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Immersive Interiors with Laura Pomponi

Francesca Webster caught up with **Laura Pomponi** of **Luxury Projects** to talk about the studio's extensive portfolio, before spending an evening onboard one of her most famous projects, the spectacular 90m superyacht *Nero*.

Founded in 2008 by PHD engineer and interior designer, Laura Pomponi, the Ancona-based studio Luxury Projects has blossomed into a full-spectrum superyacht and residential design studio that has completed a myriad of complex and decorated design projects. We sat down with Laura and her team in Cannes to find out more about her upcoming projects, the conscious-ethos of her studio and life since the birth of her daughter.

Pomponi began her career in the yachting industry at one of the main Italian superyacht builders, working as a project manager and utilising her technical engineering background. It was here that she says her passion for yachts began, and she also credits this time with teaching her the intricacies of superyacht construction. "It is important to me that everyone at my studio has experienced part of their career within a shipyard. I strongly believe that a first hand experience on the shed floor is fundamental to understand how yachts are put together - a knowledge base that is vital if you are going to design successful yachts."

Her 15 person team brings a wealth of knowledge to the studio from a variety of backgrounds, some within naval architecture, some from pure design, but it is Laura and her passion that is infused in all of the work produced by Luxury Projects. Sitting across from her over lunch, her energy and intelligence are magnetic and are traits, she assures me, her four year old daughter - who recently requested that she join the company as a sales representative - has inherited.

"Designers must be elastic, able to mould themselves to the wishes of their clients and I would say I am something of a chameleon. It is not my role or my nature to attempt to bend owners to my opinion, a designer is there to create the vision of the client and I am not so arrogant as to try and put myself at the heart of a design." As Laura explains, because of this ethos, each of the projects has a unique aesthetic and styling, and she sees *Alfa*, *Nero* and *Moonstone* to be her most expressive yachts to date.

Innovation and creativity are at the heart of Luxury Projects, and the team works hard to discover unusual artisanal craftsmen to create custom details for their projects. With the studio based within the heart of the Marche region of eastern Italy, the home of the Italian artisans, the studio is surrounded by unusual and often lost craftsmanship.

Laura explains, "So many of the yachts we build today are custom, and true customisation comes hand-in-hand with craftsmanship. We have over 1,800 suppliers and some of the most reliable craftsmen are within a 40 mile radius: we are truly passionate about promoting the businesses that surround us. Our location gives us a unique insight into the creative process of these companies and we are often inspired by the artisans of our region." The studio has also created a 600 square-metre offices and showroom that showcases the best of the suppliers work and where they can invite owners and their families to select unique pieces of art and furniture for their yachts.

Cristina Bernardini, who has recently joined Luxury Projects in Business Development, laughs as she explains that Laura's dream is to spend her days developing new materials, and creating innovative solutions to the challenges that owners and designers face while onboard. As a PHD engineer, Laura has a deep understanding of the chemical construction of materials and this enables her to follow engineering and material construction processes right from the beginning, assisting manufacturers with material development.

Not only is this highly unusual, it also alludes to her ability to create robust interiors that are tailored to the needs of the yacht owners. She explains, "There are many so-called 'innovative' interior design projects out there in the industry, but in reality there are very few truly innovative yacht interiors. When I step aboard a yacht, I always look at the ceilings, because it is here that you see the innovation. The first thing we do is understand how a client intends to use their yacht, most importantly whether it is for charter or private use, and then we can tailor the interior materials and design to that purpose."

Living by the mantra that an owner's happiness is the only true sign of success, Laura and her team are stalwarts when it comes to defending her clients decisions and protecting their projects. She smiles as she explains that she always tells owners the same thing, "We will laugh together, we will fight but in the end I am here to bring your dreams to reality and we will make sure that we have fun along the way."

Of her current ongoing projects, Laura is unfortunately unable to share too much information, though some notable works presently under construction include the interior of a 74.46-metre Amer



LUXURY PROJECTS



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Above: The saloon of the 60-metre Amels superyacht *Moonstone*, launched in 2021.
Below: The sleek and minimalist interiors of the 70-metre Benetti superyacht *Alfa*.

LEONARDO ANDREONI

superyacht which is due to be launched in 2026, and a new 37-metre Amer which is launching in 2024. In the past few months, Luxury Projects completed the deliveries of a 50-metre Benetti, a 50-metre Sanlorenzo and the refit of a 43-metre CRN.

It's not only in the 60-metre plus sector that Luxury Projects specialises. This year the studio unveiled its latest partnership, with the catamaran builder Ultimate Catamarans. The new 46-metre support yacht 150YS demonstrates that breadth of the studio's capabilities and shows how adaptable Laura Pomponi is – a true chameleon.

The 150YS superyacht concept will showcase an elegant and sporty exterior design, featuring bold horizontal lines from the bow to the stern. She will display luxury features such as a touch-and-go helipad, allowing guests to experience a seamless transition when embarking on journeys to nearby destinations. The yacht's interior is elegant and plays on the natural environment surrounding the vessel, with floor to ceiling windows and carefully selected materials, setting it apart from the trend of utilitarian 'support yachts' with limited interiors. The 150YS is just one concept born from the partnership and it has now been announced that the yachts will be constructed at the ISKRA Shipyard in Croatia, so watch this space!



