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Float On

In the face of global climate change
and catastrophic natural disasters,
Waterstudio.NL finds innovative ways
to take advantage of water

Story TRACY METZ

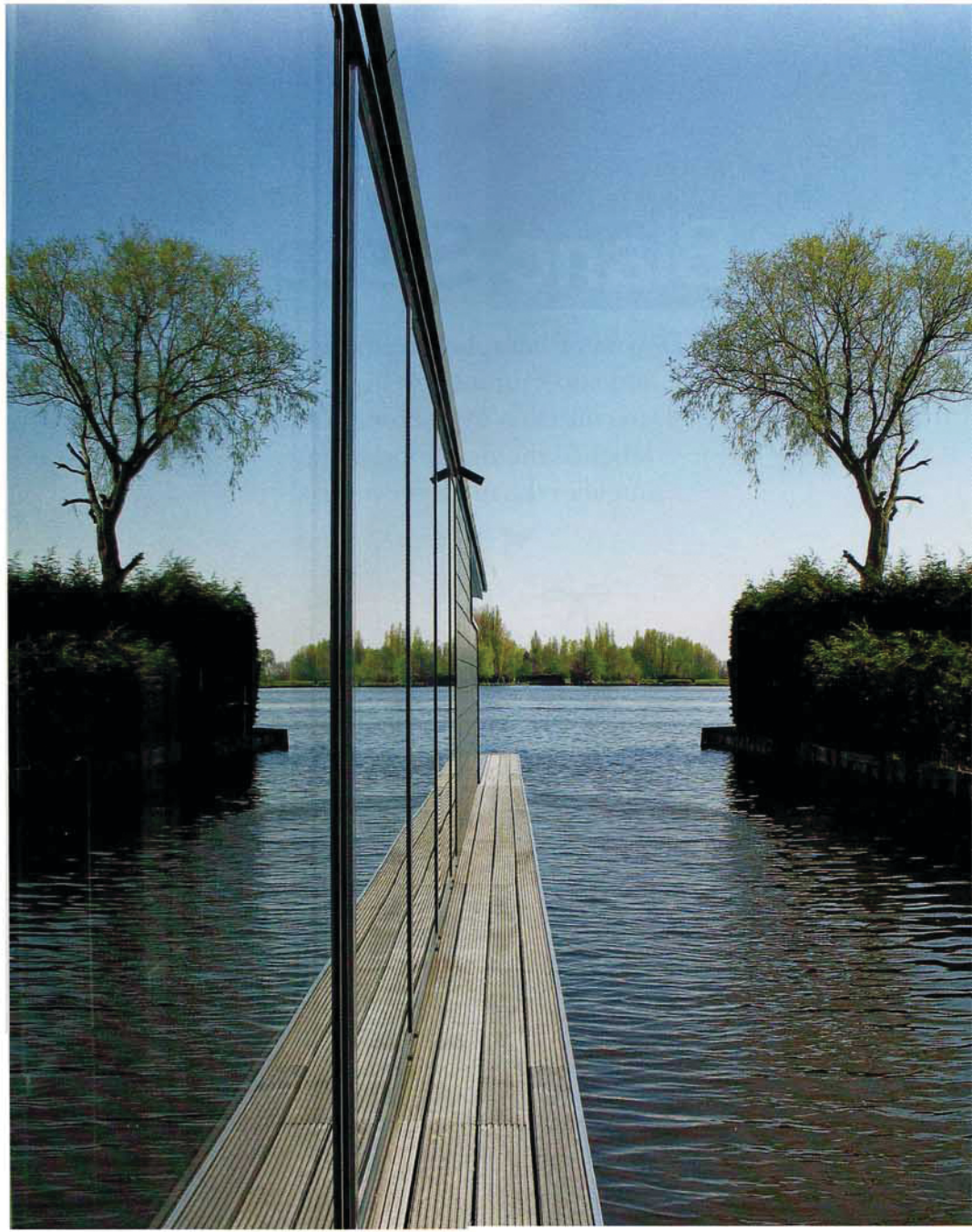


ABOVE AND BEYOND: The mirrored glass surfaces
help create privacy in the Snel waterhouse, in
which durable, humidity-resistant materials include
mold-free treated wood decks, a stainless steel
kitchen, and a yellow glass staircase that creates a
well of light

