

Making waves



The Destination Brisbane project currently underway aims to create a futuristic floating destination that will provide not sustainable accommodation but thrills, spills and a whole new take on sea-going leisure. Mark T. Hilferty, Director of Leisure and Transport at McNeece, the project's designers, introduces Destination Brisbane, and draws some hard conclusions about which way product development and design must go for the sector to move forward.

Image courtesy of McNeece

Now that we have all survived the predicted end of civilisation with the coming of the new millennium, perhaps it is time to stop talking about the future and get on with living it.

It was not so long ago that people used to say, 'Hey, get a life.' Now in the twenty-first century it would seem to be, 'Hey, get a lifestyle!' Lifestyle is god, and the leisure industry has long seen itself as the 'missionary' of this new religion.

The cruise industry has for many years prided itself on selling what it referred to as 'holidays of a lifetime', generally within a fairly exclusive market. But as the industry grows, at around 12% per annum, the competition for this lucrative market is intensifying. New players are entering from other sectors of the leisure industry, without attachment to previous conceptions of what cruising is all about, and bringing with them more clearly defined attitudes to product differentiation. The future would therefore seem to bode well for a breakthrough in what is generally perceived as an old person's holiday.

If you have ever been lucky enough to have visited a major shipyard, you will no doubt still recall that almost uncontrollable schoolboy excitement and hunger for all things big, noisy, mechanical and dangerous – because that is what shipyards are all about.

To be involved with any aspect of the construction industry is to love places of production and construction. The process of building a ship, fitting it out and putting in place its entertainment, catering and other leisure facilities has it all: every form of

production and activity, all going on at the same time, more like a scene from a Hollywood film lot than a construction site, with welders, electricians, painters, prefabricators, carpet fitters, crane drivers, shot blasters and fire watchers all rubbing shoulders with designers, artists, musicians, dancers, chefs, and even opera singers. The shipbuilding process is one of the last bastions of fun in the construction industry – now sadly disappearing from its contractually strangled land-based counterparts.

As a great believer in bringing fun to the workplace, it gives me great joy to be a traveller between what I call parallel worlds and to make regular visits from landside projects into the global community that is the passenger shipping industry. It is an arena where the grand statement is possible. The environment in which ships operate is a fickle goddess, calm romantic waters soon turning to raging beasts with awesome power. That highly promoted elixir, the sea breeze, may well be good for your health, but it is also as corrosive as acid to all parts of the ship you are sailing on. And perhaps that is why for so long designers and architects have tried to create the illusion that you are not on a ship at all, but on a floating palace (no matter what you may think about the interiors).

But strangely, in this daring and exciting industry, the architectural end products have followed a methodology that, in comparison with its land-based cousins, is conservative to say the least. Naval architectural statements have often been based on scale and not

necessarily upon innovation or excitement. In fact, innovation is not a word that comes to mind; stately or grand perhaps, but nowhere is there a drive for statements that inspire and excite, and more importantly, attract a wider and maybe younger passenger base to experience the freedom of the sea. Ships may be getting bigger, but are they getting any better?

Embracing new possibilities

With the comfort of a steady global expansion in cruising, the glam side of the construction industry has stuck to its knitting, and produced ships that all look alike to the outsider, the concept of brand differentiation being more ethereal than perceivable. Any form of innovation has generally been in the form of technical add-ons, like active stabilisers, Azipods (water propulsion systems), or 'the first at sea' as opposed to 'the first ever'. And so, as another 100,000grt cruise ship embarks on its passage across the Atlantic from its European birthplace to its

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North American station, it is difficult not to wonder why we have never really moved on in this industry, and what it will take to do so.

After several years of preaching that there was a future in the creation of new cruise ship concepts, and that ships had a strong brand awareness and identity, in which clear product differentiation was a design *driver* as opposed to a post-product rationalisation, it would indeed be a wonder to behold a client who was keen to have a discussion that proposed a new technology and new market use.

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Every other design field has opened its mind to the possibility of change and explored its medium, whether intellectually or stylistically, while the cruise industry has plodded on with its re-permed variants of an old theme or, as some would say, 'more twentieth-century brash'. Perhaps this has been the result of some perverse Northern European or North

American conservatism, or perhaps it lies deeper than that. Unsullied by such thoughts, it has, not surprisingly, taken an Australian to challenge the mould and look for something more inspiring. It was within this context that an unsolicited fax landed on my desk from 'the land down under', and it did indeed promise wonder.

Chris Mackey's (Southern Cross Maritime, Australia) concept for a shallow draught multi-hulled ship, Destination Brisbane, is a groundbreaking vision in this traditionally staid industry. Its 45-metre beam against a mere 200-metre length gives a platform of tremendous versatility and stability. This hi-tech hull design (currently also being reviewed as a possible design for future fast war ships) may well be the key to breaking the mould of cruise ships for all time.

Innovative projects have generally fallen by the wayside because they were intrinsically flawed, too big, too complex, lost in space, or downright daft. Chris's vision had all the key elements that could make it a potential winner.

Not only was he looking for something that went beyond the traditional in architectural terms, but also he suggested facilities that were outside of the norm. With

a great emphasis on water sports and the flora and fauna of Australia as onboard features, Chris was clear in his mind that he wanted the vessel not just to represent, but to be a little bit of Australia.

