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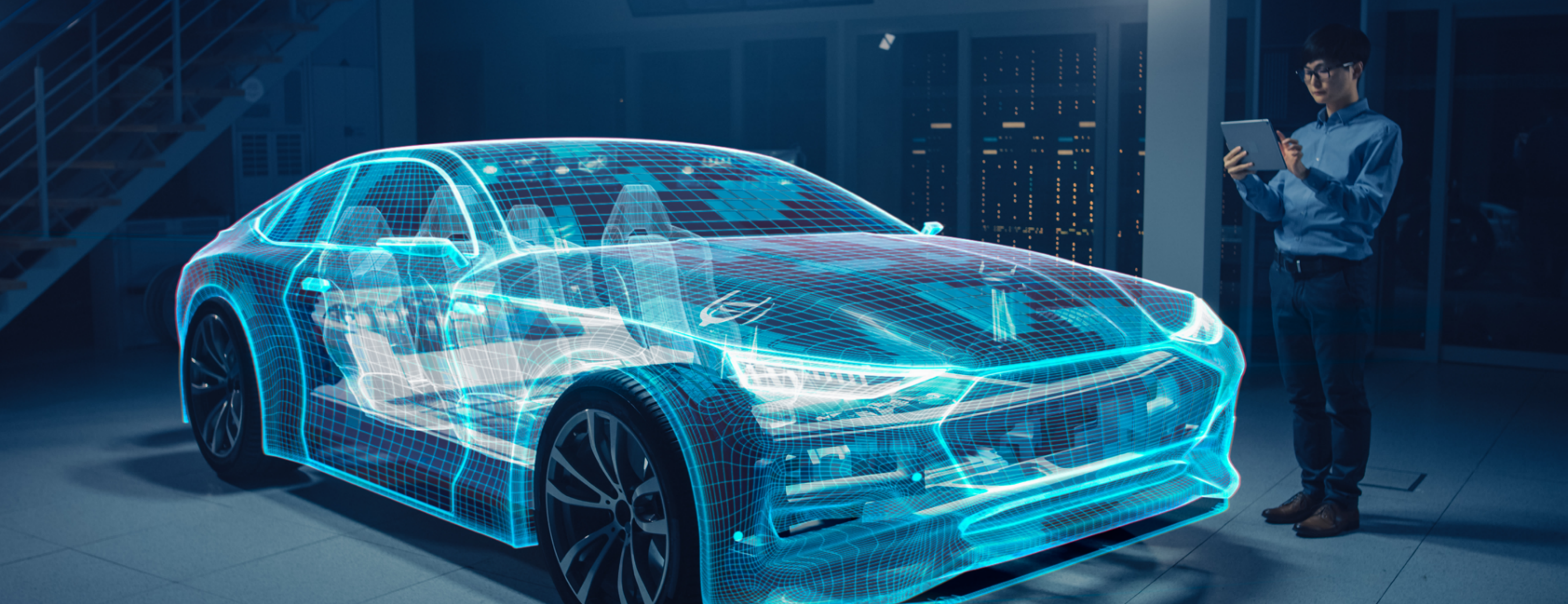
E-BOOK
AUTOMOTIVE

Driving Lighter and Smarter

3D Printing for Lightweighting & Custom End-Use Automotive Parts



Introduction

As automakers pursue better fuel efficiency, extended electric vehicle (EV) range, and improved performance, one engineering mantra stands out: “lighter is better.” Weight reduction (lightweighting) has a direct impact on vehicle efficiency – every kilogram shed can enhance mileage or battery range and improve handling. At the same time, consumers and industry trends are pushing for more customized and high-performance components in vehicles, from personalized interior trims to optimized racing parts. However, traditional manufacturing imposes limits on how light or complex a part can be, and it’s often uneconomical to produce custom parts in low volumes.

Industrial 3D printing (additive manufacturing) is changing the equation by enabling the production of ultra-lightweight structures and custom end-use parts that meet rigorous automotive requirements. In this eBook, we explore how 3D printing allows automakers to achieve significant weight reductions through advanced designs, produce complex parts that traditional methods can’t, and economically manufacture small batches or one-off components, all while aligning with goals of improved vehicle performance, innovation, and supply chain efficiency.

