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The Superyacht

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OWNER

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François Fiat on the adventure, science and education at the heart of his new yacht.

DESIGN COLLABORATION

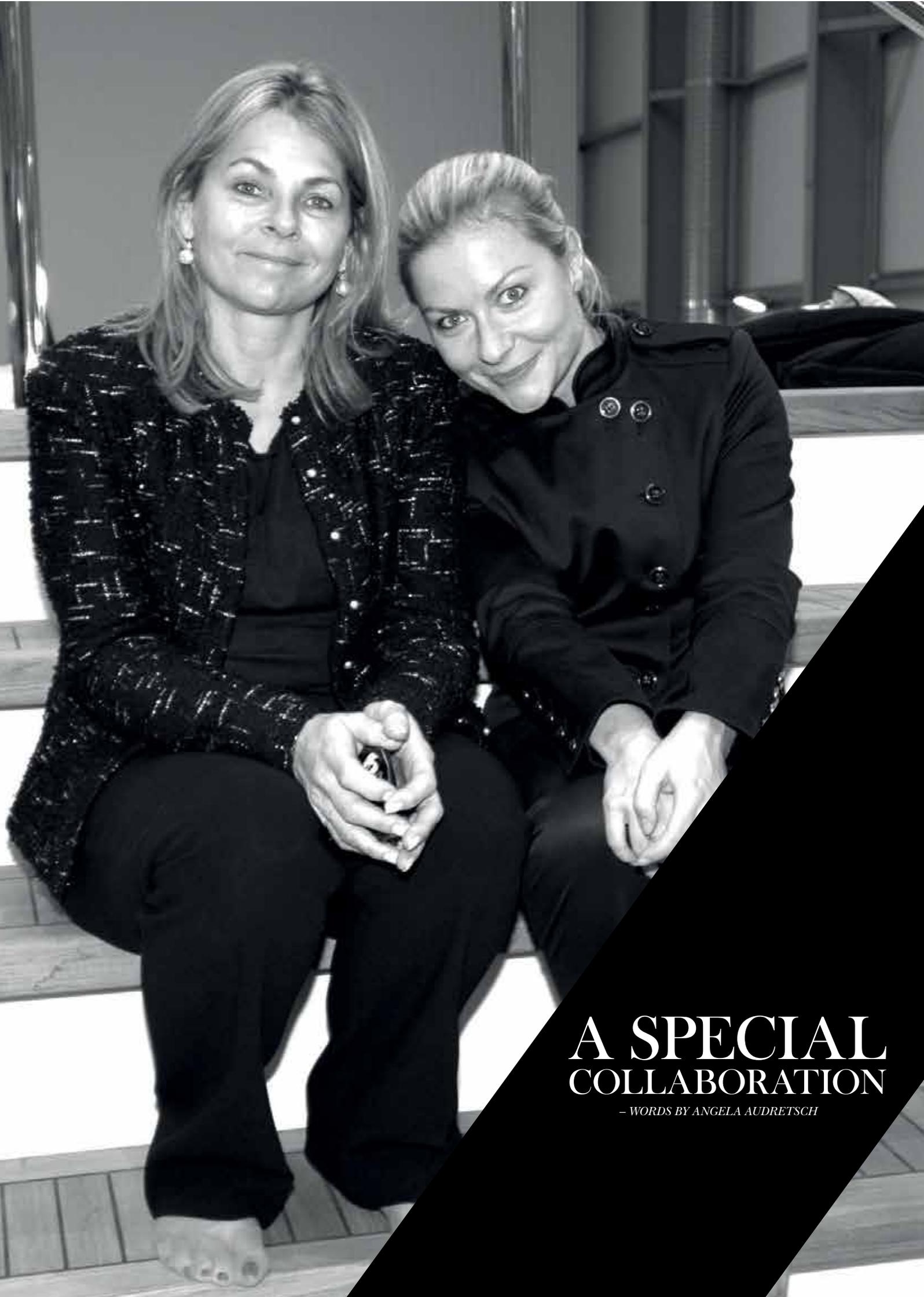
Debra Reuben and Katharina Raczek reminisce on their unique design partnership.

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The sailing yacht owner on crossing the big motor versus sail divide.



A SPECIAL COLLABORATION

— WORDS BY ANGELA AUDRETSCH

Over the past 10 years, interior designer Katharina Raczek and owner Debra Reuben have built not only three very special yachts, but also an unrivalled creative relationship. Angela Audretsch sits down with both designer and owner in London and learns that this is a partnership based on mutual trust and respect, a love of the details and a dedicated pursuit of perfection.

