

Neither House nor Boat but Bits of Both

In search of new markets, Global Boatworks Holdings marries quality home and boat building in a South Florida superyacht yard.



Text by Marilyn DeMartini

Photographs courtesy Global Boatworks Holdings

It floats on a barge hull with decks, holding tanks, and outboard engines, but it's not really a boat. It's a two-story steel and wood construction with a flat roof, 9' (2.7m) ceilings, and balconies, but it's not really a house. It has two staterooms, two heads, an office, a saloon with LED fireplace, a galley, and a wine cellar, but it is not a yacht. And don't call it a *houseboat*. The builders—Ron Rowe, Ron Rowe II, and their family's Global Boatworks Holdings LLC—say that term has a stigma. They call *Luxuria* “a floating luxury-living craft.” Built at Lauderdale Marine Center by the Rowes' public company—which has roots in Boston's North Shore and ventured from commercial and residential construction and development into “vessel” building—the hybrid boat

and townhome was designed for South Florida, where waterfront living is increasingly high priced and high-rise. For boatbuilders or homebuilders alike it looks like diversification.

The Family

Brothers Ron and Bob Rowe grew up boating and lobstering outside Boston, and only later went on to build homes in South Florida. As a teenager Ron, with the help of his father and other family members, built a custom 40' (12.2m) lobsterboat, a project that taught him about seaworthy New England vessels and boatbuilding early on. As the Rowe family built their business in Florida, Bob (Global Boatworks' CEO) often returned to Boston, managing the company while Ron,

Luxuria Specs	
Length	46' (14m)
Beam	24' (7.3m)
Hull material	steel
Draft	2'2" (0.66m)
Engines	Suzuki DF 300 AP (x2)
Cabin headroom	9' (2.7m)
Freeboard	2'10" (0.86m)
Dry weight	136,000 lbs (61,689 kg)
Fuel tank	120 gal (454 l) aluminum
Fresh water	(2) 150 gal (568 l) PVC
Holding tanks	(2) 150 gal PVC
Price	\$1,495,000 (in 2017)

who has been the construction and electrical specialist and operations arm of the company, worked a variety of projects in Florida.

In keeping with his own hands-on education, Ron started bringing his son, Ron II, along on projects so he would get the hang of housebuilding. Soon Ron II was swinging a hammer and knocking out walls, getting practical experience in the trades. He went on to study mechanical drawing in high

Above—The Global Boatworks-built *Luxuria* is essentially an elegant floating home but has its own propulsion engines and satisfies Coast Guard requirements and terrestrial building codes in Florida.

school, and was mentored in after-school programs by a European teacher who introduced him to new methods of construction and engineering. Today he is the third generation of this family that has made a name building homes ashore and now afloat.

The floating-home concept was inspired by fond memories of the 1980s, when the Rowes vacationed in South Florida. They heard about houseboats for rent at Marina Bay, a marina and resort in Fort Lauderdale that catered to celebrities and the wealthy. A cluster of two-story houseboats with four rooms each was a draw for the resort, which also included a restaurant; a health club with a rooftop deck; the Nauti Dolphin, owned by some Miami Dolphin players; several privately owned luxury houseboats; and a 200-slip marina. (Most of the houseboats were sold off over the years, and the last ones were destroyed by Hurricane Wilma in 2005.) Marina Bay

was the ideal waterfront vacation spot for the Rowe family and their guests. On each visit the brothers would say to each other, "One day, we're going to build one of these!"

That opportunity came in 2004 when Bob Rowe was working on some projects with a new marina developer in Lynn, Massachusetts, just north of Boston. With his wife, Leah, he discussed building their dream—a docked floating home like the ones they'd experienced in Fort Lauderdale. It became their first floating home, designed to resemble a Cape Cod cottage with wood shingles and a peaked roof. Built on a base of two joined raked-bow, $\frac{3}{8}$ "-steel-reinforced 12' x 46' (3.7m x 14m) barges and named *Miss Leah*, it featured a spiral staircase connecting the two stories and a second-floor balcony overlooking a lower outdoor platform. The home required no motors, as it was intended for a permanent dock space with shore power and pump-out, and

had all the comforts in its two bedrooms, two baths, living room, kitchen—all to Leah Rowe's specifications.

But as with many developments, plans were not realized for the marina in Lynn. The Rowes heard about another—in Quincy, Massachusetts, south of Boston—ironically called Marina Bay, and the floating home was towed there. Bob and Leah lived aboard for three years. In this perfect setting, *Miss Leah* created a buzz on the docks that indicated to the Rowes that they had a promising concept for chartering, renting, or selling more.

