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TECHNOLOGY DESIGNER

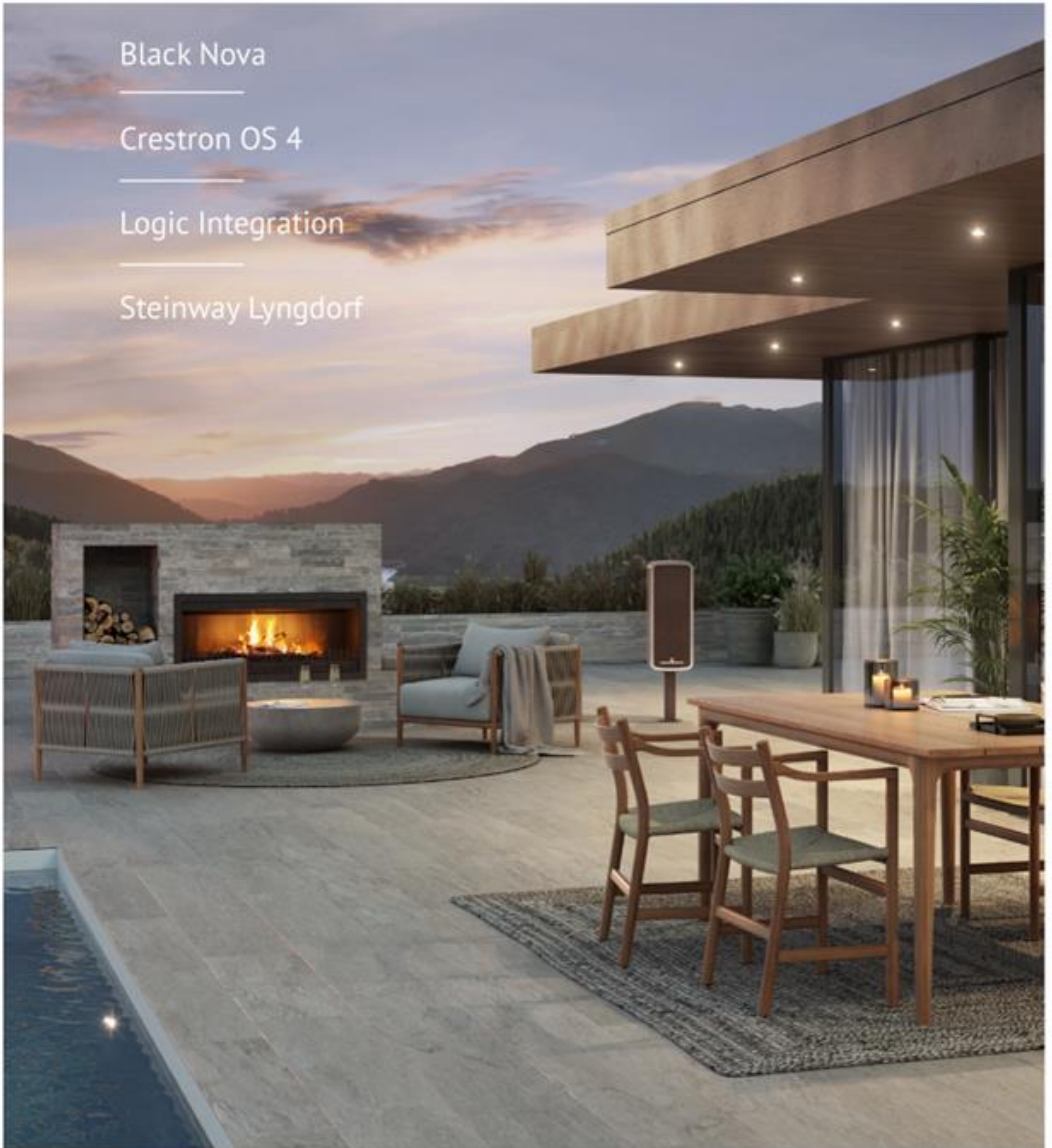
WHERE TECHNOLOGY MEETS DESIGN™

Black Nova

Crestron OS 4

Logic Integration

Steinway Lyngdorf



FALL 2023

BLACK NOVA. BY BILL HENSLEY LUXURY DEFINED.



