



GILBERT + BURKETM

DESIGN / BUILD / REMODEL

Guide to Building a Custom Boathouse

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alignment





Anytime we embark on important projects, it's key to set up a few goals before even getting started. Having end goals and a vision for what you want out of your boathouse is the first, and most important, step toward it coming together exactly how you imagine.

When you have a concrete determination of what you desire and need out of a boathouse, it makes the project much more streamlined and achievable for all parties involved.



The most important detail in goal-setting

Permits can easily be overlooked when you're in the ideation phase of goal-setting, but it's easily the most significant piece to investigate prior to the design stage. A building permit will be required for the project. Depending on the municipality, either the MNR or the local Region Conservation Authority will be involved in the permit process if the boathouse is on the water. If the boathouse is on dry land, they are not necessarily involved, but it varies case by case. The community gets involved in the minor variance process, meaning you'll require community approval if you are building a new boathouse or if your rebuild exceeds the current footprint or height. If it's a new boathouse, a minor variance may be needed to accommodate it on the lot.



Whether you repurpose an existing boathouse or build a brand new one it can have implications on what documents you need to get before beginning any work, so make sure to look into the regulations in your town and region. Before you get to aesthetic and design goals, it's important to find out what permits and documents are required for your area. Talk with your designer and builder about specific requirements in your area to get a better idea of what you can realistically achieve with your boathouse project.

Realistic goal-setting

After you acquire information about obtaining the correct permits, you can begin setting goals to establish the purpose behind the boathouse. What are the intentions behind building or refurbishing this structure?

You may want an updated structure to simply house your boat or other water toys, or perhaps you'd like to add on contemporary living spaces, like additional sleeping quarters or a lounge area. A rooftop deck and ample storage space are other considerations to think about as you plan. Keep in mind your long-term desires and needs when coming up with your ideal boathouse intentions.

Getting on the same page

Whether you want to keep it simple or go all out with an extravagant, multi-purpose boathouse, this process is a major project.


Everyone in your family, including your spouse or anyone else who will enjoy the boathouse, should be aware of all design, budget and timeline implications. Have a discussion about the underlying purpose of the boathouse... What do you know it needs to have? What are some add-ons you'd like if they fit into the budget and are permissible? Are there any materials or design elements you'd love to include? Share these ideas and non-negotiables with your design/build team to avoid disappointment down the road. Getting as clear as possible now will save everyone headaches later.

Finding a team to support your vision

The right design and build team will hear your vision out and provide valuable feedback, assurance and tweaks, if necessary, to create the best possible finished product.

Finding a team that supports your goals and provides expert opinions to enhance your overall vision is the ideal scenario. After all, you want to be able to trust the professionals who are well-versed in impeccable design and building practices.

While several construction projects require the client to separately hire a designer and a builder, it's becoming more commonplace (and more efficient) to hire a design/build team. Rather than facing discrepancies among builder and designer budgets, timelines and ideas, hiring a design-build team allows you to rest assured that everyone is on the same page toward completing your boathouse.

A two-story wooden house with a curved, arched roof is situated on a concrete pier over a body of water. The house features large windows, a balcony with a wooden railing, and flower boxes filled with purple and white flowers. The water reflects the warm light of the setting or rising sun, and trees are visible in the background.

Chapter 2 Location, location, location



Wherever your cottage is located, there are specific rules and regulations about building and renovating boathouses in that area.

When you hire a design-build company, it's best to find one well-versed in the various permits and regulations across different areas of the country. Every lake has different rules to abide by, and you may need to adjust a few of your boathouse plans depending on your cottage's local standards. Some lakes don't even allow boathouses, which can be a disappointment, but better to know before you start drafting all sorts of detailed design plans.

Additionally, if your cottage is located in a more remote area or on an island, construction is likely to take a bit longer than normal. Getting supplies and workers to and from more rural locations is more costly and time-consuming than more highly trafficked areas. This is just a small detail to keep in mind when drafting plans, timeline and budget.




What about rebuilding an old boathouse?

In many municipalities, folks who have an existing boathouse can repair or rebuild structures using the same footprint of the older boathouse.

However, if the footprint is larger than what current regulations allow, you may need a minor variance (or community approval) to move forward. If you rebuild a boathouse using the exact footprint of the old one, you'll be grandfathered in and won't need a variance permit.

That means, if you have an old structure that you want to repurpose, you are able to build an updated, modernized boathouse using the same footprint under this "legal non-conforming" rule. Always double-check with your local regulators to be sure, but this "grandfathering in" of old boathouses is a pretty awesome way to approach building a beautiful, updated structure.

