



# The Evolution of Yacht: From Status-Symbol to Values' Source

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**Abstract.** In addition to fulfilling their primary function, the so-called “status-symbol” objects also vehicles of deeper meaning. Among them, yacht have been often seen as a tool to convey messages of different content throughout the years. The aim of this study is twofold: to show the evolution of yacht design meaning during the last decades, and to outline the future one, according to the redefinition of the concept of luxury goods, category of which yacht belong. The study results confirm that the yachting sector is starting to adopt new perspectives toward sustainability and that, to succeeded in this, the multidisciplinary of design is an essential aid, if not the only possible way to tackle the challenge to convey new messages.

**Keywords:** Yacht evolution · Yacht design · Luxury Concept · Luxury Goods

## 1 Research Context

### 1.1 Yacht Design Discipline

Yacht design is a cross-disciplinary sector dealing with the panning of pleasure boat involving knowledge of the scientific fields of engineering, design, and architecture [1]. The output of yacht designers' effort is an object with different levels of complexity, because of its dual nature: pleasure craft embodies both the internal symbolic and functional values of the house as a refuge (stability, safety, privacy, comfort) and the external ones of the vehicles (lightness, dynamicity, manoeuvrability). To combine these two aspects the yacht designer must deal not only with aesthetic features, but also with technological ones: it is a matter of dealing with an articulated system of historically represented morphological and spatial relations, in which the multiplicity of human activities, the spatial areas, and the equipment present on the craft continue, on the one hand, to relate to a strong tradition of nautical practice but, on the other hand, is called on to deal with the evolution of roles and tasks on board.

## 1.2 Raising Market Trends

Today more than ever designers and shipbuilders are facing the challenge to keep up with the growing market trends. The market is rapidly evolving since 2016 and is recovering from a hard downturn that began in 2008. Furthermore, the lack of freedom experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic also contributed to increase the global yacht orderbook [2]. These two recent economic global crises highlighted a needing of significant changes both manufacturing system and design process: the yachting market, as well as the broader luxury landscape, is under transformation by the shifting wealth demographic [3]. The main raising trends are affecting the yachting sector at different levels: for this reason, they have been analysed and divided according to the different impact they have on each of these three market aspects: object, target, and values.

**Object: Size Growing.** The demand for small and medium crafts is shrinking and shifting, and the yacht market is growing both in sales volume and on boat size [4].

**Target: Owners' Awareness.** Environmental issues have made consumers more selective: the upcoming consumer force wants to see actionable plans and measurable progress regarding sustainability, and actively chooses brand that work to make the world a better place [5]. Shipyards also forecast that the yacht owners will get 10–15 years younger in the next 20 years [6].

**Values: New Luxury.** The luxury sector is slowly recognizing its responsibilities and opportunities to encourage sustainability in sourcing, manufacturing, and marketing [7].

## 2 Problem Framing

### 2.1 Status-Symbol Object Objects: The Yachts

Weber (1946) defined status as the degree of social honour, prestige, and respect attributed to an individual by others: the status value beliefs develop from perceptions of one's material resources, which include possessions and the symbolic meaning they represent [8]. However, not all products may be relevant to one's self-concept, because others may not view him/her using particular products, or simply because some products are not as rich in symbolic content or meaning. Prown (1982) distinguished between the inherent and attached values of possession: the inherent value is intrinsic, established by the rarity of the materials that compose the product. The attached value is more symbolic, having been attached by the people who originally made or use the object, and these values can have a significant impact on the monetary worth of the object [9]. Gottiener (1985) referred to the symbolic meaning of products as a second-order function: he used automobiles as an example. The primary function of automobiles is transportation; although, depending on the make, they often have a powerful second-order function as a symbol of social status [10]. The same can be told of yachts: among the examples provided by Enciclopedia Treccani to describe what status-symbol objects are, the first is about "owning a yacht" [11]. These products an individual purchases reflect his/her taste and consumption behaviour is a key component of lifestyle: since the lifestyle of many is changing, also the concept of status symbol is slowing becoming different [12].

