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PHOTOGRAPHED BY BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER

OUT ON A LIMB

In a tree house, you can go away without going away

The owners: Eric Seely, age 10. His mother, Krista, teaches piano and his father, John, is a sales engineer at Level (3) Communications. Eric has one sister, Barbara, 14.

The house: At 6 1/2 feet by 8 1/2 feet wall to wall, one can safely say space is at a premium. The house and crow's nest are bolted into two grand Douglas firs, one with a split trunk. The Seelys live on about an acre of fir- and cedar-wooded land on Bainbridge Island. The crow's nest over the tree house is perched about 30 feet in the air. The base of the house is about 8 feet off the ground. The house, platform, crow's nest and bridge went up in 11 days last spring.

The goals: A getaway without going away for kids and adults alike. Eric and friends use it for water-balloon and squirt-gun battles and pine-cone-throwing skirmishes. "When the enemy person comes across the bridge we can hold them off for quite a while," Eric says. Sometimes it's a fort, sometimes it's a quiet hideaway for drawing and to have tea and cookies. "Another thing you can do up here is cloud watching," he says. He's also considering a garden of hanging plants or even his own very exclusive restaurant, the kind "where you serve really fancy food. The reservation kind."



The upshot of having your own tree house is the opportunity to get away from it all a few feet from your own back door. The down side is sap. Trees should be limbed about six months before building. The Seelys found this out the hard way. A



One good thing about a crow's nest, if you do it right, is that you'll be above mosquito level "because they'll be eaten by a bat," says Eric Seely, shown on the bridge during a break in action. And, from up there, the grown-ups can see if the gutters on their house need cleaning.

His parents enjoy the deck for watching birds, reading the newspaper, savoring a glass of wine at sunset or just decompressing among the evergreens. "I like going up there in the evenings when I get home from work," John says. "Sometimes Kris and I go out and enjoy a margarita or a glass of wine."

Key features: The house is simple yet beautifully crafted and built to last. Trim over the front door and a rope banister add a special touch — what Krista calls a "cartoon charm." The bouncy but sturdy bridge connects Eric's house to the

handy method for removing sap, they've found, is to rub the gooey bits with butter, then wash with soap and water.

deck of the family home. The small, cozy deck leaves just enough space for two. And the crow's nest can be used as a jail or reading nook. The roof is metal, and the spindles on railings are rough limbs from the tree that holds the house.

Architect: Anna Daeuble of TreeHouse Workshop in Seattle with Jake Jacob. Jacob and Peter Nelson, co-owners of TreeHouse, have conducted workshops at IslandWood, the education center on Bainbridge, and have taken the class over to Eric's house. The tree-house observation classroom at IslandWood, in fact, is a TreeHouse Workshop creation.

Builder: TreeHouse Workshop.

Interior designer: Eric Seely

Cost: A tree house like this one costs about \$16,000.

Quote: "The larger kids are enjoying the adventure. We had sort of a tree-house warming with about eight kids from the neighborhood," Krista says. And who doesn't need adventure in their lives? Good adventure. A view of the world you can get only in the trees. It worked for Tarzan. It worked for the Robinsons, the Swiss family Robinsons. It worked for Pooh's pal, Owl. "It came out far better than we had imagined. We were thrilled," Krista says.

Advice: Krista Seely points out that a tree house for children is not a "little-kid kind of thing. It's not for wee tots."

And remember: Trees move. Therefore, tree houses move. Go with it, the Seelys say.



The Seelys are really glad they decided to build the tree house close to their own house and connect it with the bridge off the deck. "We know people on the island who have tree houses. And if you build it away from the house, you don't use it as much. We can go out to it in our socks if we want," Krista says. She also advises to "put the tree house where the tree-house people think you should put it. I wanted it way up higher, but now it feels high right where it is. And we couldn't have done the bridge to the deck if it had been higher."



It's down to necessities in here: a chair for sitting and strategizing, and a basket of pine cones for warding off the enemy.

Help for wanna-be nesters

Animals gotta nest. Human animals included. It's our comfort, our protection, our womb with a view.

So when Jake Jacob of TreeHouse Workshop in Seattle eyeballs a fir or a maple or an oak and bends way back to follow the path of the trunk, he's thinking about a human nest. "There's painfully little data about how live trees sustain load," Jacob says. "But obviously it works because people have been building tree

houses for years."

He points out that trees are the oldest living structures on Earth. "They are amazingly resilient. The trees have so much to say about what we build. The trees are living beings."

And, yes, he did have a tree house as a child. A peach-basket-wood-platform kind of a deal.

"A retreat like this represents freedom from responsibility. It inspires dreams," Jacob says.

TreeHouse Workshop has been building dream-inspiring nests throughout this country and in Canada for about eight years. Actually, with their bedrooms, cathedral ceilings, leaded-glass windows, fireplaces and spiral staircases, many are more homes than houses.

Because the tree is the foundation for this kind of home, it is all important. So before house plans begin, Jacob has a little one-on-one with the tree in question.

"I do often get feelings from the tree," Jacob says, while not wanting to be labeled some touchy-feely, tree-hugging, flannel-shirt-wearing nature geek. He's not. It's just that the tree's the thing here.

"If the tree then goes into decline, we've done a disservice," he says. "People have this notion you somehow just do it. But once they have information brought to them about the connection between a structure and a tree, they understand more about what you can do. In the end, they get more or less what they want. What I do is come as close as possible to bringing those things — the requirements of the tree and the vision of the owner — together."

In the process, Jacob and TreeHouse Workshop co-owner Peter Nelson meld the living wood with their passion for wood as a building material (preferably reclaimed). "One of the fun things about this is that we're blazing a trail. There's not a lot of code about putting real buildings in trees," he says.

That's one good reason to consider a few things before you branch out, so to speak. Among them:

- It's a good idea to consult an arborist before and during building. "It's analogous to owning a boat. Any wood structure requires maintenance. And, Jacob says, after watching for hot spots, especially during the first two years, you are almost guaranteed a support with a long life — barring acts of God.
- Bolts, used to secure the supports, won't hurt the tree as long as they're spaced 18 inches apart. "A tree is very capable of sealing the wound and moving on."



The windows are from building-supply salvage stores, but the Seelys had the glass replaced with tempered panes for safety. Bird watching really means watching out because industrious hummingbirds swoop and buzz visitors.

- Unlike other houses, tree houses move. And that's OK. Hooks connected to the bolts allow the floor supports to slide as the trees move and grow.

- Jacob's preferred supporting tree is an oak, because it is so strong. The other top trees, in order, are: big-leaf maples, cedar and Doug fir. Hemlocks often have weak tops and root systems. Poplar and cottonwood are brittle in the wind.

Call TreeHouse Workshop at 206-782-0208 or check out www.treehouseworkshop.com for workshops and more information.

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