If an old legal non-conforming boathouse is no longer usable from old age or wear and tear, driving steel piles around the existing cribs and constructing a steel frame around the old substructure is a common solution to supporting a new boathouse. A work permit is needed in many of these cases, and a structural engineer must design the steel frame. Timbers can be removed from any cribs that interfere with the new structure, but crib stones must be left alone for this method to work. This process also must be run by the MNR or local Conservation Authority.



Work with the regulations, not against them

Becoming well-versed in your local regulations when crafting your boathouse plans is the best way to start a successful project.

There are several levels of authorities to become acquainted with for the different aspects of the project. Any impact on waterways, shoreline and fish species must be run by the MNR or local Conservation Authority, or both. The location, size and intended usage of the boathouse need to be run by the Municipal Planning Department. Construction details, integrity and adherence to code are run by the Building Department.



By conforming to the laws of the land, you'll have better chances of smooth, on-time construction and a permissible finished product.

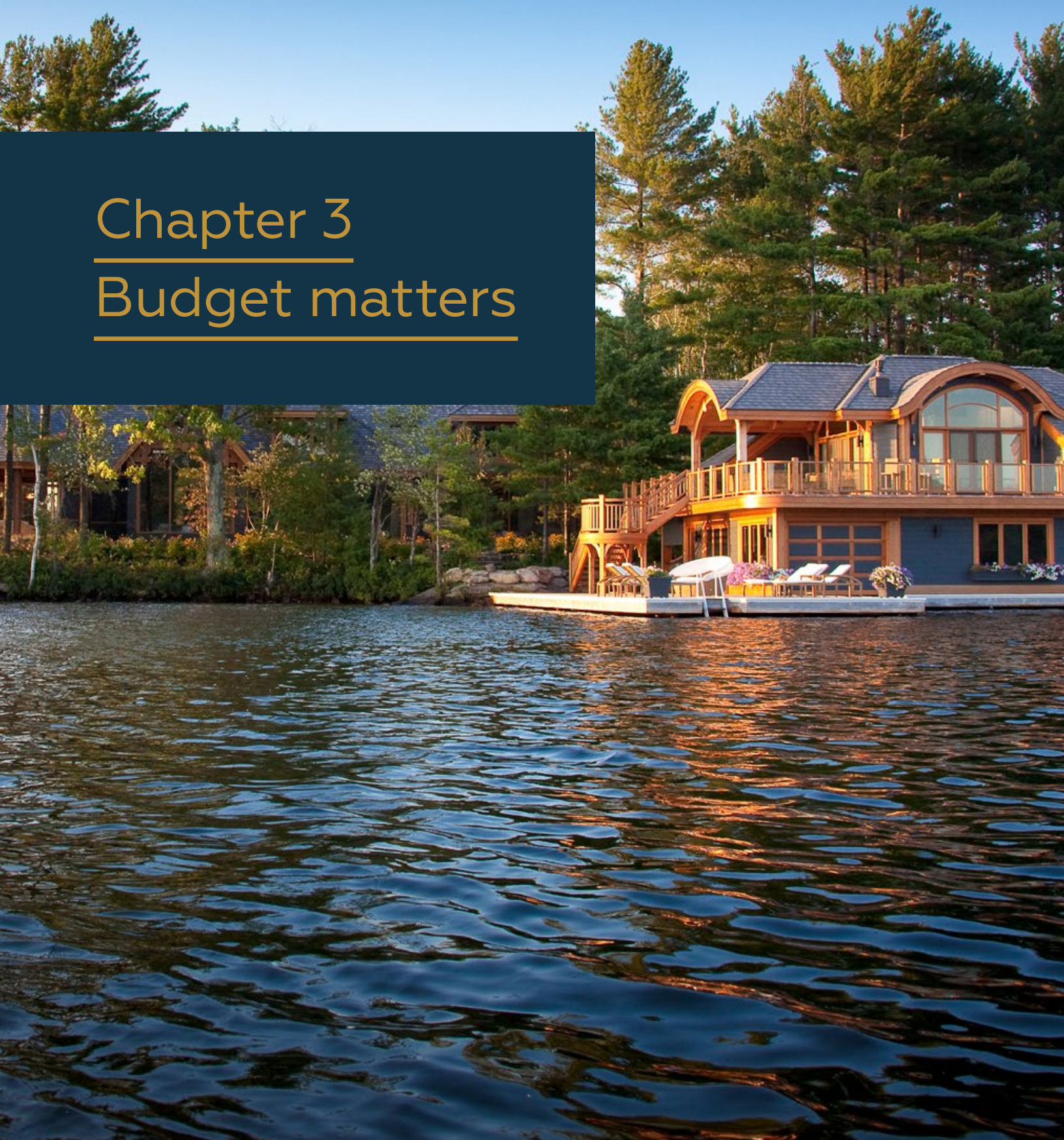
The last thing you want is to get nearly done with your boathouse construction and face setbacks, citations or building halts -- or worse, being told to tear it down, which has unfortunately happened.