AFTER GETTING MARRIED, MY WIFE AND I RENTED A CALIFORNIA BUNGALOW that was built in the 1920s and still had an original rotary light switch by the back door and another original push-button switch in the dining room. For some reason, progress had not replaced them, and they were things of beauty that spoke to the home's history ... if a little on the noisy side. The rest of the switches were plastic, the style of which hasn't changed much in the last 50 years. Functional? Yes. Emotional? Not at all.

In the last few decades of growth in home and building automation we have seen the evolution of the modern touchpanel,

where the software-based UI (User Interface) creates the custom experience. The other common in-wall control – keypads – are still mostly rooted in a limited number of plastic colors, some offering custom engraving to a variety of button configurations. A step forward in function, but not a leap forward in design.

Seven years ago, an Italian company sought to address the large opportunity of a fully custom luxury keypad market. They had a compelling prototype design; a paper thin slice of marble over an LED matrix, capable of recognizing gesture and self-adjusting brightness while controlling lighting, climate,

AMAYA FERRARI

**VP, SALES & MARKETING
BLACK NOVA**



OLAV BERUTO

**CO-FOUNDER
BLACK NOVA**



media and more. All fully customized. This was something fresh and different. The keypad was named ANY. The company was Black Nova.

Six years later, Black Nova has grown to five distinct keypad product families sold world-wide. ANY was just the start. ALBA builds on a glass motif with flush buttons for a fully modern aesthetic. BLACK JACK delivers a modern rendition of the traditional button switch. ARIA takes minimalism to the elegant extreme with a smooth solid glass face accented by custom engraving and a matching set of sockets. AXES adds a touch of sublime to the minimalist aesthetic with a special touchpanel series dedicated to the hospitality industry.

An important part of the Black Nova experience is its brand-agnostic approach, integrating with the major home and commercial control systems. In this manner, Black Nova products deliver luxury design and custom aesthetics that can elevate every opportunity, regardless of the control system behind it.

At CEDIA Expo in Denver this year, Black Nova won a *Technology Designer Magazine* Performance Home Award for its BLACK JACK Collection. Shortly after, we spoke with CEO/Co-Founder Olav Beruto and VP, Sales and Marketing Amaya Ferrari to learn more about the story behind the brand and what lies ahead.

BILL: Let's start at the beginnings of Black Nova. What led to identifying the market opportunity that turned this into a business?

OLAV: When we solve a problem, sometimes it's a problem we experience personally. And we each approach it from a personal perspective. For example, I'm more from a technology perspective than from a design perspective, while Amaya is very much from a design perspective. This is representative of the balance within the Black Nova team.



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Black Nova products are made in Italy and offer compelling designs, luxury materials and innovative features to take control of the Crestron smart home whilst delivering a unique level of personalization, performance and refinement. Our enduring partnership with Black Nova spans several years, and it continues to grow and flourish. This enduring collaboration stands as a testament to Crestron's unwavering dedication to expanding the array of designer-lead advanced control solutions accessible to our dealers and their clients.”

JOHN CLANCY | Chief Sales Officer at Crestron Electronics

When we looked at keypads there were limited options — even in the custom installation market — and all were bound to a specific control system. They came from an engineering focus, which generally left the aesthetics to be less than inspiring.

BILL: If I wore my ‘investor’ hat, I would ask: “what problem are you solving?”

OLAV: Exactly. In fact, I come from an investment banking background. The lack of available product created the opportunity for design and materials that move away from plastics and into metals, marbles, etc., and then into customization.

We embraced three pillars to define what every Black Nova keypad should be. First, they need to be beautiful, inspirational, sleek in design, and customizable. But it can be complicated to customize, and we have to watch the SKU count when managing inventory.

