

## **New designs and technology take treehouses to a higher level for adults**

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**By CECELIA GOODNOW**

P-I REPORTER

A few years back, when Lolly Shera's son was 9, he peppered their yard with four treehouses he banged together from scrap lumber, like a modern-day Huck Finn.

His mom can still glimpse some of them -- from the window of her own treehouse, a professionally built getaway she uses as an art studio.

"This is a deeply creative place," said Shera, surrounded by her sculpture and drawings. "I don't have any distractions. There are no 'voices' in here. There's no pull to do the laundry."

Unlike the kiddie versions, Shera's Fall City treehouse has power, insulation, plug-in heat, alder paneling, stairs and a deck. Its expansive windows mimic the fire lookouts she stays in when she's hiking and climbing in the backcountry.

Increasingly, this is the new face of the backyard treehouse -- as an "escape pod" for baby boomers with enough disposable income or sweat equity to rise above it all.

"The more amenities and creature comforts (it has), the more this becomes like a serious addition to your house," said treehouse builder Jake Jacob, co-owner of Ballard-based TreeHouse Workshop. "It's not a play fort."

Though treehouses have been around for thousands of years, the past decade especially has brought about a high-flying revival, thanks to innovative designs, new technology and a seemingly endless supply of clients with the money to feed their dreams.

Shera's treehouse, built in 2002 as a project for TreeHouse Workshop students, is modest compared with the whimsical retreats being commissioned worldwide by musicians, movie stars and captains of industry.

Stories on deluxe treehouses -- with amenities like fireplaces, flat-screen TVs, kitchens and baths, leaded-glass windows and fine woodwork -- are turning up everywhere, from The New York Times to Architectural Digest. Some cost hundreds of thousands of dollars and are, in the most literal sense, houses in trees.


"We're building treehouses that will last as long as a (traditional) house," said Michael Garnier, a pioneering treehouse builder in southern Oregon who has traveled as far as China to build treehouses.

Garnier is best known for his Out 'n' About Treesort, which has 22 tree-borne structures, including 13 rentable units, plus walkways and zip lines.

Garnier's own home is a 2,000-square-foot, multistory treehouse with glassed-in cupola and sprawling deck.

By comparison, Shera's 156-square-foot studio is a model of restraint -- and priced accordingly. By offering their land as a teaching site, she and her husband got some free labor and kept costs under \$15,000 in materials and



 PAUL JOSEPH BROWN / P-I

TreeHouse Workshop co-owner Pete Nelson stands in front of one of the treehouses built by participants in his workshop.

professional finish work.

Shera said students came from "literally all over the world" to build it.

"We had people come from Germany, New Zealand, Japan, California, North Carolina, Vermont."

The studio, supported by two cedars and a maple at the edge of the yard, has helped Shera with her career transition from classroom teacher to struggling artist. It's a peaceful, contemplative space where the most audible sound is the rustle of leaves through the open door.

"When it's blowing hard," Shera said, "this structure moves, and it feels like a boat that's moored. It groans and creaks. It's like being in a live animal. There's a soul in it that, if you're open to, you can feel."

This is the poetic side of treehouses -- the side that fires the imagination of TreeHouse Workshop co-owner Pete Nelson, whom Jacob dubs the "poster boy" of the treehouse movement.

Blond and boyishly handsome at 45, Nelson is a talented designer who still retains a wide-eyed, gee-whiz enthusiasm for the magic of tree-borne structures.

"They're sacred spaces, really," he said.

At one time, he even dreamed of housing his family in a series of interconnected treehouses. His wife, Judy -- worried about the safety of their three kids -- said no.

By 1994, Nelson was turning out full-color coffee-table books that helped popularize what was then a quietly unfolding trend. The most recent of his four books, "Treehouses of the World," was published by Abrams in 2004.

But treehouses were just his sideline until a couple of years ago, when Nelson left his career as a spec-home builder in Seattle to pursue treehouses full time.

"When you get the fever," he said, "it's pretty all-consuming."

John Rouches, who was Nelson's partner in P.J. Construction, declined to go that route. He does, however, work out of a 180-square-foot treehouse office that Nelson, his Fall City neighbor, helped him build in the late 1990s. The \$20,000, Craftsman-style structure has cedar shingles, double-pane wood windows, blown-in insulation and a nautical-themed interior with remilled wainscoting.

It also boasts power, cable, phone, fax, Wi-Fi, a copier, scanner, printer, computer, daybed and drafting table.

Rouches has to forgo water and plumbing, but he jokes, "There's an executive men's room right off the deck."


Founded in 1997, TreeHouse Workshop was one of the first companies to specialize in tree-borne structures. It has built or remodeled about 100 treehouses in 29 states and several countries and expects to do nearly a million dollars in business this year.

Their average project costs \$85,000 to \$100,000 -- sometimes much more -- partly because of the increasingly rare, second-use beams and planks that go into them.

"What we're being asked to do," Nelson said, "is in the very high end of woodworking."

Jacob said the demand for upscale treehouses comes from well-heeled baby boomers with fond memories of



 PAUL JOSEPH BROWN / P-I

Lolly Shera's Fall City treehouse, which she uses as an art studio, has power, insulation, plug-in heat, alder paneling, stairs and a deck. It was built in 2002 as a project for TreeHouse Workshop students.

childhood treehouses of the 1950s and '60s. Longing for a simpler time -- but not necessarily a simpler treehouse -- they're raising these retreats "to the comfort level of their lifestyle today."

