

Escape the real world and discover stylish treehouses and structures from around the globe.

From traditional rustic builds based on woodworking skills to modernist sleek builds for eco-chic glamping sites, this book covers many different styles of structures using both bespoke and natural materials. Including children's play spaces, writers' retreats and individual guest rooms, these exciting retreats use creative engineering solutions.

Gorgeous photographs accompany real-life stories and style notes that offer plenty of inspiration on how to create your own place of solitude among the trees.

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THE ANATOMY OF TREEHOUSES

JANE FIELD-LEWIS



GIBBS
SMITH

THE ANATOMY OF TREEHOUSES

STYLISH HIDEAWAYS AND RETREATS

JANE FIELD-LEWIS

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BLACKBERRY WOOD TREEHOUSE

“Wood is very calming and warm, and being up high gives you a different perspective on the world around you.”

Tim Johnson, the owner of a successful glamping business in the beautiful South Downs of Sussex, wanted to add to his collection of quirky and unique builds, and decided to create the treehouse of his childhood dreams. By doing so he hoped to attract visitors who would not normally seek to be outdoors, interacting with nature. His approach to life of “making crazy ideas come true and living a life less ordinary” exactly fitted the brief he gave himself. His idea was to build a treehouse with a magical quality high up in the treetops. It would have a sense of adventure, with towers and turrets, and be as close as possible to his childhood treehouse imaginings.

On his land he had already identified the best location for the treehouse, but most of the trees in that area were ash and might at some point in the future suffer from ash dieback (a fungal disease that has attacked and killed ash trees all over Europe). As this would make the ash tree too risky to use as a support, the treehouse was designed to surround the tree with its branches coming through the deck area. The structural support was provided by 13 pilings, which were dug 13ft (4m) into the ground.

THE BUILD

The build took about two-and-a-half years to complete, which was longer than planned, and ended up being three times over budget. Tim was absent as a project manager for part of it and some sections of the build were particularly complex, especially the turret with the irregularly hung cedar shingles, which turned out to be difficult and time-consuming to make.

Pretty much the entire interior and exterior are custom-made, and Tim tried as much as possible to reuse existing items and materials, from old scaffolding boards for ceilings and floors, to taps and garden forks for hangers and door handles. After a career as an engineer in the Royal Navy, he learnt about house building working with his father, who was a builder. “I have project-managed some renovation projects in the past and learnt as I went along. An important part of the job for me is learning new skills from the people I work with.”





MATERIALS

Using materials with a warm tone and an integrity was important for Tim. He chose elm weatherboarding (from cut down diseased elm trees) on the exterior, positioning them artistically for maximum rustic effect. The roof tiles are cedar, and in the interior, along with the scaffolding boards, scraps of oak wood were elaborately carved.

Copper is used on the bathroom ceiling and walls to reinforce the atmosphere of warmth created by the wood. Tim had been to Morocco and in the souks of Marrakesh he spotted some beautiful copper baths. The memory stayed with him and since there wasn't enough space in the treehouse for a bathtub he did the next best thing and installed a copper ceiling instead. It was made in Morocco, then shipped to the UK. In fact, it looked so good that he decided to use copper for the turret's walls as well as other details in the treehouse.

The branches that make up the rails along the stairs and terrace were all sourced from his own woodland. The massive oak beam inside came from a nearby wood where a tree had blown down and the owner had offered the wood for a building project.

“This is the treehouse of my childhood dreams.”

WOODLAND WRITER'S RETREAT

Simon Parfett is one of several prolific and talented treehouse builders featured in this book (see also pages 54 and 142). His business is designing bespoke beautifully crafted natural and organic spaces. This round treehouse was a commission from an owner who wanted an unusual space in which to meditate and write and that could also be used as spillover accommodation for the main house – and all on a relatively modest budget.

Educated in earth sciences, Simon has been building treehouses since childhood, and while studying worked his way through university as a carpenter. Over time, his designs have become more and more elaborate as he weaves together his experience, knowledge and technology.

DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

Behind all of Simon's structures is his wish to reconnect people with nature and to think about building and space in a different way. He always tries to use natural materials wherever possible and, in terms of the earth, his view is that there should be no obvious signs of how the structure on site actually got there – no heavy machinery tracks or building mess. He also avoids damaging tree root systems either by compaction or building above them.

He wanted this writer's retreat to surprise you from the moment you glimpse it floating within the woodland. "Where has it come from? And you think 'Let's go check it out' as you climb up onto the deck and walk through the fork of the sycamore tree within it. Its cozy round interior and large round windows bring the woodland inside with you, yet it's so spacious that it makes you wonder why we always build square boxes."

"It emerges through the trees as you approach and in the right light you can't see how it's supported. You walk up through the fork of the tree as you approach the stairs and deck."



THE CYLINDRICAL DESIGN

The site chosen for the treehouse was in an area of relatively young woodland, standing in a clear space to the side of a medium-sized sycamore. Although the structure could have been supported by a larger tree, it soon became obvious that the design would relate to the neighbouring tree via an entrance platform

The external size of this 10ft (3m) cylindrical space with its 8in (20cm) thick walls means that the average adult can stand at the edge of the floor and have enough headroom. Because we usually spend most of our time in rectangular-shaped spaces, this round space is a surprise. Simon's initial designs for the cylindrical treehouse came from his love of round, barrel-shaped underground hobbit spaces. "It's a shape we don't spend much time within but it appeals to the human eye. The large round glazing helps to accentuate the shape and focuses the views through each end."

THE BUILD

The treehouse was planned and developed over the course of a year, and the actual build took about one month. In terms of construction, the cylinder was built on site. Transporting materials, such as the cylindrical rings that form the body of the treehouse, to the middle of the woods was the biggest challenge. Simon's experienced way of dealing with this is to design and make each section individually, so it's possible to carry it by hand.

Much of Simon's work comes from combining detailed 3D computer design with modern techniques, such as CNC, and traditional carpentry skills. At the core of the design are the birch ply rings that create the shape. They were CNC-cut (via a computer numerical control router) from a 3D computer model, and the structure fits together like the rib cage of a large animal. This was key to the build's success.



THE WOODSMAN'S TREEHOUSE

Guy Mallinson is a respected furniture designer and craftsman in wood. Trained by John Makepeace and the Royal College of Art, he gave up a big city workshop and high-end commissions to use his skills to create a rural business. He still undertakes some commissions, but now his talents have a new direction as embodied in this crafts-built treehouse, which is part of his woodland glamping site. Along with yurts and teepees, saunas and pizza ovens, it forms a relaxed and congenial countryside escape.

THE IDEA

Several years ago, when he was setting out the land for his glamping business, Guy knew that a treehouse might be part of the bigger plan and even identified the best location in the hope that one day he would be able to build one. This had always been a lifelong ambition and requests from his happy customers spurred him on. This would be no ramshackle build but a very special high-end construction that represented Guy's skills, knowledge and years of experience.

However, such ambition doesn't come cheap and it was a big financial commitment. As Guy says, "It was a massive amount of money to borrow. Our existing customers had been asking us for a treehouse for years, as they saw it as a logical extension to the luxury glamping we already offer and our in-house design and craft skills. It was clear that there were very few high-end treehouses on the market and these were very popular, which gave us the confidence to take the risk and to design and build a treehouse of the very highest specification and which is both contemporary and uses a high level of craftsmanship throughout."

THE DESIGN

Guy's view is that yurts are a variation on an established design, as are teepees and shepherds' huts. What this project gave him was a new way to express himself. Since leaving his commissioned-based business he had missed the challenge of designing and building large contemporary projects from scratch. His approach here was to consider the treehouse as a large piece of furniture, which evolved with the essential collaboration of architects.

The original design development sketches included many features of the classic treehouse vernacular, such as towers, but as the plans developed Guy and his architect and friend Keith Brownlee realized that they were not after a fairy-tale aesthetic. Instead, they perceived it as a unique opportunity to create a contemporary design that fully utilised their experience in modern furniture design and craftsmanship.



