

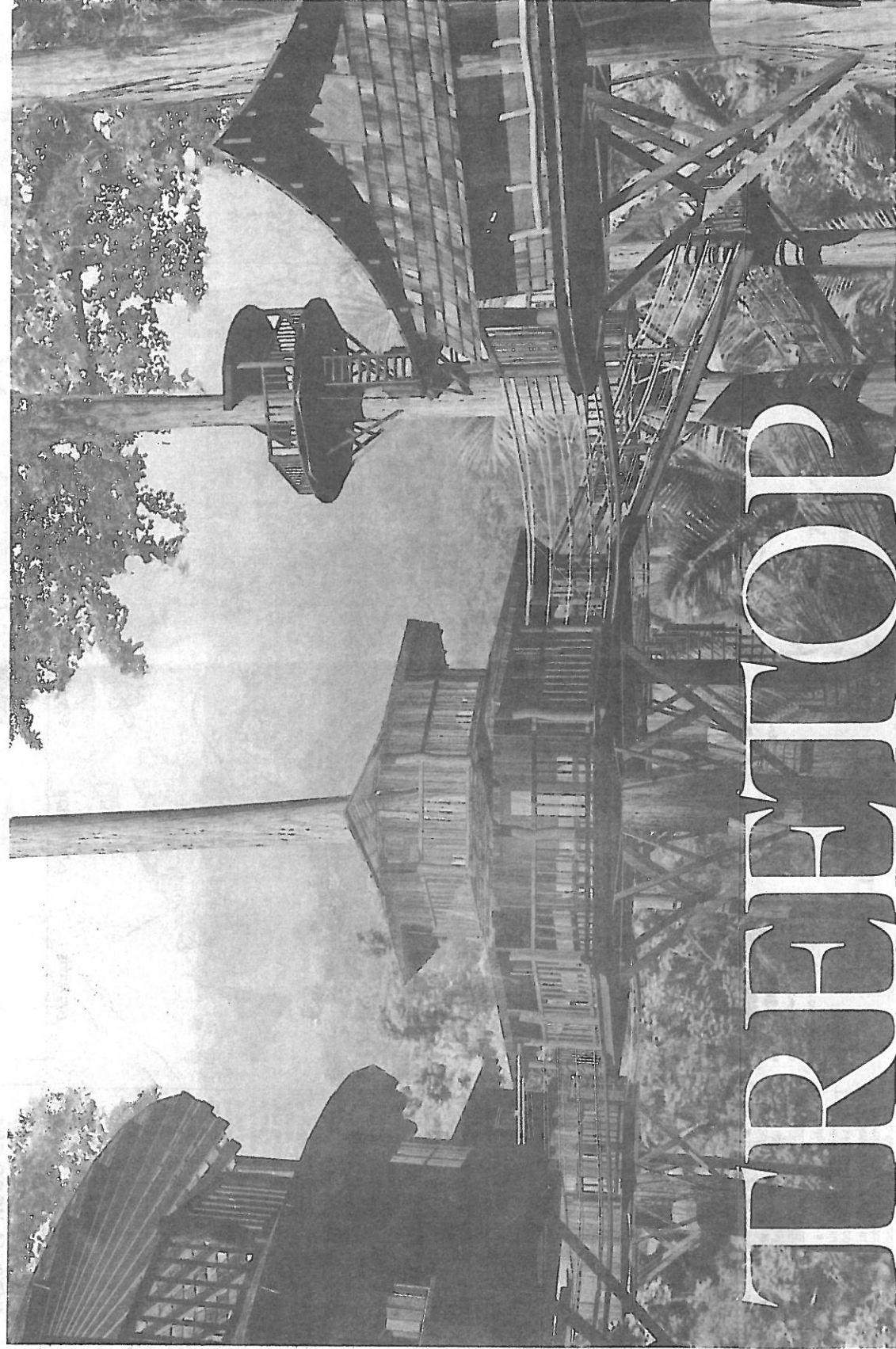
LIFE AT HOME

DECOR • DOMESTIC ARTS • RENOVATIONS • RENTALS • RESALE

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Costa Rica
tree house
project
has organic
gardens
and Wi-Fi

JACK KOHANE
FOR CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

The blueprints for Kevin Ablett's future home are up a tree. But he's ecstatic about the prospect of having such colourful neighbours as howler and spider monkeys, toucans and scarlet macaws squawking on his rooftop.

"This is what living in a rain forest in Costa Rica is about," says Ablett, 29, a former Toronto realtor who moved to Calgary to tap into the oilpatch's gushing housing market, and is now the proud owner of a tree house above the jungle floor. "When the opportunity came to be a part of this unique community, I took it. This is the ultimate in green development."

