

# The New York Times

On Location: San Francisco

## Their Floating World



The house nests in a boxlike concrete barge that provides protection and keel-like stability.

**By Sarah Amelar May 15, 2013**

**Photography: Matthew Millman for the New York Times**

**Architecture: Robert Nebolon, Architect AIA; Robert Nebolon Architects**

SAN FRANCISCO — Sarah and Kimo Bertram never imagined living in a floating house. But nearly three years ago, after being outbid on more conventional homes, Ms. Bertram spotted an ad on Craigslist offering a furnished houseboat for rent. On a lark, they checked it out.

Most surprising was the location: not Sausalito, the Bay Area's celebrated houseboat community, but Mission Creek, an obscure backwater canal once surrounded by acres of tidal shoals, and later industrial zones. For decades, this small marina with its 20 floating

homes was isolated, even from amenities like grocery stores. But by the time the Bertrams arrived, the surroundings — including the University of California’s new 43-acre Mission Bay Campus — had begun seeing rapid development. Even so, the creek’s tree-shaded banks retained a scruffy, almost bucolic charm. The couple were smitten.

As they crossed the gangplank toward the house, Mr. Bertram told his wife of five months, “Just so you know, I’m going to try to buy this.” Never mind that it wasn’t for sale.

Within minutes, they discovered more than one connection between his family and the owner. And three days later, she sold them the house that her husband, who died several years earlier, had lovingly fitted out. (Because floating homes are not typically candidates for mortgages, the seller financed the deal herself.)

The Bertrams were newcomers to the neighborhood, but no strangers to the water. Mr. Bertram, 37, is part Hawaiian and an avid surfer who grew up north of San Francisco. His wife, 31, comes from what she calls “the freshwater side of the family” in Michigan. An amateur boat builder’s daughter, she spent childhood summers living on a sailboat. “So it’s very calming for me to feel the house moving,” she told a visitor as it gently swayed in its mooring.



Living room with the saw-tooth vaulting

Living amid seals and seabirds confirmed their love of the water, Mr. Bertram said, and gave them the sense of being on vacation at the edge of a busy city. They bicycled to work downtown. (He is a vice president of real estate and development for Hyatt Hotels; she is a public policy director for a solar power company.) Still, they longed to build the floating home of their dreams.

So they turned to Bart Elmer, a general contractor and friend, and Robert Nebolon, an architect. Though neither had ever designed a floating home, they had often worked together, and the architect had built at the edge of the ocean and on stilts over a bay, he said, "getting closer and closer to the water."

The Bertrams' 2,100-square-foot home went up on dry land in a Sausalito boatyard. It took six months to build and cost about \$400,000. Nested permanently in a protective, stabilizing concrete barge, the metal-sided house is like a loft on the water. Recalling the area's industrial past, it has a saw-toothed roof and tall metal casement windows. It also has another local reference: Golden Gate Bridge International Orange, the color chosen for the front door and the circular staircase that rises to the kitchen-dining-living area.



*The free-standing metal stair services all three levels and is a method of bringing daylight to all levels. The stair has the same paint specifications as the nearby Golden Gate Bridge.*



The Bertrams donated the old boat to the Ecumenical Association for Housing, which supports affordable housing in the gentrifying houseboat community of Sausalito and refurbished the vessel for use by a new owner.

After the first house embarked last November, the moment of truth arrived, when its successor rolled down a boat ramp, [hit the water for the first time](#) and, to everyone's relief, floated.

A World War II landing craft tugged it around the bay, a three-and-a-half-hour journey past Alcatraz and under bridges, to its final mooring. There, in a regatta of dinghies, the community greeted it like a new family member. "The neighbors were all out," Ms. Bertram recalled, "ready to catch a line and dock it safely."

Now the Bertrams are squaring away for another arrival, this summer: a baby.



*The kitchen has natural daylight and views from all directions..*



Twilight view: the Swan boat was once a part of a fleet from a ride at a nearby water park



The bathroom is well lit from a high source over the sink and a low source in the shower (the high window in the shower is a reflection)





The shape and colors are reminiscent of sails of sailing ships, clouds, or white foamy waves over the ocean.