Like a Loft on Water

By Tiffany Jow / Photos by Matthew Millman – November 16, 2015

Anchored in a small canal, this floating house is all about space and light.

Architecture: Robert Nebolon Architects

After being outbid on conventional homes, Kimo and Sarah Bertram decided to check out a houseboat for rent in the Bay Area's Mission Creek on a whim. Both share a lifelong love of the water—Kimo is an avid surfer and Sarah spent childhood summers on a sailboat—and immediately were smitten with the place. The experience led them to embark on their own floating home project with local architect Robert Nebolon. While he'd never worked on a floating home before, Nebolon's experience building houses near water and on piers made this opportunity feel like a natural progression.

"By creating high ceilings with large windows, the feeling is all about space and light," says architect Robert Nebolon, principal of Berkeley firm Robert Nebolon Architects. The 2,100-square-foot floating house was built on land in six months before settling into its final location in Mission Creek. Reflections off the water often ripple across the ceiling.

"The main challenge was determining how to pack the house with storage while ensuring it had the basics," Nebolon says. Weight was also an issue. As a floating house, not a houseboat, it wouldn't move after being moored to its final location. The sculptural, loft-like result ingeniously connects to its site. Inspired by the area's industrial past, its sawtooth roof and sweeping views define and maximize space, while its door, staircase, and kitchen reference the Golden Gate Bridge with their orange hue. A trio of decks help the three-floor, two-bedroom home embrace life on the water. Oversized warehouse-style windows allow reflections of the water to constantly ripple across the ceiling.

Marked by its sawtooth roof and shipping container–like facade, the home is moored to the dock alongside boats. Since there's no way to paint a floating house, Nebolon chose to clad the exterior in 24-gauge metal siding coated with a fluorocarbon finish that will resist fading and chalking for 40 years. "It's a very durable paint system that doesn't require periodic painting," he explains. "An annual hose-down will work just fine."

Made of black anodized aluminum with stainless steel hinges, the home's warehouse-style windows are designed to withstand corrosion. No wood was used on the exterior except for the dock, called a finger pier, which allows access to the front door and the couple's boat. The home looks out onto downtown San Francisco, with AT&T Park visible from the main deck. The Swan boat was once of many a ride at a nearby water park many years ago.

A pair of Amazonia Terra teak chairs sit atop the first-floor deck, covered in Runnen teak outdoor floor decking from IKEA. The textures and shadowing are wonderful.

The living room floor is made of Australian cypress with a tung-oil finish. A Solas wall-mounted fireplace by Hearth Innovators and a curious ball-shaped chair, by Putra Salahin in Bali, complement the sun-drenched space. The natural daylighting from many different sources create a room that constantly changes.

The kitchen is marked by its Wolf gas range, white Carrara marble countertop bar, and Cobb Rise & Fall pendants by Original BTC. The architect designed a custom wine glass holder, which hangs nearby.

Fabricated by Stocklin Iron Works of Petaluma and designed by Nebolon, the free-standing orange staircase features steel railings and treads made from IKEA wood butcher blocks. "We designed the open staircase to make the trip to the second floor fun," the architect says.

In the bathroom, a teak live-edge countertop and custom yellow cabinet support a double wash basin by Duravit. A mirror from Restoration Hardware hangs below custom lights, designed by the homeowner for a steampunk look. Although the image make it look like there are two windows in the shower, only the low window is there to provide some lighting and privacy.