## 2.2 Luxury and Sustainability: Conflict or Synergy?

Luxury, compared with non-luxury, is synonymous with superior quality, uniqueness and going beyond need. Given the association of luxury consumption with ostentation, overconsumption, and overproduction, the conflicts between luxury and sustainability are still evident [7]. Despite this identify mismatch, the necessity of managing sustainability has already been institutionalized. The first mention of sustainable luxury appears in Bendell and Kleanthous's World Wildlife Fund (WWF) report [13] in 2007. The report envisions moving towards authentic luxury brands that position sustainability at their core, but it offers few pathways to this resolution. Moreover, recent years' climate challenges led luxury producers to face pressure to make their business processes more sustainable supply [14]. Furthermore, a profound understanding of the mechanisms behind the successful combination of luxury and sustainability can provide insights for both enhancing individual firm success and achieving a shift towards more sustainable products, which is also desirable from a societal perspective [15]. A higher level of sustainability is also more and more required by the target: consumer behaviour which is geared towards sustainability-oriented products is often correlated with the awareness about the impact of one's own purchasing decision on the environment [16]. Moreover, according to the Global Web Index survey (2020), 64% of Gen Z and 6% of Gen Y are willing to pay more for an "environmentally friendly" product [17].

## 2.3 Research Questions

Yachting market trends highlight on one hand a growing demand for increasing yacht size [4], and on the other yacht owners getting younger and younger, with different needs from the previous generation [6]. According to these figures, the yachting sector risks being linked with luxury ostentation, no more considered a positive value for new generations of potential owners. However, few studies are available on sustainable luxury increasing trend in relation to yachting sector: the central goal of this research is to present the evolution of yachting products, and the practices put in place by also shipbuilders and yacht designer to convey sustainable values to their audience. This goal is addressed through the following research questions:

**RQ 1:** How have been yachts evolved in the last decades, in accordance with the new sustainable luxury perspective?

**RQ 2:** What are the new values embodied and communicated both by yachts and companies/designers?

## 3 Applied Methodology

According to the scope of the research questions, a two-steps methodology was adopted, consisting of (i) an initial qualitative literature review, and (ii) a subsequent case studies collection. The literature review was focused on both yacht design stylistics and technologic evolution, including academic journal paper, articles, and doctoral thesis. Three main data gathering methods were performed: desk research, yacht designers' interviews, and infield observation. The selection criterion was the same for both steps only yachts of length ranging between 30 and 100 m, built between 1990 up to date were collected and analysed.

According to the set criterion, the study first conducted a literature review based on historiographical research that considers the main theories and trends about yacht design aesthetic evolutions. This activity encompassed a review of approached from both sociologists and architectures and yacht design disciplines' historians such as Daverio (2009), Di Bucchianico (2011), Vallicelli (2011), Campolongo (2019). Then, a timeline that highlights the steps of naval design put in order the findings. The results of these first studies framed the state of the art and research inquiries. Second, case studies were selected and divided into two categories, according to the messages they convey: the purpose of the first category, which includes only real yachts, is to highlights the formal evolution of this kind of products. Then, the second category refers to a series of events, marketing and communications' operation put in place by yachting community to convey the messages that not only the objects themselves are changing, but also the values they embodied.

