



**6 questions for... Franck Darnet,
naval designer**

Meet the people shaping the future of yachting: this week, Franck Darnet, interior designer of numerous production boats and yachts.

Figaro Nautisme: How did you become a naval designer? Is it out of a passion for the sea and boats, or a love of design?

Franck Darnet: Definitely out of passion: a passion for design, the sea, and boats. I come from a family of creators: my parents were furniture designers in Paris. And every summer, we would go on vacation to Brittany. I started out, naturally, sailing Optimists when I was around five, then moved on to 470s... I did a bit of racing, but never at a high level, just for fun. From a very young age, I knew exactly what I wanted to do when I grew up: become a designer. And I dreamed of working in the nautical industry. There was no specific training at the time, the profession didn't really exist, so I enrolled at the École Boulle at the age of 16. When I was a student there, something happened that changed everything. Annette Roux, the iconic boss of the Bénéteau group, asked Philippe Stark, the star designer of the time, to design the interior of the First 35 S 5. It was 1988, and it was a huge shock for both the nautical world and me: it was an incredible breath of fresh air. Above all, it reinforced my lifelong dream: this could be my career, and my dream of becoming a boat designer began to take shape. After graduating, I went to work at Finot-Conq for about six years.

There I learned the fundamentals of naval architecture from one of the greatest contemporary architects, who sadly passed away recently. He designed everything from sailboats for Bénéteau to high-performance ULDBs. Even back then, there were 27,000 boats built to Finot's designs sailing around the world.

Figaro Nautisme: What is the exact role of a designer in the design of a production boat? And in the case of a yacht?

Franck Darnet: Our role is to design everything above the waterline. We don't touch the hull or the structure, which are the preserve of naval architects. We may be called upon to design

the interior and/or exterior of a boat. To do this, we first need to fully understand the brand's DNA and its positioning in the market. We have a general table that lists the different possible positions for boats: fast, comfortable, etc. Our first task is to place the brand that has approached us on this table. This is always the starting point for our thinking, with as comprehensive a brief as possible from the shipyard and discussions with the naval architects, the manufacturer's design office, and its sales teams. Then it's up to us to be creative and come up with innovative ideas, new materials, new functions, and so on.



Figaro Nautisme: In your day-to-day work, are you more in contact with the shipyard, its sales teams, or the naval architect?

Franck Darnet: We are indeed connected with all these people—the team of naval architects, the shipyard, its sales teams, and of course its design office. And this is the case throughout the entire design phase of the project. Our various tasks are closely linked. To know how far we can go, we need to be very familiar with the shipyard and its position in the market: we know, for example, that a boat's interior accounts for between 16 and 19% of its price. That's a range, of course, but it allows me to know what we can and cannot offer in terms of materials and finishes. That's for production boats. For yachts, the work is necessarily more free, as it is less constrained by industrial considerations. This gives us the opportunity to be more creative, to design more refined and often more luxurious details. We inevitably have a lot more interaction with the customer, the future owner. They are the final decision-maker and set the tone. It's just as exciting. These are two different approaches to the same profession.

Figaro Nautisme: Your job is to imagine the boats of today, but also to think about those of tomorrow. What will our boats look like in 10 or 20 years?

Franck Darnet: Overall, we are moving towards ever-larger volumes with a focus on “home-like” amenities. We are currently finding in 50-foot boats what we were putting in 60-foot boats only ten years ago. Boats will also inevitably be more connected, easier to live in and maneuver. They will also be a little more virtuous in terms of CO2 emissions. Even if we are still far from being carbon neutral, we are moving in the right direction. To this end, we are trying, for example, to use more natural materials and water-based varnishes rather than polyurethane varnishes. But this is a trend that is already well underway today.

However, I think we are also moving towards ever greater specialization of each brand in very specific niches. Travel boats, fast or comfortable, “niches” seem to me to be the future of our industry.

Finally, even if we are seeing some interesting innovations, such as the rigging of the Mod X 70 or certain scow hulls, I don't see any total revolution happening within the next 10 years.

Figaro Nautisme: Darnet Design in figures?

Franck Darnet: The agency was founded in 1999. We have completed around a hundred projects. Today, more than 3,000 boats that we have designed are sailing all over the world. On that note – and to bring a little modesty back to our nautical industry – when we started working with Patrick le Quément (former design director at Renault) on the Outremer designs, I introduced myself by explaining that we were proud to have around 2,000 boats (at the time) already sailing. He had 80 million cars to his credit. Not the same world, that's for sure!

We carry out four to five projects a year and propose many more, but not all of them come to fruition. There are eight designers in the agency, with a turnover of around one million euros.

The smallest boat we have designed is 11 meters long, the largest 64 meters.

Figaro Nautisme: Last question: your last sailing trip and your next one?

Franck Darnet: My last sailing trip was around Belle-Île in mid-May on my Sun Odyssey 379 after a week of cruising with friends. I'm really proud to have sailed alongside Armel Le Cléac'h [loud laughter]. Well, we didn't finish in the same place! Actually, we mostly saw the back of his boat.

And, if I don't count weekend outings, my next trip will be for the Outremer's Cup in early June, where I hope to be able to sail the entire range of boats built by the shipyard...

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