Examining the branches of the 45-metre-high trees that will carry the weight of their 1,000-square-foot wood-sided home, Ablett and his 28-year-old fiance, Anne Stefányk, are among the first title holders to a slice of the tropical Eden called Finca Bellavista (bellavista.net), the world's only tree house subdivision.

Foot power is the main mode of transportation to enter this earthly paradise, which is fine with Ablett. "We'll be growing our own crops in the organic



Courtesy, the Hogans
Matt and Erica Hogan at The Point, a hiking trail at Finca Bellavista in Costa Rica.

garden. And if we want to stay connected with the outside, there's easy access to a Wi-Fi signal and a high-speed direct-link satellite dish. We have everything needed within walking distance."

Located at the base of a 1,828-metre mountain on the southern coast of Costa Rica, a region that boasts the highest percentage of land devoted to national parks and forest reserves in the country, Finca Bellavista (or "estate with a beautiful view") offers panoramas of the Pacific Ocean and breathtaking vistas of the surrounding

— and pristine — landscape of this ecologically lush 125-hectare property.

Currently in the first phase of a planned three-stage development, the 72-lot Finca Bellavista is the brainchild of co-founders Matt Hogan, a sports marketing consultant from Maryland, and his wife, Erica, a former newspaper editor from Colorado.

"We came to Costa Rica two years ago on a surfing trip to Pavones with no intention of buying a property," Erica Hogan says. "On arrival, we fell in love with the place. Our first thought: We have to build a vacation home here."

They became so passionate about the project that it wasn't long before the decision was made to share it with others. "We want to bring something totally different and adventurous into people's lives," Matt Hogan says.

Inspired by the Star Wars Ewok village they fantasized about as kids, with its interconnected suspended bridges linking the trees and adjoining huts, the Hogans wanted to recreate that storybook experience at Finca.

"We're astonished no one has done this before," says Matt. "For many, the idea of living in a tree house is rooted in our childhood imagination. Whatever the age, six or 60, the thought of being in a tree house never fails to elicit a smile."

Finca Bellavista's lots vary in size from about one to two hectares (two to five acres). The initial 30 parcels in Phase 1, priced at \$40,000 US, are almost sold out. The two- and three-acre lots

of Phase 2 are available ranging from \$50,000 to \$65,000 US (higher for riverfront and ocean-view parcels). The details of Phase 3 are still to come.

Housing construction costs are extra, but no need to worry — there's no rush hour, no contractor's schedule to meet and no pressure to build until you're ready.

There's plenty of privacy for Finca Bellavista homeowners. But building a community nestled within the canopy of tall tropical trees has its design and engineering challenges.

To untangle the lofty logistics, the Hogans sought world-renowned tree house designer Roderick Romero. Among his eco-friendly creations, which he describes as more sculptural than architectural, are treetop hideaways for the kids of celebrities such as Sting in Tuscany, Val Kilmer's Pacos, Texas, rear-yard retreat and Julianne Moore's New York City getaway aerie.

Finca Bellavista is his first jungle job, one he calls a landmark project.

"This is a fantastic experience," says Romero, whose work studio is in New York City.

"One of the main hurdles in building a tree house is building a structure that's lightweight as to not overburden the trees, but heavy enough to carry the weight of kitchen appliances, beds, balconies and the other creature comforts people want."

To do that, Romero and his crew of bough-abode builders, the Seattle-based Treehouse Workshop, are using all re-

claimed, salvaged wood from the region, manoeuvring each seven-metre beam, which weigh 320 kilograms, through the rain forest along narrow paths.

Each tree must be inspected and analyzed inside and out to ensure there is no decay. "I've seen these trees and they are ideal for this development," Romero says. Since the design of each tree house will be different, he must scale every tree to assess its strengths and weaknesses. "Once I'm up there, I can devise the house plan, the best staircase or ladder access points, where to situate balconies for optimal lookouts and ensure everything works to harmonize with the environment."

The Sky Trail network is a system of ziplines and platforms that allow users to access different portions of the community. Since you can't drive a car into the interior of the property and to your house, the Sky Trails are another option — besides hiking — to get to your property.

As for plumbing and electricity, Finca Bellavista is teaming up with nature. Rainwater will be funnelled into the home from a catchment system on a home's roof and distributed to sinks and bathrooms via pipes.

Rather than tying into the existing municipal power grid, which has frequent rolling outages, the Hogans opted to create their own hydroelectric power grid.

The system uses the water flowing through the mountain-fed Rio Bellavista to power a turbine attached to an electric generator.