It is required to have a building permit to build a boathouse, and in most municipalities, certain aspects will need to be designed or approved by a structural engineer. You may also need an MNR work or local Conservation Authority permit--even the addition of a small crib to an existing structure requires an MNR work permit if old and new cribs are more than 15 square metres.

You need a site plan or a survey outlining the project to apply for a work permit. Depending on the jurisdiction, the MNR will review the plans and consult Fisheries and Oceans Canada, or if it's Conservation Authority, they'll work with the local Municipal Planning Department. They may give specifications around when you can complete the work, where precisely you can build and, occasionally, how you can build. This process can take anywhere between six to twelve weeks.

Chapter 3

Budget matters





There are so many details that go into creating a budget for your boathouse. Whether you want custom detailing and living and entertaining spaces aplenty, or you'd rather have the bare bones of a simple structure to just house a boat, there are several things to consider when building a savvy budget. It's all about getting the best value for the space you want.



Boat accessibility and storage accessories

The first thing to think about when creating your boathouse budget is how you want your boat to be stored.

Will it be more of an over the water garage structure with electronic doors to protect the boat from the elements? What kind of boat lift does your boat require? What materials and finishes will be used for the structure and roof? All of these details contribute to the overall budget and are important considerations.

Whether you're adding onto an existing structure, repurposing an old one or building a brand new boathouse from scratch also plays into the overall cost. Keep in mind your end goal for the boathouse when creating your budget. If you want it to solely protect your boat from weather and sun, then a simpler boathouse is the way to go. If you'd prefer to have living spaces, a deck or outdoor and indoor entertainment options, then you'll be contributing more value to the space.

The biggest impacts on budget

Typically, the larger the boathouse, the more impact on the final cost. This isn't always the case, but most commonly, if you want a bigger boathouse, there will be more details and finish-outs to take into account.

If you opt for a smaller boathouse, there's still a lot of interesting details you can fit into the space, like a rooftop deck or a seating area beside where the boat is stowed.

Boat lifts are also something to consider, and they come in numerous styles, materials and weight capacities.

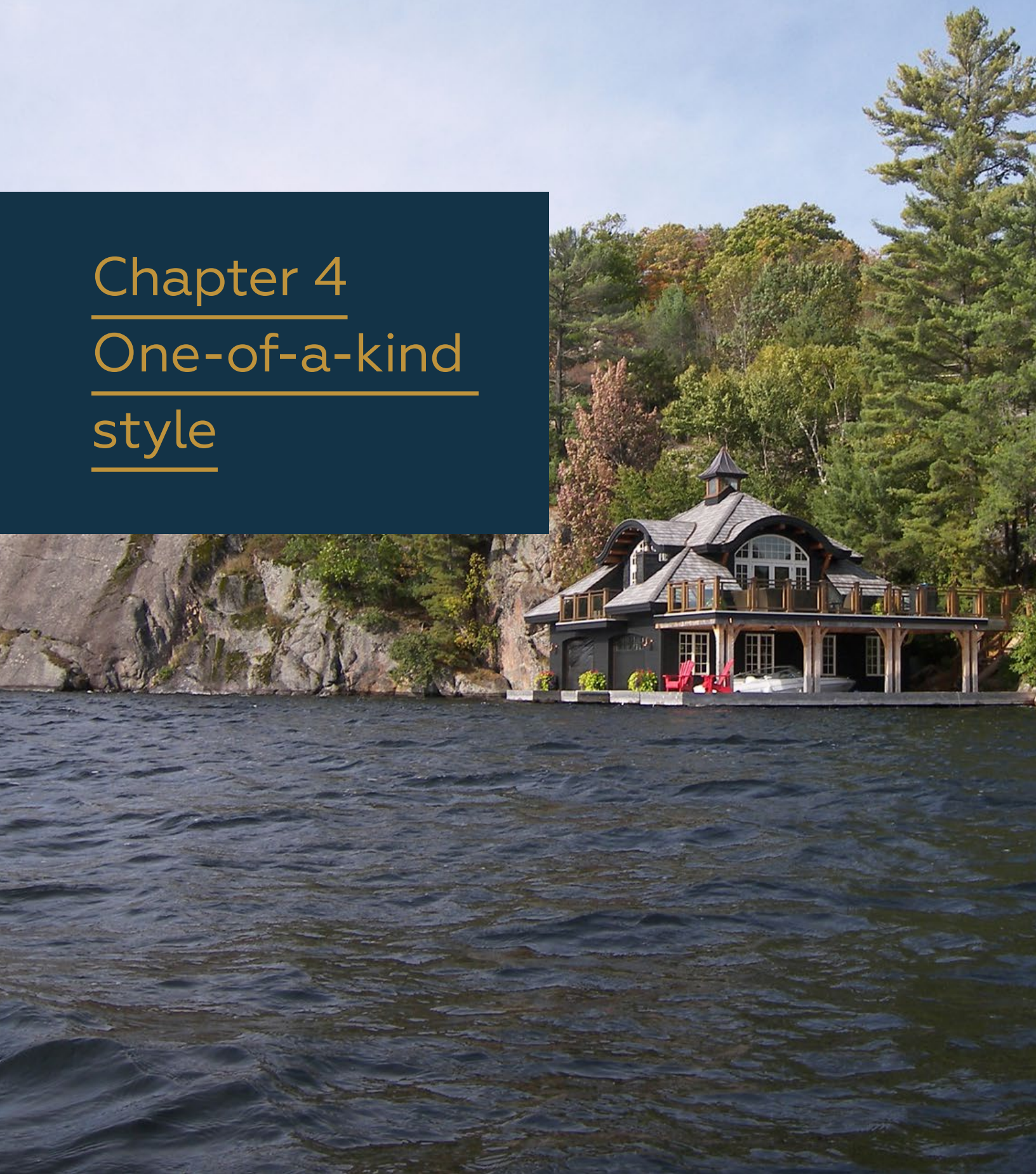
These keep your boat elevated out of the water and dry when not in use, which can save the boat from environmental damage over time. The larger the boat, the larger the lift required.

