

# FROM THE inside OUT

With two decades of ground-breaking launches, Espen Øino has come into his prime. **Will Cade** meets the man making all the waves

**I**t's a Monday. But in the offices of **Espen Øino International**, overlooking a shimmering row of superyachts in Monte Carlo's Port Hercule, a group of designers is in particularly high spirits. The whole team has gathered on the fourth-floor balcony to catch up over lunch and talk shop – one of the rare occasions when project managers aren't spread across the globe overseeing builds at yards like Fincantieri's in La Spezia, where Øino's 134m *Serene*, the largest private yacht ever built in Italy, was launched this September.

As if to complement the variety of sushi on the table, conversations oscillate between English, French and Italian. Most everyone is effortlessly polyglot, aside from one linguistically wayward chap who, as a colleague amiably says, "speaks in sketches". And yet, his is a language familiar to the whole team – and one Øino employs with ease. Seated at his desk, he clears away stacks of spiral-bound drawings and renderings and takes out a pencil. "When you sketch, you never use erasers," announces the Norwegian-born designer and naval architect, making a few quick lines. "You correct as you go, because this is not meant to be a presentation sketch – it's really just exploring ideas."

He continues for another minute or two, all the while commentating his first attempt at a new exterior for his captivated onlookers. "You look at this one here – the sheer-line coming up, which I didn't have in mind when I started. ➤



MONTE CARLO's picturesque Port Hercule provides daily inspiration

**“YOU’VE GOT TO  
DO IT FOR THE  
RIGHT REASONS  
- NOT FOR MONEY,  
NOT FOR GLORY,  
BUT JUST BECAUSE  
YOU LOVE BOATS”**



THE ØINO TEAM breaks for lunch and an Øino sketch



**“I WAS DEFINING US MORE LIKE PROBLEM SOLVERS – NOT AS DESIGNERS GENERATING PRETTY IMAGES”**

I drew this line a bit too close – one thing leads to another.” Beneath this free flow of creative geometry lies a specific, albeit flexible, process. In initial conversations with clients, Øino focuses on more general concerns: “Is it a family boat? Is it a corporate tool? Is it a combination of the two? Is it for going to Monaco and St Tropez? Is it for going to Antarctica?”

As quickly as Øino rattles off these possibilities, he can just as easily give a list of pros and cons for each scenario. The question he prefers to save for last – precisely the one many clients want to start with – is the length of the vessel. “I always try to discourage owners from saying, ‘I want an 80m boat.’ How do you know? It could be 75. It could be 85. Just try to sit down and work out what it’ll do first.”

Once the client’s preferences become clear, Øino incorporates them into a set of hand-drawn sketches to scale. “Something like this,” he says, unfolding a page about the size of his desk with the look of a drawing but the dimensions of a schematic. “Even when you’re drawing in 2D, you have to think in 3D. Often people want to see the outside before the inside. In order to get the proportions right, you start from the inside out – but you work parallel.”

While the boat is taking shape, Øino establishes a collaborative rapport with the client. “At the end of the day, you have to do compromises – long series of compromises. You want a bit more space in that cabin? Then

the cabin next door will be smaller. Or else you can lengthen the boat, in which case it will be more expensive.” And contrary to the tall tales of would-be braggarts, budget always factors in. “Trust me,” he says, shaking his head. “I still to this day have never done a project where a budget wasn’t an issue. I’ve seen some *potential* clients who say, ‘No, budget isn’t a problem’, but they never materialise. The guys who are going to do it, they’re very budget-conscious. The budget may be huge, but there is a budget.”

With such an investment on the table, clients often find it challenging to juggle all the details of a boat’s design and switch between contrasting perspectives, feats which come naturally to Øino. “I used to ski competitively as a kid. You had to learn every turn by heart. And before you race you stand up there and do the whole thing in your head.” Closing his eyes, he begins to walk through a mental map of a boat. “If I open the door, should it open this way? What’s a nice focal point? Lights – should lights be right here, or there?”

Like a gifted athlete speeding down the slopes, Øino has a tendency to make otherwise complicated endeavours appear easy. To help those unaccustomed to such visual-spatial dexterity, he uses a series of computer renderings to finalise the technical specifications, eventually producing a tangible model with a 3D printing process called stereolithography. But even with these scientific and technological

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PHOTOS REBECCA MARSHALL

advancements, sometimes a rendering just doesn't do a design justice. "When we did *Skat*," he says, chuckling over his angular, 70m warship-like design from 2002, a landmark build from the last decade, "she came out of the yard for the first time, and we were all standing there for the big moment – the moment of truth. I remember Friedrich Lürssen, one of the two owners of the shipyard, came up to me and said, 'Hmm, I'm relieved: I thought this was going to be the ugliest boat you would ever build in the long history of this shipyard. But actually, it's very nice.'"

Over the years, this recipe for success has been repeated time and time again. "We've done close to 20 boats together," says Øino on working with the renowned German yard. "We know exactly what is needed in terms of information. We know where the shoe fits." As forward thinking as Øino is, though, even the most prolific of relationships aren't always the perfect match for every project. "With someone like Lürssen or Fincantieri –

huge organisations – they have their procedures: they have those things that will guarantee a good product. But then you come with something like this," he says, pointing to a picture on his wall of the 73.3m *Silver*, a narrow, eco-friendly superyacht launched in 2007 and the envy of many in the boating world. "We first went out to approach a number of shipyards in Europe about it, and they all said no, it can't be done: this is way too light, this is way too narrow ... On the other hand, working with a new shipyard like Hanseatic (*Silver* was the Australian yard's first launch), we started with a blank piece of paper."

This realm of limitless possibilities must remind Øino of his own beginnings as a designer. Reaching behind his phone, he pulls out a small ship encased in glass. "If you look at something like this boat, which I built ... I was going to say when I was a kid!" he laughs, inspecting the miniature *Eco*, now called *Enigma*, which put him on the nautical map in 1991. "Before I set up my own company, I was working for eight years



ØINO standing before a photo of *Silver*

with Martin Francis, and I was the project leader for this. She's the same length as *Silver*," he says, pausing to calculate in his head. At twice the weight, *Enigma* boasts almost five times more horsepower but can only outrun her younger, more efficient sister by a few knots. "It's a quantum leap between those two boats."

For how far his designs have come, Øino somehow manages to maintain the presence of an expert

## “EVEN WHEN YOU'RE DRAWING IN 2D, YOU HAVE TO THINK IN 3D”



ØINO'S FOCUSED engagement is noticeably contagious

without the aura of a guru. Call it Scandinavian demure, or his own unassuming demeanour, but he doesn't come off as someone jumping at the bit to be the next beacon of light for the upcoming generation of designers. "I do some lectures from time to time. I did one just before Christmas, in Moscow. The message that I was trying to get through ..." he pauses, scoffing at himself for sounding so pedantic, and starts over. "I was defining us more like problem solvers, not as designers generating *pretty* images – in the process making it look good, of course, but our primary job is to solve problems."

By the sound of his upcoming – and undisclosed – projects in the years to come, he'll have a host of aesthetic and nautical issues to sort out. "The good thing about my profession is that most naval architects or yacht designers never retire," he says with a smile. "They keep on working until they die." ●