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A Streamlined Boathouse Perches Above the Water in the San Juan Islands

Sitting lightly above the eelgrass, the tiny dwelling serves as a port of entry for a family getaway on the Salish Sea.

Text by

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A few years ago, a couple acquired a lot next to a remote piece of land, 65 miles northwest of Seattle, where they had been going on weekends and summers since 2005. They already had a tree house and other places to sleep and cook meals for themselves and guests, but the neighboring lot had rare access to the waterfront—and the island can only be reached by seaplane or by ferries from Anacortes, Washington.



The boathouse's corner-to-corner gable faces the Salish Sea.

Photo by Andrew Pogue

Something had to be done to address an existing structure on the site, though. Hand built by the previous owner in the late 1960s, the old boathouse balanced perilously on the shore, held up by a concrete embankment and a makeshift assemblage of creosote-soaked logs and tires. "It was a very ramshackle but interesting structure that he used to keep his boat equipment," the client says of the original owner.



The existing boathouse had been hand built by the previous owner in the late 1960s.

Photo: [Prentiss + Balance + Wickline Architects](#)



Hand-poured concrete and an assemblage of Creosote-soaked logs and tires supported the structure.

Photo: [Prentiss + Balance + Wickline Architects](#)



The previous structure blocked sunlight and occupied a traditional spawning ground on the shoreline.

Photo: [Prentiss + Balance + Wickline Architects](#)

The couple wanted to build a sustainable boathouse that would restore the site's natural ecology and serve as a social gathering place, so they reached out to Dan Wickline of Prentiss Balance Wickline Architects, who had done previous renovation work for their home, and another house on the island. "So much of the project is about the site and the interaction between the structure and the shoreline," the client says.



The new building has slightly less square footage, and it's nested within the same area as the original foundation.

Photo by Taj Howe

[Photo Categories: exterior, shed roofline, boathouse building type, wood siding material](#)



The large overhang limits sun exposure in the warmer months.

Photo by Taj Howe

Wickline's plan removed the old building and the remains of the dilapidated bulkhead, and set a new boathouse on a small concrete landing, lifted above the embankment on narrow columns that allow daylight, eelgrass, and kelp to return to the shoreline. A corner-to-corner gable faces broad views of the Salish Sea, folding down to reduce its visual impact on the upland landscape.



From upland, the boathouse's visual impact on the wilderness is minimal.

Photo by Andrew Pogue



Narrow columns support the structure and dock, allowing sunlight to nourish eelgrass along the shoreline.

Photo by Andrew Pogue

"One of the main goals was to recreate the shore's edge, so that it's as natural as possible," says Wickline. "We reduced the amount of in-water structure by 98 or 99 percent by creating these really thin columns. We touch that shoreline as minimally as possible to allow for the natural ecosystem to come back to what it once was."



The balcony extends the usable area of the house, providing a place to experience the water's edge.

Photo by Andrew Pogue

Now they can open up the windows and connect with the animals inhabiting the terrain. They share the waterfront with salmon, herring, river otters, crabs, eels, dolphins, and whales—as well as foxes, deer, raccoons, and all kinds of birds (including at least one bald eagle).



Instead of air conditioning, triple-glazed sliding windows provide passive cooling.

Photo by Taj Howe



Radiant heating is embedded beneath the wood floors for the colder months.

Photo by Taj Howe

"The boathouse is so much about being out there on the edge of the shore, and hearing the sounds, and feeling the breezes," Wickline says. "For the most part, the space is used when they want to be connected to the outdoor experience."



The boathouse is designed primarily as a social gathering place, so it has no dedicated bedrooms.

Photo by Taj Howe

[Photo Categories: living room, chair, light hardwood floors, floor lighting](#)



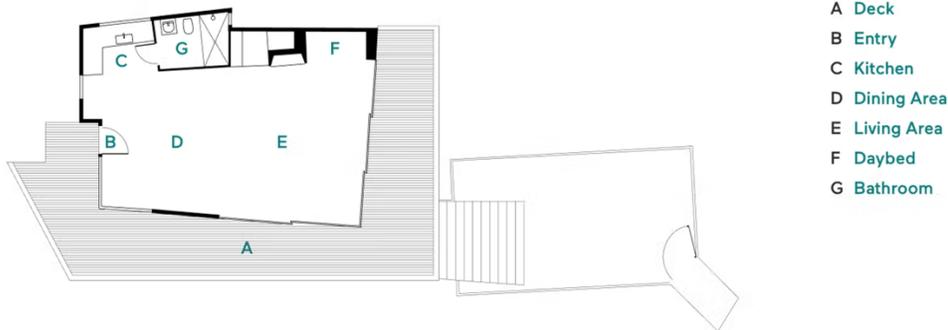
A custom mini kitchen is geared toward entertaining guests and the client's family.

Photo by Taj Howe



A daybed next to the fireplace provides a place to sit or catch a few winks.

Photo by Taj Howe



Floor Plan of Boathouse by Prentiss Balance Wickline Architects

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Project Credits:

Architect: [Dan Wickline, Prentiss Balance Wickline Architects / @pbwarchitects](#)

Builder: [Dalgarno Construction](#)

Structural Engineer: [Harriott Valentine Engineers](#)

Landscape Design: [Green Man Landscaping](#)

Interior Design: [LeeAnn Baker / @leeannbakerinteriors](#)

Project Manger: [Bonewitz LLC](#)

Environmental Consultation: [Jen-Jay, Inc.](#)