Just over a decade ago, a new design graduate and intern at Hamburg's yacht design studio Newcruise found herself leading the interior design on a 66.7m motoryacht; the creative sidekick to an experienced owner with impeccable style, exacting standards and a desire to create something unique.

"It was 2003, I was an intern at Newcruise and had just done my exams," recalls Katharina Raczek in her warm German lilt. "Debbie [Reuben] came into the office and we talked fabrics for a short time, and then we met again at the Fort Lauderdale Boat Show where Newcruise did its first interior presentation for *Triple Seven*."

While Reuben was already experienced in the world of yacht design and build, she had been hesitant to become involved with the *Triple Seven* project. "I really was a reluctant boat owner's wife at this point," says Reuben. "I like to plant roots but my husband is a trader, so as soon as I would build a boat it would be sold. I think I had been through three boats by the time *Triple Seven* came along, so I said to him right from the start, 'I am not getting involved this time'."

She laughs as she admits that this detachment was not destined to last: "My husband knows how to get me." Some months into the project, Reuben found herself casually looking over layout drawings and renders that had been conveniently left out for her to find. Her trained critical eye was unconvinced; this was not a yacht she could get excited about. The end of her impartiality came after a layout meeting with her husband and Newcruise at their home.

"Alarm bells really went off," Reuben says. "It was all reasonably nice, but I had a different vision. When the meeting was over, David asked me what I thought. He knew I was thinking something even though I kept saying that I didn't want to be involved."

Reuben confessed her disappointment. "That's how this three-yacht journey began," she says. "David asked me to help out a little ..." She laughs when I point

out that 'helping out a little' seems to have spiralled a bit. "Yes, I guess I don't do 'a little'," she says.

After choosing Raczek, a passionately driven 26-year-old, to be her partner in design from Newcruise, the pair went ahead and streamlined the entire *Triple Seven* concept. "Kathy had an infectious enthusiasm and this new way of looking at things," says Reuben. "We took out cornices, we threw this out, we threw that out. *Triple Seven* went from being just another yacht to a more minimalised, timeless classic."

The 'all-or-nothing' approach is something that both women share. After seeing a kindred spirit in Raczek on *Triple Seven*, Reuben and Raczek went on to work together on 2008's 73m *Siren* and 2011's 73.5m *Sapphire* with Kristal Waters (a construction and management company of luxury superyachts owned by Reuben and her husband); each very different yachts but with the same dedication to detail and unifying form language at their core. "We are both crazy," says Reuben. "I mean, Kathy literally ate, drank, slept and breathed all of my three projects. Without a break or intermission. If she had time to think about anything else, it would be the next project."

The pair would meet around every two weeks to dedicate at least a whole day to designing. They would attend boat shows and furniture shows together. "When the team saw us coming, everybody ran," laughs Raczek. "They couldn't bear it. We would spend ages looking at samples, comparing them in different lights." They got excited about the little things together; they shared a similar sense of style, textures, structures and materials. "We just understood each other," says Reuben. Raczek nods in agreement: "I think that's what makes our relationship really great."

"I'm amazed by how a lot of owners remain detached from their projects, leaving most decisions to the designers," says Reuben. She recollects meeting someone at a dinner party who had a



yacht that was nearing completion but she had not been to visit it and had no idea what it looked like inside. “She couldn’t relate to my passion,” says Reuben. “And that isn’t unusual. Some owners don’t feel the need to be part of the project. Some designers may have found my involvement difficult as well. But with Kathy, her mission is to create the owner’s vision with part of her soul. It’s a special collaboration.”

Reuben is an engaging conversationalist, exuding an effortless style, charming self-awareness and a sharply perceptive understanding of the industry. Sitting in a front room at her home, listening to her talk about yachts and design and reminisce with Raczek, it is clear that she is someone who knows what she wants, has uncompromising expectations and, as such, surrounds herself with people who have earned her trust and loyalty. “I am pleasantly difficult,” she says, twinkling at Raczek who corrects her: “We are pleasantly difficult!”

Together, the pair recall everything from meetings with sofa makers to the sophisticated lighting concepts they employed. The chic, yet snug, room that we sit in is the embodiment of the reduced and considered style central to both the designer’s and owner’s aesthetic. And it is especially reminiscent of *Siren*.