Lightweighting A Critical Goal with Traditional Limits

Automotive engineers have long used strategies like material substitution (for example, using aluminum instead of steel) and part consolidation to reduce weight. Yet they often run into constraints: certain shapes can't be formed or are too costly to make with subtractive methods, and joining many parts can increase weight. For instance, adding internal cooling channels or lattice support inside a part could save weight and improve function, but you can't machine a complex internal lattice easily nor mold it without multi-piece assemblies.

Generative design software might propose a highly organic, hollowed-out bracket that is fantastically light and strong – only to find that it's virtually impossible to manufacture traditionally. Additionally, when weight must be trimmed, designers often have to compromise on shape or settle for simpler designs that fit known manufacturing processes. This leaves potential performance gains on the table.

There is also a growing regulatory and market pressure to reduce emissions, which indirectly forces weight reduction because lighter cars consume less fuel or require fewer batteries. Auto manufacturers face strict fleet emissions targets, so every component is scrutinized for weight savings. In EVs, heavy battery packs make weight-saving objectives even more crucial to maximize range. Meanwhile, performance and luxury vehicles seek weight cuts to improve acceleration, braking, and handling. However, achieving significant weight reductions with conventional manufacturing might require expensive carbon fiber parts or radical design changes, which can drive up costs. And for low-volume sports cars or racing parts, making special lightweight components via casting or CNC may not be cost-effective due to tooling and setup expenses.

3D Printing Unlocks Design Freedom for Weight Reduction

This is where additive manufacturing provides an effective solution. It can produce complex geometries with internal hollows, lattices, and bionic shapes that optimize a part's strength-to-weight ratio. With 3D printing, the old design constraints fall away - if software can conceive it, the printer can likely build it. This means engineers can fully leverage generative design and topology optimization tools to create parts that meet performance specs with minimal material usage. For example, General Motors used generative design to reinvent a seatbelt bracket, ending up with a single 3D-printed part that was 40% lighter and 20% stronger than the original assembly of eight pieces.[1] The spider-like structure of the new bracket (with smooth curves and hollowed sections) could only be made via 3D printing, not stamping or welding.[1] Applying such design optimization across many parts could make a vehicle significantly lighter and more fuel-efficient.[1]

Studies and demonstrations have shown staggering potential. Using lattice structures, parts can maintain strength while cutting weight by large percentages. In fact, it's been reported that 3D-printed latticed aluminum components can be as strong as solid ones while up to 80% lighter.[2] Even if 80% is an extreme case, it underscores possibilities far beyond what traditional subtractive techniques can do. Bugatti provided a high-profile example with its 3D-printed titanium brake caliper for the Chiron supercar. The printed caliper is about 40% lighter than the previous aluminum version (2.9 kg vs 4.9 kg) yet is even stronger due to the material properties and optimized design.[3] Such a weight drop on a critical component not only improves the car's performance but also shows how additive manufacturing can achieve what was previously unimaginable. Bugatti's engineers noted they simply could not have made that complex, large titanium part by any other method.[3] 3D printing was the enabler of weight reduction and strength gain.

Crucially, additive manufacturing also enables part consolidation, which contributes to weight reduction by eliminating the need for fasteners and overlapping materials. The GM seat bracket example consolidates eight pieces into one,[1] meaning no bolts or weld flanges are needed, which further cuts weight and eliminates potential failure points. Fewer parts also often means less assembly and a leaner supply chain. Kevin Quinn, GM's Director of Additive Design, highlighted that if technologies like generative design and AM can even give "another mile per gallon of fuel economy or extend by 10 miles the range of an EV," it's a huge win.[1] That's exactly what lightweighting aims to do, and 3D printing is a key to unlocking those incremental improvements across many components.

