

A decade of redefining cruise design

Rebecca Gibson asks Javier Calle, Jorge Mesa and Yohandel Ruiz how Studio DADO's innovative approach to creating emotionally resonant cruise ship interiors has transformed the guest experience

Drawn together by a shared set of values and an aim of “genuinely reimagining” the cruise guest experience, interior designers Javier Calle, Jorge Mesa, Yohandel Ruiz and Greg Walton opened Studio DADO in Miami, Florida, on 3 November 2016. Supported by Walton's Italian greyhound Enzo – who served as the firm's unofficial mascot until his owner retired in January 2025 – the team began working in a modest South Beach apartment.

“We had a few Ikea tables, some broken keyboards, old laptops and a plant a friend gave us as a good luck charm,” recalls Mesa. “Somehow we got the table assembled and made everything work. That first year was probably the most challenging, but also the most fun by far.”

The team started developing its design approach by asking one simple question – what if? “We're all world travellers and we knew what was out there, especially in the cruise industry,” says Calle. “We knew it could be so much better.”

Studio DADO quickly established that the key to elevating the guest experience

lay in designing immersive spaces people could connect with on a personal level.

“When we design a ship, we rarely think of it as a ship,” explains Ruiz. “Our goal is to create spaces that compete on the same level as those in a high-quality, land-based resort or a starred restaurant in

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a first-tier city. To do that, we aim to cue an emotional response from the guests, so we start by asking how we want them to feel, how we can enrich their lives or how we can help them create a shared memory with someone they love. The design has



Inspired by great European conservatories, Oceania Allura's Grand Dining room features hydrangea chandeliers





Photo: Nick Torcagada

Oceania Vista's private dining space Privee is designed to make guests feel like they are dining inside a flower, with the backlit debossed walls and the chandelier resembling the petals and the pistils, respectively

to work from a practical standpoint, and comply with ISO requirements, but it also has to stir the soul and remind us all why travel is such a fulfilling and transformative experience.”

Calle explains that design must offer guests “some version” of escape. “A stateroom or dining venue should do more than function well; it should draw people out of their everyday life and into something more vivid and emotionally resonant,” he says. “We go beyond logistics to focus on the elements people remember – the room, the lighting, the mood during dinner, the sense their experience felt a little heightened. This is what shapes how guests talk about their trip. We’re always chasing that emotional connection and when we get it right, guests carry that memory with them forever.”

Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings (NCLH) was one of the first major

brands to recognise Studio DADO’s potential and enlisted the firm to refine the luxury positioning of its Norwegian Cruise Line, Oceania Cruises and Regent Seven Seas Cruises (Regent) brands.

“NCLH gave us our first big break,” says Mesa. “We aligned on several core

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Javier Calle

tenets, most notably the importance of guest experience and that great design is a key differentiator. We were hired to work on Norwegian Cruise Line’s R-class and Jewel-class ships, which led to our

project on the first Prima-class vessel, Norwegian Prima.”

The companies have since collaborated on subsequent Prima-class vessels, as well as several ships for both Oceania Cruises and Regent. “NCLH was the perfect early client and remains an important partner,” says Mesa. “The team cares about design and creating unforgettable experiences for guests. They see the value we bring to the table and give us a lot of latitude.”

The success of these projects led to projects for other brands, including Carnival Cruise Line, Princess Cruises and river operator American Cruise Lines. “That’s when we knew we had something special,” says Mesa.

As Studio DADO’s client base and project portfolio expanded, the firm refined its business processes and strengthened both its team and capabilities. “We were a small, boutique practice but we were



Photo: Douglas Friedman



Photo: Christian Santiago



Photo: Douglas Friedman

Studio DADO focuses on the small details when designing spaces like Norwegian Prima's Onda By Scarpetta restaurant and Oceania Allura's library. Top, Art-Deco-styled bevelled mirrors, marble surfaces and bold accent tones evoke the Roaring Twenties in Oceania Allura's Martini Bar

seen as disruptors and upstarts,” says Calle. “This early work allowed us to hire more people and buy a few computers, which helped us become more efficient and grow our company culture. We weren’t big on rules or conventional thinking, and this mindset attracted more talent to our team, as well as new work.”