Launched in 2008, *Siren* is the yacht closest to Reuben’s heart. Currently up

for sale, *Siren* is the perfect marriage of Reuben’s design fantasies and Raczek’s form language. “*Siren* is my fantasy yacht; *Siren* has a personality,” says Reuben. “I found the best way to develop a personality for the yachts that Kathy and I worked on was to name them first.” The name *Siren* undoubtedly evokes the powerful, fascinating, feminine temptress that this yacht is.

“Debbie wanted a Manhattan penthouse,” says Raczek, stressing that while this is not an uncommon brief for today’s superyacht designers, at that time it was a new idea. “I wanted the most amazing penthouse,” confirms Reuben. “I wanted sleek. I wanted playful. I didn’t want the décor to overtake the experience of being on *Siren* and being at sea. Prior to that, yachts tended to have that old North American look – all cigars, mahogany, lots of rugs and clutter.”

Here Reuben and Raczek took their streamlined concept from *Triple*

“IT IS UP TO OWNERS IN THIS INDUSTRY TO PROMOTE THE INDUSTRY AND CELEBRATE PEOPLE WHO ARE BOLD AND VENTURE INTO THE UNKNOWN.” – DEBRA REUBEN, M/Y *SIREN*

Seven to the next level, creating a yacht that would arguably end up leading the next generation of yacht design. Huge outdoor spaces that recalled the sexy, relaxed style of Jack Penrod’s *Nikki Beach*; flexible spaces that can become smaller, more intimate areas or open up to be inclusive; windows that open and allow in fresh sea air; and the blending of Raczek’s reduced interior style with the ease and comfort of a family-friendly interior.

“When my husband first saw the layout and drawings for *Siren* and what we were proposing, he had a nervous breakdown,” Reuben laughs. “She was very different at the time but she has been much copied since. I love *Siren*. She is another home.”

Designing any yacht with a reduced interior requires more awareness of the project as a whole than your typical interior scheme. Cohesion is vital to the flow of the yacht. “What I find so interesting working with Debbie is that the concept idea is so strong for her,” says 



Raczek. “She understands that if you change one thing then it has an influence on other rooms. Particularly when you have a reduced interior, you can’t just do one room a little bit differently from the others.”

Pushing the boundaries and doing something special has always been important to Reuben. Her third yacht with Raczek was *Sapphire*, a boat that she calls her ultimate creative fantasy. Putting a particular emphasis on her lighting scheme, Raczek describes *Sapphire* as a jewel. Elegant, full of beautiful

embellishments and fine bespoke details, *Sapphire* is perhaps not a yacht for everyday living. “It has very dark cherry wood, horsehair upholstery, and Kathy designed beautiful pieces of furniture,” says Reuben with a wistful smile. “But it is not a yacht I could have ever really lived on myself. She’s too fine. Fingerprints can be left everywhere you touch. I have granddaughters. I keep animals. I have sons who like a party. I have to have a practical space that I enjoy living in and *Siren* is the one that does that.”



Opening page: (left to right) Debra Reuben and Katharina Raczek.

Previous page: Reuben and Raczek on board *Siren*.

This page: *Siren* is the second yacht the pair worked on and the yacht closest to Reuben's heart.

When it comes to selling her yachts, Reuben says she likes to know to whom her yachts are going. I ask if this is because so much of her soul has clearly gone into each one. "It is," she says. "I want them to love the boat. If they love my boats, I love them. It is very personal."

Reuben wonders if sometimes she is too involved with her yachts, but I would argue that it is her personal relationships with people and her personal attachment to the yachts that have led to her building

trusted relationships across the board. She is certainly no pushover or backseat participant in her yacht builds, but at the same time she is happy to let the people she works with put their heart, soul and personality into the yachts as well.

She is a strong advocate of pushing the boundaries of yacht design, heralding yachts like M/Y *A* and *Maltese Falcon* for their mould-breaking profiles. "When I saw *A*, I thought it was something really special," she says. "It may have been 

disliked by superyacht purists but I thought it was genius. It is up to owners in this industry to promote the industry and celebrate people who are bold and venture into the unknown.”

Raczek considers that the ability to be bold in design is something that is particularly unique to the superyacht industry. “I realised when I started my own company and started in residential design that as a designer you are so helped in this industry,” she says. “Everyone works with you towards the vision of you and the owner. You are embraced by the shipyard and everything is done in a way that you can be really creative. On land it’s not like this.” She says that working with Nobiskrug, the German shipyard that built all three yachts, was a pleasure.

