

Resurrecting the s.s. United States

A concept and visualization by: Onno Heesbeen



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design
illustrations
photography

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The ss United States, affectionately known as the Big U by ocean liner enthusiasts, made her maiden voyage in 1952. That day she smashed all speed records on the Atlantic run and claimed the bleu ribbon, that and the fact she was also designed by William Francis Gibbs for possible conversion into a troopship when the need would arrive, makes her a true muscle ship!

All good things come to an end, the need for passenger transport by sea shrank by the growing market of air travel. In 1969 the ss United States made her last voyage, since then the ship has been laid up, her sleek interior stripped away and auctioned off. The more than 50 year old lady has been weathering away. During that period unsuccessful attempts have been made to bring the ship back into service. In the main time several foundations were born to preserve the ship for her historic and iconic value.

Facing a possible future at the scrap yard, suddenly came the news that cruise company Norwegian Cruise Line bought the s.s. United States, which by itself is an unusual move for a large cruise corporation. Speculations began about the motives of NCL: "are they genuinely interested to preserve this iconic ship as such?", "will they give her a second live and convert her into a cruise ship?", "or have they simply bought this American build hull to get her off the market and still sell her for scrap?"

In the beginning of 2003, prior to NCL's big announcement, I had already been brainstorming with fellow designer David Rodstein about possible resurrection concepts for the ss United States. We questioned what future roles she could fulfill other than being scrapped, for instance:

- Static city landmark with iconic value.
- A cruise experience themed "the golden days of ocean liners"
- Total conversion into a contemporary cruise ship re-designed with the Big U's essence kept in mind.

My concepts have been based on the above possibilities and with each I thought about: how would she be converted? What will she look like? Is it important to maintain her essence and in what way can I capture that essence?

This resulted in these four concepts:

City Landmark
Keeping The Features
Big U Goes Cruising
Muscle Ship

All visuals and concepts by Onno Heesbeen

Concept 1 – **City Landmark**

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The Big U is literally a relic from the past, conceived in a time of re-building the world after WW2 she was (like all ships at that time) a “business card” from the nation that owned the ship. It showed modernity in construction, design and aesthetics. The Big U was literally the best of the United States captured in one iconic object.

This concept is based on this historic role, being gutted there is not much to preserve about the interiors. So I suggest restoring her exterior as authentic and nostalgic as possible and permanently moor the ship in the New York harbor. Big U will most definitely become a well known characteristic City landmark and simultaneously please the ocean liner and historic community.

The interior of the ship are a blank canvas, basically everything is possible. I suggest the ship will be used according to the metropolitan architecture concept. The upper decks are used as a public area with restaurants, clubs, shopping mall, cinema, hotel etc. The upper decks give a nice panoramic view over the city skyline. The ship could also house museums/education center (ocean liner or industrial themed), creative studios for artists can be installed as well. The lower area/hull of the ship can serve as a huge storage space to rent to companies, or for personal usage.



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Concept 2 – **Keeping The Features**

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This concept is all about “keeping the features”. Converting old liners into cruise ships is not a new thing. When the need for liners grew less and less the need for cruise ships increased, companies that noticed this change of market often converted old passenger ships into cruise ships. Some conversions were done tastefully, some extensive and some plain horrible. As the United States has such iconic value I wanted to maintain as much visual essence as possible and still add those important cruise amenities.

The additions are:

2 duplex suites behind the bridge.

52 veranda cabins at the mid section of the ship.

The aft deck is converted in a spacious open lido area.

Behind funnel number 2 is an indoor pool/recreation area with a retractable roof.

6 large tenders for shore excursions.

This concept keeps much of her original sturdy “navy like”. As a maritime photographer I often enjoy photographing older ships with all those fascinating deck equipment and details. This being a nostalgic visual concept I kept as much of these features, especially the forward superstructure is historically original, it’s the “face” of the ship. The original United States Line livery is kept for that same reason.



