



## Meeting... Partner Ship Design

Following in the footsteps of the studio's founders, Timo Hogestraat and Stefan Seidenfaden take the helm at Partner Ship Design, building the business through refinement and refurbishment.

Words: Catherine Martin

It's often the shiny newbuilds that capture the attention of cruise passengers and press, but as the sector evolves, refurbishments are enjoying their moment in the spotlight too – for very good reason. Not only does a soft upgrade keep pace with rising guest expectations, it is cost effective and sustainable too – ideal for a time when spend is under constant scrutiny and recycle-and-reuse takes precedence over demolition.

For Partner Ship Design, refurbishment projects have always been part of the business, though are becoming increasingly important, not only to the growth of the firm, but to the continued success of the cruise industry as a whole. “Since the pandemic, there's not as much cash flow, so owners are looking for ways to elevate their vessels without having to invest in a newbuild,” explains Timo Hogestraat, a Junior Partner at the firm. “As a result, we're getting a lot of requests for refurbishments.”

As ships return to service and passenger numbers surpass pre-pandemic levels, cruise lines are naturally considering the next steps for their fleets. “There are many vessels that are still in very good sailing condition, but the interiors have aged over the past 15–20 years,” notes Stefan Seidenfaden, also a Junior Partner, pointing out that technology may be outdated or soft furnishings show signs of wear-and-tear.

The company has sound experience in shipbuilding and design, recently celebrating 30 years from its headquarters in Hamburg, where the studio has a waterfront seat to sailings of the Alster. Partner Ship Design was founded in 1991 by Kai

Bunge and Siegfried Schindler, who have led on a variety of projects over the past three decades, taking on every class from yacht to megaship, developing entirely new concepts and executing comprehensive refurbishments. Bunge and Schindler have built a solid portfolio and an enviable client base, and have been savvy in future-proofing their business for years to come. In 2017, the duo appointed Hogestraat and Seidenfaden – along with Silke Förster – as Junior Partners, the aim being to ensure the continuation of the Partner Ship Design name as they gradually step back from the day-to-day running of the business. Both Hogestraat and Seidenfaden have a long history with the company, rising through the ranks to one day take the helm. “I started at the company in 1993 as an intern, working during term breaks to gain experience,” reveals Seidenfaden. “In 1996, I had the opportunity to join the company as an interior designer, and then became team leader and then project manager.”

Hogestraat has followed a similar route, joining the firm in 2007 and progressing to Junior Partner. “Mr Bunge and Mr Schindler asked if we would like to join the board and eventually take over, which we're happy to do,” he explains, adding that it's an ongoing process. “We will take over step by step. It's good to have the founders by our side as it means we can learn about parts of the business that we are not yet familiar with.”

In all, Partner Ship Design employs 35 interior designers, and though each has their own area of expertise, the leadership team believe there's value in an all-encompassing



Partner Ship Design led the refurbishment of Hanse Explorer in 2021, elevating the interiors through new furnishings and finishes



approach. “We don’t want to separate technical from general arrangement for example; it’s important that designers have an overview of all the different steps of a project,” Seidenfaden notes. “Of course, everyone has their specialisms, but by working in this way, we can elevate our designs.”

Indeed, this way of thinking has resulted in a full-service solution that ranges from space planning to interior design and specification, taking in optimisation of the floorplate, passenger flow and allocation of guest and crew zones, as well as signage and wayfinding to visual identity and drawing up distinctive ship profiles. “We can develop a complete package from scratch, so that an owner can then take it to any shipyard,” Seidenfaden confirms, pointing out that the studio’s comprehensive offer results in a straightforward build process and only minor adjustments. “We know where to plan the air-conditioning and illumination; we know exactly what we want to achieve and how to achieve it,” Hogestraat picks up. “This is what we are known for. We can plan where the staircases go as well as the technical elements so that when it comes to building, the shipyard isn’t telling us that it doesn’t work.”

As the name suggests, Partner Ship Design continue to work in close partnership with the owner and shipyard, right up to delivery of the completed vessel. This approach has been key to the growth of the firm, so much so that there are several longstanding clients on the books. A case in point is Sea Cloud Cruises; the relationship began in 1991 with the design and out-fitting of Sea Cloud, a historic four-masted barque that channels the Golden Age of sailing. Then came the design of Sea Cloud II, and more recently, Partner Ship Design has completed the development and design of Sea Cloud Spirit, featuring 69 cabins, two dining experiences and extensive outdoor deck space.

