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VOYAGE

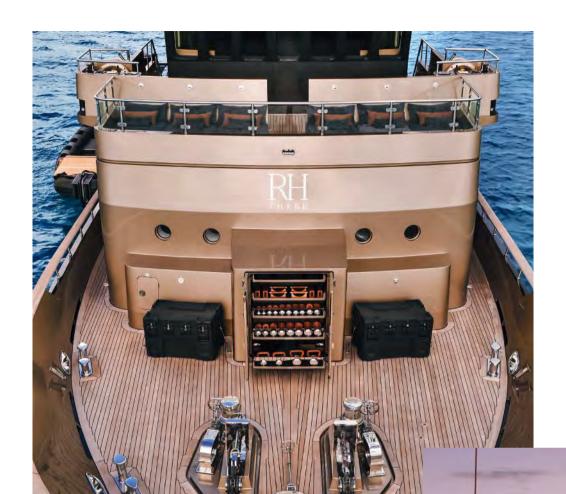
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When home-furnishings company RH decided to transform an explorer yacht in its image, it was a high-risk move. But, as CEO Gary Friedman tells Charlotte Hogarth-Jones, the gamble has paid off handsomely Photography COURTESY OF RH





hen it comes to retail, Gary Friedman knows a thing or two particularly when it comes to selling luxury home furnishings. After dropping out of college at 18, the charismatic San Franciscan began his 47-year career stocking shelves at Gap. But his keen eye for detail and innate talent for sales propelled him to become the brand's youngest ever regional manager.

William Sonoma recruited him when he was 29 and he spent the next 13 years of his career helping grow that business's annual revenue from \$300 million to \$2.1 billion thanks in part to his introduction of novel and interactive experiences (demonstration kitchens, for example, and tasting bars), now found in department stores around the world.

In 2001, he left William Sonoma after being passed over for a promotion to CEO, and he invested several million dollars of his cash in the then-struggling chain Restoration Hardware, now known as RH, and became its CEO. Since then, he's been on a mission to elevate RH from a company





selling trinkets and \$2 card games to a global luxury brand. Today, it sells everything from marble entry tables to works of art priced at thousands of dollars. And the key to taking the brand further, he believes, doesn't lie in glossy billboards or prime-time Super Bowl slots, it's in a beautiful superyacht.

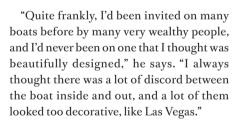
The company bought the 127ft explorer yacht RH Three in 2019 and firmly put the RH stamp on her during a refit in Florida. A calling card for the brand's design aesthetic and a way to gain the attention of a wealthy clientele, the yacht is also a charter vessel in her own right. She hits the market this season and will operate in the Bahamas in the winter and the Mediterranean in the summer. However, Friedman explains, it was a chance encounter that got things to this point.



design philosophy are evident in the RH San Francisco Gulfstream jet RH One (left and below)







A designer in Belgium who had spotted a yacht for sale called RH_3 got the ball rolling. "He emailed me and asked if it was the company yacht. I laughed and replied, 'I don't know anything about yachts; I'm not even very good at swimming!" The designer's note, however, had piqued his interest, and he soon found himself flicking through the listing. "I said, 'Yeah, it looks like we could have [designed] that," he says.

Friedman kept tabs on the yacht, visited it with his design team in Sicily, and a year later presented the project to his board. Her good condition and fair price, he reasoned, meant they wouldn't have to invest much financially to make an impact, and, besides, "This wasn't one of those white plastic boats

you see in the harbor in Saint-Tropez, which are all the same. I liked that it was different."

Following the acquisition of RH_3 , which was renamed RH Three, renovations began in earnest, although much of the original structure and design remained untouched. Built in 2003 by Turkish yard RMK Marine to a design by Vripack, the yacht had already been blessed with a transformation thanks to a renovation by the esteemed Belgian architect Vincent Van Duysen in 2016. "He had taken this boat to a certain level in a way that was extraordinary," Friedman explains. "We didn't change any of the bathrooms, they were incredible. We didn't really change any of the staterooms apart from a bit of painting and new bedding, or the lighting either."

Besides, he's keen to point out, the yacht isn't a floating catalog of what can be bought in RH stores. Rather, she represents the essence of RH quality and good design.

There were, however, some major adjustments - starting with the yacht's exterior. Her hull was originally white and



Above: RH CEO Gary Friedman. Top: the company's "showboat" represents the essence of its quality and design sensibility

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"This wasn't one of those white plastic boats you see in the harbor in Saint-Tropez which are all the same. I liked that it was different"

gray, whereas today it's a dark, metallic Phantom Gray with a champagne metallic above. It was a controversial decision. "Everyone told us you can't paint the boat metallic, it'll look bad, it'll be too reflective," Friedman remembers. "So we almost didn't. And then right at the end, we said, 'You know what, the planes are painted metallic [the company had previously designed two Gulfstream jets known as *RH One* and *RH Two*], and everyone told us that was a bad idea, and they look great.' So, then we painted *RH Three* metallic, and now she's the most beautiful boat in the harbor!"

Another move was changing the layout of the crew cabins and downsizing the yacht's five guest cabins to four in the process. "I went down into the crew quarters and I was in shock at the space the crew was kept in. I mean, two people in a room that was maybe a meter wide with 70-centimeter-wide (2.3ft) bunks on top of each other? I can't believe that's much better than a prison cell; [I thought] it was crazy," Friedman says. "Everyone said, 'That's just the way it is, don't worry about that,' and I said 'Well, I do worry about that. We have a crew that we expect to give luxury service to our clients, but we're not giving luxury service to them."