“ So many of the yachts we build today are custom, and true customisation comes hand-in-hand with craftsmanship. ”



The spa on the upper deck of Nero, built in the 2021 refit and featuring Laura's custom made treatment bed. Below: Nero's spacious aft deck with dining and lounge area.



A new era for Nero

Launched in China in 2008 at Corsair Yachts, Nero is an unusual sight among the modern yachting fleet. A modern classic, the superyacht was inspired by J.P. Morgan's legendary superyacht *Corsair IV*, launched in the 1930s and commissioned by a thoughtful and passionate first owner who reimagined the role of the superyacht in today's industry.

With her low, elongated silhouette, black hull and yellow funnel, the yacht sits elegantly in the water, evoking a by-gone era of yachting. John Leonida, ex-superyacht Lawyer and yacht historian, explains, “Nero is a reminder that there was a time when superyachting was not always perceived, as it is in some quarters, as being a pejorative pastime. There is a retrospective charm in her design but there is also retrospective charm in her origin, which she does not share with many contemporary superyachts.”

In her lines and her nature, Nero evokes a response from those who see her that differs from the impact of a truly modern superyacht. She is an example of a different kind of yachting and as such she attracts a unique type of charter guest, one who enjoys the sensation of being on the water, a closeness to the elements and the feeling of comfort that is so unique to the yacht.

Over the years since her launch the superyacht's interiors have changed dramatically. Her first interior, designed by the owner himself, was created to evoke the gentlemen's clubs of the 1920s and 30s. Dark carpets were set against a gloss oak interior, finished with golden detailing to create a dramatic and moody aesthetic; one that prematurely aged the yacht. When her

second owner took over the vessel in 2014, he and his family thought carefully about how to modernise the superyacht while retaining her distinctly unique and classic styling.

Laura Pomponi and her team were given the monumental task of rejuvenating the yacht twice over the course of her current ownership. During the first refit, which took place shortly after acquisition, the team was tasked with bringing a fresh and contemporary styling to her interiors. Laura explains; “We were faced with a very unusual task in that first refit. A yacht of this calibre and design could not be stripped out and refitted with modern carpentry and furnishings when so much of her existing interior was beautifully crafted and so accurately aligned with her style. The biggest task we faced was to change the wood that is such a main feature of her interiors and we tested a number of solutions until we decided that striping and limewashing was the most effective option.”

To say this was a monumental task would be an understatement. As a classic, *Nero* was panelled throughout her interior in glossy varnished oak, and the team at MB92 Barcelona spent months painstakingly stripping the highly detailed surfaces. The sweeping main staircase alone, with its monkey knot details, and marquetry panels, took a team of four carpenters two months to complete.

The effect, however, is exceptional. The lime washed walls, floors, doors and cabinets give the vessel a gently weathered, homely feel and immediately brighten the interior spaces. This combined with the refinishing of all gold detailing - over 2,000 individual items, such as door knobs, hinges and handles - in chrome, and the replacement of the black carpets with custom cream wool carpets from Oliver Treutlein, successfully revitalised the yacht. Despite the huge amount of work

undergone in that first refit project, by 2021 the owners wanted to reposition the vessel in the charter market and so turned to Laura and her team once again. The focus of the second refit project, undertaken at the San Giorgio del Porto facility in Genoa, was on wellness, with the goal of creating a spa and gym.

The original design featured a snug on the upper deck amidships, used as a cinema room and lounge area when guests wanted an escape from the sun, while the gym was located on the upper deck. The first task was to convert the gym into a spa, where guests could undergo a full spectrum of treatments such as facials, massages, manicures and hair dressing. In turn the snug was transformed into a gym, complete with a kinesis machine.

“The demand for the kinesis machine posed a major challenge for us,” explains Laura. “The existing ceiling of the snug was 5cm too low for the minimum height of the machine, and that combined with the sheer and cambre of the deck meant we had to remove the floors and amend the structure of the ceiling in order to fit it in.”

Despite the challenges, the captain explains that the feature is highly appreciated by charter guests and the owner alike, while the spa, with its one-of-a-kind convertible massage bed, is an undeniable benefit to the vessel. While the wellness activities of the yacht were improved, Luxury Projects focused its energies on renewing the styling of *Nero*'s interiors, specifically focusing on the furnishings and lighting.

The first refit had seen the reupholstery of the original furniture, totalling more than 3.2 kilometres of total fabric, while the second enabled Laura and her team to fully redesign the onboard soft furniture to better suit her position on the charter market. “The furnishings onboard charter vessels take a lot more stress than that of private yachts, and the furniture and fabrics need to reflect their use. We carefully redesigned all of

the onboard seating, across the decks and interior and worked closely with the fabric manufacturers to ensure that the materials used onboard could withstand extensive use by charter guests.”

Over the course of the two refits, Laura's capabilities - from lighting, architecture, engineering and fabric design - were exercised and proved highly extensive. In the decade that the team has worked with the vessel, *Nero* has been transformed from gentleman's club to a contemporary haven that appeals to the broad taste of a variety

of charter clientele. Only last month, the superyacht was exhibited at the Monaco Yacht Show, her first show since the completion of the last refit, and the response from the industry was overwhelmingly positive.

Having been designed to represent a lost era of yachting, it is safe to say that *Nero*'s future has been secured and we don't doubt that the yacht will continue to be a unique and relevant addition to the global fleet for the coming century, much as her predecessor continues to be an inspiration today. ●



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