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## One-of-a-kind tree houses that really seem like home

**By Tina Potterf**  
*Special to the Seattle Times*

Carpenter Joel "Bubba" Smith builds tree houses for a living. But these are not the rickety, slapped-together, sticks-nailed-slipshod-to-the-tree-in-the-backyard tree houses of childhood memory.

As a carpenter with Seattle-based TreeHouse Workshop Inc., Smith constructs wholly modern and sophisticated tree houses — some with bathrooms and fireplaces and second stories and suspension bridges. Some bigger than Belltown condos.

"Hanging out in a tree all day" is a dream job, said Smith, a Seattle transplant by way of Texas.

While the life of a tree house builder has its charms — travel, working outside, being creative — it also is *work*, with deadline pressures and sore muscles and inclement weather and even the occasional camping requirement.

But Smith can't imagine doing anything else.

Ever since he built his first tree house as a kid, carpentry has been a calling. But it was working as a carpenter in the summers with his uncle that provided the compass that would guide Smith's career. An article in Forbes magazine about TreeHouse Workshop ultimately led Smith to Seattle four years ago, portfolio in hand. He was soon on his way to San Diego for his first job as a tree house builder.

The San Diego tree house remains one of his most ambitious and memorable to date. The 1,000-square-foot structure sits on an 80-acre farm just outside the city and is used as a weekend cabin — one with a kitchen and bathroom, bedroom and living spaces, spacious decks, a brick and stone fireplace and central heating and air. The exterior features rich redwood decks with picket railings made from oak branches and fir rail caps, all done by hand.



MIKE SIEGEL / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
TreeHouse Workshop of Seattle builds 10 to 15 tree houses a year, about half locally and the rest across the country. This 500-square-foot tree house near Poulsbo was built as a studio and getaway space.



MIKE SIEGEL / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
Smith helped build this 500-square-foot tree house near Poulsbo. Shown here is the kitchen counter, living room and deck.

### TreeHouse Workshop

Seattle-based company  
offers consultation, design  
and construction of

Smith said that as he left that project he was both sad and elated.

"I was tired and dirty, but I was finally free of that beautiful monster tree house," he said. "That thing almost ate me."

### On Bainbridge

tree houses. 206-782-0208;  
[www.treehouseworkshop.com](http://www.treehouseworkshop.com).

Not all tree houses are as involved as the San Diego one.

Smith helped build a simple and quaint tree house on Bainbridge Island for a child with one room and a crow's nest, or loft space. The exposed stud walls and unfinished interior add to its rustic feel. And a suspension bridge — a staple of many tree houses — leads visitors to the entryway.

### Near Poulsbo

One of Smith's favorite tree houses is near Poulsbo. The 500-square-foot house, built as a studio and getaway space, is loaded with amenities and homey touches. The interior features a sleeping loft, a fireplace and a fully functional kitchen and bathroom.

The walls are done in hand-hewn recess pine paneling and fir timbers, and the kitchen countertop was constructed from a thick slab of fir. Ample windows, including reclaimed stained-glass panels, keep the space light and airy.

The interior is modern, with stucco and an exposed stone finish.

### In Seattle

Smith packed several distinctive touches into a tight space here: A crow's nest with a drop-down ladder serves as a loft, a skylight is perfect for stargazing and a padded window seat offers extra storage and folds out into a bed.

The pale amber-hued paneling adds a nice contrast to the dark-stained wood floors.

### In Virginia

Smith recently returned from Virginia, where he spent 30 weeks erecting a two-story tree house on a 40-acre farm. It features a wrap-around balcony on the second floor, cedar countertops, two covered porches, reclaimed wide-plank fir floors, a sculpted gas fireplace and artful light fixtures throughout.

The exterior is notable for its western red cedar siding, rail pickets made from cedar branches and black locust logs that function as door thresholds. Not bad for a weekend retreat.

### Eco-friendly options

On average, Smith and the other carpenters — TreeHouse Workshop employs seven lead builders — build 10 to 15 tree houses a year, about half locally. The tree houses range from 100 square feet to 1,000, and cost from \$6,000 on the low end to \$330,000-plus for top-of-the-line models.

Most tree houses take a few weeks to several months to complete and are built mostly with reclaimed wood and recycled materials.



MIKE SIEGEL / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
Salvaged building materials add special character to the Poulsbo project.



MIKE SIEGEL / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
Joel "Bubba" Smith, a builder for TreeHouse Workshop in Seattle, relaxes on the bridge of a quaint Bainbridge Island tree house he helped build.



MIKE SIEGEL / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
The deck makes for a great waterfront table for two at the tree house near Poulsbo.

TreeHouse Workshop, started by Jake Jacob and Peter Nelson in 1997, uses some reclaimed materials, from its flooring and doors to paneling and windows. The company uses primarily recovered lumber and timber from old homes, Jacob said, as well as salvaged building products from Second Use Building Materials in Seattle.

"Our eco-friendly approach is to work with as many reclaimed materials as possible," Jacob said. "It's not too difficult to make use of reclaimed or wonderful found materials that others don't want to use."

So what's the best part of building tree houses for a living?

Above all, Smith said, it's the people.

"When the owner hasn't been out for awhile to see the tree house and then sees it, it's like Christmas Day," Smith says. "Anyone who is passionate enough to pull the trigger on building a tree house is pretty neat."

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MIKE SIEGEL / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
Carved into the kitchen counter are the initials of those who worked on the tree house near Poulsbo.



MIKE SIEGEL / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
Heidi and Paul Danilchik, along with 5-year-old daughter Maile, enjoy their "getaway" tree house near Poulsbo.



TREEHOUSE WORKSHOP, INC.  
This project, in Flowery Branch, Ga., took builders a month to complete.



TREEHOUSE WORKSHOP, INC  
Smith's first job as a tree-house builder was this 1,000-square-foot beauty in San Diego.



TREEHOUSE WORKSHOP, INC.  
This 30-week project in Abingdon,  
Va., was completed in April.

### **TreeHouse Workshop**

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