

August 2007

Back to the High Life

Where do you go in today's Blackberry-dominated, cell phone-detonated, noisy, hasty world for some peace and quiet? You return to the trees.

By Jamie Friddle

When you are still, every minute reveals a symphony of creaks conducted by the wind. Cedar branches gently pray outside your windows, and the ground falls away a good 20 feet or more, beneath boughs which have scented and purified the surrounding air in a way that makes you wonder: How have I lived?

In a house perched in the branches of a tree — a treehouse, or what the French call a cabane perchée — you experience the gentle dance between the air and earth like a child resting in the sway of her mother. A treehouse lifts you out of your preoccupations and into possibility, where once again you hear your own true voice, away from everyone and everything. Anything done in a treehouse — reading, sleeping, working, making love, coloring with Crayons, screaming at the top of your lungs, meditating — somehow seems like the right thing.

For the last decade, treehouses, once the redoubts of childhood fantasy, have been returning in impressive numbers as the redoubts of adult reality. This year, professional treehouse builders will “break wood” on an average 5 treehouses per month across the globe. Costing anywhere between \$20,000 and \$350,000 and ranging from 200 square feet to 2,500, the latest affordable and fanciful addition to the American home goes out on a limb — literally.

“It’s very difficult in today’s world to free yourself from the complications we all live with,” says Nathaniel Ross, a treehouse-owner on Cape Cod. “Especially when you’re in your forties with kids, trying to stay ahead of the money game and all that. I just think it’s a place you can go and nobody’s gonna know you’re there.”

Ross, a 45-year-old construction contractor, dreamed of a Cape Cod cottage-style treehouse built between two large oaks on his mother’s property, where he spent summers as a kid growing up in Boston. To design and build it he hired Pete Nelson, whom he had met in 1983 on Washington’s Olympic Peninsula. Nelson, now probably the most well-known of a handful of professional adult treehouse builders in the United States, built Ross’s treehouse using 90 percent reclaimed lumber, pre-assembled it at his Fall City, Wash., studio, TreeHouse Workshop (treehouseworkshop.com), and hauled it to the Cape.

The summer it was completed, Ross lived in the treehouse, which has electricity but no plumbing. Now it is used by his entire family for fanciful idylls along the water. “When I was growing up,” he says, “there were places like that everywhere. You turn into an adult and the world’s got you by the neck, you need places like that you can go.”

Pining For Treehouses

Most afternoons you’ll find Lolly Shera drawing and painting in the small treehouse behind her home in Fall City, Wash. An artist and mother of two teenagers, Shera wanted a treehouse



Located in Brentwood, California, this treehouse, titled “Firespere” was built by New York-based Roderick Romero

Home Grown

About 100 years from now, sustainable architecture may take a huge step back in time.

The “Fab Tree Hab,” a concept home created by MIT researchers Team H.E.D. (Human Ecology Design) and led by doctor of architecture Mitchell Joachim, isn’t quite a treehouse. Instead of using reclaimed or recycled wood products and other manufactured elements, the Fab Tree Hab is grown — literally — out of trees, using an ancient gardening method called “pleaching.” Team H.E.D., inspired by the writings of American naturalists Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman and Alcott, developed the concept home to demonstrate how today’s existing, natural materials can be used to develop homes with little to no use of artificial materials.

Fab Tree Hab’s frame is created using self-grafting trees like elm, live oak and dogwood. A three-dimensional computer template is created and then erected in plywood to form the walls, to which vines and ficus plants are attached woven together by pleaching. (For more on pleaching, visit plantwear.com). When the woven vines eventually harden, the plywood support is removed and reused, and the interior walls are finished with a cob and clay mixture.

Mitchell’s current group, Terreform (terreform.org), a non-profit architecture firm committed to ecological principles in urban design, won the History Channel City of the Future Infiniti Design Excellence Award for New York City in 2106 by deploying numerous Fab Tree Habs in its design.

While no one has placed an order, a concept structure is currently growing in LA’s Laurel Canyon neighborhood, complete with “wind quills,” tiny featherlike structures that generate electricity when moved by the wind.

— JF

because she never had one as a kid, though she climbed trees religiously and sat in them to think. After eight years living in rural King County just outside Seattle, the time seemed right for her and her geologist husband to take their retreat to the country a step farther — up into the leaves.

