



A BOAT WITH A VIEW

The MetroShip is transforming the houseboat industry: evolving from the original home set on pontoons to comfortable, sustainable, luxury apartments on the water.

PHOTOGRAPHS & STORY BY KIM PLUMMER

Born out of prefabrication and the efficiencies that come with it, the MetroShip offers New York City loft-like living on the water. Inspired by sleek, modern design, the MetroShip is changing the perception of houseboats from crude buildings set on rafts to luxury ships, resembling dockside condos.

Walking through sliding glass doors, you step off the dock and onto hardwood floors. Light switches are touch-sensitive, unmarked buttons; a flat-screen HDTV faces the bed, and a \$20,000 stereo comes installed on the boat. A Gaggenau in-cabinet oven and electric cooktop are built into the faux-granite countertop, while the bathroom houses an LG steam all-in-one washer and dryer with a Kohler frameless glass shower.

Not to mention the views of midtown Manhattan from the bedroom of the MetroShip docked in Lincoln Harbor.

David Ballinger, designer of the MetroShip and prefab entrepreneur, says the idea came while living in a cramped London apartment in the 1990s. Living opposite two pirate ships, Ballinger imagined life on the boats to be much more liberating than his shoeboxed apartment.

"I thought that I could live in one of these things and have twice the space I do now," Ballinger says of the ships. "I would have no neighbors and it would be quite a cool way of living."

The vision was simple, Ballinger explains: a home you can take anywhere, where all you need to move are your

furniture and your clothes. However, transforming his dream into reality wasn't as easy.

Ballinger spent seven years trying to build the MetroShip, but for some reason, he says, something always went wrong. "All kinds of stuff stopped it from happening," Ballinger explains. "It was only when I bought an old houseboat on eBay and completely remodeled it to make it very, very modern" that he was able to move forward.

Ballinger describes the encounter as "pure fluke;" buying the boat on eBay was a last-ditch effort to create the MetroShip. He bought the boat in 2006, and by 2008 Ballinger had his prototype.

From the MetroShip's inception, James Lane, the most recent owner of the MetroShip, had an eye on



THE KITCHEN COMES FULLY LOADED WITH GAGGENAU KITCHEN APPLIANCES AND SLOAN TOUCHLESS FAUCETS BUILT INTO THE OVERSIZED COUNTERTOP THAT DOUBLES AS DESK SPACE.

OPPOSITE: THE METROSHIP SITS DOCKED IN LINCOLN HARBOR WITH FABULOUS VIEWS OF MIDTOWN MANHATTAN FROM THE WEEHAWKEN, NJ MARINA.

what Ballinger was creating. In 2004, Lane, a 3D Architectural Artist with Rafael Viñoly Architects, worked on an independent project in college designing a houseboat and researched the work of Ballinger.

Lane says his original plan was to design and build his own boat in North Carolina, where he is originally from. At the time, MetroShip was still purely concept. In the following years, Lane's plans for a houseboat evolved and MetroShip produced a prototype. Lane began looking for a houseboat and says "it was a matter of good luck" that he found a listing for the MetroShip when he looked on eBay. "When I got this job with [Rafael Viñoly Architects], I decided I was going to stay in New York for a while, and then decided to buy the MetroShip instead of building my own," Lane says.

When it came to design, there were a few important goals that Ballinger had in mind. These features also appealed to Lane, not only as an architect, but also as the MetroShip's newest inhabitant.

Ballinger's goal is to change the way the industry looks at houseboats, not only from a design standpoint, but from a production one as well, allowing him to create boats efficiently. Ballinger's company, GDM Ltd., owns several other prefab companies that build sheds, cabins, play areas for children, and now luxury houseboats. The same prefab concept used to build these landlocked structures is integrated into the MetroShip's construction.

The boats are easier to manufacture and the product is better quality, Ballinger says. In addition, the prefab model allows them to build boats quickly, and Ballinger can customize boats "within reason and practicality."

Aside from its building efficiencies, Ballinger put an emphasis on finding the best way to create stability in the water. "I really wanted it to be a house on the water, and have it feel like a house, with little movement," Ballinger explains.

