

Design



DESIGN

FOR LIFE

Breaking into yacht design is no easy task and should not be attempted by the faint of heart. Esther Barney spoke with a handful of today's rising stars in yacht design to find out what it takes to make it on your own in this cut-throat market.



Esther Barney

Esther has worked in yachting for over a decade, and is inspired by telling the stories of those who make this remarkable business truly exceptional.

The road to success is a tough one for many an up-and-coming yacht designer, with challenges that test their grit and determination far beyond the scope of raw creative talent. No two stories are the same, whether crossing over from commercial sector into the uber-luxe realms of superyachting or starting from the bottom-up at a large design studio.

Sam Sorgiovanni is one of Australia's best-known superyacht designers, with award-winning projects built both in his home country and in some of the most prestigious European shipyards. Having cut his teeth with 12 years at Oceanfast under the mentorship of legendary Australian designer Jon Bannenberg, Sorgiovanni's recent high-profile projects have included the interior of M/Y *Jubilee*, the 110-metre Oceanco that stole the show at last year's Monaco Yacht Show, 89-metre M/Y *Barbara* (from the same Dutch builder) and Abeking & Rasmussen's 82.5-metre M/Y *Secret*.

Although it is difficult to compare different eras, he feels that overall it is probably becoming harder to break into yacht design today: "The industry is now many times larger than when I was starting out, so in this respect there is a greater chance for designers to find employment. However, on the flipside, yacht design is now far more prominent and there are many more choosing it as a career. My gut feeling is that it is probably harder now than in the past due to the added competition for the jobs that exist."

A cursory search of Instagram would have you believe that there are scores of active yacht designers with exciting projects on the go, but the reality is that very few unknowns are scooped up and trusted with a multimillion-dollar project; and perhaps rightly so.

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Whichever way you get into yacht design, there is no shortcut.

Being prepared to do the long, hard years working for a design studio or shipyard, learning the trade and making vital connections, is critical for any would-be designer who wants to stand on their own someday, Sorgiovanni comments.

"To this day, I believe the only way to break into this industry is through word-of-mouth connections that you build over time," he adds.

This is a marathon, not a sprint. Many suggest it can take upwards of 10 to 20 years to build enough trust in the business to attract a standalone project. Even those who appear to have overnight success with high-profile projects or a flurry of awards will have likely put in the hard yards with countless hours of painstaking work along the way.

Dan Lenard of award-winning Nuvolari-Lenard studio agrees that there is no fast track to success when it comes to yacht design. His company regularly takes interns from Venice's European Institute of Design Master's course in Yacht Design to give them real-life experience in the daily challenges at a busy studio, with a number returning to Nuvolari-Lenard for full-time employment after graduating.

"Whichever way you get into yacht design, there is no shortcut," he says. "If you choose to start out on your own, like I did with my design partner Carlo Nuvolari, you have to work for 10 years before you get any interest, picking up small jobs along the way. The alternative route is to work with other designers who are already known but again, it will probably be a decade before you can start out on your own and make a success of it."

The most important thing for any aspiring yacht designer is to get to know their craft, by spending time on yachts that are out on the water, Lenard advises, adding: "A lot of people looking to get into yacht design have not spent enough time on or around yachts, and this is where I see a lack of experience in some of the market. A vessel is more than a design exercise, it is a functional machine that you are creating. When it is moving there are certain dynamics that a lot of people don't even think of without first-hand experience on board; it is a very different environment from a house on land."

So what does it take to make it on your own as a successful yacht designer today and how are the challenges evolving from those faced by designers in the past?

I spoke with the owners of four up-and-coming design studios in this extremely competitive business – where the only thing bigger than the build budgets is the clients' expectations – to find out.



THE RISING INTERIOR DESIGNER

Hailing from the Czech Republic, **Dasha Moranova** burst onto the yacht design scene by working on one of the most secretive-yet-high-profile yacht projects of its time: *M/Y Eclipse*, which – at over 162 metres – was the largest yacht in the world at the time. She has since worked side-by-side with some of the biggest names in the business and branched out into complementary luxury sectors ashore. With a background in interior design and a portfolio of super-high-end residential and hotel projects under her belt, Moranova is poised to take on the yachting interiors world under her own banner.

I jumped into yachting straight at the deep end.