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Concept 3 – **Big U Goes Cruising**

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This concept is also inspired to keep much of her original essence, but the overall look is more “cleaned up” so passengers have unobstructed panorama views when on the ship.

The additions to this version are:

2 duplex suites behind the bridge.

68 veranda cabins at the mid section of the ship.

186 hull cabins with balcony.

The aft deck is converted in a spacious open lido area.

Behind funnel number 2 is an indoor pool/recreation area with a retractable roof.

6 large tenders for shore excursions.

Modern lifeboats.

Though keeping the essential look of the Big U, I also took a more playful approach with this concept, resulting in a more cruise like livery for funnels and hull. For the hull colours I kept the American national red, white and bleu. As for the scheme, I created a wave pattern to symbolise speed and to give the ship a less bulky appearance.



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Concept 4 – **Muscle Ship**

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The key factor with this concept is using the non visual essence and history of the ship as a basis for a contemporary look, this way the exterior looks have a historical foundation without being taken too literal and visual. William Francis Gibbs designed the ship to be modern and forward looking in time, a possible conversion should do just the same thing. By looking at the past and creating a “retro” look the ship would become a caricature of it’s own. Though this conversion is modern in nature, it still has a couple of visual links referring to the “old” Big U and her history.

For this concept I only used the “American build” hull for constructing a completely new superstructure on top of it. Big U has a characteristic sleek and sharp bow almost shark like, I also took inspiration from her navy background as a possible troopship and gave her this “shark nose” bow. Also kept her original stern as a nice aft observation deck with great views of her wake. By painting the ship white the general look is fresh and her sleek hull becomes more apparent (this way one can appreciate the art of hull building as don in the golden years of naval architecture)

I kept the funnel tops in the same position as they were before the make over. Not only are two funnels a rarity with modern ships, they do balance out the profile better (the forward funnel is turned into dummy funnel in this case) The original caps are also a visual footnote to the publicity photo shoot of the original caps being lifted onto the ship during construction.

The Big U stood for power and speed at sea, being a 50’s muscle ship I followed the art of American hot rod and muscle car re-building. I turned the s.s. United States into a modern looking muscle ship.

A powerful modernistic ship housing modern cruise amenities, trough the use of glass a connection is made with the sea and the sceneries.

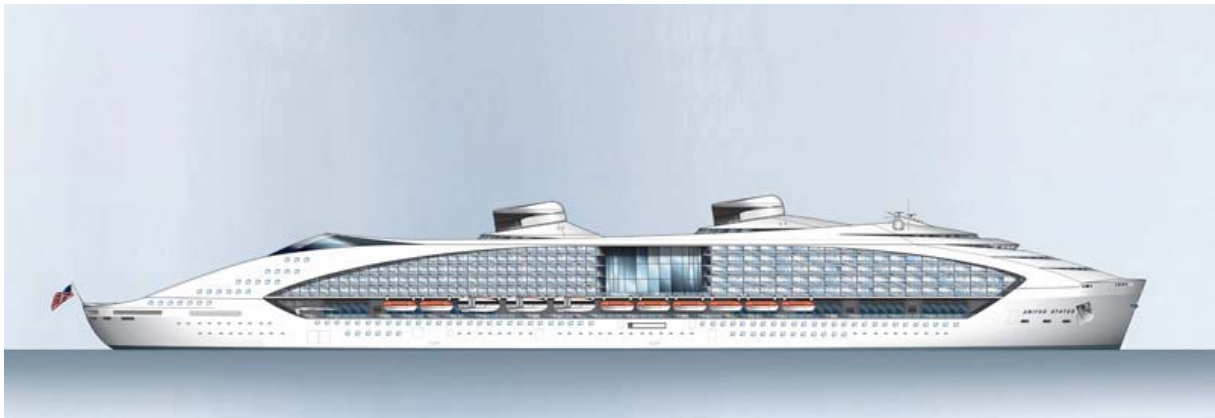


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