



Architecture

A boat on top of the Southbank Centre — is it art, or just the quirkiest holiday home in London? Hugh Pearman climbs aboard



Oh, you think. This is a dream, right? You have gone up in a lift, and there, at the top, at the end of a snaking gang-plank, a boat is waiting. It's called Le Roi des Belges. Why? And it's perched on some kind of cliff. The river is way down below. Then you look around, and suddenly — there's the National Theatre! But seen from slightly above, as if... Oh, wait. This isn't a boat at all, is it? It's some kind of penthouse. It's got comfy seating, a big double bed, a kitchen sink, even a welcome mat outside its front door, which is actually at the back, because otherwise you'd fall over the cliff.

Now you've found an enormous logbook. You've opened a secret panel in the wall and discovered maps of the Congo. Beneath those is another panel. You open it and there's a blurred portrait of a scary man with epaulettes. Quickly you wrench open that panel as well, only to find you are staring at yourself in an old mirror. Is he, are you, the king of the Belgians? Is the river down below the Congo? If so, it's merging with London again. Red buses grind to and fro. You hear the chiming of Big Ben. You wake up.

No, you are still in the boat/house, in the bed. Then the bed starts to split down the middle, its two halves sliding towards the sides of the boat. What weird psychosexual metaphor is this? Scrambling out, you find a rickety set of metal steps has descended from the ceiling. You climb up them and find yourself on the bridge. It has two high chairs, but no spoked wheel, no controls, no compass. There's some kind of railed poop deck at the front. In the cabin, another ladder, wooden this time, leads to a small circular hatch in the ceiling. You squeeze through and find yourself standing on top of the ship, beneath a pyramidal mast arrangement.

Way up there, propellers are whirring. It's all the wrong way round. The propellers should be in the water, not the air. Come to that, the entire boat should be in the water, not up in the air, poised as if to slide over the edge and plunge down.

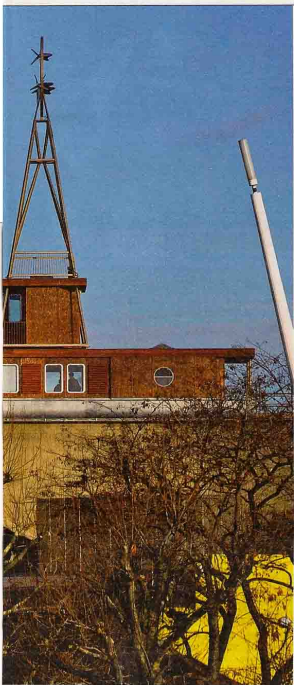
Now the weird boat is merging with other recollections. You are in the boat again, but it's on top of the Queen Elizabeth Hall; in fact, right above the auditorium where you sometimes sit. Then you wake up properly. Your phone beeps. Everything is real. You are indeed on top of the Queen Elizabeth Hall, on the

South Bank. There is the boat. Everything described above is true. It exists, just as I have described it. Pay the right folk a few hundred quid and you can go there yourself. Le Roi des Belges has another name: A Room for London. It is a holiday flat, but, as you may have gathered, not ordinary one. This is a collaboration between the arts agency Arangel and Living Architecture, a company founded by the philosopher Alain de Botton, who is also its creative director.

Living Architecture commissions top architects to build new,



A room with a view: the boat/house sleeps two and was designed by the architect David Kohn and the artist Fiona Banner



often somewhat quirky holiday homes for rent. Even by its somewhat outré standards, however, A Room for London is an oddity. Neither de Botton nor Arangel, when they set the brief, asked for a boat. They had negotiated the South Bank site for a year, having established that the 1960s concrete brutalist architecture of the QEH, right on the right curve of the Thames in central London, was not only admirably positioned for such an urban adventure, but strong enough to take the weight on its flat roof. The Southbank Centre is involved

had commanded a river boat in 1890 in the Congo Free State, which was then anything but free, being the private colony of the Belgian king, Leopold II. Conrad's steamer was named Le Roi des Belges.

Kohn and Banner's design thus came with a powerful narrative that suited the surreal nature of the location and linked London with Africa. Banner's art has always involved compressed narratives and dislocation, as evinced by her Harrier and Jaguar installation at Tate Britain in 2010 — two real warplanes, but not as we know them.

To pile on the oddness, Kohn and Banner then visited Sir John Soane's Museum, in Lincoln's Inn Fields, the brilliant, madly obsessive former home of the Georgian architect. His way of layering space and manipulating light influences the design — those opening wall panels with pictures beneath other pictures are a direct steal from the personal picture gallery in his house.

Despite all this, in its way it is a practical little place. Built in Brighton, with a riveted aluminium hull and a plywood superstructure, its width determined by the maximum permitted on a standard lorry, it was lifted into position by a crane. On either side of the back of the boat are a toilet and a shower room, behind burgundy leather curtains. The galley is not lavish: a compact fridge, a microwave, a sink. A small octagonal antique table (again Soane-ish) with two folding chairs makes for a tight dining area. The place is designed for two — either together, in which case the two halves of the bed roll together, or apart. Around the inside of the prow is a semicircle of seating, beneath which is storage for many books about London. Those propellers on top are three mini wind turbines that provide about three-quarters of the power the place needs to run.

Those who pay to stay there are encouraged to treat it as a place of contemplation, and to record their experiences in the logbook. It has proved a big hit: when the first six-month booking period went live last September, it sold out in 12 minutes. The next, and final, six-month booking window opens on Thursday. After that, the "room" can't stay there. For the purposes of 2012, it's an art installation. But it cost Living Architecture what they say is "several hundred thousand", and they will never recoup that with a year's rentals, even at between

£120 and £350 a night. So they are looking for a new location for Le Roi des Belges after 2012.

I think it should move around, year by year, to places that are sometimes urban and sometimes rural. Yes, it's more than a little mad, but it is also ingenious and endearing. Inside, it's not especially nautical; neither is it hotel-like or minimalist. "Eclectic" would describe its style. Besides, with the eyes of the world on Britain and London this year, how

appropriate to have, prominently in the centre of town, what might also be described as a monument to English eccentricity. □

Book from Thursday at living-architecture.co.uk

See a gallery of Hugh Pearman's photos of

A Room for London at thesundaytimes.co.uk/culture

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