Realising the concept

When responding to Chris's brief for the design of the vessel, we needed to look for guidance no further than its operational environment and the Australian fondness for the outdoor life: sun, sea, beaches, barbies, fresh air, sport and loads of fun. Consideration was also given to the downtown architecture of Brisbane and the harbour area, where the vessel would be moored.

If we were to create a unique product, the design concept had to connect with these elements and draw them into its world. To unite with the outdoor experience, we looked at something that must appear to expand beyond the boundaries of its hull, and reach out to embrace, rather than have the autonomous posture of a conventional cruise ship.

And so we thought of the vessel as an extension of its habitat, its lowest deck above freeboard allocated to a central swimming pool (originally conceived as an

Destination Brisbane Image courtesy of McNeece



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Olympic-sized pool capable of holding competitions) and water activities, made to appear as an extension of the surrounding sea. The 50-metre beam lent itself to this concept by allowing the pool decks at this level, rather than in their conventional location on top deck. The vessel has therefore been designed horizontally rather than stacked vertically.

The cabin module reflects the dynamic architecture of Brisbane and has been located in the centre of the vessel in two blocks either side of the swimming pool, 'floating' above the pool deck. The void between the module and the deck would be sealed by a glazed wall to visibly link together the port and starboard pool decks, thereby visibly connecting the internal and external water features with the surrounding seascape. Together with a sliding glass roof above,

this would allow natural light to stream down and across the interior that holds the swimming pool and other sporting facilities. Large sections of the glazed wall have been designed to open up for freedom of movement and natural ventilation.

This concept follows through into the means of tendering, which envisages the use of jet boats that access the vessel at the rear through a 'harbour', finally 'beaching' on a ramp.

The deck below the pool deck contains public rooms, and below that is the garage where the jet boats and beach toys can be kept.

Finally, at the aft end, we have planned a cantilevered nightclub with heliport on the top. We would use this element as the funnel, venting the exhaust out from slots in the heli-deck. The heli-deck aligns with the harbour below, forming a vertically organised docking zone. Other innovations lie in the glazed flora and fauna atrium, which upon embarkation allows the passengers to wander through a little bit of Oz as they cruise along. Complete with virtual reality domes that would allow a much deeper immersion and taste of excitement, this would indeed be a paradise on earth.

Welcome aboard

With a platform of 200 metres by a beam of 45 metres, she would be a breakthrough in terms of how cruise ships are currently designed. The target market, by its very nature, would be much younger and more sport-, outdoor-, and health-orientated. With her insides bursting with toys (jet skis, RVs, semi-subs, helicopters, jet boats and more) to help explore the wonders of the South East Queensland area above and below the sea, and the usual collection of stuffy bars and restaurants replaced by a fun and definitely Australian environment, we would have a ship without precedent.

Queensland's tourist authority have a marketing slogan, 'Beautiful one day, perfect the next', and with this in mind we hope to extend the possibilities for future tourists by giving them something more, a 'must do' while in Australia. Destination Brisbane would have more than any conventional cruise ship; she would be dedicated to people who want to live a little, whether young or just young at heart, and with an off-the-leash attitude to taking things that one step further.

Ahead, there will be many difficulties to overcome in terms of construction, achieving passenger capacities, speed,

The future of cruise? Image courtesy of McNeece





The craft's unique shape allows for innovative features
Image courtesy of McNeece

Destination Brisbane is a groundbreaking vision in this traditionally staid industry

sustainability, safety and escape. Although still in its embryonic stage conceptually, Destination Brisbane is one vision of a possible future which strives at the same time to keep reality in focus.

Innovate or stagnate

Stifling creativity too early within any project in favour of practicalities is a big mistake, but to lose sight of the practicalities altogether is an even bigger mistake. The cruise industry may well be a potential area for tremendous design opportunities, but the sea still remains a hostile environment to design for, and this must always be factored into conceptual thinking. If the industry is to move forward and embrace the future, its designers need to have a more open-minded attitude to the solutions that they are setting out to create, to be bolder, more intellectual in their

approach, grasping every design opportunity as a potential to innovate, going forward, pushing the barriers, enjoying, invigorating, entertaining, caring and, most of all, being downright unreasonable in what they set out to achieve. Only then do we have the faintest chance of success.

The problem does not lie with the passengers but with us, the people who design for them. We have to stop pretending that the general public are not up to the rigours of contemporary design solutions, start treating them as adults and design accordingly. If we are honest with ourselves, it is insulting to offer up another regurgitated decorative solution based on a watered-down version of the Las Vegas School of Design, all of it stuffed into conventional cruise line packaging. We are the problem, so maybe we should start creating design solutions *and* the

future, by designing for it now.

The will is there, the technical capabilities are there, what has been missing is that magic spark or entrepreneurial shove. Evolution is not as Darwin would have us believe, an orderly or gradual process; it is a dramatic leap in the dark, a bold yet inevitable progression, painful sometimes, inspiring always, and as inevitable and necessary as the air we breathe.

Let us create the future that we want and live it powerfully.

Destination Brisbane project team

Designer – McNeece, London (a trading name of MHA Limited)
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