THE WOODSMAN'S TREEHOUSE



“The treehouse is designed to bring out the inner child in all of us. We had a lot of fun designing it and hope that this comes across in the experience of staying in it – there is playfulness in the design. It was amusing to see all the builders and craftsmen go down the slide at lunch breaks with a smile or a whoop – it’s impossible not to!”

The designers began by considering the practical requirements of the interior and worked the rest out from there. Treading carefully on the environment was a big consideration. The foundations are steel screw piles, carefully placed so as to pick their way through the tree roots without resorting to concrete. These supporting stilts are triangulated around the central octagon to stiffen the structure. The main body of the build is timber-framed with wooden joints and ply skins to stiffen it further.

LUXURY

Guy never backs away from a challenge and he wanted to build in some serious luxury, including a hot tub, 40ft (12.2m) above ground and positioned outside on a spa deck, as well as a sturdy double-ended copper bath inside the main build. They are placed intentionally directly above each other, the load being carried down through the careful positioning of the stilts. The giant picture window that stands beside the copper bath was yet another challenge. It wasn’t possible to get a crane on site, so the only option was many hands and a raised boardwalk in order to lift the glass into place among the branches. Guy was keen to use high-level skills and craftsmanship wherever possible and to create a playful and relaxing atmosphere. With these objectives in mind, the details were considered as

carefully as the bigger picture items. For instance, the main door has a bronze wheel that you rotate to open it instead of a conventional handle. It was cast at the local foundry in Bridport. Guy had spotted an old pattern for a steam engine steering wheel that was perfect for the air-lock/submarine aesthetic he wanted. This influenced the use of bronze and rust throughout the build.

WOOD TECHNIQUES AND MATERIALS

Both the exterior and interior finishes are highly textural using different woods, treatments and materials. Alternating sawn cedar and larch are laid in a herringbone pattern on the exterior of the rotunda, while the entrance hallway and bathroom consist of log stacks in an oak frame – the sawn logs of sweet chestnut have had their sap removed with a drawknife. The bedroom is lined with hand-split oak lathes; the bathroom in hand-cleft oak shingles; and the sauna in larch slab wood. Inside the bathroom, the ply panels have exaggerated perspective joints.

PAARMAN TREEHOUSE

This tree-inspired home reflects the careful balance of space, light, choice of materials and precise workmanship. As a result, the experience of being outside is felt within. With a peaceful and sustaining interior and little to obscure your outlook, the natural surroundings prevail.

The owners asked the architects, Malan Vorster, to design a cabin-like, one-bedroom hideaway resembling a treehouse on their estate in Constantia, South Africa. Their response was to create something unique, which echoed the verticality of the surrounding trees. In order to maximise the stunning views, they selected a site in a small clearing on really high ground. The architects drew their inspiration from timber cabins and similar structures that had been designed with a lightness of touch, using the available daylight and space carefully and delicately.

GEOMETRY

With variations based on a square and a circle, the floor plan and division of the whole space were developed meticulously. The structure is based on the geometry of a central square with each side becoming the diameter of a circle with the curved side radiating outwards, thereby creating a pinwheel plan layout. The positioning of the square relates to the site's north-south axis, while the four circles radiate into the organic natural surroundings. At the center of each circle is a column with circular rings and attached branch-like arms that support the floor above.

CONSTRUCTION

This was a complex and time-consuming project with a three-year design and build process. The columns, arms and rings are constructed from laser-cut and folded COR-TEN steel plate, which needs no painting and has a protective oxide coating that weathers well. Over time it develops an attractive rust-like appearance. Each column is divided into four "trunks" in the interest of transparency and slenderness and to allow the floor beams and windows to pass through the central points of the rings.

The steel trees support the timber floor beams, the glazing on the facade and a Western red cedar exterior. The connections between steel and timber are expressed by means of hand-turned brass components. All the materials are left untreated to show the passing of time as they weather naturally with the surrounding trees.

