with sensors measuring crash intensity and roll potential in the front and centre of the vehicle allowing them to better react to the situation in hand. The same technology was applied to the seatbelt force limiters to make the most of the cushioning effect of the airbags, while certain markets (like North America) also had knee bags as part of the standard specification. All cars came with a pad in the passenger seat to detect whether or not it was being used, and the optional childseat that came with an automatic recognition facility, thus turning the airbag off, was carried over from the R170.

We can now take a brief look at protection of a quite different kind – the long-term protection of the bodyshell against corrosion, which in turn leads to a protection of investment. Aluminium sheet was used for the bonnet and in a few other areas of the

body, which not only saves weight but cannot rust either, while all the steel panels were galvanized. Modern manufacturing techniques, such as the use of preserving agents in body cavities, were naturally applied, and the plastic underbody trim was used to take the place of traditional underseal. As such, they not only looked after airflow under the car, but also protected the shell from the wet, dirt and stonechips. Finally, there was the recently-introduced clearcoat paint mentioned in the previous chapter, with its special formula giving a new level of longevity. Said to have three times more scratch resistance than regular paint due to the use of minute, densely-packed ceramic particles, all 12 regular coachwork colours available on the SLK (including the exclusive Benitoite Blue shade) employed this latest paint technology. Thanks to this gambit of anti-corrosion measures, the company offered a 30-year anti-perforation warranty, as long as the car was regularly serviced by an approved dealer.





A new look

As one magazine succinctly put it, you would need to be a real Mercedes fan to spot the subtle styling changes. But they were there alright, and however small they were in number, they certainly made a difference.

Starting with the front mask, leaving the bonnet lines intact, the nose was made more masculine thanks to a new front bumper/air dam assembly. On the face-lifted cars, the shape of the pointed surround framing the three-pointed star was shorter, following the profile of the badge's outer ring, and appearing to sit within the grille instead of dropping down to merge with the bumper moulding. Following this move, if anything, the Formula One influence was even more obvious than before.

The grille surround, which was nothing more than a strong feature line in the bonnet and bumper moulding rather than a traditional frame (the old chrome shells were incredibly stylish, but were sadly out of place in the modern era), aped that of the face-lifted R230 SL in its latest guise, looking more pronounced due to a deeper lip at the bottom, while the latter also fell

into line with the SLK by adopting a single slat on either side of the three-pointed star, instead of the three used previously. Incidentally, the aerofoil-style slats on the SLK were heavier than before, sitting ahead of a new black grille screen that followed contemporary SL practice.

The bumper's inserts were deleted and a crease was added down its centreline – again as per the SL – while the tow hook cover was made round instead of square. The headlight washer covers were still the old shape, though, when fitted, and, with the inserts gone, the sensors for the optional 'Parktronic' system now sat flush on the main bumper panel.

Moving below the bumper blade level, the intakes were reprofiled, with stronger shapes and dressed with the same netting as that employed for the radiator grille. The soft, organic outer edges and foglight housings were dropped in favour of something that looked like the old 772 AMG styling kit apron, with the two centre uprights moved closer together to a position underneath the star on the nose. The transverse fin between the two vertical bracing pieces was blacked out, which gave the new

This SLK350's colouring and position in relation to the camera highlight the front-end changes just a little better, although one would rarely see a car from this angle in real life. These are the standard wheels for this grade, by the way.





So, what did the press think of the new model? *Car & Driver* wrote in its February 2008 issue: “Away from the crowded city streets and up into the mountain roads that provide the setting for the Monte Carlo Rally, the SLK is sure on its feet. The variable-assist power steering is a bit over-assisted, but the Direct Steer system does indeed feel direct even though, technically, it’s not direct at all – it’s progressive. No matter, because the system works, and the SLK350 moves through switchbacks without any frantic hand-over-hand spinning of the steering wheel.

“The power is a welcome addition, too. We’d say the grunt’s just right, but we’re not Goldilocks, and we’d never turn down the excess of the SLK 55. Still, Mercedes charges some \$13,000 more for the extra horses in the AMG model, and the SLK350 does not want for power. Actually, the SLK350 is fast in a slightly sneaky way – a way that you wouldn’t notice unless you were paying attention. Kind of like a mid-cycle face-lift.”

A few months later, the same magazine was able to test the SLK350 on home turf. “Ride is pretty damn phenomenal for a car with such a short wheelbase. I guess that’s what 17-inch wheels will do for you,” said Erik Johnson. “Also, body roll is beautifully contained, and the 0.87-g skidpad rating is more than respectable.”

Johnson concluded: “Ultimately, we appreciate the cleverly packaged, reasonably attractive, and arguably more masculine roadster that is the 2009 SLK350. Brandishing many luxury features, a retractable hardtop, 300 horses, and a three-pointed star, the SLK350 occupies its rightful spot in the prestige brand’s line-up.”

