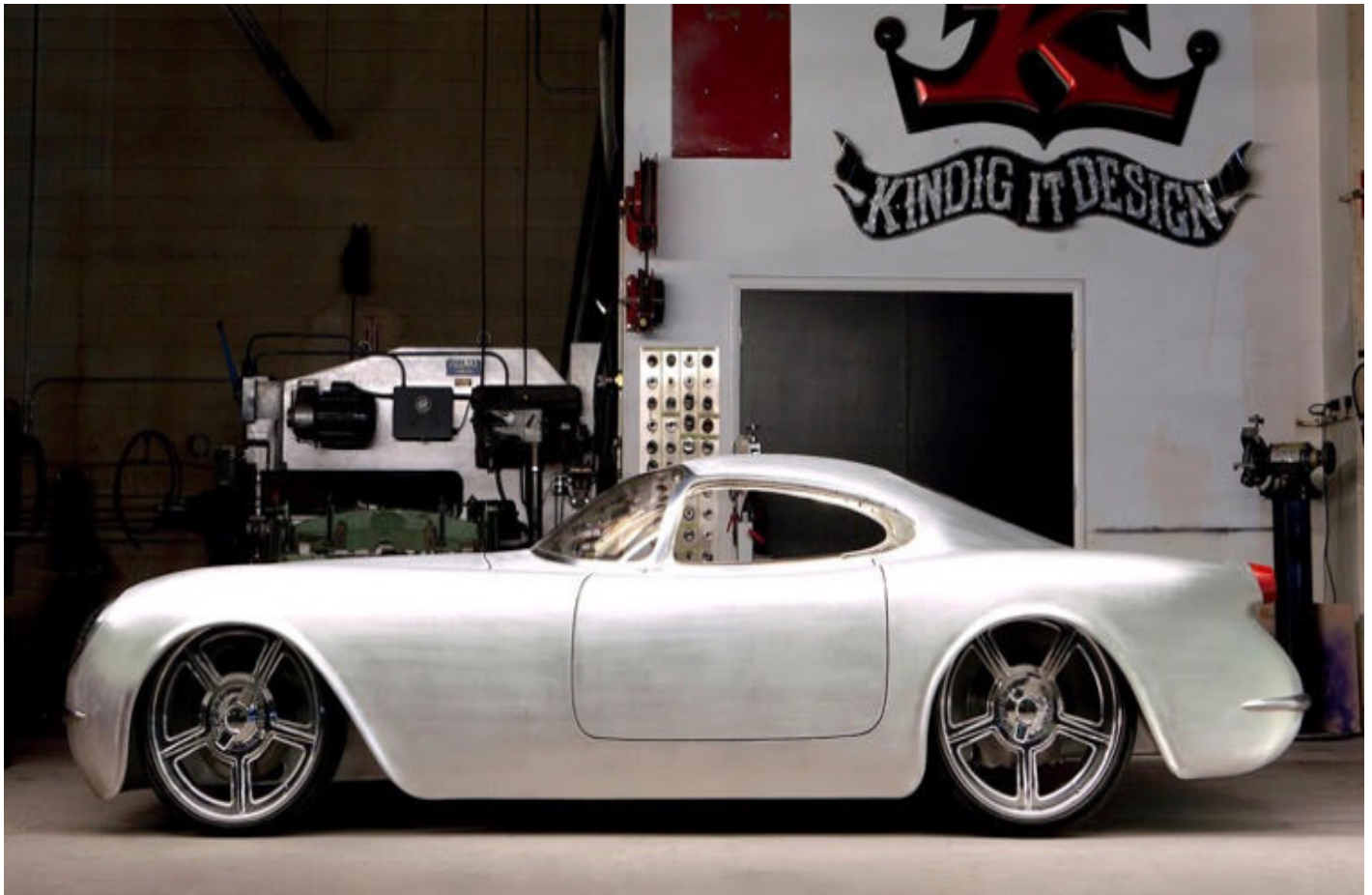


# Detroit Autorama!



Hot rodding has always been about mixing artistic style with driving practicalities, and often the cars become visual expressions for their owners. But what if builders leaned into the artistic side of the equation and didn't worry as much about the rest? Enter the Ridler Award, which was started in 1964 at the Detroit Autorama to honor [Don Ridler](#), who passed away in 1963 and was known for his creativity.