My first project in yachting was for the biggest in the world, working for three years on the owner's side for the *Eclipse* build. I had been introduced to the Blue Ocean Yacht Management team by a client for a private residential project in Mallorca. The project for 115-metre *M/Y Luna* was taking place at the same time, so there was a lot of travelling between the two shipyards in north Germany. It was a very busy few years! I was working directly for the owner, liaising with the shipyard and interior designer Terence (Terry) Disdale to fulfil the owner's supply on board. There was no budget and we could go for the best of the best. It was a huge undertaking. With a yacht of that size, you could have filled an entire house just with our cutlery order!

I have been fortunate to work on such exciting projects so early in my career in the yacht industry.

After *Eclipse*, Terry offered me a job in his London office but I wanted to go back to Mallorca for a while, so I worked for Pinmar Supply on the island and in Barcelona, on interior design and owner's supply for projects including some big refits at MB'92 shipyard. But after taking a break to have my child, I took Terry up on another job offer and moved to London, where I worked in his Chelsea studio for some time and then for another world-

renowned yacht designer, Andrew Winch. I worked on some incredible projects with big, award-winning designs, such as 82-metre *M/Y Romea* and *M/Y Kibo*, 50-metre *M/Y Oberon*, and 156-metre *M/Y Dilbar*. It was then time to return to Amsterdam to set up my own business.

It is not easy setting up and getting projects under your own name.

I am working to get more projects in yachting but it takes time to build a client base and to get that level of trust that is required. I have worked on a number of high-end residential and hotel projects that are at superyacht-quality level. I am currently working as a project leader at Marcel Wanders Studio on a six-star hotel project in Qatar with my team of 23 interior designers, graphics and furniture designers. I treat it like a yacht project and have been able to bring in a lot of yachting contractors for the job. It is really something special.

It is important to be open to new projects and different opportunities.

Over the last 10 years, I have worked on all sides of the projects, from representing the owner to working with the supplier companies building the interiors. I have

Below: Moranova's work on superyacht interiors covers the full spectrum of materials, finishes and technical aspects.

gathered a lot of experience and am very grateful for the time I was able to spend learning from some of the biggest names in yachting, like Terry and Andrew. But it is also interesting to try new avenues and work on projects outside of your usual sphere. Last year, I managed the Superyacht Gallery project in London's Saatchi Gallery, which was a showcase for amazing yacht photography that was open to the public. I continue to mostly focus on design, though, and owner's supply for new build and refit projects, as this is where my years of experience lie.

You have to be creative to find ways of reaching clients.

I think the way forward for young designers is to work hand-in-hand with shipyards and brokers, who can then present your designs to the clients. I have also made plans for a number of collaborative projects with my old colleagues at the design studios. Sometimes they happen, sometimes they don't. You have to be realistic about the fact that leads often end up going nowhere.

Social media is probably more important for creating a brand than your website.

Social media – in particular Instagram – gives designers new ways to get attention. You can express yourself, show your ideas and what you can offer to an audience every day. If you think back to



Bottom: Merzliakov is currently collaborating on superyacht projects with Gold Coast City Marina, among other business partners.



how things were just 10 years ago, or before the internet existed, it is so much easier for us nowadays.

There are so many young boat owners now, the design trends are changing.

These clients demand different styles, approaches and technologies to those of the older generation. In that sense, I think the new generation of designers has more opportunity to be commissioned than predecessors had in the past.

Perhaps there are too many great young designers in the market today.

It is easy to put nice images and designs on your website but it is experience and your style that will set you apart. Success and talent is not about the smartest and craziest designs, but using the latest technologies and having an appreciation for practicalities like safety and energy management on board.

One of the most rewarding things about setting up your own design company is finally being able to fully express yourself. To connect, lead and create the dreams under your own name as well as being able to select the team with which you will be proud to work. I always felt lucky to be able to work on such amazing projects before, but if it is working towards creating someone else's design or dream, it never gives you same sense of accomplishment or ownership. I am excited to be able to share my true passion for yachting and design with my new clients.

dashamoranova.com

THE ARTISTIC NAVAL ARCHITECT

Misha Merzliakov is fast becoming a strong player in the southern hemisphere's yacht design community. Having made his mark as a finalist in the prestigious 2011 Young Designer of the Year Award competition, he has worked with European builders as well as Australian shipyards. With a growing design team under his eponymous brand, Merzliakov currently has a number of active projects on the go, including a confidential superyacht project in Europe, 40-metre and 70-metre superyacht collaborations with Gold Coast City Marina, and bespoke production yacht series with Whitehaven and Integrity.



