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BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

*Award-winning design duo Carlo Nuvolari
and Dan Lenard tell Stewart Campbell how the
best superyachts start with great draughtsmanship,
and why computers should be the last port of call*

Portraits - Stefano Massimo

*Carlo Nuvolari and Dan Lenard
photographed at their modernist
offices in Scorzè, outside Venice*

Who else designs boats as small as 12 metres, but can also claim to have designed the world's biggest sailing boat, not once, but twice? Easy: no one



Top: Nuvolari Lenard's 2003 project Felicità West (now Spirit of the C's). Below: the 81m Oceanco Alfa Nero

Left: the huge in-build sailing yacht Solar. Far left: the cool MC4 from Monte Carlo Yachts

There's something seriously wrong in the world of boat design. Carlo Nuvolari and Dan Lenard, the duo behind Italian firm Nuvolari Lenard, call it "averaging", the abuse of computers in the early phase of a yacht's design. "Look at this shape," Lenard says when we meet in the studio's impressive modernist offices not far from Venice. "It's done with my hand, using a spline. A computer is not able to replicate that curve."

Too many designers are starting the creative process on a screen using 3D modelling, the pair insist, and the art of sitting down, pencil in hand, and agonising over a boat design is being lost. Software, meanwhile, has resulted in a market engorged with 3D models, drowning out the quality designs and making them harder to find. "It's bringing it down to what is today an iPod," Lenard continues. "Two thousand worthless pieces of music against one CD you bought on purpose because you wanted that music from that band at that time, you know?" "It's 'averaging'," Nuvolari chips in. "The abuse of 3D modelling is not only damaging yacht design, it's damaging design in general."

There's a thin line between soapbox and pedestal. Which one you're on really depends on your résumé, and this pair's is impressive. When Lenard jokes that he could walk into any marina in the world and get a free lunch, it's funny because it's true. They have thousands of boats on the water, more than anyone else in the game. Who else designs production boats as small as 12 metres for a monster like the Beneteau Group, but can also claim to have designed the world's biggest sailing superyacht, not once, but twice? Easy: no one. It means you pay attention when they say something is up, and they're both of one mind in their belief that something is most definitely up. They make a fascinating study. Lenard: confident, handsome, expensive haircut; and Nuvolari: pensive, professorial, sleeveless pullover. If they were cars, they'd be a Ferrari and a Mercedes; if dogs, a pointer and a Labrador. However the dynamics of this duo work, they clearly do: they've been together 25 years and rather than their collaborations tiring in that time, you feel the most interesting stuff is to come.

Counted among those projects we're yet to see is *Solar*, currently in build at Oceanco. This enormous 108 metre sailing boat will be revolutionary. Three DynaRig masts will power the yacht to more than 20 knots, but I'm sworn to secrecy on a few other details (the clue's in the name). It qualifies as the world's largest sailing boat because the only thing bigger with any cloth up, *Sailing Yacht A*, is classed strictly by its owner, Andrey Melnichenko, as a motor yacht with sailing potential (see page 128). The first time Nuvolari Lenard smashed the sailing barrier was back in 2003 with Perini's 64 metre *Felicità West*. Twelve years later they've added 42 metres to their record.

Right now, though, I'm just having trouble steering them away from their original point: the problem with yacht design. "You ask any cultured person about any kind of design field and ask them to nominate the most important designs, and they'll always be from the past, because those were emotional objects, crafted by hand," says Lenard. Like a classic Riva? "Exactly. That was a complete expression of one man's idea. He had a guy cutting wood and said, 'No, no, take a little bit more off here.'" It's a concept they're committed to, says Nuvolari, and

each boat that begins life in the Italian studio is modelled by hand. It's modified with clay until the final shape is defined – and only then is it digitised. "The computer is just at the end. The computer is just the tool to write down the notes of the music," Lenard says.

It's much more costly to design this way, the pair concede, and it's an approach that's almost disappeared, even from the auto world, except at the very high end. "Ferraris are still done like this, with one-to-one clay models. That's why people still love Ferraris. They have a kind of human expression in their design, not a machine expression," Lenard says. "It's not necessarily a criticism of the market, because it's the same everywhere. You can buy cheap food in a supermarket and people buy a lot of it. There is a market for that." The team at Nuvolari Lenard take the same care over their production-boat projects as their superyachts and interestingly claim it's the smaller end that's more risky for designers, hence the lack of big custom-yacht names operating in this segment.

"It's challenging," says Nuvolari. "Not only do you have to design a nice boat, but you have to design a boat that satisfies not just one but many customers, so it's long lasting. You can't fail, because otherwise you endanger the livelihoods of a lot of people." Quite right. The tooling and investment in the product undertaken by yards to produce 50 or even 100 boats is immense. If the model doesn't sell, the financial penalty is huge. Designing a production boat that's not a hit, adds Lenard, is a quick way to guarantee "you won't have a job in the future".

There's a bit more rope in the world of big boats. When designing for a single owner, you operate largely at his or her whim. "You can't control a billionaire building his boat, it's his decision in the end. He wants it pink, he makes it pink," says Lenard. "It's not often you have 100 per cent control over a design." So far the pair say they've been lucky in their custom commissions, working with "very competent" owners. "We don't attract uninterested people who just want to spend money on an object they think their status allows or forces them to have," says Lenard. "We get really passionate, enthusiastic guys that are open to a free discussion."