Now sponsored by Meguiar's, the Ridler Award has some very strict rules. The top one is that the car must debut at the Detroit Autorama. If the car, or any unique part of the car, is shown in public prior to the show, then it's disqualified from competing. Ridler cars take years to build, so in the age of social media, one of the biggest challenges is keeping it all hush-hush. In fact, even a rendering or drawing getting out into the public sphere can cause disqualification! Though these cars are art they also must start, stop, turn, and move forward and backward under their own power. They must also

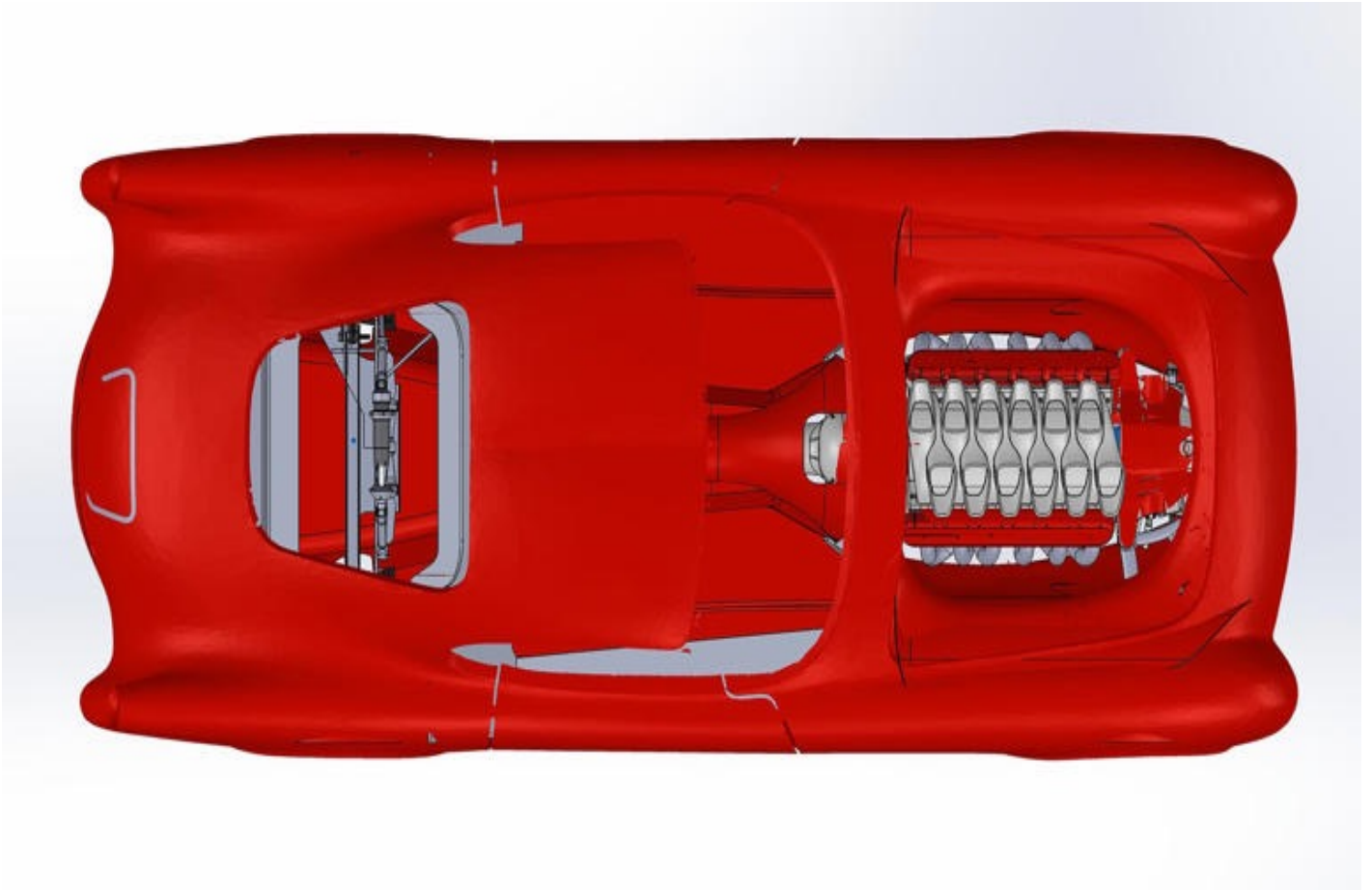
be driven to the display spot. Being an actual working car does factor into the judging. Once at the show, the first hurdle is being picked as one of the [Great 8 Ridler Finalists](#) and then the winner is selected from that exclusive club.



