

# FRAME

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Courtesy of Virgin Voyages

# CHARTING NEW WATERS

They're known as ocean polluters, retiree retreats and now even coronavirus containers. Not a great start for anyone trying to overhaul the cruise ship's image, especially when that means targeting a younger, experience-driven generation that places a high value on wellness and sustainability. But that's what Virgin Voyages is setting out to do – by throwing a group of designers who've never worked in the cruise industry before straight into the deep end.



Concrete's design of the upper decks altered the blueprint of the cruise ship. One of the main changes was the addition of a running track, part of their 'playground for adults' concept.



**CARIBBEAN SEA** Cruise ships have copped a lot of flak over their time. Comedian Bill Burr took the mockery to the point of suggesting he start ‘randomly sinking cruise ships’ as a solution to overpopulation. ‘You get 2,500 to 3,000 people a whack, and I think it’s a really good mix of people to get rid of, you know? Think about the kinds of people that take a cruise. These aren’t forward thinkers. These aren’t seekers . . . You ever hear someone coming back from a cruise? It’s one of the worst stories you’re ever gonna hear. Cause they don’t do shit.’ Laughter ensued from an audience of the presumably non-cruise persuasion. And it’s this audience that Virgin Voyages is trying to seduce with a new breed of ocean liners that look to modernize sea vacations.

In order to offer a different kind of spatial experience, Virgin Voyages decided to collaborate with creatives who would think about space differently – specifically because none of them have ever worked in the cruise

industry before. *Scarlet Lady*, the first in the fleet, includes interiors by Tom Dixon, Roman and Williams, Softroom, WorkAC and Concrete. What these studios have in common is that they’ve all designed top-notch hospitality spaces on land. Virgin wants to rival the best hotels and restaurants – but then on water. Without past experience to drive practicalities, the designers could unwittingly push the boundaries. ‘If you’ve worked on a ship before, you know the limitations and think certain things are impossible,’ says Lisa Hassanzadeh, partner and head of interior at Concrete. ‘We were naive and thought *everything* was possible.’

To ensure the design process was as mutually beneficial as it could be, the collaborators were involved from the very beginning, even before Virgin had settled the contract with the builder. ‘Normally designers are handed the blueprints of the ship,’ says Hassanzadeh. ‘They can clad it, but the main

steelwork is fixed: here’s the pool, there’s the main staircase. We developed the proposal for the upper decks, which changed the ship’s blueprint quite a lot.’

One of the main changes was the addition of a running track, part of Concrete’s ‘playground for adults’ concept. Virgin Voyages are for those over the age of 18 only – no kids are allowed, but the target market is far younger than the 50-pluses that have long dominated the decks. Focusing on a more youthful demographic wasn’t part of the briefing, says Hassanzadeh, ‘but it’s of course obvious. If you want to change the way people use cruise ships, you have to change the target group.’ To appeal to a ‘woke’ generation well-versed in the experience economy, the project focuses on wellness, hospitality and – perhaps most surprising for the cruise-ship category – sustainability.

The wellness and hospitality offerings align with younger demographics »



**The Groupie** – a bookable karaoke, gaming and movie lounge – is filmmaker Roman Coppola’s modern take on a Japanese-style karaoke room.



**TOP Cabins** are designed for both alone time and socialization, with beds that can fold away to become bench seating.

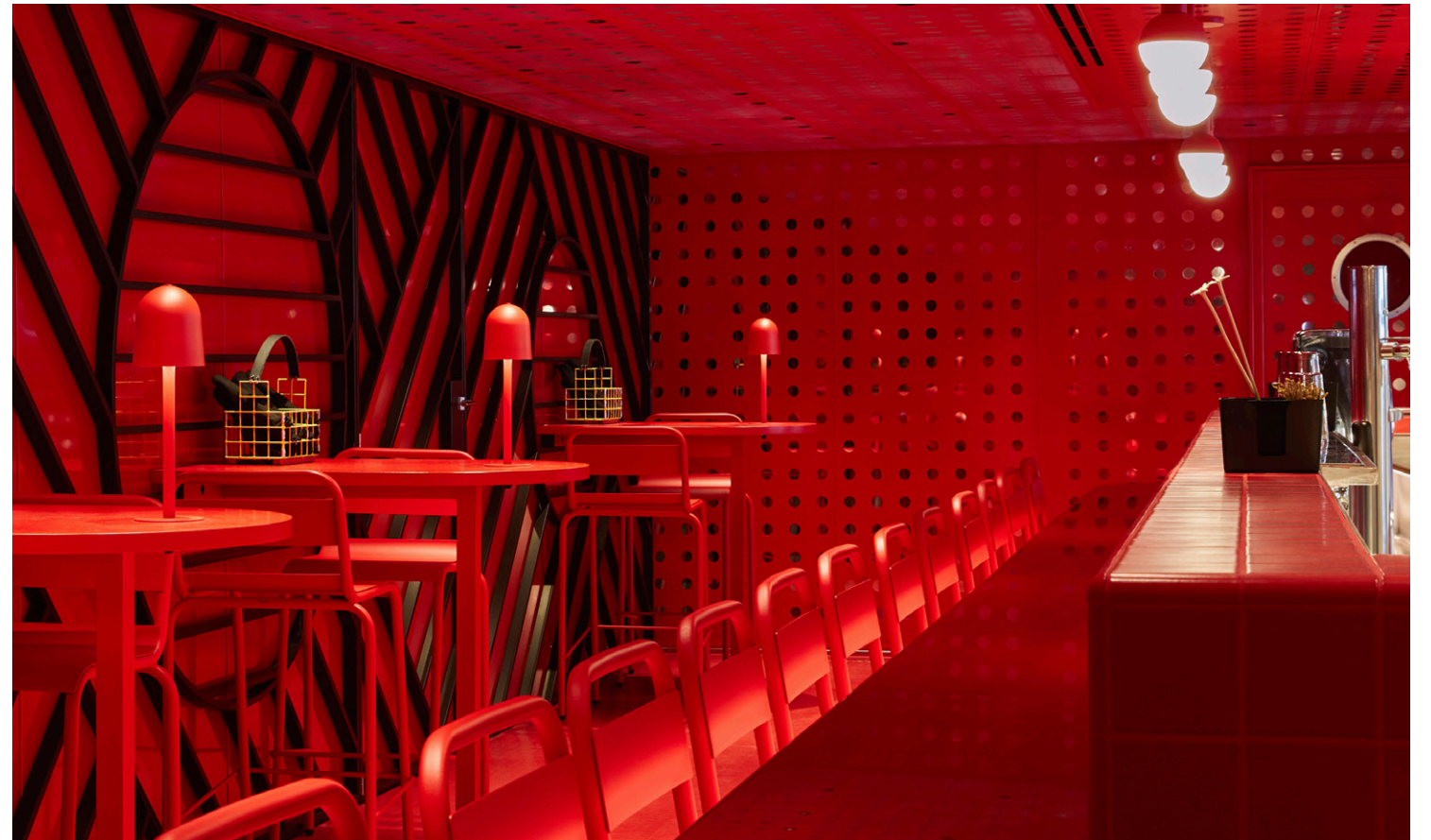
**BOTTOM Tom Dixon-designed suites** feature large marbled bathrooms with peekaboo showers.



