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Building with Belief

With a 6,000-strong global workforce and over 5,000 vessels floating around the world all built under his name, I cannot imagine that there is anyone else in the world who eats sleeps and breathes shipbuilding as much as the chairman of the family-owned Damen Group, Kommer Damen. Having requested an interview over the past few years, I was eventually invited to his office in Gorinchem, the Netherlands, for two hours of his precious time. He only grants two interviews a year, so I felt fortunate to be able to spend quality time with the head of what could almost be described as a shipbuilding cult. By MHR.
Back in 1969 Damen had a vision and today it remains the same, focused and stable – to build ships on spec, with components and hulls in stock and you can deliver vessels in a very efficient manner and, in theory, quicker than anyone else. Some 43 years later, when I was sitting in his offices overlooking the River Merwede, I could see a fleet of half-built tugs and supply boats, all waiting for a customer. It is this business model that has delivered more than 5,000 Damen ships worldwide and built a family-owned empire of some €1.3bn in turnover in 2011, with an increase in profit and turnover projected and on target for 2012.

Now, where does all this fit in with the yacht market and why would I want to track down this revered figure of the shipbuilding sector? Well, in simple terms, he is a bit of a hero of mine, as back in 1994, two years after the start of my own business, I hosted a conference in Rotterdam for the salvage industry and stood on the deck of a vast SMIT-owned tug and fell in love with the Damen product. It was the engineering, the simple complexity (if that’s not too much a contradiction in terms) and the raw power of this muscular small ship that had the bollard pull to be able to push or drag some of the largest tonnage in the world. This tug was as big as some of the largest superyachts of the day, yet had been built in a fraction of the time and for the past 18 years I have since wondered why yachts cannot be built quicker.

So when Amels Shipyard in Makkum was acquired by the Damen Group the year before I started my business, even then I wondered if this was the start of applying the fundamental shipbuilding principles developed by Kommer Damen.

The period between 1991 and 2000 was an interesting and rocky ride for Amels and valuable lessons were learnt along the way, painful ones too, with bankruptcy on the cards at one point. However, Damen himself was clear in his vision that he should have applied the modular and stock-building programme from the very beginning, but banks and others suggested it was too risky as the market was much more volatile than that of commercial ships.

So they stuck to building full custom projects and followed the market. While a small fleet of famous Amels projects were brought to market with varying degrees of financial success, Damen had built his Group into a power house that no longer relied on banks as it did in the early ‘90s and was now able to manipulate the Amels model into his thinking.

Stories floating around the market would suggest that Amels had five projects in build but no orders, but that didn’t deter the team, and with the right sales strategy it was successful in finding clients who wanted to take delivery of a yacht within 12-18 months, just the right time for a new owner to influence the interior and accommodation requirements. In 2005, the first of the LIMITED EDITIONS concept hit the market and many sceptics didn’t appreciate the idea of a premium semi-custom 50m yacht, as this market was dominated by full-custom ego-driven ideas. The attraction of the LIMITED EDITIONS concept is the time-saving aspect. An owner has a yacht delivered in a shorter period of time, and although it has a set exterior design by Tim Heywood, there is complete scope for personalisation with the interior. Owners can choose any interior designer and tailor it to their individual needs and preferences; there are opportunities for aspects of the exterior to be customised too. The industry soon witnessed this revolution that has been copied and applied by many of the world’s major superyacht brands, but which perhaps have been less transparent about their model. More of this topic later.

So who is Kommer Damen? I found him to be a slender, elegant gentleman with a humble attitude and clear beliefs, who loves shipbuilding and admires what he calls “good-looking ships”. His office is simple and functional and full of business; walls are covered in images of his vessels and spreadsheets and some interesting art, a personal hobby of his. There are antique globes, marine artefacts, books and plenty of seating for informal and formal conversations, all with clear views of his emerging and growing fleet.
He appears to have no ego and is incredibly modest in his approach to answering questions, but with a wry smile you can tell that his diplomatic thinking is avoiding the topic or choosing to divert the subject to something he wants to discuss. He wanted to talk ships, shipbuilding and business, things he truly understood and enjoyed, and all through the exchange he gently puffed away on a classic gentleman’s pipe, filling the bright office with curls of grey smoke, something that is alien in today’s office environment, but when you have achieved what he has achieved, it’s hardly surprising that if he likes doing it, he just does it.

Sitting in his office with Victor Caminada and Rob Luijendijk, both of the Amels team, we all discussed the future of Amels and how Kommer Damen had played his role. The focus of Damen had always centred around the importance of repeat clients. This is the recipe for Damen’s success and longevity and has obviously filtered down to Amels too. Instinctively imposing his ideas on stock building and systematic series production had changed Amels dramatically; the whole team had adopted this doctrine and was preaching to the market the Damen way of life. By building in this way, they seem to have controlled the difficult parts and allowed the clients to have control of the things that really mattered to them. This pre-engineering, design and research & development phase that ensures the build team knows exactly what to do and when has clearly made them more efficient, and Kommer’s face beamed with pride when Rob explained that they were now delivering on time and on budget, without fights or disputes: “It’s actually quite a pleasant process now, without the stress!”