## 4 Findings and Research Evidence: The Yachting Evolution

### 4.1 Formal Evolution

In this paragraph are presented the case studies gathered following to the methodology applied. Aim of this section is to highlight the formal and technical evolution towards a new concept of luxury which embrace also sustainable features. In general, both interiors and exteriors are nowadays extremely different from the ones of the early 90's. For most of the twentieth century, the most representative statement to describe the nature of yachts' interior is by Barthes (1956): "an inclination for ships always means the joy of perfectly enclosing oneself, of having at hand the greatest possible number of objects and having at one's disposal a finite space" [18]. Yacht interiors have then slowing shifted from heavy over decorated space with opulent pieces of furniture and texture to a more linear, modern, and clean languages. For more than a century yacht interior had been characterized by custom made pieces of furniture, mainly built with the most exotics and darkest wood essences. Fabrics' textures and finishing materials were, in general, baroque, and heavy to see, with the effect of making spaces narrower (Fig. 1). Furthermore, especially during the last decades of the twentieth century, there was not correspondence between the land-based architecture styles and trends, and the one of yachting, which remained linked to an outdated taste. *Nabilia* (Fig. 1a), an 86 m superyacht built in 1979 by the Italian shipyard Benetti, was built on commission by the Saudi businessman Adnan Khashoggi, who wanted to build the world's most luxurious and modern motor yacht. She was one of the world's largest yachts at the time and soon became known the world over for her sumptuous interiors and ostentatious luxury: the 11 suites were panelled with chamois leather and bird's-eye maple; bathrooms were decked out in gold and onyx. The interior design was managed by Luigi Sturchio. Another example of the design trend of the past century is represented by *Sokar*, a 63 m motor yacht built in 1990 by Codecasa shipyard: the most striking aspect of the interior was the sumptuous use of lacquered briar wood veneer for most of bulkheads and elements of furniture (Fig. 1b). Then *Alejandra*, a 41,33 m yacht built by the Spanish shipyard Mefasa in 1993, shows how the same interior design trend was widespread also onboard sailing yacht. Her interiors, styled by design house Bruce King, which

accommodate eight in four cabins, are classically styled and features a blend of Cuban mahogany (Fig. 1c): despite the custom skylights that allow the fresh sea breeze to flood the interior spaces, there is no correspondence between the interior and the exterior; and only the scale model of the yacht displayed in a niche could help guests under-standing that are inside a sailing yacht.



**Fig. 1.** 1990s' interior yacht design: case studies.

During the last decade of the twentieth century, there was not correspondence between the land-based architecture styles and trends, and the one of yachting, which remained linked to an outdated taste. Only few yachts can be considered exception, ambassadors of the new raising features that today are widespread onboard (Fig. 2): Blue Velvet, built by Codecasa shipyard with Porfiristudio and launched in 1994 is one of the first motor yacht that introduced onboard “free standing” pieces of furniture directly coming from the home furnishing (Fig. 2a). Moreover, almost all the bulk-heads were covered with the same leather materials, which was a real revolution for



that time. Onboard the motor yacht *Sai Ram II* (Benetti shipyard, 2003) the firm Lazzarini&Pickering adopted a new perspective to design a yacht: the arrangement onboard was, in fact, completely unusual for the time. Furthermore, there were also large informal lounge areas both indoors and outdoors, with furniture made up of a few macro elements, and oversized sofas (Fig. 2b). Nowadays the hybridization trend between houses and boats, and the lower level of formalities onboard are no more a prerogative of only fully custom yacht producers: the Italian shipyard Sanlorenzo, in collaboration with Lissoni&Partners architecture firm, has been the first shipyard to open, with the SX line, to serial production the cross-over yacht designed as an open space (Fig. 2c).



**Fig. 2.** New trends of the yacht design interior: case studies

## 4.2 New Values for Sustainable Luxury in Yachting

It is important that sustainability efforts avoid being perceived as self-serving: luxury 'green-washing' is a risk if organizations engage in the proliferation of unsubstantiated ethical and sustainability claims, leading to increased consumer cynicism and mistrust [19]. Furthermore, today more than ever consumers are influenced by the perceived status of the product, as well as the perceive status of the retailer [12].