Eventually, the firm moved into a studio in Coral Gables, which Calle says made the team feel “grown up and serious”. While the firm has since outgrown its original studio and is now seeking a larger space, it has retained its innovative spirit and forward-thinking approach.

“We still have a lot of fun with our work and that makes a huge difference,” says Calle. “Our clients notice – they like to visit and roll up their sleeves to join us for work sessions and charettes. These partnerships are why we keep doing what we do.”

Approaching every project with this progressive mindset has enabled Studio DADO to challenge long-standing interior design conventions and redefine how the industry envisions the onboard experience. For example, by rethinking how food and beverage venues are designed, the firm has

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reshaped the role the culinary offering plays in the overall guest experience, says Mesa.

“Cruise lines once centred their food and beverage offerings on a limited set of operational models, but now a ship’s culinary identity carries as much weight as its itineraries,” he says. “That’s especially true for cruise

lines like Oceania Cruises and Regent Cruises, where guests make booking decisions based on the promise of Michelin-level cuisine and atmosphere. Every project gives us a chance to interpret cuisine through materials, lighting, sound and movement.”

This is exemplified onboard Oceania Cruises’ Oceania Allura, which debuted in July 2025. “Oceania Allura showcases some of the best work we’ve done,” says Calle. “The ship sets a new standard for luxury at sea and embodies the brand’s focus on culinary excellence. One reason it stands out is because we designed so many of the spaces – including staterooms, dining venues and public areas. This allowed us to create seamless transitions between spaces and develop a unified onboard experience – everything feels intentional, curated and considered. It’s not something most designers think



Photo: Stephanie Hynes

From left, Javier Calle, Yohandel Ruiz, Jorge Mesa and Greg Walton founded Studio DADO in 2016

about, but it was important to us and it makes a vast difference.”

Now that guests’ expectations are shaped by constant access to videos, reviews and recommendations from other travellers, it’s more crucial than ever for Studio DADO to design with intention, says Ruiz.

“Guests can sense when an experience has, or has not, been carefully considered, and they’re looking for something that goes beyond novelty,” he explains. “They want to encounter new places, flavours, moods or perspectives that expand their horizons. This makes hospitality design more demanding but also more rewarding because it gives us the opportunity to create spaces that are emotionally precise, visually compelling and impossible to mistake for anywhere else. This is exactly the kind of challenge that drives us.”

Studio DADO’s ability to navigate complex challenges and deliver bespoke, luxury cruise ship interiors has kept the firm in high demand in the decade since it launched. In addition to continuing to work on new cruise ships, the firm is also diversifying by applying its design expertise to land-based hospitality, restaurant and retail projects.

“We’re working with several new clients, all of whom have come to us looking to step up their design and find innovative ways to enrich the guest journey,” says Calle. “We believe cruising may be entering a ‘golden age’, where guests are looking for a more sophisticated and transformative experience. And designers must rise to that challenge.”

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The firm anticipates cruise ship interior design will follow a similar trajectory to land-based hospitality. “There will likely be some consolidation that leaves a few larger cruise lines and limited regional operators, while the boutique and superyacht brands will continue to find

their niches,” says Mesa. “In addition, there will be increased stratification, with ships becoming more targeted to a specific clientele through the level of luxury, design, amenities or itineraries they offer.

“There are only two paths for the industry to follow: one where ships get larger and offer more extreme onboard amenities and activities, and another where they become more bespoke and intimate. The market can support both, but Studio DADO is most aligned with the latter.”

To keep pace with these industry shifts, Studio DADO will continue investing in the talent, skills and tools required to stay ahead of evolving design demands.

“We’re all passionate enough to believe great design can change the world, but realistic enough to know we must always deliver for our clients,” says Calle. “We need the best people to achieve this goal.”

Ruiz agrees. “We’re constantly looking for new skills and talent,” he says. “We’re on what we call ‘the impatient search’ – we’re always looking for both the next thing and also a new way of getting there. We want to improve both product and process. Keeping pace with design trends is important, but so is testing new techniques, tools and technology. It can be terrifying, but it’s also exciting.” **CFI**