

INTERIORS

Tour a Collector's Retreat Aboard the World's Largest Residential Yacht

Studio Ahead exactlyingly overhauls a two-bedroom maritime residence into a warm family refuge shaped by its owner's passion for craft and collecting

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For a residence aboard *The World*, the largest private residential yacht on Earth, Studio Ahead anchored the living room with custom cabinet shelving whose art panels by Bay Area woodworker John Gnorski depict a family at ease.

PHOTO: INGE PRINS



Maritime nods were kept subtle, but include a Fish Bone Chair by Florence Provencher sourced from Bruises Gallery in Montreal.

PHOTO: INGE PRINS

Remodeling a residence aboard a seafaring vessel bears little resemblance to a similar project unfolding on terra firma, especially when the ship is a megayacht with 165 private units that continually circles the globe. For Homan Rajai, co-founder of San Francisco firm **Studio Ahead**, revamping one such unit aboard **The World**—the largest private residential yacht on Earth—demanded meticulous planning and absolute coordination that left virtually no margin for miscalculation.

Rajai had known the client, biotech entrepreneur Nora Betyousef Lacey, since his teenage years and long admired her commitment to collecting and patronage. She had acquired a palatial Lake Tahoe retreat once owned by a hospitality magnate, complete with his original art collection, yet the setting soon felt stifling. “She doesn’t ski and wanted the freedom to travel,” Rajai recalls. Years earlier, while house hunting in Los Altos, she learned about **The World** through another couple. Curiosity led to extended stays aboard the ship, followed by a decisive shift. She soon purchased a two-bedroom unit and committed fully to a nomadic life at sea.

Translating the relaxed spirit of a weekend retreat into a snug 1,400 square feet wrapped in a stark white-on-white envelope could test even the most seasoned practitioners, but Rajai, Studio Ahead co-founder Elena Dendiberia, and senior designer Seth Huxel embraced the challenge with pleasure. Beyond their personal history with the client, the rapidly rising firm has cultivated a sterling reputation in the Bay Area and beyond by approaching interiors as sites where cultural identity and artisanal work converge, fueled largely by the founders’ sustained engagement with independent makers and vernacular craft traditions.



Aybar Gallery and Vava Objects fashioned the custom fiberglass kitchen, which features zellige tiles in sea-green shades by Davinci Marble and Clé Tile. The induction cooktop is by Sub-Zero Wolf. PHOTO: INGE PRINS

That sensibility guided Betyousef Lacey’s initial brief, which focused solely on furnishings. Studio Ahead introduced a tightly edited mix that included a lustrous green-tiled cabinet by Piet Hein Eek alongside carefully chosen vintage seating (Gianfranco Frattini sofas) and custom wool-upholstered pieces (walnut dining chairs by Hagerman Studios), many marked by round, bulbous shapes. “The boat is moving constantly, so we didn’t want to do many rigid or hard edges,” Rajai says with a laugh. “We wanted the space to feel soft and cocooned.”

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HOMAN RAJAI
Studio Ahead

The studio installed these elements piecemeal when the ship was docked briefly in Montreal and Boston. “While that was happening,” Rajai recalls, “[Betyousef Lacey] was traveling constantly and sending us photos from wherever she was.” Each destination, from Asia to the Caribbean, reinforced her belief that

the apartment should reflect the breadth of her travels. At first, she felt comfortable leaving the interior architecture as is, but that position soon changed. “Once she experienced the level of craft and intention in the furniture, she wanted the same care applied to the entire residence,” says Rajai. “Even when she didn’t arrive with a concrete idea, she stayed fully engaged in the process. If we proposed something unexpected, she pushed it further.”



Black walnut benches by Hagerman Studios, upholstered with woven chair cushions by Lane Alexis, surround a goatskin dining table by Karl Springer. Behind the Gianfranco Frattini sofa sits a cabinet by Piet Hein Eek, a fiberglass table lamp by Jorge Suarez-Kilzi, and artworks by Larry Rivers and Mary Silverwood. PHOTO: INGE PRINS

That expansion opened up a new realm of possibilities—followed quickly by formidable logistical hurdles. Each port allowed only a narrow installation window, and every employee required security clearance weeks in advance, which left no room for last-minute changes. “When we moved into kitchens and baths, the stakes increased,” recalls Huxel, who coordinated logistics and partnered with the Vienna-based contractors who originally built the ship to ensure precise measurements. “Everything had to be exact. If something didn’t fit, there was no backup plan.” Components were fabricated and approved down to the millimeter in Austria before shipment to Cádiz, Spain, for installation during one of the ship’s dock

periods. At one point, the primary bedroom's sizable painting of an ocean vista by Morten Slettemeås risked missing a delivery window. The contractor frantically drove to Seville to retrieve it with minutes to spare.



The primary bedroom is furnished with a custom bed upholstered in cream wool felt by JG Switzer, neighboring an oceanic painting by Morten Slettemeås. PHOTO: INGE PRINS

That incident only begins to capture the technical curveballs Studio Ahead dodged. Every element aboard the ship carries weight limits, fire ratings, and regulatory oversight, and needed to fit through narrow entrances and corridors. “Homan and the client generated bold concepts, so I focused on feasibility,” Huxel explains.