Second, they need to be flexible and interoperable. Again, we saw a market where keypads tended to each be tied to a specific control, or lighting control system, like KNX, Crestron, Control4, Savant, RTI, Vantage, Rako, Nice/ELAN. The Black

Nova product is a combination of these two sides: Design needs to be brand-agnostic, while the technology needs to work with all the different control options available to integrators and their clients. For the client, choosing a keypad should be the same as choosing a light fixture.

BILL: Exceptional design with robust integrations.

OLAV: Yes, and the final pillar is that it needs to be simple, intuitive and cross-market, crafted to embrace all key market verticals: hospitality, residential and commercial.

BILL: How did you come to market?

OLAV: Our first product was the marble one — ANY — which was also the most difficult. We had a clear idea of what we wanted and ran a tender with designers. We went with Alberto Mornico, who became Co-Founder of Black Nova and our CTO. We already had a client lined up — the MGM with 3,000 rooms between Cotai and Macau. They agreed on a significant down payment which enabled us to begin development. We ended up retaining a few of the people in the initial project; they are now Black Nova employees.

BILL: And then after launch you went on to the second product?

AMAYA: We've been designing ever since and are now at five collections, about one per year.

BILL: How do you determine the design direction?

OLAV: Part of it is just listening to requests to give the end user the best possible options. After the completion of ANY—which was our 'vision one'— we moved on to the soft touch with ALBA, and then on to the more traditional button approach of BLACK JACK.

We try to balance the cost and requirement of development with the need in the markets we serve. Hospitality is our top market, representing about 70 percent of our business. But even a vertical like Hospitality is not homogenous. For example, we do a lot of business in the Middle East. As a region, customers prefer the touch interface of AXIS and ARIA. There is similar technology behind each. AXIS features nine buttons, while ARIA is more premium and able to show more feedback and understand more gestures which is a more residential — and learnable — solution.

But every client is different. The W hotel in Dubai and some others are using ARIA. Some want a more traditional look with buttons: ALBA is our modern interpretation of the push button. After a year and a half, we launched the BLACK JACK collection that leverages the same back end as ALBA for industrial synergy but is dressed in a different way to look like a more traditional keypad. And the feel is more traditional as well — this is very important for us — making sure to get the right double-click feel of the buttons. We believe in a holistic approach to what the client will see, touch and feel.

BILL: Let's talk about that holistic approach, how you identify opportunities for different types of experiences, and how you get information that helps inform what you do next.

AMAYA: The way we craft our keypads is really a framework. With an ALBA keypad you can play with three dimensions. You have the frame which can have a different material and a different finish. You have the buttons, which again can differ with materials and finish. And then you can engrave the buttons in three different ways: no engraving, only icon, only text, or icon and text. The result is that you can have two products with completely different emotions and personalities, but underneath they are the same industrial product.



As an owner's rep, I always look for the best solutions to enhance the guest experience and the operational efficiency for my client's properties. That's why I recommended Black Nova keypads to my clients. Black Nova keypads are not only sleek and elegant, but also highly customizable and versatile. Integrators can design the user interface with unique icons and text, and match the keypads with the style and color of the rooms.

JIM GIST

Owner Representative,
Fontainebleau
(Luxury Hotel in Las Vegas)



Black Nova is one of the few companies we collaborate with that really understands the architectural design process and not only makes great products but also beautiful products.

RICHARD REISIG

Vice President
Technology West Group
System Integrator for Fontainebleau



“The sophisticated design of Black Nova keypads is an obvious choice for luxury residential, hotel, and commercial installations. The RTI integration with Black Nova enables integrators to deliver an elevated in-wall control experience completely in sync with the building design.”

NEAL ELLSWORTH
Director of Product
Management, RTI

With this holistic approach, the products are fully customizable and able to blend into any space. And we go into more detail with the mounting options. In the beginning we had only what we call the Float option with the front sitting 4mm off the wall. Then we started the Flush, which is completely flush to any surface. After that we came to the Flat because every different architect or end-user has a design vision, and we want to support them. Of course, adding options presents challenges. Each SKU is multiplied by the number of mounting options, by the number of finishes, by the number of buttons ... the SKU count can really explode.