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[1] *Driving a Lighter, More Efficient Future of Automotive Part Design,* Autodesk, https://www.autodesk.com/customer-stories/general-motors-generative-design

[2] *Applications of Additive Manufacturing in the Shopfloor: The case of the Wire Harness Industry,* José Maria Monteiro da Silva Inglês Dissertation, https://fenix.tecnico.ulisboa.pt/downloadFile/1126295043840470/87597_Jose%20Maria%20Ingles_Dissertation.pdf

[3] *World Premiere: Brake Caliper From 3-D Printer,* Bugatti, https://newsroom.bugatti.com/press-releases/world-premiere-brake-caliper-from-3-d-printer

Custom and High-Performance End-Use Parts

Beyond just making existing parts lighter, 3D printing enables entirely new designs and customization in end-use parts. For high-performance segments like motorsports or supercars, engineers can push boundaries, creating intricate geometries that maximize airflow or integrate functions into a single piece, such as cooling channels within a piston or brake or consolidated fluid manifolds.

A great example is Porsche's 3D-printed metal pistons for the 911 GT2 RS. These pistons, made by laser powder bed fusion, are 10% lighter than the forged ones and feature an integrated cooling channel design that could not be achieved conventionally.[4] In testing, these pistons with improved cooling allowed the engine to run with more power and efficiency without sacrificing reliability. They are now used in a production model – proof that 3D printed parts can meet the high demands of a 700+ horsepower sports car.

Customization is another arena where traditional manufacturing struggles. If a customer or a limited series program requires a unique interior trim or a small batch of custom parts, the cost of creating molds or tooling for such a short run is difficult to justify. 3D printing flips the economics because making one part or 100 parts has roughly the same per-unit cost since there is no tooling – the parts are just printed from their digital file. This means mass customization becomes feasible. For instance, BMW's Mini brand offered "Mini Yours Customized," where buyers could personalize dashboard trim or side scuttle pieces with their own text or patterns, which were then 3D printed on demand. Another emerging example is Cadillac's Celestiq, a luxury EV sedan, which reportedly contains 115 3D-printed parts, including structural pieces and cosmetic parts. One of its showcase features is a 3D printed steering wheel trim that can be highly customized per vehicle without new tooling.[4] This shows how automakers are using additive not just for hidden parts but for visible, customer-facing components to enable design differentiation.

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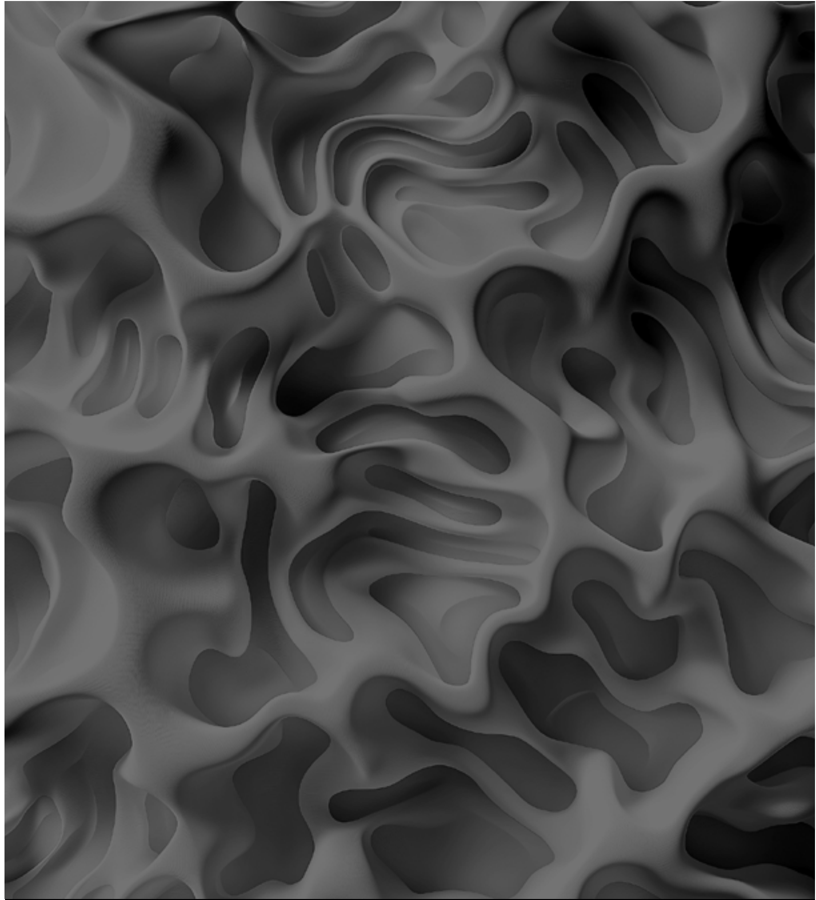
[4] 3D-Printed Cars: 13 Current Examples, builtin.com, https://builtin.com/articles/3d-printed-car

