

Shore thing: boat with a view seeks £120-a-night crew

A Room for London is a year-long arts venue where the public can stay the night

Jonathan Glancey

There are just a few things missing to complete the scene. Savage dogs, rusting engines from white vans plundered for parts, seagulls squabbling over landfill, scuffed barges laden with gravel and a backdrop peppered with indifferent high-rise housing. Add a slight scent of sewage and the 27-tonne *Le Roi des Belges* (King of the Belgians) might be berthed on some wind scythed stretch of the Thames Estuary far east of Tower Bridge.

The illusion, conjured on a grey and blustery January morning is not so very whimsical. *Le Roi des Belges* just happens to be moored on top of the brutalist Queen Elizabeth Hall between the Royal Festival Hall and the National Theatre. This, though, is no weather beaten Thames trader; it is, rather, an artwork - houseboat, too, which the public can stay in. It was designed by architect David Kohn and artist Fiona Banner, with Artangel for Living Architecture, an organisation set up by the philosopher Alain de Botton to build innovative holiday homes around the shores of Britain.

The shock, having ridden a slow and brutally utilitarian lift up through a jagged concrete interstice between the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Hayward Gallery, is to find the houseboat anchored to the vast concrete roof of the 1960s concert hall, a terrain as bleak, and as compelling, as any found downriver from Tower Bridge.

Artist and architect say they were inspired by Joseph Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness*, set on the Thames and the *River Congo*, and by Conrad's tales of how he steamed up the Congo in a boat



A room with a view: from inside the houseboat there is a wide-angled panorama of central London, framing the city's skyline Photographs: Charles Hosea

of the same name in 1889. But, where Conrad experienced the all but unspeakable horror of the atrocities committed by King Alphonso II, what you see spread out before you as you board the artwork *Roi des Belges*, also known as *A Room for London*, is the most compelling, and gloriously wide-angled, panorama of central London, framed by the Palace of Westminster on the port side and St Paul's to starboard.

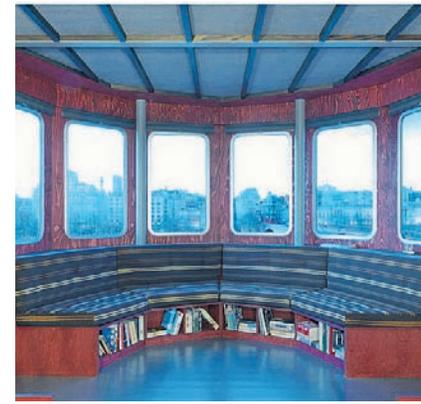
"Once ships sailed out from imperial London to the rest of the world, today the world has come willingly to London," explained de Botton.

Two people will be able to stay here every night this year. Snuggled into their cabin - complete with neat galley, dining room, bunks, a shower with a view of St Paul's and a library - those stowing their jib aboard this happily unexpected houseboat, are offered shelves stacked with books on London, peerless views and the strangest sense of being marooned in the heart of a neon, fluorescent and sodium-lit city and with the sound of Thames water lapping the shore overlain with the noise of night buses and emergency service sirens.

A Room for London is a year-long arts

venue. A programme of visiting writers includes Swedish author and cultural historian Sven Lindqvist and novelist Jeanette Winterson. Among the musicians staying on board will be Andrew Bird, the Chicago multi-instrumentalist, German composer Heiner Goebbels and Laurie Anderson. Video and installation artist, Jeremy Deller, and Talking Heads' David Byrne will also be part of the crew.

Le Roi des Belges is the sixth of the rental houses commissioned by Living Architecture. These include the Balancing Barn on the Suffolk coast between Aldeburgh and Walberswick by Dutch



architects, MVRDV, the Shingle House at Dungeness, by the Glaswegian team NORD Architecture, and the Dune House in Suffolk, by Norway's Jarmund/Vignoaes architects. The boat is fully booked from January to June. Bookings for July-December, starting at £120, will go on sale on 19 January at 12pm at living-architecture.co.uk