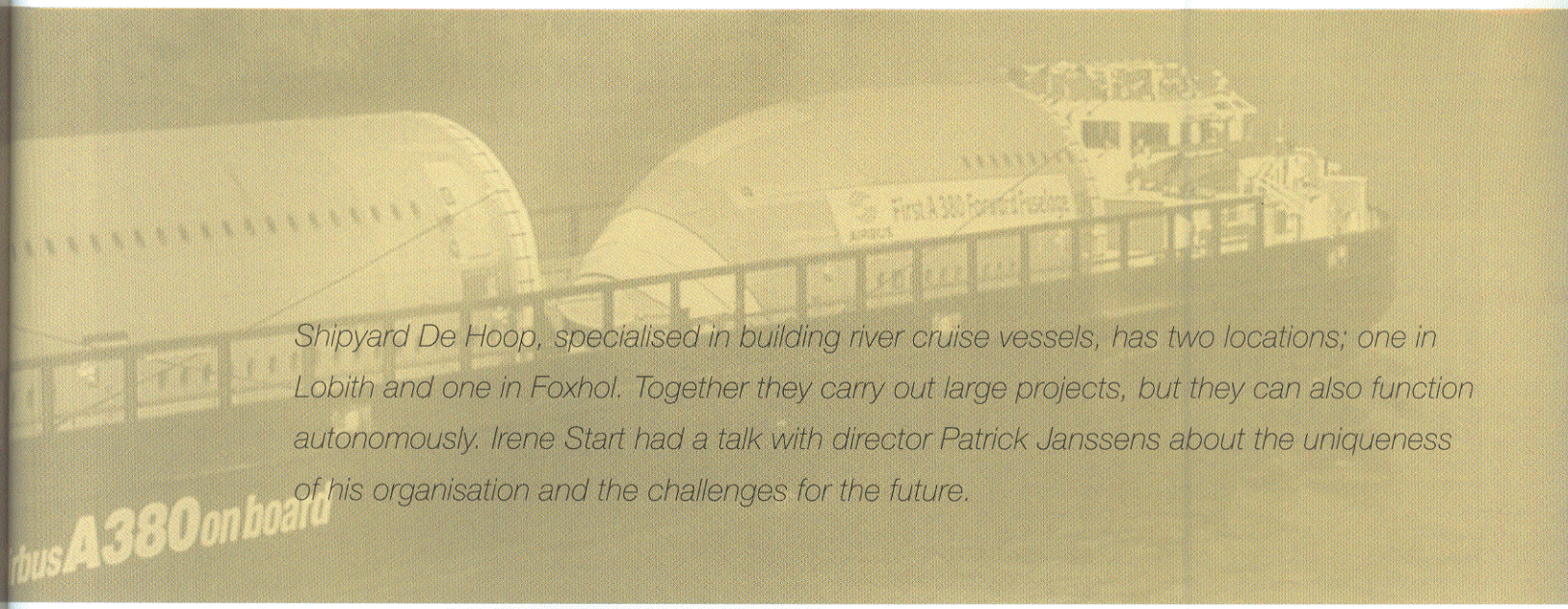
CEO Patrick Janssens

'We Help Finding the Right Solutions'

Patrick Janssens, who is thirty-five years of age, is quite young for a CEO. When he joined the board of directors of Shipyard De Hoop in 2004, he was even younger. Janssens is not a descendent of a shipbuilding family either. On the contrary: he studied business economics. However, boats and water have always been his hobby. In 1996 he combined the two when he co-started a small consultancy firm which focussed on the maritime industry. He worked for yacht builders, shipyards and maritime suppliers and thus learned through hands-on experience how boats are being built.

Head Hunter

'I worked in different countries and learned a lot from various trade-sides of the business. In 2002 I sold my shares in the consultancy firm and started to work as an independent interim manager in the United Kingdom. Here I was running a yacht building company when in 2004, I was approached by a head hunter for a job in the Netherlands. It took only a short introduction for me to get very enthusiastic about working with De Hoop. The yard is a very dynamic one and employs highly skilled people. The potential for the future was evident for me.'



Shipyard De Hoop, specialised in building river cruise vessels, has two locations; one in Lobith and one in Foxhol. Together they carry out large projects, but they can also function autonomously. Irene Start had a talk with director Patrick Janssens about the uniqueness of his organisation and the challenges for the future.

Janssens has always been the economist amongst technicians. This was never a problem: 'On the contrary, it has been an asset to be acting from another perspective. My surplus value is that I know a lot about structural organization, managing projects and quality management. These things matter in today's global shipbuilding industry.'