Luxuria

As the family became established in Florida, they envisioned a new vessel to match the modern South Florida lifestyle. They wanted to keep *Miss Leah*'s wood-framed configuration, but planned a luxurious interior and more robust construction to withstand Florida's hurricane seasons.

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Luxuria's spacious, naturally lit, modern interior belies its plain, angular exterior. The hand-built staircase, supported by a custom wine cooler, is a central focal point of the galley and saloon. The floor-to-ceiling windows are fitted with sheer screens for shade and privacy.

"Luxuria" became the theme for the new floating home, with clean lines and "understated elegance," says Ron II. "It is harder to build simple than busy—everything has to be perfect." The vision of 360° waterfront views, top-quality construction, spacious layout, and stylish décor took shape in CAD drawings and plans, which were reviewed by the Coast Guard and Florida engineers to ensure that they complied with all marine regulations and residential codes. Every nut and bolt was weighed. At 135,000 lbs (61,689 kg), *Luxuria* is no lightweight but can still fit into a 26' x 46' (7.3m x 14m)



catamaran dock slip.

The vessel meets all marine standards and is fitted with two 300-hp Suzuki outboards that can power it to an average speed of 8 knots. While it's not meant to cruise, it can handily motor from one dock or marina to another in protected waters. Despite being a square structure with high windage, the vessel steers with

ease via a Sea Star electronic power-steering system. The actual helm is located on the starboard upper deck. The outboards are mounted at opposite outboard quarters of the aft deck to maximize maneuverability, and a large TV screen at the helm station enables the captain to see in all directions via cameras.

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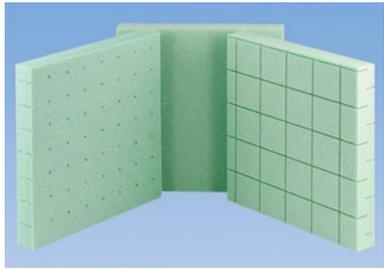
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The Build

When Global Boatworks decided to build *Luxuria* in 2016, it needed a location that would provide space to construct the vessel, accommodate on-the-water testing, and have access to residential and marine contractors. Lauderdale Marine Center, a 60-acre (24-hectare) yard on Fort Lauderdale's Middle River, proved ideal—especially to Mark Pratt, a fellow New Englander, who understood the project and agreed to give the Rowes a high-visibility corner in the East Yard, devoted to “big boat” construction. But, before the crew could start, Lauderdale Marine Center was bought by the Carlyle Group, an investment firm betting heavily on the marine industry and South Florida resorts.

Doug West, who had just joined Carlyle from Rybovich Yachts in Palm Beach, took over as general manager. When he heard about the *Luxuria* arrangement, his first thought was,

“How can I kill this deal?” He saw building a “houseboat” as a disruption for the yard’s customers, especially as the facility was working to change its image from a commercial yard to a recreational one. But because the agreement had already been made for *Luxuria* to occupy space that had previously been storage but was now producing income, the project moved forward. As *Luxuria* took shape, West’s opinion changed. “These guys are real professionals,” he stated. “They followed each regulation and all safety guidelines, and we had no issues. The finished product was very impressive. And interesting.”

West and yard manager Eric Hruska report that people—especially yachters—were intrigued by *Luxuria*. People would come by daily to see what was going on. “No one knew what to make of it,” said Hruska. Ron agreed, “We were like the Clampetts [of *The Beverly Hillbillies* TV show fame]

coming in with ladders and tools building something they hadn’t seen before.” Since most of Lauderdale Marine’s customers are transient, staying only a month or so, it was also unusual for a project to be housed for nearly a year.

At first, the project resembled a commercial barge. Ron II devised a proprietary frame that supported the two barges while they were welded together to ensure that there would be no corrosion between them. When it was completed, the base was hoisted with the yard’s 300-ton lift and placed on a platform in preparation for the build. After the metal-reinforced wood frame was raised, it became clear that it was, indeed, a house—and a boat—though the Rowe family stands by “floating luxury-living craft.” Bob: “Houseboats have a bad connotation, and from the quality of construction to the finishes, both *Miss Leah* and *Luxuria* are designed to be elegant homes on water, not a houseboat.”



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Left—Luxuria’s boxy shape alongside her aerodynamic neighbors at Lauderdale Marine Center raised some eyebrows in the superyacht yard. **Right**—The boat’s base hull is two barges welded to each other; to hold them together during joining, crews built the custom yellow support beam structure. The yearlong build was a source of curiosity, entertainment, and awe for conventional yard workers and customers.