“It was never ‘no, that is impossible’, no matter how tricky our ideas seemed at first,” Raczek says. “We would always work towards a compromise if something was very difficult but it was never just ‘no’.” I suggest that we are in a unique industry where the word ‘no’ doesn’t really exist; budgets are big, yachts are the ultimate luxury non-essential and the industry thrives on building owners’ fantasies. “You are right,” agrees Reuben. “I mean, what is a superyacht? You don’t need one. It isn’t a necessity. It is the owner’s dream.” She says that working with Nobiskrug on her dream yachts was always personal. “It was old-fashioned; you made a deal, you shook hands and you followed it through,” she says. “That is how I operate as well. My word is my bond.”

Having worked with some incredibly talented individuals and companies across her projects, from interior outfitters Metrica to the collective of artisans at DKT Artworks, Reuben says that she has been spoiled by superyacht quality. Raczek describes one visit when she arrived and Reuben was doing some work on the house. “She came up to me and said ‘you’ve ruined me!’,” laughs the designer. “I am ruined!” exclaims Reuben. “Once you own a yacht you are on a different level, I promise you. It is a different world; fabulous, nurtured and completely insulated from the rest of the world.”

So does this design dream team have any plans to create anything together again? “You know something, I am going to build a penthouse in Mayfair and Kathy is going to do it,” says Reuben calmly. “Wait, is that still on?” says a surprised Raczek. “Yes!” Reuben assures her. “I feel like I’ve been busy for 10 years and I had to put so many things to one side. But in the last year and a half I have started bringing them back.” Raczek and Reuben start flicking through the initial concept renders for the apartment that Raczek created in 2010. 📄

This page: (top) the main salon on board *Sapphire*, (bottom) the master cabin on *Siren*.

Next page: (top) Raczek’s sketches for the custom dining chairs on *Siren*, (bottom) *Siren* underway.

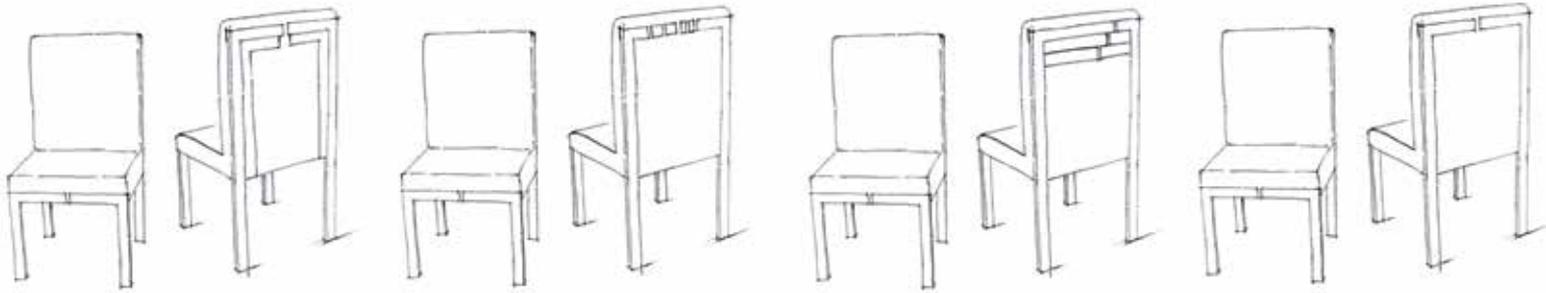


THE SUPERYACHT AGENCY



ALEXIS MARTIN

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“YOU ARE SO HELPED IN THIS INDUSTRY. EVERYONE WORKS WITH YOU TOWARDS THE VISION OF YOU AND THE OWNER. YOU ARE EMBRACED BY THE SHIPYARD AND EVERYTHING IS DONE IN A WAY THAT YOU CAN BE REALLY CREATIVE.”
– KATHARINA RACZEK, DESIGNER

Cooing over the high ceiling, abundance of light and timelessness of the design, they start animatedly recalling the original plans before Reuben stops scrolling through the images and looks up from her iPad.

“The real question is, should I build another yacht?” she says. It is almost a rhetorical question. “If I don’t put my toes back in the water soon, then I will never do it.” She admits that she feels she would need to build in the 90m+ range to be commercially viable but finds it hard to get excited about this size bracket. “Feels too ostentatious,” she says. As she ponders sticking to residential projects, I can’t help but feel that she is one owner who will find it hard to step away from the superyacht world entirely. And thank goodness for that. Owners with this much passion for their projects, this much energy and this much experience are an asset to the industry and unparalleled champions for the world of yacht ownership. □



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