

The top-floor balcony of their cabin on Lake Macbride in Solon, Iowa, is Tom and Beth Simpson's private prospect. Just off the master bedroom, the space provides shelter from exposure but enables a dramatic view over the water. The lookout served as a convenient refuge when the couple visited the cabin during its construction. The project caused a bit of a stir in the area, which is experiencing new building for the first time in many decades. Hidden from below, they enjoyed a glass of wine while curious neighbors floated past in their boats.

HOUSE ON WATER



This "lake house," as its owners call it, is no mere cabin, of course, and is strikingly different from the lot's existing small house that the Simpsons removed to make room for their Modernist replacement. The neighborhood, which consists of both year-round and weekend residents, is changing, and this project by AKAR Architecture and Design of Iowa City helped break the ice for more new houses and expansions along this stretch of shoreline. The Simpsons' elegant update of the lakefront cottage puts a more urban spin on the rustic retreat.

The Simpsons had worked with AKAR previously, and loved the Modernist detailing of the new kitchen the firm designed for their house in Iowa City. The lake house's galley kitchen is quite similar—not too big but fully engaged with the adjacent dining space in the great room—with a tight work triangle in an expansive setting. The kitchen anchors the activity of the heart of the lake house and frames the views of water and trees that bound the site.

The house fills out its relatively small lot to the area's new, more restrictive setback requirements, gaining an extra few feet toward the road on the north, with the grandfathered foundations of the pre-existing house. The garage sits on this edge and the entry bridges over the drop in topography toward the lake. The narrow path and tight-entry foyer experience is immediately washed away by the wide-open view of the water. From inside, the house appears to float over the lake like a boat. From the lake, however, the composition bobs up from the reservoir's high-water mark like a brightly wrapped package. Its south-facing facade is a lively and informal arrangement of balconies, overhangs and windows, stacked in three layers that define its primary spatial divisions. According to Sanjay Jani of AKAR, the site constraints defined the house form, disciplining the project from the outset. As Jani liked to say, "the cards were laid," and he has nicknamed the house "Cabin 717 0" in honor of the elevation above which the Army Corps of Engineers requires all-new construction to sit.



The garage greets you on the north side of the lake house.



While the house sits tightly up against its legal abstract limits on Lake Macbride, its interior spatial boundaries feel quite limitless: A view of water or sky is framed in almost every room of the house. Playing with how these views might differ as people move about became the architect's personal challenge. The project was disciplined by its dimensional restrictions, but it was set in motion by water. The house, for the architect, was an exercise in how to build next to water. At each of the three levels of living space, fenestration and spatial organization define a unique experience of the lake. At the ground floor, the living area spills out onto the boat dock. On the next floor, the great room commands the lake in a very public manner, and the top-floor master suite creates a clever tension between privacy and panorama.

Jani says the exterior material palette—cedar siding and corrugated aluminum panels—felt right for a lake house: The materials resonated with both landscape and boats. Nevertheless, the combination is unusual in the neighborhood, and the aluminum siding might as likely remind some neighbors of those omnipresent grain bins that float on Iowa's oceans of corn and beans. The materials, inside and out, also address the Simpsons' low-maintenance requirement. Interiors are more refined with Douglas fir ceilings and oak cabinetry, but the polished concrete floors betray the owners' practical sensibilities.

In addition to its visual relationships to site, sky and water, the house makes good use of natural ventilation, passive solar strategies and daylighting. It is possible to capture breezes off of the lake through the carefully placed operable windows and to ventilate warm, moist air through the automatic stairwell skylights. While the house is conventionally heated and cooled, it is possible to live in the building as an active partner with the changing seasons.

The Simpson family uses the place as a weekend retreat, but may someday join their year-round neighbors. No doubt, this house will create a more intimate relationship between them and the weather, and the house will surely seem more boat-like than it looks. ■



A practical galley kitchen with a panoramic view. The narrow entryway (left) opens to the great room and its expansive view of the lake.