Like all Florida homes built to code, *Luxuria*’s frame is reinforced by steel Simpson Strong-Ties and diagonal metal cross bracing attached to each beam for structural support and to prevent racking. Several United States Department of Agriculture BioPreferred

materials were employed, including 5/8" Mold Tough Sheetrock panels, as the fire- and moisture-resistant gypsum core increases mold resistance and adds to the “green” building standard. Icynene sprayed open-cell foam insulation—a U.S. Green Building Council

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While boxy in design, the exterior is covered with 3/8"-thick, 2'-wide smooth gloss PVC panels for easy maintenance. A thermoplastic olefin (TPO) membrane was used instead of PVC over DensDeck Prime Roof Board for sound mitigation and excellent fire-, moisture-, and wind-lift resistance. The deck and railings add some interest to the blank walls, but most impressive are the floor-to-ceiling impact-resistant doors and windows, which are vinyl-framed, dual glazed, air-filled Low-E (thermal emissive) energy-efficient glass.

While using commercial-grade construction materials fortified the

residential part of the build, Global Boatworks still had to address its marine aspects. Hruska recalls that when the contractor came to install the twin outboard Suzuki DF 300 AP engines and was told to mount them on either side of the flat aft deck—which was really a floor atop the barge—he said, “You want me to do *what?*”

Familiar to boat systems installers are the two 120-gal aluminum fuel tanks and four 150-gal PVC water tanks—two freshwater and two holding tanks—as well as LED running lights. Stainless-steel posts joined by 316-grade stainless-steel cables make a robust balcony rail on both floors. Balconies are accessed via a spiral staircase with a 316-grade stainless-steel multi-run railing system and coated-aluminum center-tube steps. Marine-grade coatings were applied to the hull. The interior compartments were primed and finished with industrial urethane enamel, while the exterior

was primed and finished with Sherwin-Williams SeaGuard 5000HS Epoxy, a UVA-protective clear coat, and two coats of its antifouling paint below the waterline.

They fitted the bilge compartments with 12V ventilation fans and 4' (1.2m) vaporproof LED tube lights. The barge’s 2'2" (0.66m) draft also accommodates a virtual fan-cooled “basement,” with nearly 5' (1.5m) of headroom and waterproof storage for water toys, supplies, extra furniture, and more, accessible via a ladder.

Living on Water

Testaments to the comfort, convenience, and livability of the luxury floating homes come from repeat charterers like David Sica, a marketing executive from Manhattan. He has enjoyed bringing his son and daughter and their friends on vacation trips aboard *Miss Leah*, and he also recently stayed on *Luxuria* at the Bahia Mar



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Yachting Center in Fort Lauderdale, its current home dock. He can bring his 20' (6.1m) center-console, tie it up to the deck, and enjoy all aspects of the water. "It is an amazing experience!" Sica says. "One stay and I was sold. The *Miss Leah* feels like a Cape Cod cottage—extremely well done with a huge upper deck. It has all the advantages of being on the water in a *house*, with none of the hassles of a living on a boat. The marinas are great communities, and you get to know everyone, because no matter the size of the boat, you share a lifestyle that can't be replicated."

Carl and Susan Steele, sailors from Palm Springs, California, also stayed aboard *Luxuria* and found no comparison to living aboard any boat—except perhaps a superyacht. While in Fort Lauderdale, they took the water taxi from the dock and cruised past beautiful waterfront houses. "Some of those people pay about \$40,000 in real estate taxes," Steele noted. "I think the

price of *Luxuria* is very reasonable—especially by Palm Springs standards. They've thought of everything—you can't fault it," he added. "The materials are superb, the living space is amazing—and an easy fit for a family of four. And if you don't like your neighbors, you can move it!"

Whether it will appreciate as an asset is yet to be seen, notes Sica. "But no one is making money selling a boat these days," he added. "It is the best of both worlds."

The Future

Global Boatworks foresees a future for marina communities of luxury floating homes and plans to create its own, with services and retail to suit the "neighborhood." Just as *Miss Leah* and *Luxuria* started from hand-drawn plans that were translated by architects and then created by the family builder, Luxury Global Communities could be next. Stay tuned. 

About the Author: Marilyn DeMartini entered the marine trades representing World Championship offshore racing teams such as *Drambuie On Ice*, *Lucas Oil*, *Outerlimits*, and *Statement* powerboats. She managed PR for *Latham Marine* and the iconic *Cigarette Racing Team* for more than a decade. She has written for numerous marine publications including *Yachts International*, *Power Motor Yacht*, *Soundings*, and *Boat International*.

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