Unaware that open kitchens aren't typically possible on cruise ships, Concrete designed Test Kitchen like an open laboratory. Rather than adjust the design, they tweaked the concept. Some components are cooked back of house, but whatever can happen in front of guests, does.







Concrete's more casual restaurant contribution, Razzle Dazzle, is inspired by the ship camouflage technique known by the same name. Hidden at the restaurant's rear is the Red Bar in on-brand Virgin red.

demanding the luxury of choice. There are 'show-off places to see and be seen', says Hassanzadeh, as well as spaces for quiet contemplation and meditation. A 'ying/yang approach', Hassanzadeh calls it. Even the aforementioned running track offers the potential for a solo evening stroll. The ship has several different restaurants, two of which Concrete designed. Instead of the standard cruise-ship affair, where 2,000 people might gather in one large buffet restaurant, 'you can have different experiences on different evenings – more like you're in a city than in a machine where you hand over your passport and are told what to enjoy.' Concrete went for two extremes: Razzle Dazzle is approachable and casual, Test Kitchen is higher end. At the latter, diners gather around islands to watch the chefs in action. 'We didn't know that open kitchens on boats just aren't done,' says Hassanzadeh, 'especially since *Scarlet Lady*'s home harbour is in the US where restrictions are higher than in Europe.' But rather than adjust the design, they tweaked the concept. Some components are cooked back of house, but whatever can happen in front of guests, does. As for the cabins, rather than conform-

ing to the large social spaces-tiny sleeping spaces relationship of ocean liners – and adopted by many contemporary co-living providers, by the way – they're designed for both alone time and socialization. Beds can fold away to become bench seating, for example. 'You can use them just for hanging out,' says Hassanzadeh. 'Almost all of them have a balcony, too, a private spot that looks out over the sea.'

It would be hyperbolic to call *Scarlet Lady* entirely 'sustainable'. 'Trying to build a completely environmentally friendly cruise ship is like trying to build an environmentally friendly aeroplane,' says Hassanzadeh. 'You do as much as you can, but it will never be sustainable until you stop using certain fuels. What I can say is that Virgin Voyages makes a big step towards sustainability *compared with others*.' As Virgin outlines in a statement: 'While our long-term ambition is to transition to low- and zero-carbon fuels, the technology and infrastructure required at scale are not yet available. In the meantime, we are pioneering new onboard technologies, supporting research and development for alternative fuels and purchasing carbon

offsets. Utilizing carbon offsets is an immediate, and measurable, first step we can take towards continuous improvement.' Other initiatives include banning unnecessary single-use plastics from the ship, reducing food waste (another reason for the banishment of the buffet) and purifying wastewater to make it potable.

What Virgin Voyages couldn't predict, of course, was the added dent in the cruise ship's image brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. Suddenly, vessels were presented in the news as coronavirus containers. Virgin Voyages decided to delay its launch celebration until the dust settles – and when it does, Hassanzadeh believes this line of onboard adventure might take off in an entirely new way. 'I think people will travel again, but they'll travel more consciously. We're becoming more aware of the true cost of travel, environmentally speaking. I think we'll be more cautious in our search for transformative experiences, and a trip on a cruise ship like this would be just that: a once-in-a-lifetime thing.' **TI**  
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**REBRANDING** If you want to radically upgrade something's image, it often pays to go back to the drawing board. In a cruise ship's case, the framework is typically fixed before the design teams come on board, making any interventions limited. By bringing in collaborators at a much earlier stage, they can impact the architecture itself and potentially shape new spatial experiences. Attracting new audiences is about more than moving floors and walls around, though. If a typology has a bad sustainability reputation, for example, newcomers will have to go the extra mile to convince their potential clientele.