Above: Merzliakov's 2011 Young Designer of the Year Award entry, *Eva*.

I first got into yachting when a friend introduced me to life on the water.

Her family had a 50-foot Cheoy Lee motor yacht and an Etchell sailing boat, and I spent many weeks on board cruising Moreton Bay. It was with her family that I first experienced sailing twilight races, on the Etchell. I remember sitting under the Story Bridge by the Brisbane River and deciding to make yachting my future path; it was an easy decision to make. I moved to Tasmania, studied naval architecture and got a job with a local yacht design company. I later headed to Europe for a couple of years, to design superyachts, and then returned to Western Australia before heading to Queensland in 2015.

For me, the size of a project does not matter.

I have worked on superyachts as large as 120 metres and others boats as small as 12 metres, and each has its charms and challenges. I will always remember the first yacht I was involved with, the 30.5-metre *Azzura M/Y Oscar*, on which I had a junior role at a local design office, but I was so proud to be part of such a project. On my first visit to the shipyard, it seemed like an extravaganza of materials; I remember the fresh carpet with generous underlay, newly applied paint being polished, the smell of the joinery workshop with its mix of sawdust and resin, and the sound of the sewing



Photo: Andrea Francolini



Credit: Tony Castro Design

Bold and beautiful: Merzliakov worked on the 120-metre Tuga project at Tony Castro Design.

machines working feverishly on the leather and fabrics. My favourite part was seeing the craftsmen at work. It was a day I will always remember.

Being shortlisted as a finalist for the Young Designer of the Year Award made a huge impact on my career.

It opened doors at some of the biggest shipyards in the world like Lürssen, Feadship and Oceanco, and I was able to meet the rock stars of the industry. It certainly helps to be involved in awards, but it is what you do next that really counts because the credibility gained from being involved with awards only goes so far when you are launching a brand. It has to be bolstered with attending conferences, going to boat shows and meeting key people face to face.

Working for a big studio in Europe was a lot of fun.

It gave me a chance to experience a cauldron of cultures and creativity. The commercial reality of business can be sobering. Thankfully, some of my best business lessons were learned while working for someone else; I think it is wise to spend some time working for someone else so you can learn. But working for yourself is rewarding, and you do not get Monday-itis! Moulding a design team within your organisation is satisfying (we are soon to welcome our fourth designer to the studio), as well as providing a fulfilling environment and room for growth for others. After all, the bosses are not the

only ones with dreams; everyone in the team has their own dreams.

On the whole, it is a supportive industry we are in and all the great designers I have met have been very generous with their time and their wisdom.

I have spent time with some of the biggest names in yachting and each and every one of them has been warm, approachable and willing to share their wisdom. Many times, I was sat there with a calm exterior but going bananas on the inside! I listen and learn; I don't think you ever stop learning.

A few individuals have stood out as helping me or regularly checking in on my career. Superyacht lawyer John Leonida has been instrumental in my street-smart growth, while Michael Breman from Lürssen has provided me with lots of

bigger-picture mentoring each time we have met over the years. Ex-Oceanfast guru Kev Altera, now at GCCM, has been a big influence, with a huge amount of project management experience that goes back as far as the Jon Bannenberg days in Western Australia.

While a premium design brand is desirable, the buy-in can be extraordinary to get that high resale value.

A lesser-known designer combined with a good yard can still yield a fantastic result. I have heard that straight from a number of Northern European yards, and they often suggest it as it works. There is such a spectrum of owners and brands, so there is always something to fit the budget of a customer. It is really horses for courses.

Influencers run yards, buy boats and sell boats; they go to events and boat shows.

Going to major yachting events and shows around the world, having face-to-face meetings with key people and putting out new concepts are all vital if you want to succeed.

Having a naval architecture background helps because you know straight away when something will not work, which saves time and money for everyone. I am able to kick a project off quite quickly by being able to carry out some preliminary feasibility analysis. It also helps steer a creative mind and keep it on course by using a systematic approach to projects and maintaining objectivity. After all, aside from creativity your project has to be built on time and on budget!
mishamerzliakov.com



One to watch: Merzliakov's Whitehaven 6100 Euro will launch at the 2018 Sydney Boat Show.

