



EXPERIMENTAL



The Fiat X1/9 was the first truly affordable mid-engine sports car. Graziella Diana Ferrero visited Bertone's styling center to see and drive the original show car, a mint production example, and an Abarth Rally car.

Photography by Roberto Carrer.

In the 1960s, the popularity of Fiat-based sports cars built by Siata and Carlo Abarth convinced Fiat's owner, Giovanni Agnelli, that there would be a market for an Italian equivalent of the Sprite, Midget, and Spitfire. So, when it came time to replace the 600 with the 850 series, Fiat simply adopted many of Abarth's techniques and produced a 2+2 coupe and a Giugiaro-designed, Bertone-built spider to accompany the new sedan. The 850 trio debuted at the Geneva Show in 1965.

In the late 1960s, Fiat started thinking about replacing the 850 Spider with an improved model. Bertone was sharing shop space with Fiat at the Grugliasco works in Turin and had already designed one of the most sensual supercar body shapes ever: the mid-engined Lamborghini Miura. At the time, it seemed that the dynamic advantages of the mid-engined sports car would make it the wave of the future. Bertone believed that the rear-engined 850 Spider should be replaced with a mid-engined micro-Miura.

To make the point, for the 1969 Turin show Bertone created a mid-engined car, the Runabout. Giugiaro had left Bertone for Ghia so the design was entrusted to Marcello Gandini. With no engine mass up front, Gandini was able to create a wedge-shaped body. Elements of the Runabout appeared in several of Bertone's prototypes over the next few years, including the Lancia Stratos.

Bertone's design impressed the Fiat hierarchy, and they decided that the 850's replacement would share many of the Runabout's features. To make the initial design practical for production, Bertone added a full windscreen, side windows, bumpers, and doors. While the end result was noticeably more angular, in profile it retained the spindly daintiness of Gandini's Runabout.