

INTERVIEW - Antoine Gicquel, Project Manager for Privilège catamarans at Darnet Design: “Designing is a balancing act”

A passion for cars that leads to boats is nothing new. But to have made it his sole profession with passion for thirteen years now, that's more remarkable. Here we meet Antoine Gicquel, originally from Caen but now living Nantes because of his love of design and a job well done.

How do you become a designer?

I think that originally, like all car enthusiasts, I love bodywork. I've always drawn a lot, ever since I was a child, my mother is an art teacher, so I had to do it (laughs)! After a scientific and technical baccalaureate, on the advice of a friend I entered Strate College in Paris, a pure car design school, which was my first wish. Initially, I was passionate about cars, more so than pure car design, which is why I preferred not to work in this field, to keep this passion alive. So, I did my diploma validation work placement in the nautical sector, here at Darnet Design in 2011, and I'm still here! Having grown up in Normandy, 800 meters from the sea, it's part of my environment. So, I was very quickly attracted to the world of boating. There were so many things to do, and I was able to bring in knowledge from other sectors such as the automotive and real estate industries. I'm not sure it's the same everywhere, but here we take the time to do things well, and that's what I liked about it.

What is design, what attracts you in the first place?

Design is a balancing act, creating something that is as pleasing as possible both visually and in use. There's no point in making something extremely beautiful that isn't practical, and vice versa. With a boat, we add constraints such as weight, cost and limited space, even though we are sometimes closer to a living space than a means of transport. This varies from one brand to another, with some customers wanting the atmosphere of a small house, while others need to feel at home in a vehicle. The typical example is the glazing on the saloon, which, the closer you want to get to a 'home' feel, the straighter it will be, so that you don't feel the exterior shape, whereas the more you're in a 'vehicle', the more you can accept curved lines, even to the point of feeling streamlined while still being inside. It's a choice that has to be made from the outset of a project.

What is your role within the agency?

Coming from an automotive background, I'm more specifically in charge of exterior styling and imagery, for which I've developed a real passion. But as project manager, I'm responsible for the project from start to finish. This has been the case for all the Privilège catamarans over the last ten years. You have to be aware of a lot of the problems that exist for boatyards when you design things. There are a lot of times when we support something beautiful, and we have to find alternative solutions or compromises to ensure that we like the shape but that it also works technically. The French meaning of the term is more focused on the drawing, but for the Anglo-Saxons, it's really the whole process, and for me that's what design is.

How would you define the Darnet Design style?

The basis of the Darnet Design style is timelessness. That's the objective we set ourselves every time: to make something that's modern when it comes out, but that won't become dated after two or three years. And that's a really difficult thing to do, because doing something that's timeless and modern doesn't mean doing something that's fashionable at the time. That's the influence of Franck, with whom we work a lot at the start of the project,

because he brings his vision. The more we get into the technical side of things, the more he will let us manage, but at the beginning we talk a lot about what direction we're going to take the project in, depending on what we understand about the brand's DNA, so it's important to talk and decide what new things we're going to bring in, what directions we're going to follow.

How are the interiors designed?

With each new project, we ask ourselves these questions: how can we bring this or that style seen in luxury housing, for example. How can we transpose it to the yachting world without blowing the budget in terms of weight and cost? Above all, we ask ourselves what kind of world the future owners live in, and what they expect to find in their interior. We look at the hotels they frequent, the architectural language, the materials, the atmosphere, the whole world in which they live. Even if we mustn't forget that some people come looking for a traditional nautical atmosphere. So, we have to see if they're drawn to a more luxury world, and then we design things in line with that.

How do you work with naval architects?

An initial 2D layout plan is drawn up. We then fit the large volumes of this plan into the initial envelope given to us by the naval architect. Very quickly, we see possible improvements and we have several discussions with the architects to come up with the best possible project. Do we need to modify the envelope, move the rails or the structure to optimize the space? Even though we do a lot of work on the layout plan beforehand, this back and forth is an essential stage, because when we go from 2D to 3D we see things that don't work, and that's part of the process. Then there's a little interplay between structure, lightness and something more or less plush.

Was there a particular project that stood out for you?

When I started out, Franck Darnet positioned me in a competition for a carbon monohull for the Turkish shipyard Allia. I was really able to be creative, to do the whole exercise from A to Z, with a fresh eye. I realized what it was like to design a boat, and that's still my favorite project. I said to myself, if this is the boat, that's cool! (laughs)

What interior design trends do you foresee?

One of the major points is the integration of home automation, which is still in its infancy in the boating industry. On a boat, it's hard to standardize a chart table, because you have visible VHF's. A chart table with just a glass plate on which you can do everything like on an iPad is still science fiction. But when you come to a boat with a perfect saloon, if you have a technical chart table with wires all over the place, the whole design is destroyed. When we integrate all this technology, we'll make a great step forward. Progress can also be made on upholstery and furniture structure.

Antoine Gicquel embodies a vision of design where aesthetics meet functionality, with a constant quest for timelessness. Drawing his inspiration from a variety of worlds, he adapts the codes to the world of yachts, combining refinement, nautical constraints and stylistic demands. In doing so, he demonstrates that creating a boat is much more than just designing: it's about understanding uses, anticipating desires, and always innovating. It's a subtle balance that reflects this passionate designer's ongoing quest for excellence.

Design is a balancing act.

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