

Out on a LIMB

Tree houses not only capture our imaginations, they bring us close to nature. From platforms in anti-logging campaigns to carbon-neutral homes, we take a look at the role of tree houses around the world in the environmental movement.

WORDS BY **MARION STEINMETZ**

A few hundred years ago there were many tribes living in tree houses. This number has now dwindled to the point where tribes who maintain this tradition, such as the Korowai people of Indonesia, are extremely rare. These days tree houses are most commonly thought of as a playhouse for kids, but increasingly, they also serve as unique hotel rooms, retreats, studios, tea rooms and more recently, as homes. And they're not always small and cramped; they can in fact be luxurious mansions (the biggest tree house in the world is 10 stories high). Regardless of size, all tree houses are the natural result of inspiration for a creative structure that is in harmony with the environment.

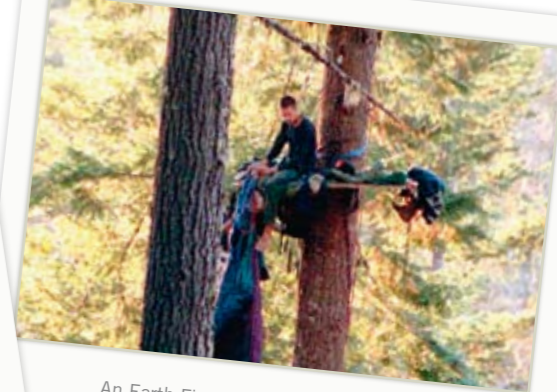
A HOME FOR ACTIVISTS

While tree sitting has been used as a strategy in saving forests for decades, it has become more common in the last 15 years. In the 1990s, tree houses became a popular tool for environmental activists wanting to stall logging operations. Activists sometimes stay in trees for months at a time, so platforms are constructed to make the protest more comfortable. This practice sometimes extends to building tree house 'villages' where several tree houses are occupied and tied together. The Fall Creek/Red Cloud Thunder Tree Village in Oregon, USA consisted of seven tree houses complete with solar/wind power, composting toilets and even hydroponic sprout farms. It was occupied by an estimated 1,000 activists for almost six years, from February 1998 to November 2003, and as a result the Fall Creek forest still stands today.

One of the most famous tree sitters of all time is Julia 'Butterfly' Hill who occupied a Californian Redwood for 738 days. She lived on two platforms, 60 m off the ground. Her vigil was extremely challenging with both wild weather and the anger of logging companies to contend with, but she generated a huge amount of publicity and was inducted into the Ecology Hall of Fame. After two long years a deal was struck and the 1000-year-old redwood was spared. >>



Julia 'Butterfly' Hill sits on a platform atop a 1000-year-old giant redwood tree - her home from 1997 for over two years.



An Earth First activist lives in an old growth forest under threat from logging in California in 1996.

The Styx Valley in Tasmania has also been a well-known site for tree sitters. In November 2003 two platforms were raised into an old Styx gum nicknamed 'Gandalf' in hope that the old growth trees in the Styx Valley would be left alone by loggers. The protest spurred the imagination of architect Andrew Maynard who designed a tree house that would function particularly well as a protest shelter. The structure was designed to provide good shelter from harsh weather and spread its load over three trees, thereby protecting more trees with each dwelling. While these tree houses were not built, their design did help to raise awareness of Tasmanian environmental issues.

THE SIMPLE LIFE

Tree houses as homes lend themselves to a simple lifestyle, with fewer conveniences and a shared environment with nature and other living creatures. Around the world there are many people living this kind of lifestyle in the trees; in Costa Rica you will find an entire community of tree houses called Finca Bellavista – a sustainable rainforest community for the ecologically minded. If you can (or prefer to) survive without shopping malls, telephones and TV then you would likely be content with what you'd have instead; approximately 350 acres of rainforest encompassing an entire peninsula and a mountain, two white water rivers and a diverse range of wildlife.

Created for the sole purpose of preserving the local rainforest it resides on, Finca Bellavista is set up so that you can rent tree houses or buy plots of land and, if you choose to, build your own tree house and become part of the community. All electricity is generated on site via solar panels for the entire community so residents and visitors can still have a few modern conveniences (including internet access) while remaining carbon neutral. Each dwelling has a rainwater or springwater collection system and a biodigester to process food waste. Human waste is treated in an underground biodegrading septic system. Meanwhile, if you're



The expansive tree house community of Finca Bellavista is linked by a number of bridges along with their 'Sky Trail' zip line network.

still after that childhood fantasy that comes with living amongst the canopies, the community's 'Sky Trail' network of zip lines and platforms will have you yodelling like Tarzan in no time.