Anything additional-- bedrooms, living rooms, lounge spaces, decks and more--will impact the budget. But if these are pieces of your idea that support your ideal vision for your family's boathouse, a skilled design-build company will take them into account and come up with a plan that incorporates the desired budget and outcome.

Chapter 4

One-of-a-kind

style





There are some extravagant and ultra-stylish ways to customize your boathouse and make it more than just a place to store a boat.

Whether you paint it a standout color, incorporate a place to host gatherings on the roof or include an indoor lounge area--the options are almost endless to make your boathouse feel like a home just a few steps away from your home.

When the weather becomes unpredictable, a boathouse provides boat-owners some assurance that their water toys will be safe from the harsh elements. They act as a garage for boats, but can also double as a relaxing rest area, social get-together locale or even another place to lay your head at night. Consider some of these ideas when crafting your boathouse plans.

Creative boat and toy storage

Of course, the whole point of a boathouse is to shelter your boat from the environmental elements, but there are all sorts of ways to customize the storage options. Whether you have other water toys, like jet skis, paddle boards or kayaks, or have more than one boat, talk with your designer about easily accessible and safe storage options for everything. From life jacket cubbies to an actual fridge inside the boathouse--the options are nearly limitless.

Deck it out

Decks provide an outside space to hang out, eat meals or catch some sun with a good book. Whether you put a deck on the roof of your boathouse or next to it, it's a great way to incorporate the delight of the outdoors from a cozy chair or lounge chaise. If you're a fan of grilling out, you could even add an outdoor cooking area, grill and mini-fridge for nice days that make it feel impossible to stay inside.

Additional sleeping quarters

While your cottage may be able to host several guests, adding a closed space above the boathouse is another way to provide an extra bed or two for your visitors. With the right insulation, window placement and finishes, it can be just as cozy and welcoming as the cottage itself. Built-in bunk beds are a creative way to fit more sleeping areas into a smaller space. Double check with your municipality restrictions, as this may not be a possibility in every area.

Indoor lounge spaces

On chillier days and evenings, or during poor weather spells, it's nice to have the option to be near the water without having to deal with nasty weather conditions. Building a boathouse lounge area allows you to experience the joy of lakeside sunsets without fully committing to being outdoors. Better yet, make it an indoor-outdoor experience by creating an inside lounge that extends to a covered patio overlooking the lake.




Unique finishes, textures and design elements

Finally, coming up with a design aesthetic that fits your style, needs and personality is key.

This space may be smaller than a home or cottage, but it should still reflect who you are and the design elements you love. Whether it's an extension of your cottage's style, or you branch off with a completely novel design scheme, choose textures, materials and elements that bring you joy.

It's also important to consider what you'll most likely use--in smaller spaces, every square inch counts. So, if you want a more rustic, rugged, outdoorsy look, or you want to keep it clean-lined and modern, commit to that idea fully and outfit the space with logical and useful decor, furniture and additional items.