And then we also have the Frame option, so we have Float, Flush, Flat and Frame. So, we really give the end-user all types of customizations so they can decide to “hide” the keypad or really make it stand out.

BILL: I’m envisioning a lot of work behind the scenes to make all this look easier than it really is.

OLAV: The growth of the company has been sustained by the growth of our systems, even our ERP. The biggest investment

to date is our configuration tool. You can go on our website and craft your keypad in an easy yet very detailed way. In my opinion it is unmatched in the market. If you are logged in, you can use this to place your order. It’s a nice customization tool and a great selling tool because the client can really visualize the result, and of course it’s a great ordering tool.

Then we create other software specifically for design. For example, all our keypads come with the BIM Modules (Building Information Modules). Not only the CAD drawings but the specifications as well.

BILL: Were there any surprises? Anything unexpected that caused a pivot? Or did you do enough research that you nailed it from the beginning?

OLAV: I don’t want to be arrogant, and maybe we’ve been lucky, but we didn’t need to pivot the business model because of something we hadn’t accounted for in the business plan. But one surprise along the line of your question was in the U.S. where we thought or maybe hoped that the square design — our flagship design — would be good for the U.S. market

as well. It's our third largest market, but as we go deeper into the market with new use cases, the retrofit is becoming more evident and frequent, so we are now considering developing the U.S. single gang form factor for our collection. We had hoped not to do this. First, because it is country-specific and second because it explodes the SKU count. Third, it's a brand-new product, including new certifications, so it's quite an exercise that is probably inevitable at some point.

BILL: Let's talk about distribution and support.

OLAV: We want to make integrators aware of the line and options, but 70 percent of our projects are specified, so our go-to-market strategy is reaching designers, architects and specifiers. We have a beautiful facility South of Milan in Rosate from where we can ship to the U.S. in four days.

AMAYA: Likewise, support is based in Milan – with working hours adjusted for the non-EU regions like the U.S.

BILL: What type of support calls come in?

OLAV: An interesting note is that most calls relate more to the control system because the Black Nova product is straightforward in its operation. About 90 percent are level one support calls. Sometimes we get a call specific to particular installations the integrators are doing, for example integrating several systems and the dealer might ask: "Do I use the RTI or Lutron integration for this?"

AMAYA: Before a dealer can become a Black Nova partner, he or she must complete our training. We have multiple training modules that walk the integrator through everything they need to know.

BILL: Are there any misunderstandings about Black Nova?

OLAV: Integrators think it's a control system or a lighting system, and don't understand it's a keypad-only company. We try to deliver top features and top design, of course fully customizable, mixing high and low voltage, with custom color backlight and a temp sensor on all keypads. And our UI is fully customizable. Let's use RTI as the example: RTI can send any feedback and we can display it — song names, temperature, etc. We're still a small company, only seven years old so we need to evangelize constantly.

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We've chosen Black Nova lighting keypads for their blend of functionality and style. Their design is not just aesthetically pleasing but also integrates effortlessly with our control system. It's not uncommon for guests to remark on their distinct look. These keypads truly reflect the essence of Italian craftsmanship — quality, design, and innovation.

MICHAEL UMANSKY

Homeowner

Aspen/Snowmass Colorado

BILL: What's next, particularly for the U.S.?

OLAV: Two things. One, having all our collections in a single gang form for the U.S.

BILL: I can put that in the article?

OLAV: Yes, you can. And the other opportunity is to embrace the full collection in a wireless environment. Our gateway is currently wireless, but our keypads are energy dependent —

with lights, etc. — and require a 24volt cable. You can cable the keypads to the gateway and connect wirelessly from there.

BILL: This has been a great conversation. Is there anything else you would like readers of *Technology Designer* to know?

OLAV: We are really creating a brand, more than just a group of products. Ultimately, our goal is to become the leading global brand for luxury keypads.