Beside design choice that allow yachts to perform in a more sustainable way, many shipyards and designers start taking part or promoting events addressed to raise awareness about sustainability needs in the yachting market. For many, sailing is not only a free-time activity but a sport that beside the competition is committed to spread positive messages to its audience, also thanks to the worldwide visibility some sporting events can boast. America's Cup is for instance going far beyond just being a responsible sport event organization: the protocol for the 37<sup>th</sup> Edition of the oldest trophy in international sport obliges all teams to build and operate two hydrogen-powered foiling chase boats for their campaign [20]. The showcasing proven hydrogen technology in the marine sector will help create a game-changing pathway for the wider industry and lead to a significant reduction in its carbon footprint.

Also The Ocean Race, thanks to its worldwide visibility and audience, is bringing attention to ocean health throughout a series of plastic clean-up events and global platform [21]: the objective is to create awareness, activate discussion, highlight local relevancy and put out a call to action to businesses, governments and individuals to play their part in turning the tide on plastic. In the online platform "Racing with purpose" of The Ocean Race website [21] are displayed all the objects and initiatives currently underway, with also a Sustainability Report (2019, 2020 and 2021) that tracks the progress in meeting their sustainability ambitions.

Then, if few years ago yachts and superyachts' brands were often associated only to the ones of supercars and watches, nowadays also marketing operations reflect the importance of being linked with organizations and events focused on environmental issues. An emblematic example of this strategy is represented by the Italian shipyard Rossinavi, which recently started a partnership with Parley for the Ocean [22], a non-profit organization that enables creators, thinkers, and leaders to collaborate and raise awareness on the rampant ocean pollution problem: the context is the one of a call to action for the yachting industry to embrace eco-innovation and development of new technologies with low environmental impact. "As yacht builders we have a natural responsibility to respect and protect the oceans" states Federico Rossi, COO of Rossinavi [22].

Also the British boatbuilder Sunseeker started a partnership with BLUE (Blue Marine Foundation), a UK-based charity dedicated to restoring the world's ocean to health by establishing marine protected areas and tackling overfishing: Project Menorca will see Sunseeker and Blue team up with a number of local organisations help tackle the numerous pressures facing the island's marine environment.

At The Superyacht Forum 2019, Water Revolution Foundation launched its Yacht Assessment Tool, created through collaboration with shipyards to minimize the marine industry's ecological footprint and preserve the ocean throughout a software tool based on computational sustainability for sustainable development within the superyacht industry.

## 5 Conclusion

This research aims to study how the yachting sector and shipbuilders are evolving according to the raising market demand of sustainable luxury objects. This evolution is affecting not only brand values' communications, but also the yachts themselves: within three decades yacht interiors have been completely redesigned, this thanks to a new sensibility both of yacht owners' and designers and their attention to the shift in lifestyle behavior and status symbol changes. From the market perspective, luxury brand cannot ignore that they act like industry model, and they have the duty to leave by example: a shift towards sustainable luxury can pave the way for more sustainable mass products on a broad scope as well. Shipbuilders are now called on to deal with the evolution of roles, aesthetics features and new attitudes and values such as partnerships with sustainability ambassadors' organizations, reduction of prediction footprints and attention to climate change.

To understand the complex relation between sustainability and yachting it is fundamental to consider the potential of this industry, a playground where almost unlimited budgets meet the most advanced technologies, and that's way yacht industry must start to be considered and to act as a sector can drive the change in term of sustainability.

## 6 Further Research

Yachts formal revolution also affected the exterior design: the lines become more straight and simple year after year, and also the volume distribution changes: the better management of the onboard spaces, also thank to several technological innovations, allowed to reduce even the number of decks: for this reason, further studies will focus on the evolution of also exterior yacht design. Moreover, the research teams will continue to foster didactic activities like workshops that both involves Master in Yacht Design students and industry stakeholders, to support shipyards and yacht designers transition toward more sustainable yacht design communication and production. Then, participation in EU funded projects and PhD scholarships are other great opportunities to also investigate another aspect of sustainability: the reduction of greenhouses gas emitted by ships and yachts during they lifetime. All these research activities will contribute to provide further assessment of how yachting sector can become a less polluting and more sustainable industry in the next years.

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