Perhaps that's because these owners identify Nuvolari and Lenard as kindred spirits, fellow enthusiasts. Both grew up boating, and get on the water at every opportunity. "Not that we can compete with our larger-boat clients, but we certainly understand what happens on a boat," says Lenard. This isn't something that can be said of everyone operating in the field, adds Nuvolari: "A lot – not all, but a lot – of our colleagues don't go on boats. I can't understand it."

The issue of people designing boats who don't know how to operate them rangles with the duo. "I wanted to propose a single-handed regatta for the design industry. It's a match race. You're a boat designer. You have to be able to handle a 10 metre sailboat. Or if you're not a sailor, here's a 10 metre powerboat, twin engines, no thrusters, and you have to do some manoeuvring – go

out, pick somebody up, moor outside a restaurant, don't damage other boats. It's the only field in the world where the experts are not users," Lenard laughs. "I would be shocked to find a car designer who doesn't drive a car, you know? It's the same with fashion designers. Basically, most of them know how to sew."

The first boat the pair designed together was an 18 metre powerboat. They met at the Genoa International Boat Show in the late 1980s,



PHOTOGRAPHS: STEFANO MASSIMO

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*“Jon Bannenberg
got the lifetime
achievement award
and we got the
newcomer award,
like the passing
of the torch”*



*The 10 best
Nuvolari Lenard
projects:
boatinternational.com/best-nuvolari-lenard-yachts*

From top: Palmer Johnson's 65m aluminium Lady M; cinema aboard Quattroelle; the five-deck 86m Seven Seas; the inspirational Jon Bannenberg; Birgitta (ex-Cover Drive); Cutty Sark, another old-school inspiration



Lenard just 20 and Nuvolari five years his senior. They started talking boats and before they knew it were a studio. The partnership started well: that 18 metre boat was a success. Forty were built by a yard in Venice and exported to Sweden, Portugal, even Mauritius. They've applied the lessons picked up in this production end of the market to their superyacht projects. When Theodore Angelopoulos took over Oceanco in the early 2000s, he asked the duo to design a platform for a new generation of 80 metre-plus projects. The boats that resulted speak for themselves: *Alfa Nero*, launched in 2007, Steven Spielberg's *Seven Seas*, *Amevi* and *Vibrant Curiosity*. Another famous boat in their portfolio is Lürssen's *Quattroelle* at 88 metres. With *Solar*, another 110 metre and a 130m-plus project in build, their place on the designer leaderboard is assured.

Theirs wasn't a quiet entrance into the superyacht world, as you'd expect. In 1998, less than a decade after launching the studio, their first big boat, *La Baronesa*, hit the water. Built in Sturgeon Bay by Palmer Johnson, the 59.4 metre yacht was the biggest launch in the US since the 1930s and the world's largest aluminium superyacht at the time. That led to collaborations with CRN, Perini, Amels and Lürssen. It's Palmer Johnson, though, with which the pair are perhaps most closely identified.

One of their early boats with the yard, *Cover Drive* (now *Birgitta*), launched in 2003, was a yacht ahead of its time. "Before that, they were making tri-decks at 40 metres, 45 metres. Good boats, but insignificant boats," Lenard says.

"The owner at the time was Mike Kelsey," adds Nuvolari. "A real gentleman of American yachting and a man with experience. He was lauding his products, but when he met us he said, 'You know, when it comes to our product, it comes down to appearance. We are not going to sell any more of these traditional boats: I need an idea.' So we came out with this 120, the first Palmer Johnson Sport Yacht. And he went for it – he was very brave." Lenard's splines were put to good use crafting the sexy curves of the low-slung yacht, a radical departure for the US yard and anything but average. They went on to create a fleet of boats for Palmer Johnson, designing more than 25 projects and changing its direction totally.

When *Cover Drive* was on the drawing board, Nuvolari Lenard was still a young company, run by two young men designing very big boats. Not long after the turn of the millennium, this was recognised formally at a design awards event in the US. Sitting at their table was another man horrified by the average and, for both, a pioneer: Jon Bannenberg. "He got the lifetime achievement award and we got the newcomer award, like the passing of the torch," Lenard says. "I gave a speech saying we seemed to be doing projects that were in metres double our age. When we were 30, we did a 60 metre, and at 32 we did a 64 metre." They blew that formula some time ago, but nowadays it's not just a length game. This pair are in it to create designs that survive, that are remembered. "If you look at yachts from the 1930s and the classics since, they were not classic at the time, but ultra-advanced yachts. The epitome of engineering," Nuvolari says. "The others are forgotten. The average, no one remembers them."

One surprising source of inspiration is the tea clipper *Cutty Sark*. Nuvolari makes regular pilgrimages to London to see the yacht, built in 1869. "If you're sitting in the coffee shop, you look up at her and see her lines, and are amazed how beautiful they are, especially given the building materials: heavy oak and steel frames," he says. Designed by hand, using traditional methods, but representing the most advanced technology of the time. It's like a mantra for this Italian studio. And *Cutty Sark*'s designers didn't even need a 3D rendering. ■