One client, identified only as a record producer in Magnolia, hired them to build a wine and cigar retreat, complete with flat-screen TV. The owner is keeping it under wraps in hopes of shopping it to Architectural Digest or another of the glossies, which won't touch it if it first gets written about somewhere else.

Another client -- this one in the Midwest -- has been chewing on the idea of a cigar retreat, too, but the technical drawbacks have him stumped and the project is on hold.

"He wanted it quite high," Jacob said, "but then, when he realized it was going to be 35 feet of vertical stairs -- maybe some of the gents didn't want to do that. Maybe they didn't want to pee over the side."

As for building it -- no problem. Jacob, 55, who works out of the Port Townsend area, is a make-it-happen guy who was trained in marine engineering and has expertise in rigging and structural mechanics.

"I'm constantly exploring how we can get structures into trees," he said.

TreeHouse Workshop has collaborated on occasion with New York artist and treehouse designer Roderick Romero of Sky Cries Mary, the former Seattle-based indie rock band. One of their joint projects was a treehouse for actor Val Kilmer.

Jacob likens upscale treehouses to RVs and well-appointed boats. But they're still so new and unconventional that lenders, insurers, real estate agents -- even phone directories -- don't know what to make of them.

"We've occasionally not been able to proceed on a job," Jacob said, "because we've discovered how difficult it is to insure these structures."

He said real estate people tend to worry that a treehouse -- like a swimming pool -- will narrow a home's appeal, but some agents have been pleasantly surprised. "I've even had a Realtor call me back and say, 'Your treehouse is what sold the property,'" he said.

On the down side, treehouses may need occasional nip-and-tuck retrofitting as the supporting trees thicken with age.

Rouches said he finds his tree-borne office hard to keep clean because "you've got a lot of bugs and squirrels." When the wind blows, he jumps ship because the sway feels "a little insecure."

Even so, he'd build it again because treehouses, literally, give you a new perspective on life. "It's a nice place that I can retreat to," he said, "and apply myself to my work."

## **Plan for treehouse retreat is up in the air**

An idyllic, forested patch of five acres in Fall City may soon become a center of treehouse instruction and recreation, if treehouse guru Pete Nelson can work out the knots. Nelson and his wife, Judy, bought the land last year with visions of creating a cultural and environmental retreat center for "all things treehouse."

Treehouse Point Private Event Center and Overnight Retreat, situated off the Preston-Fall City Road, already has leafy pathways, a trout pond and a large house that has been turned into an inn for conference-goers.

Plans call for TreeHouse Workshop to locate its instructional arm there, as a new non-profit called Northwest Treehouse School. Students would get hands-on learning building treehouses the Nelsons would then rent out for overnight lodging.

The first such treehouse has already gone up -- and there's the rub. Called Temple of the Blue Moon, it's a striking

structure whose lines, Nelson said, were taken from the Parthenon. Perched dramatically above a steep bank, it's accessed by a plank-and-rope bridge that sways just enough to convey a sense of Swiss Family Robinson romance.

But King County wants it gone. The 200-square-foot structure, at the edge of the flood-prone Raging River, is within a designated critical area and poses a safety hazard, the county says. Nelson hopes to find common ground with county officials, especially since much of Treehouse Point could face similar issues. King County, which calls the Temple of the Blue Moon an "egregious" violation, says it's willing to find a way to help Nelson develop the property.

"The department is interested in working with Mr. Nelson to find a way to make him legal," said Tim Attebery in the county's Department of Development and Environmental Services. "But you can't just build and hope for the best."

– Cecelia Goodnow

## TREEHOUSE RESOURCES

Whether you're an aspiring do-it-yourselfer or prefer to leave it to the pros, there are books, classes and Web sites that can help. Here are a few:

- "Treehouses & Playhouses You Can Build," by David and Jeanie Stiles (Gibbs Smith, \$19.95). Step-by-step instructions for the average do-it-yourselfer.
- [treehouseguide.com](http://treehouseguide.com): Building tips, links to plans, treehouse articles and forum.
- [treehouseworkshop.com](http://treehouseworkshop.com): Services include design, consultation, construction and occasional instructional workshops. Site has a cool treehouse gallery, some dos and don'ts of construction and helpful links.
- [treehouses.org](http://treehouses.org): Forever Young Treehouses, a non-profit in Vermont, builds wheelchair-accessible treehouses around the country.
- [treesolutions.net](http://treesolutions.net): Scott Baker, a registered consulting arborist, is part of the staff at Seattle-based Tree Solutions Inc. Services include treehouse consultation.
- [treehouses.com](http://treehouses.com): Reserve lodging at Michael Garnier's Out 'n' About Treesort in Takilma, Ore., sign up for a building course at his Treehouse Institute or enroll in the World Treehouse Conference. The site also offers construction tips and sells plans, specialized materials and Garnier Limb hardware (\$85).

-- Cecelia Goodnow

## KNOW THE BUILDING CODE

- Seattle's building code treats treehouses as play equipment, so permits generally aren't required. But exceptionally large ones could spark land-use issues, so check with the Seattle Department of Planning and Development ([seattle.gov/dpd](http://seattle.gov/dpd)) if you plan to exceed 120 square feet.
- King County generally doesn't require permits for family-fun treehouses of 200 square feet or less. But you'll need a permit if you intend to live in your treehouse or use it for commercial ventures. ([metrokc.gov/permits](http://metrokc.gov/permits))

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