

The next generation

While older customers favour the glitzy, Las Vegas-inspired interiors common on cruise liners, a new wave of younger passengers is in search of something more contemporary. Tillberg Design's **Fredrick Johansson** tells Elly Earls how ships like NCL's *Norwegian Epic* can embrace shore-side trends and bring variety to a traditionally static sector.

Cruise ships have frequently been criticised for their wittingly over-the-top interiors and glitzy designs, but many in the industry are wary of moving away from a tried-and-tested formula in favour of something more stylish and contemporary, fearful of investing in a short-lived phenomenon and alienating their regular passengers.

Despite this scepticism, however, large scale operators such as Celebrity and Norwegian Cruise Line (NCL) are following in the footsteps of their more compact competitors, taking inspiration from the design of modern boutique hotels. And as this concept is gradually applied to larger and larger liners, the industry can really begin to tap into an often ignored demographic, the younger generation.

At the forefront of this development is marine architecture and interiors company, Tillberg Design, a Sweden-based operation, which has been involved in the styling of more than 140 vessels including *Queen Mary 2* and most recently NCL's largest vessel to date, *Norwegian Epic*.

For Fredrick Johansson, partner and senior architect at Tillberg, the *Epic* marks the beginning of a new generation of ships for NCL. "We've always gone for quite a contemporary style with NCL, but on the older ships the designs were very bold, colourful and daring," he says. "On the *Epic*, the themes are still there but a bit less pronounced and this is reflected by a more mature and stylish use of colours and materials."

NCL is not the first cruise line to opt for a more contemporary look, and, according to



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Johansson, *Norwegian Epic* is set to become for NCL what *Solstice* was for Celebrity, "a very successful move towards the idea of a floating design hotel inspired by the most talked-about resorts ashore.

"A lot of people – particularly younger generations and the young at heart – feel that they would prefer to spend their holidays at a stylish resort hotel because they simply do not feel at home on a glitzy, Las Vegas-inspired cruise ship," he continues. "And in response many cruise ship owners are now trying to wash away that label and show that they are different,

they are contemporary and they are keeping in the loop of what's going on ashore."

This trend will only continue to progress, with operators already starting to return to older ships to upgrade their design features and onboard facilities. "Celebrity is the most obvious example," Johansson notes. "After they launched *Solstice*, *Equinox* and *Eclipse* and had considerable success, they decided to 'solsticise' the rest of the fleet to achieve the same look and atmosphere; I think that development is going to continue."

Indeed, following the launch of *Epic*, NCL has also started to upgrade its existing fleet



Epic's cabins create a fresh and déjà-vu proof experience.

to become more 'Epic-like', modifying cabins to emulate the boutique style found on the line's newest ship.

Form and function

With the bottom line always a high priority, it is critical to achieve a balance of functionality and design on a cruise liner, something Johansson was only too aware of throughout the *Epic* project. He says of the ship's new wave cabins: "We wanted to create a fresh and déjà-vu proof cabin experience and visually these rooms may look very radical. But the principle of the 'interlocking' cabin layout is commonly used to save space.

fleet, with 60% more passenger space than its current largest ships; and this has presented unfamiliar challenges in terms of how to use the space onboard.

"One of these is, of course, that the larger the ship, the harder it becomes for passengers to find their bearings onboard. We spent a lot of time trying to optimise this and create the best possible flows and spaces," Johansson explains. "In order to retain a spacious atmosphere and aid orientation, the central passageway is punctuated with three atria that link the reception and shopping areas on deck five with the public spaces on deck six and seven."

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"This arrangement enables a complete and functional cabin within a module of 2.6m and the split bathroom and shorter module means a space saving (or increased ticket sale and onboard revenue) of approximately 20% compared to a traditional 18m² cabin. Imagine that over a 20 year period."

NCL's *Epic* also offers 128 'Studios' aimed at the budget traveller and built around a communal private lounge christened the 'Living Room.' At only 100 square feet, space is limited in the Studios, but design has not been sacrificed with features including customisable colour-changing light effects.

Although the *Epic* is 32% smaller by gross tonnage than Royal Caribbean's *Oasis of the Seas*, it is by far the largest ship in NCL's

But the marriage of functionality and style is perhaps best epitomised by the *Epic's* stunning atrium chandelier. Made up of spiralling oval discs of up to 30 feet in diameter, approximately 40,000 crystal glass pieces and 112 suspended crystal encrusted balls, which orbit the main structure at varying heights, it is a contemporary interpretation of a classic design, set in a 'strict and clean architecture'; it is also energy-efficient and fully dimmable, something Johansson feels is essential onboard a modern cruise ship.

"Energy efficiency is something we now have to consider everyday as most of our current clients are very progressive and responsible," he remarks. "And it's no longer just a matter of saving money by the use of

low-energy lighting. I think the future success of the cruise industry partly depends on how the players tackle this issue and, of course, the public perception of how it is handled; it will certainly be a huge competitive advantage to be one of the operators that is known to be green in the international market."

Tried and trusted techniques

Some things never change, however, and the rules and requirements for choosing materials remain as stringent as ever. "There is just no time in the yard schedule to specify things that don't work onboard," Johansson acknowledges. "We have, therefore, over several decades, built up a unique library of hand-picked suppliers and manufacturers that we know have got what it takes in terms of looks, quality, certificates, punctuality and after-service. Everything we specify has to look a million dollars, be non-combustible, last forever and cost next to nothing – an equation that keeps us on our toes."

Nevertheless, there are changes afoot and, for Johansson, it is the recession that has really served to highlight the increasing diversity of the sector. "On the one hand, there is a rising number of larger and more budget-friendly ships but, on the other, equal growth in smaller, more exclusive cruise concepts," he notes.

And this variety is echoed in the arena of marine interior design. "We see some ship owners moving away from strongly themed, heavily decorated designs towards more subtle, contemporary styles," Johansson notes, citing Celebrity and NCL as the prime examples. "Others, like Cunard, continue to nurture their heritage and tradition."

It is this 'steadily growing heterogeneity' that Johansson believes will define the foreseeable future of the industry and he and his colleagues have a pivotal role to play. "Who can tell what future ships will look like?" he asks. "That's what we designers are here for; anyone can reproduce what is already out there but the real challenge for a designer is to define and design for the future."

Vessels such as NCL's *Epic* with its clean lines, contemporary features and commitment to energy efficiency, mark the beginning of this new generation. While tradition and heritage will by no means be entirely lost, the industry is slowly but surely beginning to broaden its horizons, gathering inspiration from an ever-widening pool and embracing trends that hit landside hotels many years ago. ■