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Lake — Union

A couple takes their place in the houseboat community, restoring a neighbor's home in the process

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Dock workers and boaters did a doubletake one sun-drenched morning last April to gape at a two-story house being towed into Lake Union, its owners leaning out over the barbecue deck, waving and raising glasses of champagne.

The people along the Ship Canal might have raised a glass, too, if they'd known the on-deck couple had just given away their old home, the gift of a lifetime to a stranger who'd lost everything in a fire.

And if people along the canal were really paying attention, they'd have realized that large house floating by as if it were a boat also signals a trend.

Houseboating in Seattle is changing as owners do what people in the suburbs have been doing for years: building as much house as they legally and financially can. And many are saving money by building off-site and floating their new homes into place — some all the way from Canada, where the American dollar buys a lot of house.



From the kitchen, the Carlsons can look out across the dining deck to the east side of Queen Anne Hill.

Casey, the family dog, lounges on the dock connecting the Carlsons' house with the shoreline.

That scene on the canal was set three years ago when Susan and Rune Carlson decided to sell their 3,600-square-foot house overlooking Lake Sammamish and buy something they could put more heart into.

The Carlsons had already spent two years traipsing through architecturally swell homes-with-a-yard-and-a-view, "trying to



On sunny days, the Carlsons go up top to enjoy full-circle views under big blue skies. The houseboat's deep-green color and bright-white trim are reminiscent of the "Old Muskoka" upscale boathouses popularized in the wilds of Ontario, Canada, in the 19th century.

imagine ourselves in a traditional house in a traditional neighborhood," says Susan, a development planner. "Then we realized what was missing: water. High-rises and land-houses just didn't have enough connection to it. The only thing that did was houseboats. In the end, we were just seduced by the lifestyle and the sense of community houseboaters have."

Seattle's houseboats first appeared on Lake Union, Lake Washington and the Duwamish River in about 1895 — mostly flimsy stick houses arranged on log floats as cheap housing for fishermen, mill workers and loggers who couldn't afford land and substantial housing. After World War II, college students found them to be the cheapest of housing. But residential use of shorelines was restricted beginning in 1972, limiting the number of houseboats and driving up prices.

Today only 487 are left, clustered along Lake Union and Portage Bay. Many retain vestiges of the poorly built shanties from which they evolved — walls with few studs or stuffed with newspaper insulation — and many have been remodeled so many times

that buyers like the Carlsons feel they've lost all sense of proportion and usefulness.

"Every one we looked at, the spaces in them just didn't work anymore," says Rune, financial officer for Fidesic Corp., an Internet company. "It was like instead of being planned, they just rose up from the version they had before, like sourdough."

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SO THEY BOUGHT "a tear-down," an 850-square-foot ramshackle houseboat they could replace with something more in tune with the times.

"It was dark and dank and smelled like kitty litter and mildew," Susan says. "There was no counter space in the kitchen and the refrigerator had to be put out on a porch. It was awful, literally falling apart. But we figured we could live anywhere for six months. We didn't know it would turn out to be three years."

In the meantime, they began drawing up plans and contracted with a Canadian firm to build

their new home and float it from the Fraser River to their dock space on the east side of Lake Union. And then they began making themselves comfortable in the close-knit houseboat community.

The "sense of community" the Carlsons sought was apparent to Ozell Gaines, who bought an old-style houseboat on Portage Bay 37 years ago. He has watched the neighborhood gentrify around him but says the newcomers haven't changed its spirit.

Gaines, a custodian for a downtown restaurant, lost everything but community a year ago, when fireworks accidentally set fire to his uninsured houseboat and turned it into a charred shell. Neighbors took him in while he tried to figure out what to do.



Pillars in the great room next to the kitchen offer support for the beamed ceiling as well as decorative appeal. The floors are reclaimed old-growth fir from railroad trestles and demolished buildings.