Damen himself was clear in his views that by regulating the build process and controlling the high risk of superyacht construction they would almost guarantee success and a real profit. He contributed some wise words: “You see, in the past, superyacht building was all about selling slots and, as everyone has seen over the past few years and longer, if you haven’t sold your next slot, then it can be quite stressful for the management and you can become desperate and sign bad contracts that can damage your business,” citing the early pre-2000 experiences at Amels, as the prime example, “However, now we control the risk by starting work on a project that has no client, and we are confident that before the end of the programme we will find someone who does not want to wait three or more years for a brand new yacht.” So far, this series of models since the arrival of the first LIMITED EDITIONS has been hugely successful, with 13 units now within the fleet and some exciting new projects on the horizon.

Our conversation turned to Asia where Damen has huge infrastructure and building facilities to serve the vast marketplace. While Kommer was in agreement that the client potential is there, he is not yet considering building
INTERVIEW | KOMMER DAMEN

Damen is a true businessman who has made the sea his focus, creating a fleet of ships and small vessels that conquer the waves and deliver efficient operational comfort to a vast list of clients around the world.

the Amels range in China, but thinks the market will one day demand a new product and perhaps under a new brand exclusively for Chinese clients. However, when talking about Damen orders for pilot boats in the Chinese port of Dalian Harbour, he explained that the client was not interested in buying vessels built in China, but expected them to be built in Europe at Gorinchem, the Damen headquarters and then shipped several thousand miles to the port. However, he added, “If the Chinese market understands and adopts yachting as the lifestyle asset it affords, then having seen the growth of Asia as a shipbuilding market, there is nothing to suggest that one day we won’t see hundreds of yachts delivered in this market.”

He also commented on the quality of the workforce and lack of experience being a barrier to growth in that sector. “It is hard to find management and teams that truly understand quality and efficiency,” he explained, and in fact suggested that to build ships in Vietnam and China, the two Damen shipbuilding centres, it can demand double the man-hours to achieve the same results and therefore in some cases eradicates the perceived benefits. There is no legacy or generation mentality throughout shipbuilding in China. In northern Europe you can see grandfathers, fathers and sons all within the same shipyard; this is currently missing in new emerging industrial nations like China, and without this culture, at the moment quality and experience have to be taught or developed. “This is what makes north European shipbuilding the best in the world. Add to this our research and development programmes and we are on course for a healthy future,” Kommer commented.

Having spent two hours in his company, it is clear to see why, even at his senior age, he is still very much hands on and enjoys working on new designs and seeing what good ideas he and his management can bring to the market. As Rob suggested, “Every year, Damen and now Amels bring new products to the market; [through] innovation and new thinking [we try] to deliver products that don’t exist or can fill a new niche. It’s actually very exciting to be part of this programme and not be following a market of complex custom projects.”

At this year’s Monaco Yacht Show, Amels will not only debut an incredible project under the brand name Sea Axe, something that was introduced to the yacht market a couple of years ago, but will also announce the latest project in the LIMITED EDITIONS concept. At 83m and 2,700gt, this new project is not only a substantial increase in size and volume for the premium semi-custom business model, but it was clear
that everyone around the table was confident that the demand for bigger premium semi-custom products would be there. Having the security of the Damen Group behind the project and the design and pre-engineering work already completed, this will no doubt be one of the exciting announcements of the show season.

If you consider the true spectrum of ships that Kommer has developed and delivered with his vast workforce, it is easy to see how the transfer of ideas and technology, combined with their procurement and service, has made such an impact on Amels. Within the group, there is so much intellect and experience that the technical team at Amels is perfectly placed to integrate new ideas throughout its future fleet, although I am not sure Kommer Damen ever expected to apply one of his commercial support vessel designs to large yachting.

This brings me to the tour of their latest product due to be debuted at Monaco. Outside his office were three versions of the Sea Axe in final stages of completion and a handful of sister hulls and superstructures awaiting clients. This was a perfect demonstration of his “FunDAMENtalism” at work. You could see these crew supply vessels in varying stages and guises, with different livery and technical appendages depending on the work list. The superyacht version of these Sea Axe Fast Crew Supply boats is the Sea Axe Fast Yacht Support vessels. Finished to a superyacht standard in order to complement any superyacht fleet, the hull is faired and painted to a superyacht quality. There is a Bolidt artificial teak deck and the interior is finished to a much higher level – to the standard of the crew accommodation on an Amels yacht. One such project stood out from the busy crowd. The pristine white-hulled M/Y GARÇON, at 67m LOA, the largest of the Sea Axe crew supply fleet, ordered and managed by the Moran team on behalf of one of their clients, was in her final stages of completion.