The foundation of the MetroShip is a heavy steel hull, creating a low center of gravity. The kitchen and bathroom are purposefully located at the boat's center, further maintaining stability.

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—David Ballinger,
MetroShip designer

According to Lane, the steel hull sets MetroShip apart from most manufacturers who use aluminum and fiberglass. For Lane, the steel hull is one of the ship's most appealing features because it will allow him to keep the MetroShip in the Hudson River year-round. Boats with fiberglass hulls must be taken out of the river or dry-docked because of the ice in the Hudson.

As for the design features you can see with the eye, the MetroShip's translucent wall panels help create the boat's sleek, modern look, as well as providing insulation and natural, diffused light all day long. The panels are made of crushed, recycled glass mixed with a polymer for a smooth finish that's nearly self-cleaning. "Nothing can stick to it," Ballinger says. "These panels have been tried and tested and have the perfect application for the water because they don't corrode."

Furthermore, the panels provide insulation in the winter, while preventing solar gain in the summer. For Lane, who plans to live on the boat year-round, the insulation the panels provide in the winter is very important. "It's insulated like a house, not a boat," Lane says. "The wall panels give you the same insulation value of a residential studded wall with fiberglass insulation."

Prior to Lane's purchase of the MetroShip in Lincoln Harbor, the boat served as a model home docked in Connecticut. Nearly 1,000 people toured it when it was located in Stamford and, later, Greenwich.

The MetroShip, starting at a base price of \$290,000, sells predominantly to customers in the Northeast—unusual for houseboats, which have the largest market



DURING THE DAY, THERE IS NO NEED TO TURN ON LIGHTS BECAUSE OF THE NATURAL, DIFFUSED LIGHT LET IN THROUGH THE TRANSLUCENT WALL PANELS ALL DAY LONG.

in Seattle and throughout large lakes in middle America, Ballinger says. However, he also has boats throughout San Francisco, Miami, Chicago, and Washington, D.C.

Ballinger says the company aims to sell the MetroShip as a “piece of real estate on the water,” which means the boat needs to be packaged with a dock in a marina. Ballinger says most customers usually have a preference of where they want their boat, but for those who don’t, the company will negotiate with a marina on the customer’s behalf.

The package makes the transition to houseboat living much easier—especially for the next customer Ballinger is working with: a retired couple, who have “sold off everything in their suburban home” to move into a new two-level, three-bedroom MetroShip.

Currently, the MetroShip is on a seven-to-10-year waiting list for dock space in San Diego’s Sea World Marina. In the next year, MetroShip will be receiving dock space at the 79th Street Boat Basin in Manhattan after a five-year wait.

In the future, Lane plans to take the boat around Manhattan once or twice a year, and hopes to travel up the Hudson. In the meantime, Lane’s bedroom continues to face midtown Manhattan, where he takes solace in sitting on the aft deck enjoying a drink, watching 8 million people beneath the twinkling city lights.



THE ACCESS POINT TO THE STEEL HULL IS BENEATH THE BED. JAMES LANE PLANS ON DEVISING A STORAGE SOLUTION TO BETTER UTILIZE THE EMPTY SPACE IN THE HULL.

Resource List

metro-ship.com

AUDIO/VISUAL

SONY LCD FLAT SCREEN TV; *sonystyle.com*

JAMO IN-WALL SPEAKERS; *jamo.com*

CYRUS AUDIO STEREO SYSTEM; *cyrusaudio.com*

ENGINE

90 HP HONDA OUTBOARD MOTOR; *marine.honda.com*

FURNITURE

METROSOFA; *metrosofa.com*

KITCHEN APPLIANCES

GAGGENAU IN-CABINET OVEN AND ELECTRIC COOKTOP; *gaggenau.com*

VIKING INTEGRATED FRIDGE/FREEZER; *vikingrange.com*

VIKING INTEGRATED DISHWASHER; *vikingrange.com*

LAUNDRY

LG STEAM ALL-IN-ONE WASHER DRYER; *lg.com*

SHOWER

KOHLER FRAMELESS GLASS SHOWER; *kohler.com*

WATER FIXTURES

SLOAN TOUCHLESS WATER CONSERVING FAUCET; *sloanvalve.com*