But in talking with Shera, one gets the notion that a treehouse-less childhood is not the only reason she pined for one as an adult. “It’s like being on a ship or on a boat, because it moves and you feel the movement — it’s very subtle,” she says reverently, her eyes retreating into a dreamy glaze. “I don’t feel scared, but it does move and creak with the wind. And I hear the wind in the trees.”

In 2002, the first year Nelson taught a real treehouse building workshop out of Treehouse Point (treehousepoint.com), his Fall City-based eco-retreat on the salmon-laced Raging River, he needed a practice property. Shera, a friend and neighbor of Nelson’s, offered her land’s rock-solid tripod of western red cedar, maple and fir. In a few days, the class built her a modest one-room of reclaimed cedar, alderwood and Douglas fir.

“We designed it after a mountain lookout,” says Shera, standing in the natural light flooding through her treehouse’s leaded glass windows. “Being mountain climbers, we’d go up and go to the fire lookouts. They are generally square shaped with windows all around.” The tin roof, she explains, came from an old chicken coop in Washington’s Snoqualmie Valley. “So it’s all rusty and it fits in.”

Roots of a Revival

The precise origin of today’s modern adult treehouse revival is unknown. It’s as if the message to “build in the trees” for respite traveled through the air across continents on the perfume of leaves.

Adult treehouses gained considerable relevance in 1991 when Michael Garnier, the undisputed grandfather of the modern treehouse revival and host of the annual World Treehouse Association conference, opened his first “treesort” with a single treehouse in Takilma, Ore. More than 15 years and numerous legal battles later — there is no building code for treehouses, so the biggest headache is usually dealing with naysaying neighbors — Garnier’s Out ‘n’ About Treesort offers 13 different treehouses to tourists of sylvan persuasion.

“To a degree, we do have some outlaw in us,” Pete Nelson admits. “The majority of these projects are done on private property without permits.” But engineers such as Garnier — who along with Oregon-based Charles Greenwood invented the so-called “Garnier Limb,” an artificial steel limb that bolts into the flesh of trees to support anywhere from 6,000 to 30,000 pounds — have made treehouses extremely safe. And prolific builders like Nelson (he is author of four of the top-selling books on treehouses, most recently 2004’s *Treehouses of the World* and 1994’s classic, *Treehouses: The Art and Craft of Living out on a Limb*) have propelled modern adult treehouses into the alternative dwelling zeitgeist.

Back to the Branches

Many in the profession are careful to call the adult treehouse movement a “revival” because, at one time, we all lived in trees for protection and food. Evidence now shows that bipedalism began in trees, not on the savannah as previously thought. And in Papua New Guinea, indigenous peoples still live in trees to avoid tribal skirmishes.

In his book *The Meaning of Trees*, England-based German arborophile Fred Hageneder reports tale after tale of people seeking protection from trees, from making weapons out of their heartwoods to seeking shelter in them from storms. Trees are the oldest living creatures on earth, and groves of them were designated as sacred in pre-Christian societies. Cedars and firs — both excellent treehouse trees, according to Nelson — were known as the World Tree, or Tree of Life, in different cultures. And treehouses, themselves, have a purple legacy:

Go Ahead. Build Your Own.

First things first: Obviously, you need a good tree or trees. According to Peter Nelson, the best trees for treehouses are apple, ash, banyan, fir, hickory, madrona, mango, monkeypod, oak, palm, pine and spruce. The worst are alder, black walnut, cottonwood, elm and sycamore. Tripods, or three trees in relation to each other, make the strongest foundations. But strong healthy twos and ones work well, too.

If you want to be absolutely sure your tree or trees are safe for treehouses, bring in a certified arborist. They know how to inspect trees properly to surmise if the tree can withstand the new load of a treehouse.

“Building a treehouse is a folly, an artistic adventure,” says Washington certified arborist Jim Burgess. “In doing that we need to put the best of our knowledge and scientific data and intelligences together to make [it] the safest, most risk-free situation we can have.”

Healthy trees grow “wound wood” around bolts and other injuries that may be introduced by the treehouse. This compartmentalization, as it’s called, allows the tree to reroute nutrients to areas that eventually help support the treehouse as part of the tree itself.

