

REAL ESTATE

The Best Of

CITY LIVING

QUEEN ANNE

MAGNOLIA

LAKE UNION

BELLTOWN

CAPITOL HILL

Houseboats:

Getting away from it all — and staying close

By Mike Dillon

Realtor Rick Miner likes to tell the story about how an old, Lake Union houseboat had its floorboards pulled up several years ago. Underneath — a yellowed newspaper from 1918 advertising Broadmoor lots on sale for a cool \$3,000.

The Lake Union houseboat scene predates "Sleepless in Seattle" by a long shot. In the early 1900s and through the 1950s, when Lake Union bubbled like the La Brae Tar Pits, houseboating was for the marginal and proto-Bohemians. Just drag a shack or cabin down from Capitol Hill or Wallingford, float it on first-growth logs of cedar, lash it to land and you were set.

Nowadays it's a different scene. Houseboats are regular houses, fully plumbed, with electrical appliances.

Well-heeled professionals, even doctors, live on them.

"It's not the '70s," Miner notes with wry understatement, evoking the days when house boating was a hippie scene and the houseboats were rockin' — and not just because of the boat wakes.

Continued on page 2



And no lawn to mow. A Portage Bay scene in early April.

Photo by Bradley Enghaus

Houseboats, Continued

"If you look at just square footage they would rival downtown condos — up to \$700 per square foot," says Miner, who is with Coldwell Banker Bain Associates. Miner makes his headquarters in Coldwell Banker's Lake Union Westlake office, just across the lake from where he and his wife have lived on their houseboat for the past decade.

Miner is sold on the houseboat way of life. He speaks of the water and sky and the comings and

"It's really living with nature," Miner says.

"It's calming. You roll with it."



This is definitely a houseboat.

Photo by Bradley Enghaus

goings of ducks, eagles, otters, beavers and salmon and the dramatic city skyline rising to the south.

"It's almost unexplainable," Miner says. "It's like living on vacation all the time. We feed our regular ducks Cheerios every morning."

Miner has one houseboat on the market now with an asking price of \$496,000.

"They're Seattle's least expensive waterfront properties," he says.

If a homebuyer isn't obsessed with square footage the idea of living on the water isn't that outrageous. By comparison, in 2004 the median price for a land-

On Seattle's water, as on its land, multiple offers happen.

The market is tight, and there are only about 500 houseboat moorages in Lake Union and Portage Bay.

"You just can't build one and bring it into the lake," Miner says.

Miner adds that living on fresh water is a distinct advantage. House boaters in Sausalito, Calif., for instance, or Vancouver B.C. rise and fall

with the tides. Too, the salt water is corrosive. And you can't use it to water your plants.

Houseboaters in Vancouver's inner harbor, in fact, are facing possible eviction. Houseboat-owner stability, in Seattle, Miner says, is something to pay attention to: "I'd say 90 percent of the docks are owned by houseboat owner co-ops."

Certainly houseboating isn't for everyone. It's not recommended for those with small children. And you are cheek to jowl with your neighbors. Space, Miner says, is less of a problem if you strategize.

locked home in Magnolia was \$455,000 while parts of Ballard and Greenwood-Phinney, Green Lake areas ranged between \$355,000-385,000.

The problem is availability.

In 2003 there were 21 houseboats listed and sold, Miner notes. Last year that number dwindled to 14 and so far this year just three houseboats have been listed so far.

“We have storage lockers all over the city,” Miner jokes. “We leave the doors open hoping someone will steal our stuff.”

And the wakes?

“Not bad,” he replies. Unlike the old days, there’s a Lake Union speed limit for boats.

“It’s really living with nature,” Miner says. “It’s calming. You roll with it.”

Houseboat, house barge, vessel:

Semantics are everything

Imagine the theology of defining what is technically a houseboat, subject to one set of codes, as opposed to, say, a leaky old vessel tied temporarily up to a dock. The Seattle Department of Planning and Development must try to have an answer for everything. Here are some thumbnail definitions:

- **Floating Homes:** A floating home is defined “as a single-family dwelling constructed on a float that is moored, anchored or otherwise secured in waters. Seattle’s construction codes apply to floating homes and have requirements similar to those for houses built on land. Floating homes are required to be located in approved ‘floating home moorages’ and have direct connections to sewer and water utilities. In addition to other location and design restrictions. The number of authorized moorage locations for new float-

ing homes is very limited.”

- **Floating Barges:** A house barge is defined as “a vessel that is both 1) designed and used for navigation but lacks a means of self-propulsion and steering equipment or capability and 2) designed or used as a place of residence.”

In other words, “designed for navigation” means it can be towed.

House barges are cheaper than houseboats - Rick Miner has one on the market for \$254,900. “There are approximately 34 authorized house barges in Seattle. New house barges are not permitted,” the regulations state.

- **“Vessels:** Boats, ships, barges or other floating craft that are both designed and used for navigation and that do not interfere with the normal public use of the water are classified as vessels.”

Got it.