Nestled amongst the Queensland rainforest, the humble tree house that Marion Steinmetz called home for a year.

was beautiful. While the tree house leaked in the rainy season it was, overall, an idyllic life, and a good feeling to tread so lightly on the planet.”

The writer's year in an Australian tree house

“I was lucky enough to spend a year in a tree house on a self-sufficient farm in a Queensland rainforest – essentially house-sitting for a year with a friend of mine who was looking after the farm while the owners were working elsewhere. I had a few conveniences (such as running water and a gas stove) and, if I wanted more, there was an underground house nearby with enough solar and hydro power to supply an electric light, radio and freezer. The underground house also had a wood stove for baking and to heat water for the shower.

As I was living in a warm climate, the walls of the tree house were partially open so nature wasn't just around me – it was very much in my home too. This could be challenging as well as appealing – snakes often roped themselves around the roof beams, a possum slept on my shelf on wet days and the only sounds I heard were from nature: rushing water, squabbling fruit bats, frogs and birds. The view from my balcony, of tree tops, mountains and sky,

THE WAY FORWARD FOR ECO HOMES?

In a world where land space and resources are increasingly being stretched to the max, are tree houses a viable option for sustainable living? Some believe so, and according to Ethiopian architect Ahadu Abaineh, they could provide the answer to his country's housing crisis. Insufficient housing in urban areas leaves many Ethiopians living in unsanitary conditions. To relieve the incredible pressure on ecological resources to provide adequate conventional housing material,

“Created for the sole purpose of preserving the local rainforest, Finca Bellavista is set up so that you can rent tree houses or buy plots of land.”

Abaineh proposes homes using living trees as corner posts, frames made from fast-growing eucalypts and traditional mud walls. His designs are quick to build and far cheaper than conventional housing, plus “there's no need for consultants and contractors to satisfy a basic human need,” he says. The living trees also help to tackle pollution and improve the appearance of cities. Despite the ingenuity of the idea, it has faced criticism for being a little too ‘out there’. Says Abaineh; “I'm negotiating with the municipality, but they think the idea is a little weird.”

Marion Steinmetz is a freelance writer, now based in Tasmania following a stint in a tree house in the rainforest of Queensland.

Tree house getaways

MANY ECO RESORTS ARE BUILDING TREE HOUSES TO FURTHER THEIR APPEAL. HERE'S A QUICK GUIDE TO FIVE WORTH VISITING.

The Canopy, Cairns Highlands, Australia

This rainforest eco-resort combines luxury accommodation with green living on a 40 hectare property with an abundance of wildlife. They use 100 per cent renewable energy, biodegradable detergents and self-contained disposal systems. www.canopytreehouses.com.au

Collines de Niassam Lodge, Palmarin, Senegal

Accommodation includes a tree house in a baobab tree, huts on the ground and over water. The African lodge is run on solar and wind power and the owners support their local community through a shop containing local produce and craft for which the lodge takes no commission. www.niassam.com

Cedar Creek Tree House, Mt Rainier, USA

This solar-powered, no-frills accommodation is nestled next to a stunning national park in Washington State. The tree house is built in a western red cedar tree, with extensive windows providing views of the mountains – or view the skies from an arboreal observatory. www.cedarcreektreehouse.com

Green Magic Resort, Kerala, India

Hop into a water counterweight lift to reach these tree houses, which are close to 30 m off the ground! This company takes the environment seriously: renewable energy is used (the cookers are powered by bullock dung) and meals are made using organic fruit and vegetables grown on site. www.jungleparkresorts.com

Gankoyama Tree House Village, Chiba, Japan

This sustainable culture centre offers workshops in forest survival skills and tree house building using traditional Japanese carpentry. The village uses 100 per cent renewable energy and the meals are vegetarian and prepared from organic ingredients, including edible plants from the surrounding forests. And for those who stay a night or two, there is the opportunity to sleep in one of their beautiful tree houses. www.gankoyama.com

SILKE GONDOLF; ALLISON SHELLEY; ANDERS BIRCH