

HOME The perfect house



what A barge which has been kitted out using concrete, steel and glass
where Semi-permanently docked in Ghent-visserij, Antwerp
architect Cuypers & Q
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HOME AFLOAT

WITH ITS REMODELLED INTERIOR AND UNUSUAL DESIGN, THIS ISN'T JUST A HOUSEBOAT, IT'S A FLOATING BUILDING, SAYS KEVIN McCLOUD

WORDS KEVIN McCLOUD

You may have seen the recent episode of *Grand Designs* where we followed a pair of individuals as they attempted to convert a hulking steel barge into a floating eco-home in Kent. They did this with no detailed drawings, no bill of quantities and no plan to speak of. The husband, Chris Miller, described the design process as completely in the hands of the 'Lords of Synchronicity and Ladies of Serendipity', relying on what materials turned up on site and whatever second-hand stuff he could find. Chance, in other words. The only visual reference they and their builders had was a three-inch long sketch that Chris did on the back of an Asda receipt.

Admittedly, despite the near-lunacy of this approach, the result was almost nice-looking.

The boat was a darn sight prettier than many of its near neighbours in the marina, partly because the Ladies of Serendipity smiled from their Boudoirs of Magnanimity, and partly because the standard solution to converting a steel barge into a houseboat is in fact to lower a mobile home onto its deck and, er, move in. So against a yard of floating second-hand caravans their project was always going to look good.

It didn't look so good when the tide went out though. The components of the perfect house are many, but mud isn't one of them. Nor are shopping trolleys. If you want to live on a tidal river or estuary like the Medway or Humber, then the landscape is only partly liquid, shimmering and marine. Most of the time it's brown and sticky.

this picture The idyllic mooring for this unusual-looking steel barge provides the perfect backdrop for the urban glass structure and the natural plants on deck. The potted stones and bamboo recycle the boat's waste water for re-use



this picture The modern, open-plan layout creates an spacious living and work area **opposite** Beams of light from the skylight cast a wonderful glow across the reflective kitchen surfaces **below** Hi-tech lighting used throughout the interior creates a variety of moods

TELL US ABOUT IT

Who are you?

Ilze Quaeys and Guy De Vylder of Cuyper & Q

Where is the boat?

Semi-permanently docked in Ghent-visserij, Antwerp.

What was the budget?

£120,000. The owners did a lot of the interior fittings themselves.

What inspired the design?

The project SAFLOT was to create a contemporary living and work space within the boat. You can also see several recognisable elements of Flemish building: living space linking urban and rural.

What materials were used?

The interior and boat is made mostly of steel, plus a few extra tons of concrete! A glass structure sits on deck.

Are there any eco features?

The waste water from the boat flows through the plants on deck and is then filtered back into the house for re-use.

In fact, coming from a family of sailors who for centuries plied the waters from Scotland to the Humber, I can tell you that the Humber Estuary is brown and sticky, even at high tide.

With a building, the context sort of remains constant. Okay, so the weather changes and the leaves fall off the trees in autumn. But places change pretty slowly. Which is just fine because buildings, good ones at least, are generally designed in response to place. They're made to feel at home where they are. Which must make it pretty frustrating when it comes to designing something like a boat, that gets moved around and can spend most of its time at an annoying angle on a mudbed that stinks of fish. Let's not even get onto the sanitary arrangements.

Afloat, the equivalent of planning permission is a mooring. Getting the right mooring is like being given permission to build on a beautiful site. So architects Cuyper & Q had a bit of a head start with this project. For a start it's not on the Humber Estuary. It's not even in Britain. The equivalent land-lubber dwelling for this floating home is a groovy urban pad in downtown Antwerp with a view of the city's rooftops. As waterborne locations go, it's peachy: right in the centre of an

attractive, canal-strewn European city, in a country that understands modern architecture. And there's no mud in sight! So no ugly shopping trolleys and no stink of fish!

What makes this place even more appealing is that unlike most boats, which are fitted out with plywood, melamine and sticky-backed plastic, this one has been remodelled in concrete and plaster. I suppose the architects and engineer just took the view that since barges made from 10mm thick steel float, a few extra tons of concrete here and there wouldn't make much difference.

The new materials just replace the ballast that would once have filled the hold and settle the barge back down onto its old plimsoll line. Although from the outside the new work looks like a boat that's just been messed around with at one end.

But isn't it a brilliant example of what can happen? Of how you can take a horrible old damp hulk and magic it into an extraordinary floating building? And isn't that the real point? What makes it so good is that it hasn't been designed by boat builders but by architects, that it wasn't conceived as a boat, nor a houseboat, but as a floating building. No mud, no sticky-backed plastic and not a hint of caravan about it. ★

floor plan

- 1 bathroom
- 2 bedroom
- 3 open-plan lounge
- 4 kitchen
- 5 studio
- 6 water tank
- 7 glass lightwell
- 8 control room