THE CROSSOVER CREATIVE

Scott Blee grew up on the water in Hobart and spent his formative career years in Melbourne and then Sydney. With a technical design background, he has worked across multiple sectors from defence and commercial vessels to luxury yachting. Having set up Sabdes Design in Tasmania, he has spread his wings working with the likes of Bering, ICON and Feadship, and regularly works abroad. His robust 70-foot Bering coastal cruiser, of which two are currently in build, is set to make waves at the Cannes Yachting Festival this year.

It was not a linear career path to get to where I am today.

Although I practically grew up on the water (like many people from Tasmania), and was pouring over yachting magazines and drawing boats for myself from a young age, there were not a lot of opportunities to work for Australian yacht builders or designers when I was first starting out.

So in 1990 I joined a defence company, taking my first job as a design draftsman working on patrol vessels and navy frigates. It gave me a chance to build up my core skills and learn more about computer-aided design and engineering.

When I got to the point where it felt like I couldn't go any further, I went back to university to study Industrial Design, specialising in Transport Design.

At first, I was reluctant to head to Europe and knock on the doors of shipyards and established designers.

I sent some designs for a 40-metre superyacht to Oceanfast while I was still working in defence, and they suggested sending them on to Jon Bannenberg, one of the most legendary yacht designers of all time, and who was my hero growing up. He also happens to have been an Australian designer who hit the big time on the global stage. I nearly moved to Europe in 2008, to work for some of the bigger studios and also for a British shipyard. But the timing was off because of the financial crash, and I realised that I was getting older and wanted to do my own thing rather than working for someone else. It gives you a freedom to design the style and type of vessel that you are passionate about.



A lot of my inspiration comes from other sectors, like defence and naval design.

After getting my degree in Industrial Design, I broadened my portfolio by working on some furniture and architecture projects. But then one day I woke up and decided it was time to refocus on my passion for yachts. I have been able to draw upon my technical knowledge and experience in other fields to improve my yacht designs, looking at things like military vessels of 150–200 metres with huge floating docks for tenders, and design for stealth. I was able to scale back ideas from that market and imagine them on superyachts, which is not done very often. I am a big fan of the rugged, military style that you see and there are a lot of features I would still like to try and bring into yachting.

Starting from scratch on your own is a slow process.

When I was first starting out, the internet was only just taking off and it was the first time you were able to publicise yourself on your own terms rather than relying on the media. I discovered that it was a great way to reach a wider audience, so I entered online design competitions and put my own designs out on the net. At the moment, I am more focused on building personal relationships than pushing my social media presence. Social media is a valuable marketing tool in that you can get a huge amount of people to look at your product, but whether these are the right people or not, I am not sure. I like the videos that brokerage companies are making to help sell pre-owned yachts, which put the personality of the vessels into them; they seem to be really well received and it is a great way to engage with the audience and could be really interesting as a marketing tool for designers, too.

In the early days, I had to do a lot of work – especially concepts – for nothing to help raise my profile.

Thankfully, now I can be pickier. For any speculative concept work that I do now, I would only invest the time if it shows something I have not seen before, in order to showcase what I can do. As a freelance designer, you get to try a lot of products



Sabdes 72: Blee marries technical elements with smooth yachting lines.

and styles along the way, which you do not always have the opportunity to do if you are working as an in-house designer for a manufacturer of yachts or boats.

It is up to the builder to guarantee the quality of their yacht, rather than the stylist or designer.

As long as you can tie yourself to a good yard that can produce a complex or demanding yacht project, there is no reason why an owner should have concerns about working with a smaller yacht design team. My clients have been less concerned about working with "big names" and more interested in choosing the design on its own merit. A lot of designers have had their first major project be a very large superyacht, like Lobanov Design's first superyacht build, Y708 with Oceanco, and recently the award-winning M/Y *Jubilee*. An owner took a chance on an unknown name but that risk was taken away by working with a renowned yard like Oceanco, and it paid off.

As a designer, you never stop evolving your style, no matter how long you have been around.

I love seeing the new work coming out and am constantly studying recent launches and concepts from builders and other designers. A lot of the really wild concepts do not work but there can be little elements in there that make you take notice and think along new lines. As a designer, it does not matter what size of vessel you are working on, you can be passionate about any project.
sabdes.com

Sabdes 145: Blee's designs often draw inspiration from outside yachting, such as the defence and naval sectors.