Aida Cruises is another such example of a long-running partnership, one that has endured multiple changes of ownership and now sits in the Carnival Corporation portfolio. “In my first

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year at Partner Ship Design, we won our first Aida vessel,” Seidenfaden explains, referencing the beginning of the journey, which began with Aida Cara in 1996. “As Aida grew, so did Partner Ship Design; they went hand-in-hand. It’s nice because everybody knows exactly how to work with each other and how to communicate to achieve the best possible result.”

Their latest collaboration is in Aida Cosma, sister ship to Aida Nova, for which Partner Ship Design developed the Helios Class platform to devise a flexible floorplan. The unique arrangement of passenger areas has also served as a template for other vessels amongst Carnival brands, including P&O Iona and Arvia, Mardi Gras, Carnival Celebration and Jubilee, Costa Smeralda and Toscana.

Though Hogestraat and Seidenfaden continue to work on newbuilds, refurbishments are currently making up a notable proportion of

projects on the boards. As the duo discussed earlier in the conversation, refurbishments have become an increasingly effective way to elevate the passenger experience, without the costly investment of a newbuild. These projects still present challenges however. “What we have found is that requests are coming in at short notice,” states Hogestraat. “It’s often a last-minute decision so we have to step-up and in some cases, deliver within weeks.”

Fortunately, the firm has a vast library of resources they can tap into when it comes to the upgrade of flooring, wallcoverings and soft furnishings. “For materials we are very well prepared,” Hogestraat confirms. “Every product we have in-house is IMO-certificated or has the necessary certification for cruise ship design.” The specification of furniture can be a challenge however, particularly if it’s made bespoke. “The lead time is a challenge as we have to find products that are comfortable yet also meet our design scheme and fit the measurements,” Hogestraat continues. “If a product is out of lead time, then we have to find an alternative.”

Carpets and curtains upgrades are amongst the most-requested of late, and there’s a trend for larger TVs with casting features so that guests can stream content from their own device. Bathroom refurbishments or the conversion of cabins to suites require a greater investment, and with any change to the cabin, cost is a major challenge. “You have to keep in mind the size of the vessel,” Seidenfaden points out. “Even if you do something that costs an extra €20, when it’s multiplied by 1,800 or 2,000 cabins, it adds up.”

The team go on to stress the importance of open communication between all parties, particularly when working to such a tight timeframe – a factor that is surely aided by their close relationship with clients. In ensuring a refurb is effective, some clients share feedback from guests, while others grant access to a sailing to witness first-hand the spaces that aren’t reaching their potential. “When we have the opportunity to get on board, we can

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see how guests behave – what they like, what they don’t like – and we take this with us to the new design,” Seidenfaden explains. As a result, the designer has witnessed changes to dining preferences, with a notable move away from the buffet, which has been accelerated by the pandemic. He explains: “Guests are increasingly looking for quality, so there’s an opportunity in the future to design more speciality restaurants.”

Whether designing a restaurant or a stateroom, Partner Ship Design often look to nature for inspiration, pointing out that patterns in the sand could translate to a carpet motif, for instance. The team are also influenced by their own travels, and the hotels, restaurants and bars they experience on land. “We incorporate a selection of ideas to create a new design,” says Seidenfaden. “We take the inspiration and elevate it.”

Elevating the look and feel of a vessel is very much at the heart of the Partner Ship Design philosophy, with Hogestraat and Seidenfaden

adept at working within the guidelines of a brand while creating a fresh identity. The project portfolio spans a variety of genres, from the 1930s aesthetic of Sea Cloud to the Scandi style of Aida – not to mention the more playful aspects of Carnival’s big ships. The duo is conscious that they don’t become known for a signature aesthetic, as Seidenfaden notes: “We are not tied to a particular design style; our style is to create the ideal atmosphere for passengers of the particular brand we are working for.” And Hogestraat confirms: “We listen to the owner and help define their vision, whatever the style. This is our competence.”

While Hogestraat and Seidenfaden remain tight-lipped on current projects, they’re optimistic about the future, both for the wider cruise sector and for Partner Ship Design, concluding: “There are challenges to face, but we are focused on the future, ensuring that we continue to build on the foundations that Partner Ship Design has established over the past 32 years.”