The competition is tough and gets harder each year. We've heard some say, "These cars are out of my league and I can't relate!" Well, yeah, they are, but those people are also missing the point of the Ridler. The Ridler is here to show what is possible in automotive art if there are no restrictions on creativity, labor hours, or money spent. It's a "bring-your-best" car show where there's no limit on what can be done. The Ridler cars these days take years to secretly build, and commonly cost over a million dollars. They are the best-of-the-best in the custom car world.

This year's winner was the "1953 Corvette" built by [Kindig-It Designs](#) for Dave and Tracy Maxwell. The year and model are in quotes because the entire car was hand-built over the course of five years! "Keeping people away from the car was one of the most difficult parts of the build," recalled Baylee Kindig, Dave Kindig's daughter. Well, the build isn't a secret anymore, and we have

the exclusive, behind-the-scenes shots of how this insane, hand-built car came together.



It all starts with a vision and a plan. The overall design is inspired by Dave Kindig's line of [CF1 production cars](#) as well as the [1953 GM Motorama Corvair concept car](#). While the Ridler winner does look like Kindig's CF1 car, not a single part was taken off the shelf for this build, and many of the proportions were changed. "We tried to create something completely different and wanted to do everything we possibly could as a one-off for this project," commented Kindig.



In addition to good old-fashioned drawings, the build also relied on cutting-edge computer technology and 3D printing to keep things on track.





There was a time when the best cars on the planet were formed by hand, and that was the case here. The build crew used a buck to get the shape of the aluminum sheetmetal.



The top and outer shell were hand-formed out of 3003 aluminum. We can only imagine the hundreds of hours spent shaping the panels to conform to the buck.



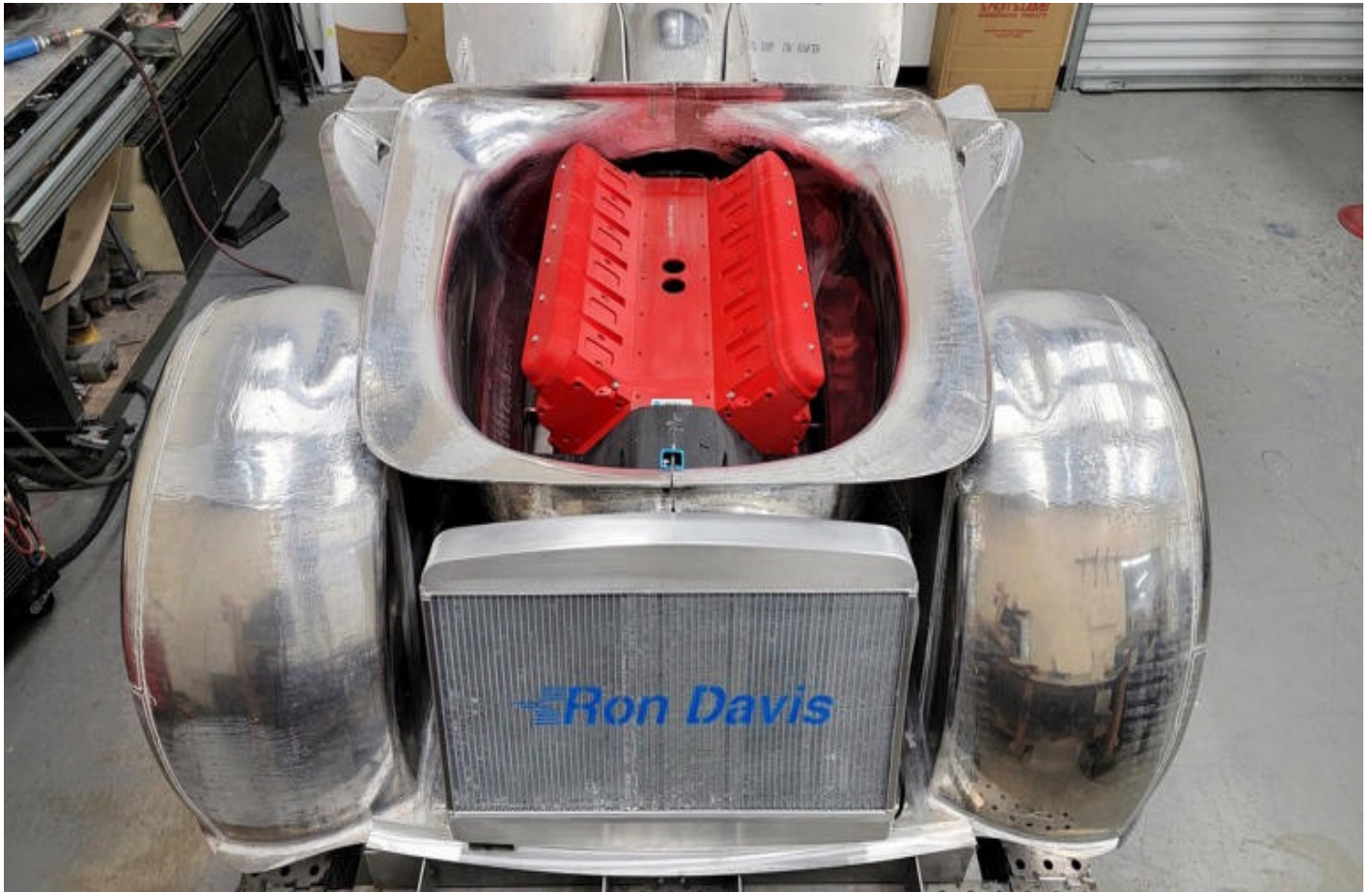
The car was built in three main pieces: the top/outer sheets, the floor/bottom, and the doors and hood. No donor car was used, and the whole car was designed and built from scratch, in-house.





