The solitary designer

In the fourth appointment with our Observatory on the nautical sector we meet yacht designer Ivana Porfiri in her Milanese studio

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How is the conception of space on board changing in sail and motor yachts?

For a very long period, from the 19th century, space on board remained almost unchanged, with lines and layout concepts always repeated on the basis of the same criteria. It’s only in the past 10 or 15 years, since I started working, that we have seen the intervention of designers who did not have a specific nautical culture. This led, although with some limits, to a modernisation of marine interiors. Earlier, the non-specialists were in any case professionals who for one reason or another had an affection for the sector and loved it for what it was. There has always been more attention to interiors in ships than in pleasure boats. We can recall the modernity of what Ponti did on big ships, but there are not such evident traces in smaller boats. Then, in the 50s, things started to change, thanks to certain owners, and this led to the introduction of different competences, cultures and extraction. This is the reason why I too began working on small boats. I too came from the big ships sector, and I remember that my first job was on a boat of just 30 m. The owner, a collector of contemporary art and a keen sailor, wanted to build a boat using non-traditional criteria. So he turned to various designers who had attitudes and a language that were absolutely contemporary. That’s the way it happened in those years! The arrival of new design energy was not just episodic, because it was a time of greater prosperity and expansion and, in times like those, innovation is always welcomed. Welcomed up to a point, because the nautical sector was very conservative. Obviously the purchaser always welcomes innovation, because we are talking about private purchasers where the customer takes priority in cost and style decisions. The biggest changes came about in pure custom-built boats, with a few exceptions when the purchaser, the yard hand and the seller were one and the same person, as in the case of Luca Bassani with the Wally experience. This is a very fortunate conjunction: in fact it led to remarkable results that will remain as focal points of change in the history of the sector, both in the formal, aesthetic sense and in the functional, technological and typological sense. The other experiences, as in my case, may have lasted many years and concerned many projects, but were always episodic, paid for by purchasers who were prepared to bring innovation to their own boats at their own expense. But since you tend to change yard every time, hardly any traces are left.

What has been the biggest change in the nautical sector in recent years, in your experience?

The main change has been a mutation of style. Normally, style is not a nice word, because it refers to the external aspect almost to the detriment of other design qualities. But we are...
talking about a high cost and high-value situations, where the elements of self representation are very important and are thus part of the project. Being able to show off and enjoy spaces of greater quality, or at least on a level with those of life on dry land, this was the real change. Up until 15 years ago, even the purchaser who lived in very modern conditions on dry land ended up with a very conventional boat, because there was nothing different. The sailing sector has conserved its natural boatiness in a more evident way, although with some updating, because the sailing boat is the boat. Even if it’s reached a dimensional of 50 m, where the proportions are impressive, it still has a configuration were the boat architecture, the hull and the top sides, predominate over the superstructure. Both sides, the user of a sailing boat has a much more precise culture of the sea and the nautical sector than a motorboat user. It’s clear that here too there has been great evolution; think of the catamaran: if you’re working on two hulls that house functions and are united by a platform, this allows new possibilities of fitting out and usage, so it suggests ways of fitting out that were not possible before. The modernisation of the sailing boat consisted of the simplification of the lines, in a lightness of fittings in terms of materials, colours, in details typical of dry land which were less imposing than on motorboats. On motorboats, since it was possible to create spaces that had proportions different from those on sailing boats, there was a variety of expression and much more modernisation. However the nautical machine has a whole series of constraints that come from its being at sea, and as much as you modify it it will never be a seaborne villa, although there has been a tendency, and especially on pleasure motorboats, to transform them into something similar to a dry land environment.

What is the biggest change you have introduced in the nautical sector?

I have worked on methods of building the fittings. For years I took small steps from one project to another, from 1 yard to another, trying to create continuous surfaces, which is something that really didn’t exist before. To be able to create...
these surfaces the first time took careful and painstaking design, a step at a time. Even if you don’t realise it, there is something different: the absence of joints. Dividing into panels is what always makes a yacht interior a question of fitting out. If I can create a plastered and painted ceiling of a hundred square metres on board, this creates a totally new possibilities and a vision and lightness of the spaces that is completely different and unusual. Simply avoiding fragmented or decorated surfaces has created spaces that are completely different. For me this is the construction of the clarity hand the definition of the general plan of a boat. The overall plan is for me the most important aspect of the entire design of the boat interior and it is what contributes most to the quality of the boat. It’s even more important than in architecture, because the spaces, even on a big boat, are always limited, so you have to make careful use of space. Clarity in the overall plan of compartmentalisation is a battle I’ve been waging for years. Still today, it worries boat builders: “if something happens on a boat, you need to intervene!”. At home there is piping, electric cables, as on board; why is it you can intervene on the walls of the building and not on a panel on board? You can, but on board you need coordination. With the excuse of being able to dismantle you avoid the real problem, because right to the last moment you add things, remove them, pass and distribute on board a lot of minimal apparatus. Right to the last moment you can always open up and see what is not working. Limiting the possibility of dismantling, besides generating new solutions in formal and spatial terms, obliges you to respect the limits from day one. So in my project, before I start passing cables and pipes, I place templates, limits: we establish which are the indispensable technical elements and identify precise spaces, preferential paths where you can lay them; no further! Because access is planned for there, and nowhere else. This method of construction means using specific materials, so it demands great experience, something I have built up with installers of increasingly optimised and refined systems. Today I have fewer cracks on board than on land! Cracks always form on dry land, because of the way you use materials and the way they dilate; on board, thanks to texturing and disjunction between horizontal and vertical panels, I have had no cracks. At worst, they can form when the boat is moved, when it is launched or hauled out. Are your colleagues with you in this battle? I and a solitary designer, so I don’t know. I never mix with the crowd on the job, I tried to understand if I can be useful and, if I can be, I accepted being placed in a situation where I can do something I hadn’t already done. If I put together my designs, I can read them all together; each one uses the experience of the one before, discarding some things and adding others and this leads to the next one. This means that, although they were individual projects, developed in completely different situations, they have allowed me to carry out a process of research over the years that has proved effective.

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