

THE

LIFE



For designer Charlotte Biltgen and her family,

TEXT BY IAN PHILLIPS PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHAN JULLIARD

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AQUATIC



home is a shipshape houseboat on the Seine

LEFT THE LIVING AREA IS OUTFITTED WITH PIECES OF CHARLOTTE BILTGEN'S OWN DESIGN, INCLUDING HER ECUME ARMCHAIR, EBISU SOFA, MOONLIGHT COFFEE TABLE, MONCEAU TABLE, AND USU RUG. RIGHT BILTGEN IN THE TENDER WITH HER FAMILY'S HOUSEBOAT IN THE BACKGROUND.

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Shortly after they met in June 2005, French designer Charlotte Biltgen and her husband Cédric made a trip to a boatyard in Burgundy. It was there that an industrial barge he’d bought a few months earlier was in the embryonic stages of being transformed into their future home. “It was very rudimentary,” recalls Charlotte. “There was only the hull and the bargeman’s quarters. But, I was immediately seduced. I love unusual projects.”

Once the major structural work was complete, Cédric sailed the vessel through a total of 169 locks to its current location on the banks of the Île de Puteaux to the west of Paris, which was already home to a budding houseboat community. It took another two years to make the interior livable.

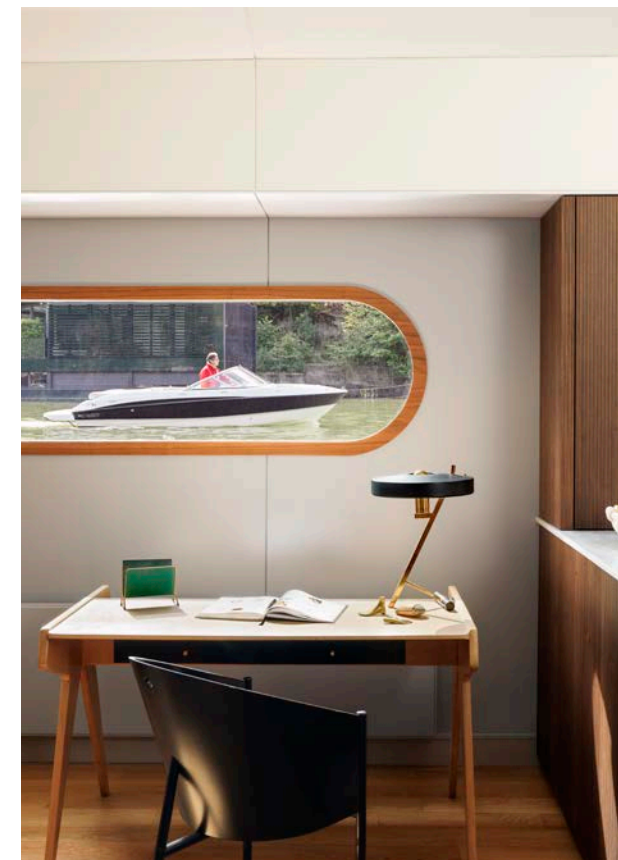
Cédric caught the “barge bug” after spending weekends on the boat of a friend in his youth. “While the rest of my pals were living in tiny apartments, he had nearly 2,000 feet of space and could organize great parties,” he recalls. Serendipitously, Charlotte’s parents had lived on the water before her birth. “I recall my father telling stories of their bohemian life aboard,” she says. “I didn’t necessarily choose to follow in their footsteps. I chose Cédric, and the boat was part of the package.”

Measuring nearly 130 feet in length and 16.5 feet wide, it now bears the name *Txakoli* for a white wine grown in the French Basque country, where Cédric spent many a childhood vacation. It also



ART: GENEVIÈVE CLAISSE © 2005 ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / ADAGP, PARIS, ATELIER LORENZI

IN THE PRIMARY BEDROOM, THE DADO IS COVERED IN BLACK DIAMOND AFRICAN FABRIC FROM AISSA DIONE. BILTGEN’S KLAY ARMCHAIR WEARS A VIBRANT YELLOW VELVET. MIDCENTURY DANISH TABLE; RUG FROM ATELIER TORTIL. ARTWORKS INCLUDE (FROM LEFT) A PIECE BY GENEVIÈVE CLAISSE, A PLASTER HEAD OF APOLLO FROM ATELIER LORENZI, AND DRAWINGS BY EDUARDO CHILLIDA. THE FLOOR LAMP AND SCONCES WERE FLEA MARKET FINDS.



has strong claims to being the most stylish houseboat on the Seine. In particular, it is filled with numerous creations from Charlotte’s in-house furniture collection (she was India Mahdavi’s right-hand for 13 years before setting up her own firm in 2015). There is her Ecume armchair with its inviting curves and generous proportions; her Monceau table whose plaster base is decorated with a ribbed spiral motif; and her totem-like Moonlight floor light, inspired by the work of Ettore Sottsass. In the dining room area is a sconce fitted with a prototype of a brass-bead shade made in collaboration with MTX Studio, which belongs to Chanel. “I use the boat as a kind of laboratory,” says Charlotte. “It’s where I can test out new designs.”