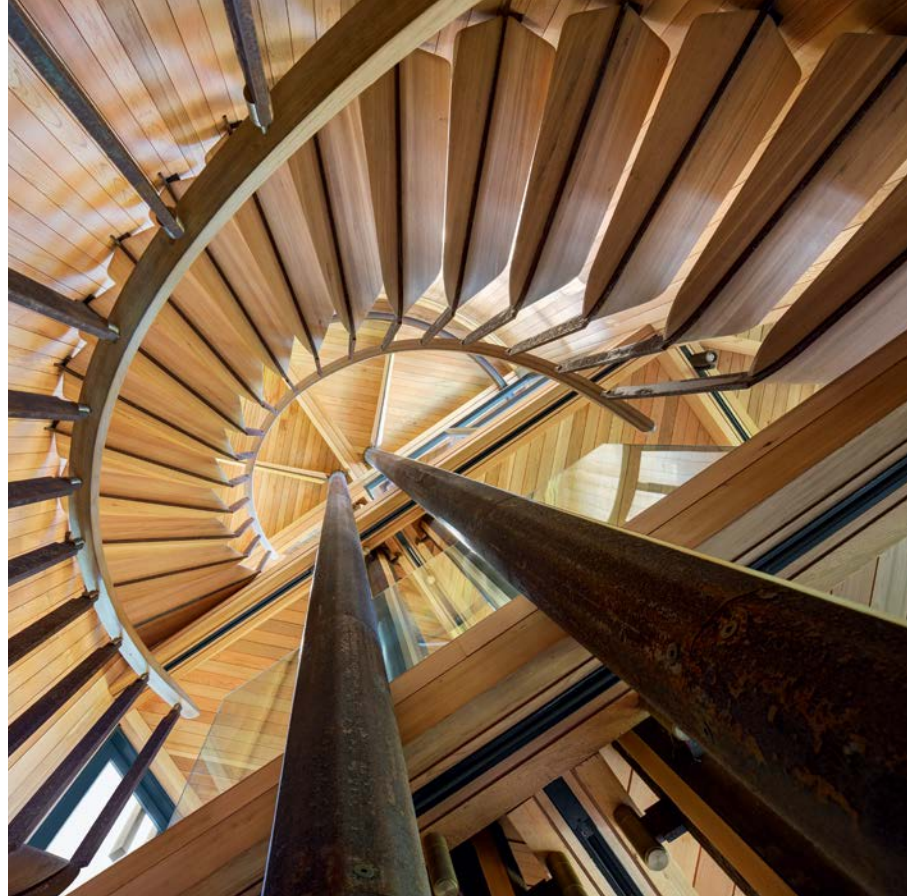
"Inspiration was drawn from the timber cabins of Horace Gifford and Kengo Kuma's notions of working with the void or in-between space, while Louis Kahn's mastery of pure form and the detailing ethic of Carlo Scarpa informed a process of geometric restraint and handcrafted manufacturing."



THE STRUCTURE

In line with referencing the height of the trees, the building is arranged vertically over three floors, with the main living area on each floor inside the central square. The living room is located on the first floor, a bedroom on the next and a roof deck on the top floor. Services are at ground level below the building.

The half-round bays accommodate a patio, dining alcove and stairs on the living level, while on the bedroom level there's a bathroom, and a built-in seat on the roof deck. The building lightly touches the ground, and entry is by means of a suspended timber and COR-TEN steel ramp.



“It’s a privilege to be woken by birdsong and the sound of squirrels clambering over the house, and to be able to see the amazing sunrise over the mountains.”



STYLE NOTES

In this area of outstanding natural beauty, this treehouse-inspired home not only provides the aspect of being off the ground and having a higher vantage point, but also, and more importantly, alludes to the lightness of materiality. Although not large, the spaces feel open, and there's little to intrude upon the eye and divert your gaze from the external views. The connection between you and the natural world outside is abundantly clear. This is a space that has no conventional walls, with only exterior glass and thin red cedar spines, blurring the conventional distinction and dividing lines between inside and outside. Wood is the key material used throughout the house. Warm-toned and textured, it emphasises the world outside, while the color palette and furniture are subtle and quiet, taking second stage. The bedroom has curved wooden walls, which give it a warm and cocoon-like feeling. This is an exquisitely designed and well thought-out space, holding its own proudly among the trees.