The floor and bottom were built using a reinforced structure of thicker 6061 sheetmetal that was sandwiched together to create a monocoque/unibody. Look closely at that mockup [LS engine](#) and count the cylinders— we'll get to that in a bit.



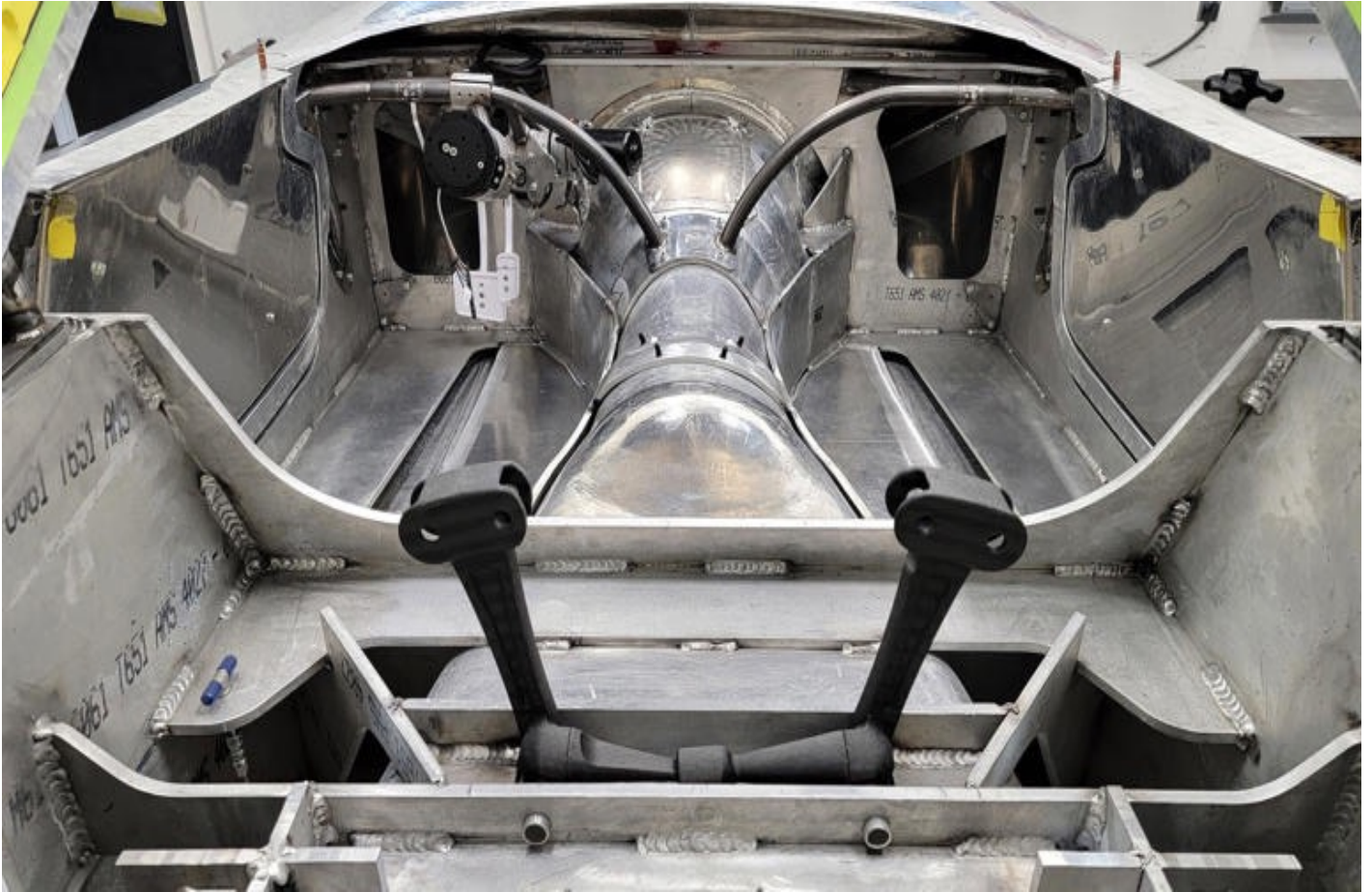


Everything about the car is unique, and although this had to be a working and driving car, Kindig wanted to avoid the clutter of the parts needed to make that happen. The drivetrain is bolted to that inner structure, making it an integral part of the car's load-bearing surface, and as many components as possible were hidden from view.



The engine is a custom-ordered, cast aluminum LS-based V-12 called a [V12LS](#) from the Australian company Race Cast Engineering. It is currently tuned down to roughly 650 hp and nearly identical torque. The engine is capable of far more—close to 1,000 hp is possible—but 650 is more than enough for Kindig-It to take it to the big show.





A modified automatic [C7](#) Corvette transaxle was used. The torque tube was extended, and the housing was replaced with one that was thicker and more structurally sound. Race Cast Engineering also cast a piece Kindig designed and calls the nose cone. It is attached to the front of the engine and houses the rack-and-pinion steering, the pass-through for the engine cooling, and some suspension components like the sway bar and front spring.



For many of the five years the car was under construction, the build team perfected the body panels in a back “secret room” at Kindig-It. This is also where they film the hit TV show [Bitchin' Rides](#), so making sure it was never in a background shot complicated life quite a bit. The taillights are automated to pop up with the control unit in the center console to reveal the plug-in for the battery tender and the fuel filler. When you’re trying to win the Ridler Award, it’s the little things that can push you over the top.