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SETH HUXEL
Studio Ahead

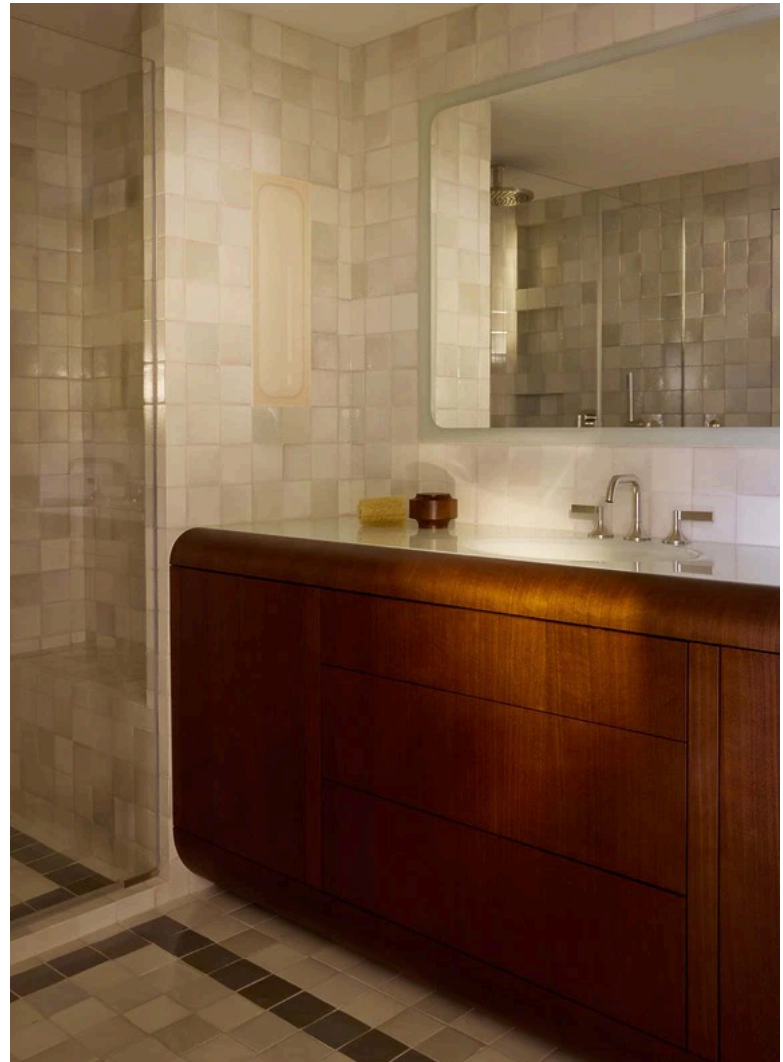
Excess weight in a single unit could throw off the vessel's overall balance, which required creative ideas to evolve through rigorous problem-solving. Plans for onyx slabs in the kitchen, for example, quickly gave

way to Italian fiberglass, a lighter material often used in shipbuilding, fabricated by Vava Objects with Aybar Gallery in soothing sea-green shades. Pearlescent zellige tiles provide a luminous backsplash and echo the Piet Hein Eek cabinet in the living room, a treatment repeated top-to-bottom in the primary and guest baths. Even kitchen shelving demanded careful scrutiny—each shelf includes a subtle lip to keep glassware and plates secure when the ship inevitably navigates choppy waters.



A fiberglass sconce by Faye Toogood for Matter Made, custom bed in cream wool felt by JG Switzer, and Rachel Shillander side table decorated with an ostrich egg from The Strangers Club Cape Town contribute to the guest bedroom's cocooning effect.

PHOTO: INGE PRINS



Zellige wall and floor tiles clad the primary bath, which features a walnut vanity, back painted glass countertop, and Dornbracht sink fittings.

PHOTO: INGE PRINS

Elsewhere, Rajai curated art and furniture attuned to the client's Assyrian heritage, her role as a matriarch who frequently hosts family, and her life at sea. The dining table by Karl Springer is wrapped in goatskin, a material Rajai links to the Qashqai tribes of the Middle East and Central Asia, whose nomadic traditions relied on the mammals for shelter and textiles. Nautical references, meanwhile, are intentionally understated, sans a fishbone skeleton-shaped chair by Florence Provencher of Bruises Gallery. It perches near a bookshelf fitted with hand-painted woodblock prints by Bay Area artist John Gnorski, whose imagery depicts a family resting, playing music, and caring for one another. "It has a grounding quality," Rajai muses. "It's exactly how she wants to feel on this boat."



Artworks by Ida Rittenberg Kohlmeyer and Larry Rivers add bursts of color to the dining room.
PHOTO: INGE PRINS

The clever design interventions and exacting coordination have paid off. “Everyone says this unit is the best on the boat because it has a sense of identity and place,” Rajai says, crediting Betyousef Lacey’s deep involvement in sourcing the designers and makers represented throughout. “She’s proud of all these things, and she’s proud to be a patron to these things.” The satisfaction also registers in the afternoon stillness, when sunlight glimmers and ricochets across the dining table and fiberglass surfaces, animating the rooms as the ship continues course.

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