Strategic Business

Shipyard De Hoop has a long history expanding ages. The yard was established in Lobith in 1886 and completely destroyed during World War Two. After the war, it was rebuilt with modern equipment. In 1999 Mr. Jan Reint Smit took over the yard and led it into a new direction. From then onwards, the focus was on creating extra value for the customer. In 1999, the former Verolme Shipyards Heusden was acquired and in 2001 a yard in Louisiana, USA, was added. In 2004 the Heusden yard was sold again. Recently, De Hoop took over Volharding Shipyards in Foxhol.

Why all these take-overs? 'We wanted to boost capacity for shipbuilding in the Netherlands,' Janssens answers. 'In 2004, when I joined the board of directors, we decided to consolidate. The market was rocky; we saw increasing focus on knowledge based on innovative shipbuilding.

Simultaneously the financial markets demanded yards to be more self reliant. This became our strategy. The selling of the Heusden yard did not stand on its own: we transferred Houma fabricator into a strategic business partner. Shortly thereafter we also sold this yard. This formed the basis of our strong financial position and the start-up of our external engineering branch.'

All Kinds of Projects

How do clients feel about a yard that operates from two different locations? 'It does not bother them at all', Janssens ensures. 'We have a group of very loyal customers that keep coming back. Our organisation may seem a little unusual at first, with 130 employees in Lobith and 70 in Foxhol, but it is really an advantage to work from two locations. Because of our organisation, we can undertake all kinds of projects. The large ones we do together, for small projects the yards can function autonomously. Besides, two know better than one. Knowledge has been building up during the years.'

The database of the yard contains over fifteen hundred basic ship designs. 'Yet every time we start with a new client, we start with a clean sheet of paper', says Janssens. 'We mainly build all types of inland vessels and offshore vessels for the oil industry, but are not limited to that. Our vessels are innovative and special. Our device is to offer solutions to whatever complex issues our customers have. This means we sometimes design an efficient ship low on fuel consumption, and the next day we build a vessel relatively cheap to exploit.'

The examples speak for themselves. The last few months De Hoop replaced a 100-tonnage deep-sea crane from one vessel to another, launched a large section-block, and delivered a multi purpose offshore service vessel. Quite something different than the inland cruise vessel Henri Dunant III, which De Hoop built in the nineties for the Dutch Red Cross and which received much acclaim.

Working on Innovations

'Yes indeed, we operate on very different markets and levels', responds Janssens. 'It is a way to run a financially sound business, but it is also an advantage when one develops new ship designs. Our engineering department is constantly working on innovations that can be used on different types of vessels. For passenger ships, a lot of new regulations apply. The vessel is bound by certain maximum measurements. Space is limited, so we have to fight for every centimetre. Bath cells have to be compact; the same holds for the machinery. We developed special compartments for the machinery that are smaller than usual. The same design can be applied on offshore vessels. Another example is the information we gathered building inland vessels. We know a lot about the performance of inland ships in shallow waters. This knowledge we put to use when we built vessels that were used to transport components of the Airbus.'

Optimizing Possibilities

Shipyard De Hoop is continuously looking for improvements: 'On one hand shipowners demand certain innovations, on the other we invest a lot of time in our own research and development projects. The diesel-electric ships we have been building since the seventies formed the basis of many of the current river vessel designs. During the last years we were able to find quite a few improvements in the onboard installations. Of course we also scan different markets. Developments within the tourist industry often have big consequences on the way we build river cruise vessels, for example.'

There is a limit to what only one engineering department can do, Janssens admits: 'Innovation simply means a lot of work. Apart from this, the accent lies on multipurpose nowadays. Shipowners want more and more functions on a vessel. When you want cranes, you need ballast tanks. In other words: sometimes one can demand too much. Sometimes one has to protect clients against themselves so that 'multi-purpose' does not become 'multi-useless'. Our concern is to optimize all the possibilities.'

Finding Solutions

In future Shipyard De Hoop likes to continue to design and build effective custom vessels. 'In the offshore industry there is a demand for efficient transport vessels that can work in deep sea. Passenger ships trend to become 'floating hotels': customers want more luxury. Apart from these trends the rules and regulations are becoming stricter. As a shipbuilder, you have to design more compartments in the underwater ship, to give an example. Then, on passenger vessels, nowadays you have the obligation to create facilities for disabled people and there is a strong supervision on which materials are used.' The strictness of the marine safety rules does not bother the director. 'No, not at all. Shipyard De Hoop has always been one of the first to find solutions to problems our clients have. Regulations are becoming more complex, but with clever designs we help our clients unravel them.'

i. www.dehoop.net