TOP RIGHT A VINTAGE CHAIR BY PHILIPPE STARCK FOR CAFÉ COSTES PULLS UP TO A 1950S DESK FOUND AT PARIS’S SAINT-OUEN FLEA MARKET. VINTAGE LOUIS KALFF TABLE LAMP.

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Things were not always so plush. There was no access path on the riverbank, and no water or electricity supply for the first year. Instead, they installed a generator in the hull, which would recharge batteries overnight, and a system to filter water from the Seine. “Things took time because I adopted a very hands-on approach,” says Cédric. “I oversaw much of the work myself.”

In 2018, the couple decided it was time for a serious upgrade and moved to an apartment for nine months with their three children—Salomé, Sacha, and Juliette, now 22, 15 and 12. “Having to put up with the noise of the neighbor’s TV made the kids realize just how lucky they were to live on a boat,” says Cédric.



TOP LEFT BILTGEN WITH HER HUSBAND, CÉDRIC, AND THEIR THREE CHILDREN IN THE KITCHEN. ABOVE THE PRIMARY BATH IS CLAD IN BISAZZA TILE. DEVON&DEVON TUB; TWO CERAMIC TABLES BY MIA JENSEN FROM AURÉLIEN GENDRAS. OPPOSITE IN DAUGHTER SALOMÉ’S ROOM, BILTGEN’S ATOME TABLE SERVES AS A NIGHTSTAND. BEDDING BY LISSOY; KNOTTED CALVI RUG FROM ATELIER TORTIL.

ART: PHILIPPE CARON

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Among other things, the former wheelhouse was revamped, allowing the addition of a utility room and a new bedroom for Salomé. To bring in more natural light, a pane of glass was also inserted into the arched lightwell in the living room (it had previously been covered with corrugated plastic). Then, Charlotte got to work remodeling the 2,000 square feet of interior space.

Her main constraints were juggling with the volumes. Fortunately, she didn’t have to deal with the low ceilings of most boats as the couple had the foresight to use railway track steel as ballast in the hull, which takes up just six inches, compared to the habitual three feet of concrete. As a result, the living room measures over nine feet at its highest point in the center. Charlotte did, however, have to

contend with the barge’s long, thin form, addressing it by eschewing corridors and ensuring that the majority of spaces have sources of natural light on both sides.

Charlotte was particularly keen to avoid nautical clichés. “They’re fine if you stay somewhere for a week but get tiring if you live there all year-round,” she says. So no splashes of blue, no collections of seashells, and no lifesavers on the walls. Instead, she opted for a largely neutral palette, so as not to distract from the views. One notable exception is the golden-hued armchair in the primary bedroom. “I think it’s very positive to sleep in the presence of yellow,” she says.

Mixed in with her own designs is a host of vintage finds, such as a trio of Gio Ponti glass bottles, a Louis Kalff desk lamp, and a chair designed by Philippe Starck in the 1980s for the legendary Café Costes in Paris. “It takes me back to when I used to hang out there as a teenager,” says Charlotte. Among the art is a Martin Berger work above the dining table made from deformed propylene. “Its wavelike form gives it movement,” notes Charlotte. “It looks almost like a piece of pleated Issey Miyake clothing.” Up on the deck, meanwhile, the main terrace features lush vegetation and sophisticated outdoor furniture made from materials like straw marquetry, which help to soften the barge’s industrial aesthetic.

Life on the Seine certainly sounds idyllic. During the summer, the family spends as much time as possible outdoors, often waterskiing on the weekends, hosting barbecues, or taking boat trips in a tender along the river. In the winter, a fireplace and hammam make it perfect for cocooning.

“It’s such a unique lifestyle for Paris,” enthuses Cédric. “We’re only a few hundred feet from the city limits, yet feel like we’re in the countryside.”

“When I get home, I feel completely disconnected from the city,” adds Charlotte. “It’s as if we’re on vacation, but in our very own home.”

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