The crew then spent a week at RH's California Center of Innovation and Product Leadership, advising designers on what they needed and felt was important in their space. One of the five guest bedrooms then became the captain's room, while the captain's room became a spacious twin cabin, replacing one of the two bunk rooms that previously was for the stewardesses.

The upper deck was also transformed, from a space that was half lounge, half gym, to a single area with a bar and lounge that extends outdoors, which entailed changing the white ceiling into a wooden one. Initial plans to place a Jacuzzi on the top deck were abandoned when the team realized how much it would cost in terms of stabilizing the boat. The planned Jacuzzi was replaced with a large fire pit and outdoor daybed to create a sunset terrace, while a new gym was created on the bow, with equipment stashed out of sight.

Inside the salon, a masculine palette of champagne lacquer, wire-brushed white oak, caramel Italian



RH Three's main salon is dressed in the same color scheme as the exterior





Instead of a taking maximalist approach, the interior design relies on curated shelves and an extensive spirits bar taking center stage

bar taking center stage.

Friedman has been on board lately to iron out any last-minute kinks. "I don't get any freebies," he says with a laugh. "I have to pay full price, and I've chartered the yacht three times now. One was last winter, and then I chartered this summer, one week in Saint-Tropez and one week in Ibiza."

Friedman was born into. He grew up "very poor," he says and he "barely saw a swimming pool" where he lived. "I thought rich people had color TVs, I never even knew about superyachts," he goes on, explaining that his father passed away when he was five years old, and his mother suffered from

bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Throughout his childhood, he lived in "tiny apartments," while "the most my mom ever earned in one year was \$5,000, and that was our best year."

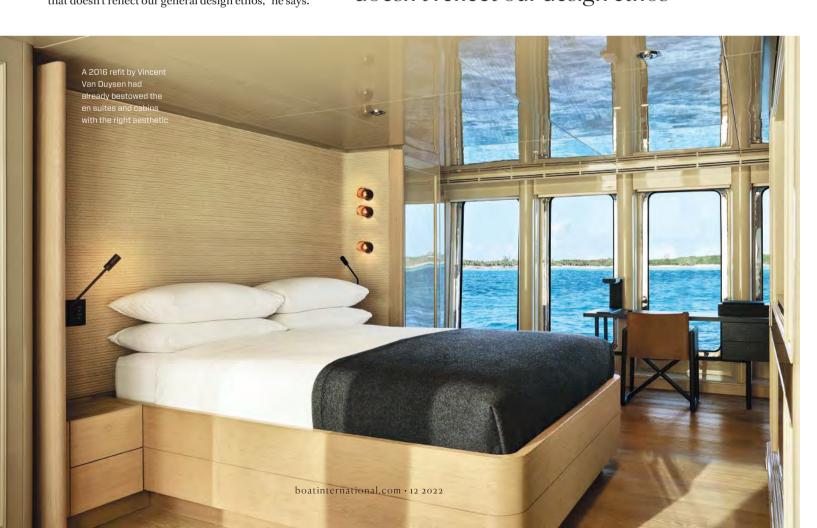
"I had no clue into design or luxury, I had no background," he says; however, he thinks that gave him a unique perspective.

"When you come from outside of industries, you come at it with a lot more curiosity. Steve Jobs was never in the music industry, the cellphone industry, or the video camera industry, but he reinvented them and had a fresh view of them. If you think about the car industry, Elon Musk had never built a car before. How does the car industry, with all that capital, all the knowhow, how could they not figure out electric cars? It's because they're trapped by what they know."

Since RH Three has been out and about, she's gathered her fair share of attention. The company has now had requests for yacht design from some of its biggest investors, as well as owners who have seen it on the move. With such a clear and fixed aesthetic, catering to the personal tastes of clients could be problematic, and Friedman agrees that the brand will be choosy about what it takes on. "We're not going to do anything that doesn't reflect our general design ethos," he says.



"The brand will be choosy... We're not going to do anything that doesn't reflect our design ethos"



According to Friedman, RH Three is already fully booked for the Caribbean season and has limited availability for next summer in the Mediterranean, having been swiftly snapped up by RH customers and experienced charterers alike. A sprinkling of stardust due to some "very influential people" booking time on board too, will no doubt have helped her reputation.

For now, other projects are vying for attention. Among them, RH Guesthouse in New York and RH England in the UK - a 73-acre estate in Oxfordshire with a 1615 manor house, built by legendary neoclassical architect John Soane, which will mark the company's first big move into Europe.

Nonetheless, RH has already met with Feadship several times to discuss the possibility of designing a new yacht from scratch and has also been in talks with Vitruvius designer Philippe Briand about a potential collaboration. "It's not the right time yet for us to do [another] superyacht, but it's more likely in our future than not," Friedman teases.

Of course, there's a risk that another yacht project could prove to be somewhat of a "difficult second album," but Friedman talks only of opportunities and the learnings that come from operating in unfamiliar territories and the joys of finding new ways around problems that the industry had previously thought insurmountable. And besides, he says, once RH takes on a project, it commits to it 100 percent. "Our expectation is only to do stuff that is really special."