I am not one to get too excited by new projects, but by coinciding my visit to the Mecca of shipbuilding and meeting the man behind the faith, I was able to get a sneak preview of what I am confident will revolutionise superyacht ownership. With a whole fleet of Sea Axes already in service across offshore industries all cutting through waves and delivering crew and equipment with sea-keeping and shipbuilding efficiency, this new generation of the Sea Axe Fast Yacht Support vessels is a brilliant addition to Damen’s armoury. The Damen Group is so confident of the
product’s success that a sister ship to the 67m Sea Axe is already in build and ready for a client to support his existing larger yacht. When you consider the Damen model of highly efficient shipbuilding and shorter delivery times, these Sea Axe projects are always in build and therefore available at shorter notice than might be expected. The current range covers 37-67m, with a 50m model in between, two of which were delivered as support vessels for an oligarch’s yacht fleet last year.

The most exciting and interesting thing about the Damen Sea Axe is the business model, with delivery prices starting at about €9 million all the way up to about €30 million, depending on the completion specification. This makes this superyacht support vessel an easy addition to an existing large project, where the new build budget may have been €50-100 million. As both Kommer and Rob noted, “With the amount of storage space, extra crew capacity and toy-carrying facility that the Sea Axe delivers, coupled with a helipad if required, you can re-design new builds without all these voluminous additions and just focus on building a good-looking yacht with perfect balance and proportions.”

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This is a truly exciting project that will, in my opinion, revolutionise the yacht market and, as usual, it has Kommer Damen’s name all over it. If you get a chance to tour M/Y GARÇON in Monaco, then I am sure that you will quickly understand the model and the real potential this project offers. Damen is a true businessman who has made the sea his focus, creating a fleet of ships and small vessels that conquer the waves and deliver efficient operational comfort to a vast list of clients around the world. Our conversation then explored his personal interests, including the arts and art, with some interesting examples decorating the Damen HQ, yet when asked about his yachting interests, he admitted to having considered a large yacht, but at the moment it’s just a thought. Today, however, Kommer will be at the helm of his robust 56ft sailing yacht on the next leg of his world tour, sailing with a group of friends from Brisbane to Cape Town, no doubt at the wheel with his pipe puffing into the stiff breeze of the Southern Ocean. He tries to sail for at least two or three months a year.

When pressed about his interest in possessing a large yacht, he admitted that he thinks about it more often these days, so perhaps one day he will join the market that he has created. His knowledge of shipbuilding and his experiences on board Amels’ clients’ yachts will no doubt make the decision process very simple. Even though he loves sailing and did consider a bigger sailing yacht, with designs drawn up some years ago, he explained that he

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loves small anchorages and not being restricted by draught, so that idea was scrapped.

“I think that one day I will buy one, a very classically designed project that will give me privacy and space. It won’t have a commercial ship style as I don’t see the advantage of these trends; it needs to be attractive and a place where I can smoke my pipe and read my paper in peace,” he said, while drawing a long breath through his briar stem, obviously dreaming of sitting on deck observing the watery horizon that has been his marketplace for several decades.

When asked about the future of Amels, he closed our conversation with a few comments about the Damen model: “We have made a success out of refit and repair in the commercial world, with several yards around the world dedicated to servicing the fleet. I can tell you that Rob and I are now exploring this sector more seriously in the superyacht market and are considering acquiring yards either in the Med or in northern Europe that can provide an Amels service base.”

Rob was quick to add, “I think it’s too early to say where and who we are looking at, but we are confident that this is a market we want to develop and have been doing significant research on its true potential.”

Damen is a humble, intelligent man who has made his fortune in shipbuilding and with such a healthy build programme with Amels and the new Sea Axe product, it is easy to see that he is on course for more success. If he does buy a large yacht, you can expect it to be one of his own, as he seems to admire Tim Heywood’s work on the LIMITED EDITIONS, but he jokingly added while refilling his pipe, “In the future, when I start to think about taking over one of the stock in build projects as my own yacht, no doubt some broker or Rob will sell it before I make up my mind and sign my own contract.”

Having met the man and listened to his story and witnessed his vision, Damen is someone who makes up his mind and sticks to it, so I’m not sure there are many people out there who could alter his decision, one day he will be not only a shipbuilder, but a superyacht owner too. However, I think he will spend more time in the shipyard than on his yacht, as this is the source of his fundamentalist views, and with more emphasis on the word ‘fun’.

Images: Sascha Schalkwijk

To view a video of M/Y GARÇON on sea trials, visit www.superyachtnews.com/syf/seaaxe

To comment on this article, email issue137@superyachtreport.com with subject: The FunDAMENtalist

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