

Planes Making

AN EXCERPT FROM
GRAND AMBITION: AN
EXTRAORDINARY YACHT, THE
PEOPLE WHO BUILT IT, AND
THE MILLIONAIRE WHO CAN'T
REALLY AFFORD IT BY G. BRUCE
KNECHT, BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF THE PROVING GROUND.

// If a man is to be obsessed by something,
I suppose a boat is as good as anything,
perhaps a bit better than most. //

—E. B. White

Evan Marshall, one of the world's most sought-after yacht designers, was in his London office in the fall of 2006, hunched over a door-sized desk that was covered with schematic drawings of *Lady Linda*. While his iPod shuffled through a collection of more than five thousand songs, a mix of soul, jazz, and rock from the 1960s to the present, he rarely lifted his head. When he did, it was only to look at his laptop, which held electronic versions of the same plans, together with engineering specifications.

Marshall's appearance was not what most people would expect of a yacht designer. A powerfully built black man with a shaved head, he looked like an African-American Mr. Clean. *Lady Linda* was the most important project of his career. It was his biggest yacht to date, and the owner's ambitious goals gave it the potential to advance the reputation of the London-based design firm Marshall founded in 1993.

He had just begun work on *Lady Linda*'s design. His head was filled with so many thoughts, he was not sure where to begin. Marshall eventually focused on the entryway, which, like the foyer of a large house, would play a crucial role in setting the overall tone. Trinity Yachts had provided a conceptual layout, but the foyer it showed was narrow and oddly shaped, lacking the symmetry and balance Marshall believed to be prerequisites for every estimable interior space.

Turning to his computer, he used his mouse to shift the position of the walls. Although he frequently complained that the design field had suffered because young designers were so dependent on computers that they did not know how to explore concepts with freehand sketches, the forty-seven-year-old Marshall relied on his laptop to expedite many phases of the process. With fingertip ease, he could reverse the direction of stairways, drop tables and couches into a room, land a helicopter on the deck, and even stretch a yacht's overall length. Down the road, computers would enable him to create three-dimensional images into which he could incorporate furniture and fabrics.

Marshall had been drawing boats since he was a child growing up in New York City. His first creations depicted relatively small vessels, inspired by his family's 32-foot cabin cruiser. His father, Kenneth, a sociology professor at Columbia University who was active in the civil rights movement, loved boats, but he never had enough money to maintain his properly, so it rarely left the dock. During an outing on Evan's sixth birthday, the craft almost sank, and was sold not long after that. But boats had already taken hold of the young Marshall's imagination, and he spent much of his boyhood filling spiral notebooks with his ideas. A few years after the aborted birthday cruise, he was walking the docks of a Hudson River marina when he came across the *Highlander*, an imposing green-hulled vessel that belonged to Malcolm Forbes, the flamboyant magazine publisher.

Although he did not know it at the time, Marshall was looking at one of the best-known yachts of the day: a collaboration between Holland's Feadship, widely believed to be the world's best builder, and the foremost yacht designer, an Australian named Jon Bannenberg.

Bannenberg had transformed yacht design. Before him, hulls were invariably white or blue, and interiors were almost always paneled with dark woods. Bannenberg used light-toned woods to create more modern interiors, introduced new shapes for hulls and windows, and incorporated previously unheard-of amenities, including elevators and movie theaters. He also encouraged owners to build bigger boats. In the mid-1990s Bannenberg designed a game-changing 316-foot giant for Leslie Wexner, the retailer who founded the women's clothing chain The Limited. The yacht — Wexner named it *Limitless* — kicked off an epic nautical footrace. The next step up was *Octopus*, a 413-footer commissioned by Microsoft billionaire Paul Allen. Shortly before he died in 2002, Bannenberg designed Oracle Corporation founder Larry Ellison's 453-foot *Rising Sun*, which became the world's largest privately owned yacht.

The captain's stateroom and galley located amidship acts as a buffer between the aft dining area and the owner's suite forward.



During his examination of the *Highlander*, when Marshall managed to glimpse into its galley, he was astounded by what he saw: a pair of commercial-sized refrigerators. Since his father's cabin cruiser had only a small ice chest, the presence of the large appliances was a revelation.