THE DIVERSE DESIGN DUO

After cutting their teeth at some of the busiest and most renowned yacht design studios in the UK, **Rob Armstrong** (below) and **Alastair Fletcher** (right) decided it was time to venture out on their own by forming ThirtyC in 2015. They have developed a distinctive style and work with a diverse range of clients, from owners and yacht brokers to boat manufacturers and other design studios.



Top: Alastair Fletcher started out his creative career studying Industrial Design. **Above:** Rob Armstrong grew up in an artistic family, with both parents working in illustration.



We came into yacht design from different fields but took our first yacht design jobs under the same British designer, Ken Freivokh.

With two parents working in illustration, Rob's background had been in computer animation combined with an Art Foundation degree that covered everything from art history and textiles to graphics. Alastair had studied Industrial Design at Loughborough University and then worked in product design and manufacturing, including overseas in Australia for a design consultancy. We worked together at the studio for six years, at which point Alastair moved over to Terence Disdale Design in London while Rob stayed with Ken a little longer, also working on Pascoe tender projects.

The design industry is like a family, and we didn't want to burn any bridges by deciding to work for ourselves.

We still wanted to work with our previous employers, but felt it was the right time to develop our own identities in the business. It was a difficult subject to broach at the time, but all the established designers have been there themselves at some point.

The most daunting aspect of starting out on your own is taking a leap of faith that you have the ability, skills and experience needed, and that clients will trust in what you can deliver.

It's not easy to break away from the comfort, predictability and routine associated with full-time employment and a guaranteed income. Setting up a new business is a whole lot more than just design work; there's the responsibility



Left: ThirtyC's 60-metre motor yacht concept, named Ákos.

associated with running a company and the investment in securing new work and contracts, all while meeting our current clients' high expectations. On the other hand, these new challenges help to push you forward as an individual and a business, so they are very positive. We are free to be creative in our own way, have been able to expand our network and have broadened our scope of work in many aspects of the industry. To stay in the game, you can never miss a deadline and must always deliver; you have to be really dedicated and passionate.

Branding is really important to us, and a key starting point was the development of an image which is strong and identifiable but never restrictive.

We needed an identity which would not tie us to one specific sector of the market and actively decided to avoid using our names. While we are at the core of every project at ThirtyC, and take ultimate responsibility, we are supported by a team of great individuals who are just as passionate about design, and whose support we rely upon. We are active on social media but have chosen an alternative approach to the norm by injecting a little fun and humour. Even though we are very dedicated and take our projects seriously, we wanted to break the mould by showing some individuality.

The perceived lower resale value of yachts by lesser-known yacht designers is a sticky subject that comes up frequently as a newer design studio.

We have many years' experience working under other, established names and without the support and nurturing we received from

our former employers, we would not be in the position we are now. There will always be those clients who want a big name designing their yacht and are willing to pay a premium for this, though they may be more open to a new perspective when it comes to refits. But we feel there's a tangible sea change in the client market. Our clientele is becoming younger every year and the opportunity to work with a new generation of owners, who may be more willing to look at alternative avenues in terms of designers, is an exciting direction we aim to follow. Even the big names were newcomers once.

Gone are the days when owners want to spend all day lying on a sunpad.

They want to go out and see things and have an active and adventurous experience. The younger, Instagram generation wants single-deck living and to have some fun. If we put out a concept,

we talk to naval architects to make sure that they are feasible first; it is important that whatever we design will work. There is no point disappointing the owner when you cannot actually deliver on the drawings.

In this digital age, people want to see fast results.

It is better to send something quickly to a client or broker – perhaps a new colour profile or small change – than to pour over drawings for long periods of time. This can come during the development process, but keeping the client enthused, excited and keen is key. Being a smaller, leaner team helps us to meet these short turnaround times and we can be quick off the mark. We have had some of our most rewarding and rapidly advancing projects by sitting with the owner in front of a computer screen and building the design right there and then. It is more exciting for the client to see the design developing in front of their eyes, and they are often braver when it comes to new ideas and features this way.

As we grow as a studio, we always want to stay involved with the projects and to know what is going on. Of course, we would like to see ThirtyC expand, as we are doing with the move to our new studio. But we have friends who work at huge and successful non-yacht design studios where the management get just 15 minutes with each team member a week, and at that point you can start to lose touch with why you started in the first place. thirtyc.com