For electric vehicles, 3D printing opens up possibilities to offset the weight of batteries by making other components lighter. It also allows integration of complex cooling channels for battery thermal management or motor/inverter components that need intricate designs for heat dissipation. As EV designs evolve rapidly, being able to iterate and then produce final complex parts quickly is a competitive advantage.

Some companies producing EVs have used large-format 3D printing for body structures, such as the Blade supercar chassis by Divergent 3D or Czinger's 21C hypercar with a largely 3D-printed structure.[4] While these are exotic cases, they demonstrate that printing end-use automotive structures is possible and can yield extremely high performance - the Czinger 21C boasts top-tier acceleration, partly attributed to its lightweight printed components.

Streamlining Supply Chains with On-Demand Manufacturing

Another benefit of 3D printing custom and end-use parts is the potential to simplify supply chains and aftermarket support. Traditionally, for spare parts - especially for older models or low-volume cars – companies had to either maintain inventory or face expensive small production runs when stock ran out. Additive manufacturing offers the ability for a digital inventory. Manufacturers just store the design files and print the parts when needed.



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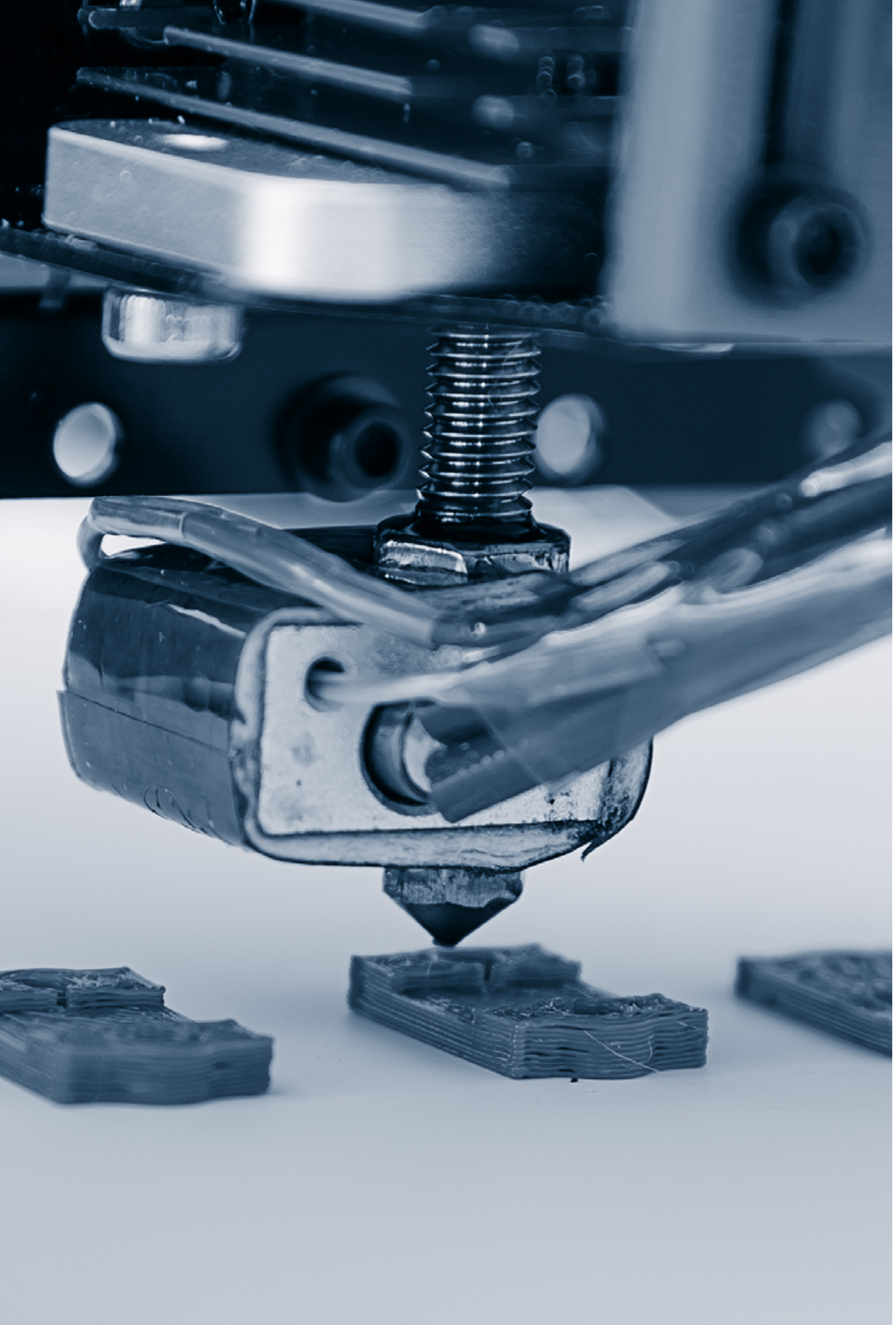

