

Strange as it may seem, the curious device pictured below may well be the answer to your dreams. Why bother with the fast lane when you can hover over the jam-packed city streets in your own personal flying saucer?



FLYING START

By Louisa Young

Paul Moller is a dashing-looking, rugged kind of fellow, with black hair and a tan. He designs flying saucers, and his company, Moller International, based in Davis, California, has so far spent \$25 million developing them. He says in explanation that he was 'impressed by a humming bird at an early age'.

Moller's flying saucers are, in fact, two- and four-person vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) aircraft, and his company first came to our attention when Moller advertised for distributors and joint developers in the *Economist*, a publication not best-known for flying saucer stories. The ad uses phrases like 'safe and easy to operate', 'fits in a single car garage' and 'revolutionizes personal transportation'. The illustration is a line drawing of two people sitting in a flying saucer. The craft in question is round and has eight little rotary engines set in a circle around the edge, each one looking like a battle-

val tie-pins. Tethered on a long, limp cable from a crane, it might be a *real* captured alien flying thing awaiting identification.

In fact, this is a viability demonstration which has been mounted for the benefit of the press. Rod Weeks, technical yet debonair in a purple Lacoste shirt, climbs into the central cockpit and speaks about radial accelerometers, electric carburation, gyroscopes (three, to keep it level) and the necessity to simulate lightning strikes and induce 'scenario after scenario, every conceivable malfunction'. He tests the engines one by one. It doesn't sound twenty-first century, it sounds like a lawn mower — smells like one too, as the downward thrust sends bits of grass scurrying and eddying. The eggs spin swiftly, and somebody cracks a joke about putting a whole new angle on getting a project off the ground.

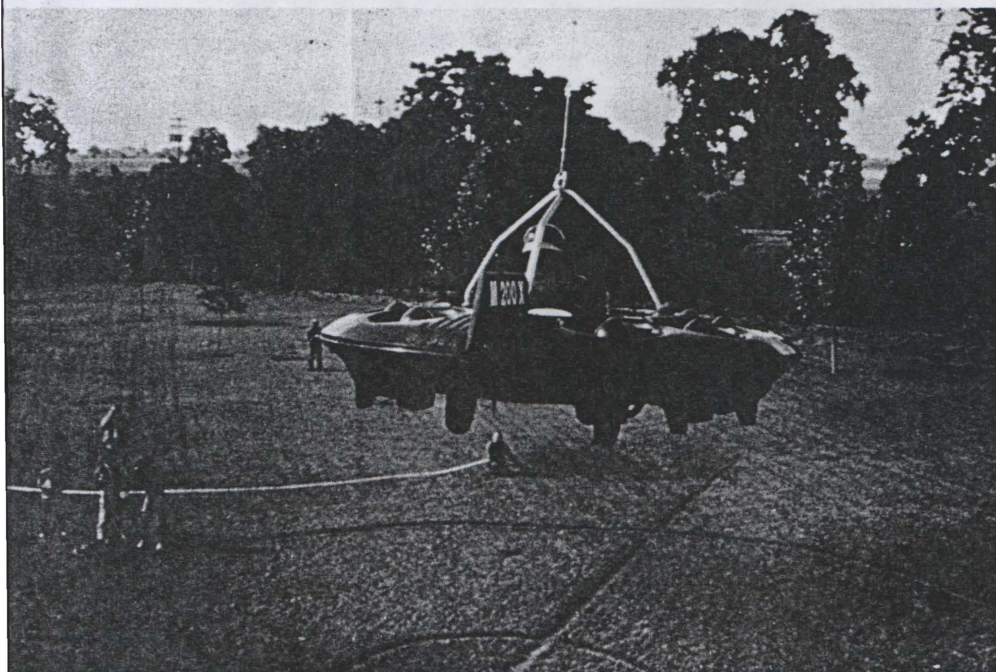
And then Paul Moller appears, inventor, designer, financier, 52 years old, looking very serious in over-

trailing its limp cable (required by the Federal Aviation Administration and the insurers) and scooting up to about 40 feet above our craning heads. It's very exciting, and lots of people are laughing in a nervous and alarmed way. They all think it's following them, too.

The saucer circles and goes up and back and forward and down, and after about five minutes it settles delicately back down whence it took off. Everybody claps. Moller climbs out, grinning. Everybody claps again. 'What's it like up there?' they say. 'Just seems high,' he says. 'Isn't it frightening?' they say. 'There's always a nervous element,' he says. 'And wobbly,' they say. 'I could go up there and eat a lunch,' he says. The M200X sits there, looking very cute and nearly as relieved as its mentor. Cuteness notwithstanding, it's the last thing you could realistically imagine taking off from Acacia Avenue at eight thirty on a Monday morning.

But that is precisely the masterplan, and the point of all Moller's work. He's involved in producing aerobots (little unmanned VTOL craft for surveillance), a project which is part-funded by the US Navy. For many years he has taught engineering and aeronautics at the University of California at Davis and he has recently sold his very successful silencer company, but the dream is and always has been the affordable high-speed commuter VTOL aircraft.

Moller is entirely unabashed by the apparent absurdities or shortcomings of his baby. 'It's early days,' he says of his life's work, 'This is just a demonstration vehicle. It's not designed to be quiet at this moment — well, you all know Moller can make a muffler. But negative comments just stop other people from jumping on the bandwagon, which is fine by me. The fact is that as soon as credibility is established the whole thing will take off very, very quickly. Initially the craft will be pretty expensive, comparable to a helicopter, but when it's properly in production we aim for it to cost about the same as a luxury automobile — maybe \$30,000. The price will be volume sensitive, of course, and we may market them as a kit, which will bring the price



ship-blue boiled egg. It looks very sweet, very '50s sci-fi and has a clear bubble which sometimes covers the cockpit. It is called the M200X, and as I meet it for the first time, it is sitting on a lawn behind an industrial park in Davis, surrounded by photographers and TV news teams and observers with na-

alls, crash helmet and ear plugs. Four little fire extinguishers stand by and the observers are dismissed to 30 feet away for safety.

Off it goes, a bit wobbly at first, smoothing out as it gains height. Everybody rushes about, swept up like the scraps of grass. I could swear it was following me,