The background image shows a bright, modern interior space, likely a dining or meeting area. It features large, multi-paned windows with light-colored wooden frames. The walls and ceiling are also finished with wood. A long, curved wooden pendant light hangs from the ceiling. In the foreground, a large, dark wooden table is visible, with several black leather chairs tucked under it. The windows offer a view of a calm body of water, surrounded by lush green trees and a rocky shoreline. A dark metal railing is visible outside the windows on the left.

Chapter 5

Sourcing the

right materials



Picking the best materials is one of the most exhilarating parts of boathouse projects. Largely, the style and material concepts of your boathouse should be water resistant, especially for ‘over the water garage’ structures.

Whether you are more nature-driven and eco-friendly, or you’re more into technology and modern aesthetics, it’s important to communicate your style preferences to your designer and builder. Your personal design preferences are a conglomeration of your experiences, lifestyle and personality.

Tell your design-build team exactly what you like and, almost more importantly, what you DON’T like. Show them materials, magazine clippings, Pinterest boards or any other inspiration you’ve gathered for your ideal boathouse. This openness about preferences and style will allow the team executing your vision to fully understand your expectations and deliver exactly what you imagine, or hopefully, even better.

If you have preferences about brands, styles or types of technology in the boathouse (i.e., the boat lift, remote control garage doors, etc.), share these ideas with the team, as well. Even more vague details, like preferring a lot of natural light, enjoying the outdoors or liking ample storage for drinks near the boat, are important to share, because they’ll be considered when creating a design and picking materials.

Coming up with a design aesthetic and committing to it

Many people might think boathouses are just protective structures--but they'd be wrong. Boathouses are an opportunity to elongate your design style from your home and cottage into another space.

Who you are, what you like, your hobbies and your experiences all play a part in making up your design preferences, so really consider these things when deciding on a particular style scheme. Eclectic, contemporary, mid-century modern, old-school, natural, clean and simple... There are so many different styles out there--which one resonates most with you?

Try to partner with a design-build team that helps you to infuse your style into a boathouse that also withstands time for use in the far future. In 30 years, a big party deck may not be as important as a quiet, covered lounge space. Communicate these long-term goals, as well as the look and feel you want to achieve, while staying open to feedback from your design-builder throughout the process.

Keeping your family and lifestyle in mind

Are you a parent of young children, or do you anticipate having grandchildren running around in the near future?

Safety features might be of utmost importance to you in your boathouse design. Or, maybe, you're empty-nesters who like to enjoy weekends at the cottage with a bunch of friends. For you, an outdoor grill feature, plenty of seating space and a built-in refrigerator might sound like the dream. Consider your family and any other guests you host frequently. Think about what you enjoy doing with your time, and how you'd best make use of your boathouse, before committing to any one idea.



Maintaining an open mind with materials and budget

Now that you've thought about your design style, lifestyle and family, you probably have a pretty full picture of what you want in a boathouse.

Next comes the time to plan with your design-build team. During this phase, it's incredibly important to stay open about possibilities and options. Certain materials and technological devices cost more than others. For example, there's a wide range of boat lifts available. Depending on the size of your boat, you may have to use more of your budget on the lift itself. This could cut into some of the particular finish-outs or materials you'd imagined.

Luckily, in this day and age, there is a plethora of similar materials in a variety of price points. You may need to opt for different materials than you imagined on finishes here and there to be able to get the overall desired outcome of the boathouse. Stay flexible when discussing materials with your design-builder, and just know that they want to provide the best value for your project within the determined budget.

About Gilbert and Burke

The signature of excellence

Gilbert + Burke is an industry leading design-build firm known for signature designs and distinguished excellence. Recognized for consistently delivering flawless communication and impeccable project management, alongside an award-winning cast of designers, artisans, and craftsmen, make Gilbert + Burke the go-to choice for discerning clientele seeking to create elite lifestyle spaces. Gilbert + Burke's design, build and renovation services have been highly sought after in the cottage country hot spots of the Muskokas, Kawartha Lakes, Southern Georgian Bay, Parry Sound and in areas spanning the GTA for over a decade.

Gilbert + Burke is registered with Tarion, with certification in Energy Star home building, and is a member of the Canadian Home Building Association, Renomark, Muskoka Builder's Association, Peterborough and Kawartha Home Builder's Association, Canadian Federation of Independent Business, and the Kawartha Lakes, Orillia, and Collingwood Chambers of Commerce.

Learn more about **Gilbert + Burke**, and see our portfolio of renovation work at

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