Porsche Classic took this approach for rare spare parts of models like the 959, where demand is extremely low.[2] They successfully 3D printed metal and plastic spare parts that meet original specs, providing customers with needed components without the prohibitive cost of restarting traditional production for just a handful of pieces. This strategy reduces storage and tooling costs, ensuring that veteran cars can stay on the road. For current production, companies like Audi and Volkswagen have discussed plans to produce tens of thousands of parts via additive manufacturing (AM) by 2025,[4], indicating a shift towards using 3D printing where it makes sense in serial production or in service.

From a decision-maker perspective, these capabilities mean more flexibility and resilience. If a supply chain issue arises, having in-house 3D printing capacity for critical components can keep production running. It also allows rapid introduction of model variants or mid-cycle enhancements. If marketing wants to offer a special lightweight package or a custom trim option, manufacturing can deliver it via additive without needing to invest in new tooling.

For performance improvements, 3D printing can be the bridge that makes an idea feasible to produce. For example, if engineers develop a new lightweight suspension knuckle that improves handling, a limited run of them could be printed for a performance trim of a vehicle, even if it's not yet viable for full mass production. This agility – being able to create and implement specialized parts quickly – supports innovation and can carve out niche markets that enhance a brand's image.

Proven Results Lighter, Better-Performing Cars

The transition of 3D printing from prototyping to production is already yielding real results on the road and track. We've mentioned Bugatti's brake caliper (40% weight savings) and Porsche's pistons (10% lighter and improved cooling). Another notable development is in motorsport: some Formula 1 teams and Le Mans prototypes use 3D-printed titanium and Inconel parts in their cars, exploiting shapes that give aerodynamic or cooling advantages that couldn't be otherwise made.

For instance, Formula 1 teams have 3D-printed complex hydraulic line manifolds and light brackets to optimize every gram. In the commercial realm, Cadillac's Celestiq, which uses 115 printed parts, demonstrates that for luxury vehicles, additive can deliver both customization and performance. BMW has used metal printing for the i8 Roadster's roof bracket, a part that ended up lighter than the original plastic version while being stiffer.[5] That's a remarkable outcome: by printing in aluminum, they achieved a part superior in both weight and rigidity to a part that was originally injection-molded plastic. It demonstrates that sometimes, the combination of design freedom and material can beat even lighter traditional materials because you can put material only where needed.