To find a certified arborist near you, visit the International Society for Arboriculture, isa-arbor.com.

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Treesortery

The perfect way to “feel” a treehouse is to stay in one. Treehouse bed and breakfasts now dot the earth, ready and waiting for your arboreal pleasure. Most are priced the same as hotels, and most have electricity. But be sure to inquire about plumbing.

Cedar Creek Treehouse in Ashford, Wash., near Mount Rainier is not for the faint of heart. Nestled 50 feet up in a 200-year-old western red cedar, it also features a forest observatory at 100 feet. 360.569.2991, cedarcreektreehouse.com

Michael Garnier’s Out ‘n’ About Treesort in Takilma, Ore. is, of course, not to be missed. Choose from 13 different treehouses. Ziplines and platforms abound. And if you’re lucky, Michael will serve up some of his Fantasy Flakes. Usually booked a year in advance, so call early. 541.592.2208, treehouses.com

A little more rustic than many adult treehouses, Salt Spring Island’s Forest Retreat in British Columbia, Canada, is a real back-to-the-earth experience. Two treehouses to choose from, one for a family, the other suitable for a couple. 250.537.4149, saltspringforestretreat.com

Some great treehouses are built on stilts, like the seven at Post Ranch Inn along Pacific Coast Highway 1 at Big Sur, Calif. The inn has received numerous hospitality awards and the treehouses seem equally deserving. Staircases lead to triangular shaped rooms. 800.527.2200, postranchinn.com.

The emperor Caligula loved to entertain guests in his plane-tree treehouse. Italy's Medici put a tiny marble palace up in a tree and Winston Churchill retired to his treehouse at Chartwell Manor to ruminate on matters of state. Even John Lennon hung out in his own treehouse during the early Beatles years.

"I don't want to get Darwin on you here, but don't you think we all lived in trees?" asks Bill Allen, executive director of Forever Young in Vermont, a non-profit that builds 2,500-square-foot treehouses for handicapped children. "It's a DNA thing."

Whispers in the Leaves

One man who doesn't need clinical proof of the cosmic connection between humans and the leafy branches above is Roderick Romero, a New York-based treehouse builder (romerostudios.com). A 20-year yogi and lead member of the alt rock band, Sky Cries Mary, Romero leads a kind of woody, idyllic dream life bursting with art and silence, his sylvan creations adorning the properties of big names like Sting, Val Kilmer, Donna Karan and Julianne Moore. His work, which more often resembles found-wood sculpture than traditional home, will stop you in your tracks — its shapes and positions otherworldly, wispy and deliberate.

"I try to combine all the things I've ever been educated in, such as yoga, into my architecture," says Romero. Long pony tails dangling on either side of him and Romanesque nose pointing the way, Romero is known to spend days on a property "listening" to trees, sitting in their branches, trying to hear how the tree, as architect, will respond to the invitation of hosting a treehouse.

This year, Romero will build about four structures, while his brethren in treehouses — Peter Nelson, Michael Garnier, and Bill Allen — will build five times as many. But Romero's clients seem to appreciate his meditative and artfully spiritual approach.

"I believe trees do have chakras," he admits. "Just like humans, they are this life form. There's really no separation between us and nature. We feel we are separate, and that's why it's so easy for us to destroy it. But if you feel this obvious interconnectedness, then through that you're making yourself available for all these incredible lessons to learn."

Jamie Friddle never had a treehouse as a kid. And growing up in Texas, he never had much of a tree. One day, he will have both, and on that day he hopes to retire. He lives and writes in Seattle, where Douglas firs rule.

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Near Kavieng, New Ireland, Papua New Guinea sits the Treehouse Village EcoResort, an extremely authentic treehouse experience sandwiched between a rainforest and a South Pacific Ocean lagoon. The treehouse offers a main suite and a loft and offers running water and electricity. 675.984.2666, treehouse.com.pg

The Green Magic Treehouse Resort in Vythiri, Kerala, India is a completely dedicated eco-lodge set on 500 acres of private secondary forest. Flora and fauna abound as you're pretty much deep in the evergreen rain forest. The treehouses were built by local Paniya tribesmen "well-versed" in making sleeping platforms. No frills, but wholesome, pure delight. +91.487.242.0556, [web site](#)

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