When the Carlsons heard about the fire, they offered to float their old houseboat into Gaines' spot as soon as their new one arrived.

While they lived there, the Carlsons had made it more seaworthy than it had been in years. All Gaines needed was \$2,800 for the necessary permits to move the houseboat and a saw to trim the deck a few feet to fit the footprint of his old houseboat.

As the Carlsons were floating across the lake, toasting onlookers on the morning of the switch, a hired crew unhooked the metal arms, sewer lines and utility wires on the old houseboat, then eased it into the care of a tug that would take it to Gaines' spot on Portage Bay.

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THE CARLSONS found inspiration for their new home not in Seattle's working-class houseboat origins, but in a coffee-table book filled with lush photographs of the upscale boathouses on the shores of Lake Muskoka in the wilderness of Ontario, Canada.

The Lake Muskoka community dates to the late 19th century and consists mostly of summer cottages tethered to the lakeshore by docks. Most of the houses began as covered moorages for vintage runabouts owned by city-dwellers, who used the lake as a getaway. Eventually they added cozy apartments upstairs from the open moorages and created a style that's at once traditional and up-to-date. With its dark forest-green siding and sturdy white deck railings and lintels, the Carlsons' houseboat reflects what Canadians call "Old Muskoka" style.



A model sailboat skims along the edge of a small loft built out over the south entryway to bring in more light.

Visitors step off the dock onto a gabled porch, a mid-level entry that leads upstairs to a living and dining area, library and kitchen set off by stout columns. Downstairs are two bedrooms and baths, a workshop, laundry room and swimming decks.

The upstairs "has a great-room feel to it," says Rune. "It was hard to design that way because houseboats have to flex and torque with the movement of the lake. But that's why we have the columns, to support it."

The flooring upstairs is fir reclaimed from old buildings and railroad trestles. The fact that it scratches easily is a plus to the Carlsons. "It'll just make it look more interesting and lived in," Susan says.

Flooring downstairs is heated cement, colored and textured to look like old leather. "When people come in from swimming in the lake, we don't have to worry about water dripping everywhere," says Susan.

During the design stage, the Carlsons often climbed out on the roof of the old houseboat to photograph exactly where the sun shone in various seasons and at different times of day. It helped them determine where to place windows to catch as much faded winter sunlight as possible. They also measured the wind that sweeps across the lake to help them place outdoor decks for maximum protection.

Nearly every cranny in the house has a view, and it's wired for as many technological gew-gaws as the Carlsons would ever want.

The Carlsons contracted with International Marine Floatation Systems of Delta, B.C., to build the houseboat. IMFS is one of several firms that build houseboats off-site. The houseboats come with an attached foam-and-concrete float to replace the old-growth cedar log floats that have supported Seattle houseboats for more than a century.

"It's really more cost efficient to build them in Canada and float them down than haul all the materials down the dock," says Peter Longwood, an IMFS representative who works out of Bellingham. The homes cost from \$250,000 to \$1 million. Because the American dollar is so strong in Canada, that's about one-third less than if they were built in place in Seattle, Longwood says.

The Carlsons had to get the same shoreline permits required of other houseboat builders, and their home was built to U.S. standards, Longwood says. Inspectors from Olympia go to Canada regularly to inspect the work.

The Carlsons' houseboat has attracted some complaints from neighbors. Some say the houseboat seems massive and dark; others protest it's "just not houseboat-y" and mourn the changes in Seattle's houseboat community.



"For us, houseboat-y means the views and the connection to the water, and it certainly has that," says Susan. "And it is traditional — it's just not Seattle traditional."

"Nowadays people want to live on water but they don't want to put up with the damp and cold," Longwood adds. "Some people get nostalgic and want to keep things like they used to be, but that isn't going to happen."

One person who's not complaining is Gaines.

"It was very fortunate for me that the Carlsons came along when they did," he says. "I know things change. But what happened to me was really a miracle. That house sort of erased the bad memories for me."

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