

Below
The structure
will house
paying guests
throughout
the year

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A Room for London

David Kohn and Fiona Banner's temporary houseboat on the South Bank embodies a mass of contradictions, but has a quiet sense of purpose nonetheless

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There's no shortage of architecture inspired by boats – from grand art deco hotels to the De La Warr Pavilion in East Sussex – but there is a fine line between inspiration and literalness. The structure that sits atop the brutalist, concrete shell of the South Bank's Queen Elizabeth Hall crosses that line fearlessly, just as it crosses the problematic territory between architecture and installation. The question is, why?

A Room for London is part of the continuing Living Architecture programme instigated by writer Alain de Botton, which aims to promote modern architecture as something to be enjoyed in its own right. Thus, the little beached boat will be accommodating paying guests, alongside a series of art events, throughout 2012.

The explanations given for the project by architect David Kohn and artist Fiona Banner, who designed the boat, embody a glorious mess of ideas. Chief among them is the inspiration taken from Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness*. The rooftop structure is emblazoned with the words "Roi des Belges", which was the name of the real steamer Conrad captained up the Congo in 1889. The steamer in the story sets sail from the Thames. In this way, Kohn and Banner introduce the themes of colonialism, trade and a foreboding sense of darkness and fear that haunts this successful and self-satisfied global city.

Much has been made of the view through the round-cornered windows, as if this beached vessel were a harbinger of some strange tsunami that tosses things out of their natural place. The whole installation embodies a slew of contradictions. It is intended as a space for viewing the city, yet it is stranded on a river bank where you struggle to find a vantage point without a view; it is proposed as a

space for contemplation of the city, yet it is right at its heart – too close to really see it; it expresses dark ideas, but with a jaunty, nautical structure; it occupies the uncomfortable territory between architecture and art, between the beautiful and the bodged.

Yet, against the odds, it works. Approaching it from the dark, rain-stained concrete crevices between the walls of the arse-end of the Hayward and Queen Elizabeth Hall is in itself a narrative of a particular, unforgiving version of London. The release, on emerging from the lift on to the breezy terrace on which it sits, is a revealing moment of clarity. The structure is spread over two floors – a cabin and kitchenette in a curving, plywood-clad envelope and a tight, octagonal library above. The fittings, from lamps to coat hooks, exude a nautical economy and robustness. Just as on a real boat, space is squeezed so that even the art is stowed away – inside a flush-fitting cabinet door is a series of Banner's works, including parallel maps of the Congo and Thames; a portrait that could be Conrad or his fictional lead Kurtz; and a piece inspired by Joseph Gandy's drawings of the Bank of England, depicted as a ruin. This is another of those intimations of an apocalypse – an idea overlaid against the city skyline.

If de Botton wants to suggest that modern architecture can be enjoyable, he has surely put it in the wrong place. The once-derided South Bank has become a place of architectural pilgrimage. But what the boat does is make you look, wonder what this thing is and what it is doing there, much as Antony Gormley's figures did a couple of years ago (is it a suicide attempt, a shop mannequin, a police marksman?) A Room for London is packed with symbol and story. It is, perhaps, because it is in the wrong place that it works so well.