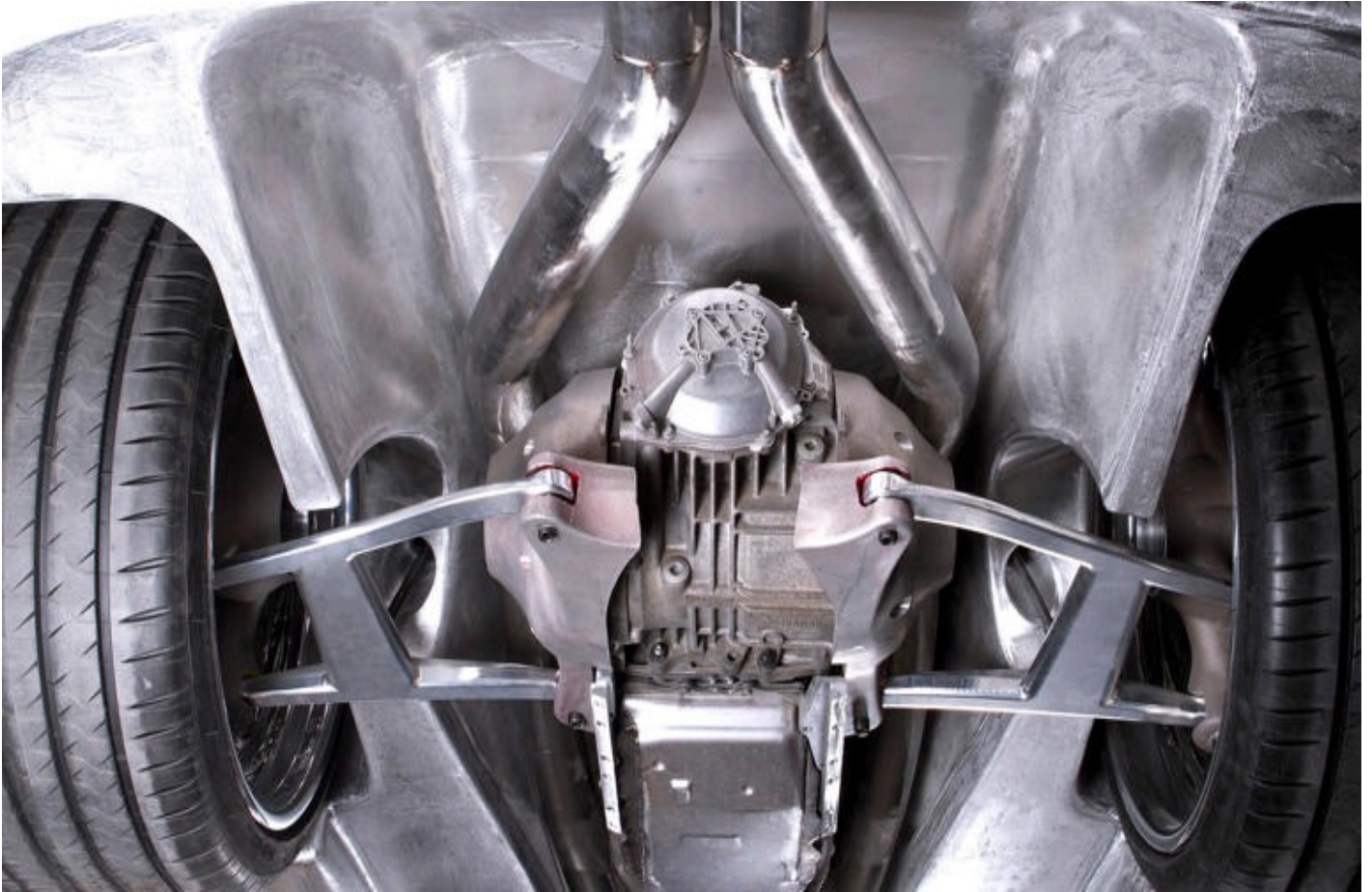




The aluminum body is insanely light and can be lifted by one person. I imagine dropping it might result in job opening at the shop, though.



The suspension is inspired by F1 and Indy car designs but utilizes only one spring mounted horizontally. The front suspension has an A-arm on top that connects to the nose cone, an H-arm that connects to the reinforced oil pan, pushrods, and a sway bar that is two pieces and coupled in the middle.



The rear suspension is very similar, with the pushrod design, the sway bar, single spring, and the lower H-arm connecting to the transaxle housing, but the top resembles more of a traditional cantilever setup. The upper components are the only parts that are attached to the body. They bolt to the inner reinforced structure. Due to the unique pushrods and sway bar design, the single spring acts like two separate springs as each side moves.





Like the body panels, all the trim and various bits are one-off parts either handmade or created using CNC machines or 3D printing.





It was a big moment when the body was perfect enough to head to the paint booth. Kindig's body and paint team finished every surface of the car to the same degree of perfection, top to bottom—even areas hidden by the drivetrain that will never be seen.



The color is Modern Classikk "Infrared," and the accent color found throughout the interior, engine, drivetrain, and elsewhere, is a custom mix called "Sagebrushed," which is a satin bronze color.



Final assembly was a nerve-wracking experience, since one chip or scratch could set the project back months. Look closely and you can see the Wilwood Aero6 and Aero4 calipers that were painted to match the engine and given chrome Twelvair logos.





Most of the interior was 3D printed and wrapped in Sienna-colored leather. The dash coves/pods were inspired by early Corvettes, while the center console and overall cockpit feel took inspiration from later Corvettes. The one-off aluminum steering wheel takes inspiration from the squared shape of the C8 but takes the overall styling from the C1. The gauge cluster has white gold inlaid with diamonds for the markings. Yeah, diamonds! Hey, we did say the Ridler is a no-holds-barred battle.