One of Waterstudio's first projects to substantiate
Olthuis' claims about the viability of living on water is
a two-story, 7,000-square-foot villa that is built on
Westender Lake in the northern Netherlands. The
property, designed for the family of a flower farmer (Sjef
Snel, his wife Agnes and their son) from the town of
Aalsmeer, the property includes a 10,000-square-foot
garden occupying the land adjacent to it. The lower
floor, which is underwater, contains a home movie
theater, a lounge, washroom and storage space. Agnes
Snel did not like the idea of sleeping semi-submerged
beneath the water's surface, so the family sleeps
upstairs in two small bedrooms adjoined to the living
room and kitchen by a transparent fireplace. The glass
walls of the living space fold open, accordion-style,
providing a view of the lake; the architect painted the
interior black so as not to detract attention from the
surrounding landscape.

"When the Snel family moved here from a thatched
farmhouse," says Olthuis, "they marked the transition
by throwing out all their old furniture and starting over in
a clean-cut, modern style. We picked it out together."
The furnishings, all of the highest quality, include sofas
by Italian manufacturer De Sede and an armchair by
Jori. Dutch firm Boley supplied the hearth, and designer
Paul van der Kooij created the kitchen using compo-
nents from Gaggenau, Miele and Atag.

Olthuis has also received commissions for larger proj-
ects, like a group of 70 holiday homes on a lake in
northern Netherlands developed by Kontour Vastgoed.
He also devised a number of other floating structures:
a garage that can be moored wherever extra parking
capacity is needed, a Pentacostal church with a
20-foot-high door in the shape of a cross, as well as
a vacation camp on Aruba specifically designed for
handicapped people.



The architect's true fascination, however, is developing
larger systems that will allow prefab construction on
the water. He recently designed and patented a new
technology called "floating land." "The principle is a
core of foam in a casing of concrete, which can be
manufactured in sections at the factory," explains
Olthuis. "These sections can then be connected quickly
and easily – and therefore cheaply – to form mobile
islands with a surface area measuring hundreds of
square meters."

Olthuis has proposed a floating riverside boulevard for
the Belgian city of Antwerp as well as new urban exten-
sions for Ho Chi Minh City and Bombay, both using this
new technology. And an even bigger project is in the
making – Waterstudio.NL is now one of two finalists for
an island building project in Dubai. Using "floating land,"
the firm would build a string of islands that formed
Arabic words as part of the second Palm Island now
being built just off the coast. A project far grander in
scheme than the Snel residence, but nonetheless one
that will surely have all the comforts of home. TM

In this post-Katrina age, it requires a leap of imagination
to understand exactly what the Dutch mean when they
say they no longer see water as a potential foe, but
more as a friend. For centuries past, the Dutch have
been masters of flood control, trusting the traditional
defense method of building ever-higher dikes around
gradually subsiding polders – but now they are developing
solutions that work with the environment, not against
it. The Katrina aftermath, combined with a growing
awareness of global climate change, has stirred both
international and local interest in the work of
Waterstudio.NL, an architecture firm headed by 35-
year-old Koen Olthuis. His 10-person operation,
housed in a former supermarket in the town of Rijswijk,
is surfing a wave of water-building success; their unique
approach focuses entirely on inventive solutions for
living on, in and around water.

For their first two and a half years, the company had
plenty of ideas but no commissions. "Now things are
really picking up," Olthuis says. "For an architect, water
is not simply a niche field, but an enormous potential
market. The traditional typology of the houseboat has
kept architects from thinking of new approaches to
living on water," he says. "But I see no reason why you
can't develop more creative architectural solutions." To
build the foundation of his water houses, Olthuis uses a
hollow concrete box that can weigh up to 500 tons (the
equivalent of a Boeing 747). Like a large boat, the
house is stable precisely because of its weight. Olthuis
either attaches the buildings to land by cables – if the
water level is stable, as in a small lake – or by means of
wood, steel or concrete stilts, in the case of a tide-
prone body of water. He further accommodates water
level instability with flexible pipes that provide sewage
control, gas and electricity.

One of the biggest barriers, Olthuis discovered, is
winning the trust of insurance companies, convincing
them that a floating house isn't a boat, and that it
employs safe, long-term building techniques. Only then
can potential buyers receive mortgage approvals,
allowing the market for water-housing to grow into a
credible and large-scale alternative.

