



With development banned on Chatou's Ile des Impressionnistes (Impressionists' Island), the Floating House (*La Maison Flottante*), designed by Ronan (below right) and Erwan Bouroullec (below left), was the evocative solution to providing an artists' residence in the area. →

# LIFE ON THE WATER

WITH A SMALL BUDGET AND NOT MUCH ROOM TO MOVE, DESIGN TEAM BOURULLEC EMPLOYED EFFICIENT SOLUTIONS TO CREATE THIS FASCINATING WORK-LIFE ENVIRONMENT  
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home

At first, this floating guesthouse seems like a strange imposition on the landscape made famous by the trail of impressionists who flocked to Chatou's Ile des Impressionnistes (Impressionists' Island), just 20 minutes west of Paris, in the late 19th century. Moored off the bank where Renoir painted *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (*Déjeuner des Canotiers*) in 1881, its current form resembles an industrial barge.

Only when you get inside, do you discover rooms lined with red cedar and appreciate the windows that open up to great groaning vistas of trees and quiet canal waters. Just off centre, a cube cleverly contains a galley kitchen, a bathroom, a mezzanine loft and an office/bedroom that opens up to the main bedroom. At either end, terraces take in the changing light and moods of the day. Soon the trellis that wraps over the top of them, and the aluminium skin of the home, will be covered in vines, merging the structure into the lush surrounds.

Commissioned by the Centre National de l'Estampe et de l'Art Imprimé (National Centre for Engraving and Printed Art), the floating structure was conceived as a studio for resident artists and a pragmatic response to the island's tight no-building regulations. For its design, the centre turned to the famed product-designing Bouroullec brothers, who were yet to make an entree into the world of architecture. Their lauded product designs, such as the raised cubby-style sleeping cabin Lit Clos and the freestanding, movable Disintegrated Kitchen, had clearly shown the brothers had an understanding of the sort of compact and temporal efficiency required of designing a 'floating house' that could be replicated.

"Basically, we deal with a lot of different scales and things, so at first it wasn't scary," says Ronan, the elder of the two brothers. But the many restrictions placed on the project turned its →

A gangplank (opposite page, top left) helps guests safely access the floating house, which is able to cruise the canal (top centre). In the main living area (bottom left), a Facett sofa and ottoman, designed by the Bouroullec brothers for Ligne Roset, allows residents to relax in front of an open view of the canal. A Vitra 'Zip' carpet, also by the design duo, adds graphic colour to the simple space and allows residents to undo and reconfigure it to suit themselves. With a tight budget, costs needed to be kept down where possible. The original kitchen concept was replaced in favour of an affordable Ikea design (bottom centre), while, in the office (this page), an inexpensive table lies comfortably beside the lacquered Metal Side Table, a piece the pair created for Vitra.



completion into a five-year battle. Many factors restricted the design. Notably, the budget, which was tight, and its required small size – it had to be no wider than 5 metres with a ceiling height of 3.6 metres, so it could navigate canals and go under bridges. Then there was the issue of finding a company that would commit to reproducing the project.

But the issue freshest of all for Ronan is that he and his brother, Erwan, had to collaborate with architects Jean-Marie Finot and Denis Daversin – a foreign concept for the pair, who had previously only ever had to consult each other on design matters. “Jean-Marie Finot is a kind of superstar in the boating industry. He’s a very big, strong character,” says Ronan. “This was the most scary thing for us, as we’d never had to deal with anyone else [in a professional capacity].”

In the end, the collaboration came down to considerations of efficiency. Budget restrictions saw the houseboat built from aluminium

not plastic, a red-cedar interior installed, which was supplied to promote a company’s product, and an Ikea kitchen replaced a more ambitious concept. “Very quickly we forgot our kitchen design. It’s hard to compete with the low-budget efficiency of Ikea,” says Ronan.

One thing the Bouroullec brothers wouldn’t budge on, though, was the curve that forms the outer skin of the house, a design thread that runs through all of their work. “You see this sort of curve with a certain tension in a lot of our work – from our coffee cups to other objects.”

Structural considerations aside, it’s the atmosphere inside the so-called Floating House (*La Maison Flottante*) that pleases Ronan most. He can’t describe what creates it, but it’s the aspect the duo wants to continue to address. “It’s the problem of modern architecture, that it can be interesting from a lot of points, but still miss something – which is the quality of atmosphere. For us, that’s the most important call.” ✦

Almost a quarter of the houseboat’s total space is devoted to outdoor terraces (above), which are located at either end of the structure. A Slow chair, designed by the boys for Vitra, encourages creative contemplation. In the main bedroom (opposite page), a ‘Lantern’ lamp, yet another one of their designs, throws ripples of light across the red-cedar ceiling at night.