Marshall's fascination with boat design began as a childhood obsession, a youthful fantasyland, but over time he began to believe it could become something more. After studying naval architecture in college, he secured a job in 1985 with Sparkman & Stephens, a legendary New York design firm. In 1990 Marshall went to work for one of Bannenberg's former designers. Three years later he founded his own firm.



Labor is the predominant expense in modern-day yacht building: the aluminum or steel used to form the hull and superstructure represents less than 5 percent of the total cost. Labor accounts for two-thirds. New materials and technologies have diminished the need for many types of blue-collar labor, but this does not apply to large metal-hulled vessels.

Since Trinity had agreed to build *Lady Linda* for a fixed price — the base amount was \$37 million, though Von Allmen (original owner) would eventually agree to several increases — Marshall's instinctive taste for curves would inevitably lead to conflict. The tension would be complicated further by Marshall's own interests vis-à-vis Trinity.

Evan K. Marshall (left) opened his studio in 1993. His treatment of *Lady Linda's* drawing room (below), dining area (right) and master stateroom (bottom) show his preference for curves and special woods; circular motifs on the overheads define individual spaces.



The plans Marshall was developing for *Lady Linda's* interior layout were a cornerstone of the overall design process. The conceptual layouts Trinity had provided were just a starting point. However, they would play another role in one of the great tugs-of-war that are part of the building of almost every large yacht: even though Trinity marketed itself as a builder of custom yachts, it sought to reduce its costs by encouraging a degree of standardization. It also attempted to minimize the kind of rounded shapes that are easy to draw but expensive to fabricate because of the extra manpower they require.

The company had referred several clients to him, and he did not want to do anything to jeopardize that relationship, unless he had to.

Several weeks after Marshall began developing *Lady Linda's* design, he went to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to talk to the owner, Doug Von Allmen and his wife, Linda, the yacht's namesake, about his preliminary ideas.

The Von Allmens' house is a sprawling Mediterranean-styled structure situated on the Intracoastal Waterway, the system of interconnected bays and sounds that reaches from Florida to New Jersey. Through the glass of the front door, he could see the living room and, beyond that, a manicured

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backyard and the dock that would be home to *Lady Linda*. Linda opened the door and led Marshall to the library, where her husband was waiting. Once they sat down at a marble-topped bar, Marshall unrolled a drawing showing a side view of *Lady Linda's* exterior. The superstructure was dominated by two long bands of continuous dark-glass windows that had swooping curved shapes. The arched forms were Von Allmen's idea — he had faxed a simple sketch to Marshall several months earlier — and the designer had embraced the idea. The shapes reminded him of scimitars, and he thought they would go a long way toward establishing *Lady Linda's* character. He hoped a similar aesthetic could be carried over into the interior, with cabinetry that would be bowed rather than flat faced.

After the Von Allmens examined Marshall's drawings of *Lady Linda's* exterior, the conversation moved to the interior. Von Allmen was particularly eager to talk about an idea he had for the sky lounge, the space that would share the uppermost deck with the bridge. "I'd like to put the biggest

flat-screen television we can find on the forward bulkhead," he said. Because the bridge would be in front of the sky lounge, there could not be any windows on that wall. Therefore, while the sky lounge would have excellent sight lines in three directions, it would be impossible to see what was directly in front of the yacht. The Von Allmens' idea was to mount a video camera at the bow that could relay the view to a large television screen.

Marshall promised to look into large flat-screen televisions and then brought up a different topic: the construction schedule. "I've asked Trinity for a schedule several times because we need to establish some milestones," he said, "but they haven't gotten anything back to me."

The timetable was crucial because it would figure into one of the other big battlegrounds involved in getting a big yacht built. Under Von Allmen's contract with Trinity, *Lady Linda* was supposed to be delivered to him by May 15, 2009. Every day of delay would reduce its price tag by \$10,000. Given the magnitude of the potential penalty, Trinity would be inclined to pin the blame for any delay that did occur on the owner or — more likely — Marshall. This meant the milestones in Trinity's schedule might have comfortable cushions of time for the construction phases but difficult deadlines for when Marshall had to deliver various plans. He was eager to get his hands on the proposed dates so he knew exactly what he was up against.

"I've just got to get the schedule," the designer declared.

By then, Von Allmen was glancing at his watch and rising from his chair. "I know, I know," he said. "I'll call Trinity later today."

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