From an efficiency standpoint, lightweighting pays dividends in meeting regulatory targets. According to research, a 10% reduction in vehicle mass can result in roughly 6-7% improvement in fuel economy for an internal combustion vehicle. Shaving even tens of kilograms via dozens of small improvements – which additive manufacturing makes possible – adds up. And for EVs, every kilogram saved extends range or allows a smaller (cheaper) battery for the same range, which is critical for cost reduction. Frost & Sullivan and other analysts have projected that by 2030, additive manufacturing will be integral to automotive production, not just for cost savings but also due to its performance benefits.[6] They foresee a future where many "cornerstone" parts of the car are printed for optimum lightness and strength.[6]

Conclusion: A New Era of Automotive Design and Manufacturing

The use of 3D printing for lightweighting and custom end-use parts is ushering in a new era where the phrase “form follows function” can be fully realized in automotive engineering. Decision-makers in R&D and product development can now seriously consider designs that were once shelved due to manufacturing constraints. The result is vehicles that can be lighter, more efficient, and highly tuned to their purpose, whether that means more miles per gallon or delivering exhilarating track performance. At the same time, the ability to produce parts on-demand and customize in small batches aligns with modern market trends of personalization and agility. Automakers can offer niche variants or quickly implement engineering improvements without massive retooling costs, thus fostering innovation while managing costs.

It’s important to note that 3D printing is not a silver bullet for every part. It complements traditional manufacturing where it makes sense, typically where high complexity, low volume, or high performance is involved. Currently, no manufacturer is 3D printing an entire high-volume car, but as we’ve discussed, crucial pieces of cars are already being printed and making those cars better. For leaders evaluating this technology, the key is to identify those value-added applications where a lighter or custom 3D-printed part can deliver a competitive edge or solve a persistent problem that casting or machining can’t. The data from recent years is convincing that such opportunities are plentiful, with weight cuts of 40% or more and lead time drops of 90% or more in getting new parts. Implementing additive for production requires investment and learning, but it aligns directly with strategic goals of performance improvement, innovation, and even sustainability.

In conclusion, industrial 3D printing enables automotive teams to design and build the optimal part rather than a compromised part. It allows a shift towards smarter, leaner vehicles and a more responsive manufacturing approach. Companies like GM, Porsche, and Bugatti have demonstrated the real-world benefits. Now it's up to the broader industry to build on this momentum. For those in charge of product development, embracing additive manufacturing for end-use components means pushing the boundaries of what the vehicles can do, achieving feats of engineering that delight customers and meet regulations, all while keeping an eye on cost and efficiency. It's a technical revolution with a very practical outcome: lighter cars, better parts, and customers that are happier - all achieved through the strategic use of 3D printing technology in automotive design and production.[1 4]

The Main Takeaway: Additive manufacturing unlocks new possibilities for producing lightweight and custom end-use automotive parts-enabling performance gains, design innovation, and supply chain agility that traditional methods can't match, especially for low-volume or high-complexity applications.

Find Out more at **stratasys.com**

[5]*A million printed components in just ten years: BMW Group makes increasing use of 3D printing,* BMW Group, https://www.press.bmwgroup.com/global/article/detail/T0286895EN/a-million-printed-components-in-just-ten-years:-bmw-group-makes-increasing-use-of-3d-printing?language=en

[6]*Printing the Future: Ford Motor Company's New Production Process,* HBS Digital Initiative, https://d3.harvard.edu/platform-rctom/submission/printing-the-future-ford-motor-companys-new-production-process/

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Stratasys Headquarters

7665 Commerce Way,
Eden Prairie, MN 55344
+1 800 801 6491 (US Toll Free)
+1 952 937-3000 (Intl)
+1 952 937-0070 (Fax)

1 Holtzman St., Science Park,
PO Box 2496
Rehovot 76124, Israel
+972 74 745 4000
+972 74 745 5000 (Fax)

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