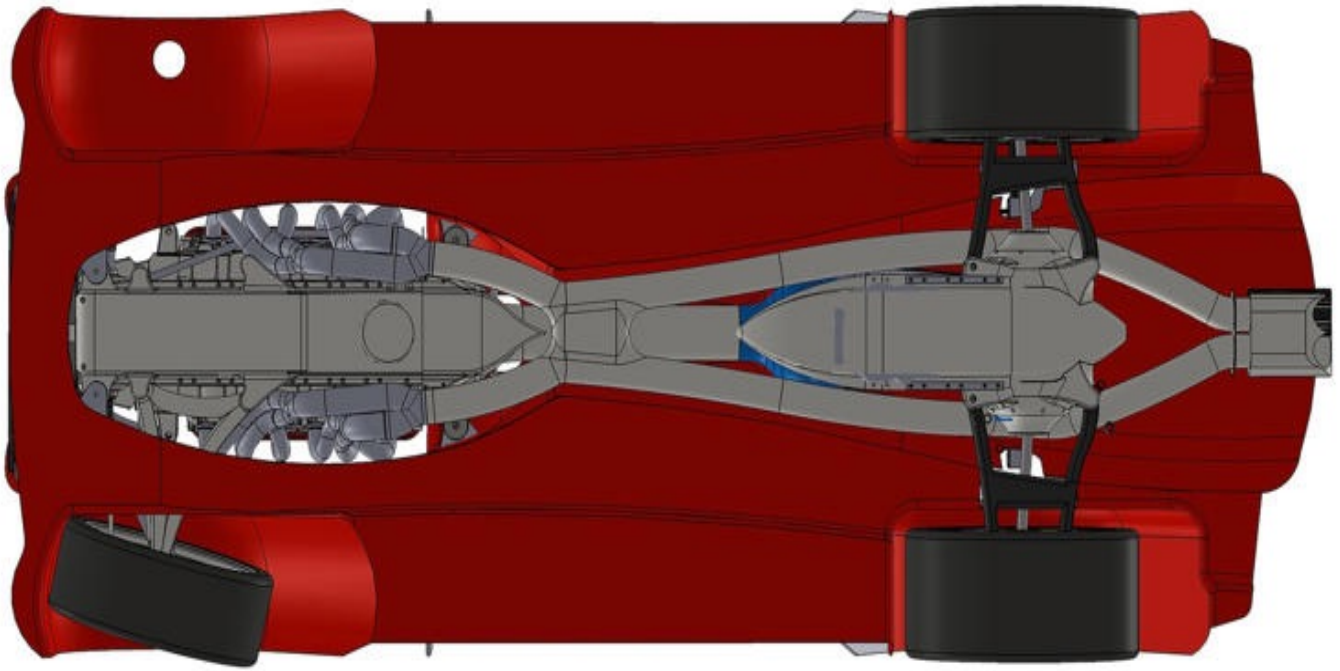




Dave Kindig came up with this proprietary design for the wheels, where all the hardware is hidden. His design was sent to EVOD, which machined the 19x8-inch front and 20x12-inch rear monolug five-spoke billet wheels. When vendors are used for a Ridler build, they know how important secrecy is to the project.



Black Diamond Classics shaved the Michelin Pilot Sport tires for the car. They say the wheels make the car and, in this case, they weren't wrong, since the elegant five-spoke wheels really flow with the overall look and scale of the car.



The exhaust was built in-house with stainless 3-into-2-into-1 collector style headers incorporating a 3-inch stainless tube that has the augers integrated in place of a muffler. The exhaust tip was built into the body. The upper rear suspension components are hidden within the faux package tray in the rear. The top of the package tray can be opened to reveal the components through the rear window.





When the goal is perfection, the build team really has to step up in the final days to make sure everything is just right. One mistake can erase five years of hard work.





In the end, Kindig's creation [won the 2024 Ridler Award](#) and, to be honest, it was easy to see why nobody at the Detroit Autorama was shocked that it took the top spot. As you can imagine, the \$10,000 prize isn't why the Maxwells had Kindig build the car. After all, we doubt that was enough to pay for even two of the wheels. It was built for the prestige and the challenge of being a Ridler winner and creating a masterwork of automotive art. Be sure to roll though the attached gallery for more behind-the-scenes images of this amazing car coming together!

*-Photos courtesy of Kindig-it Design*

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