

GREEN TECH THE SERIES COLUMN FOR OCTOBER 5, 2016

HEADLINE: TREE HOUSE LIVING.....NO LONGER THE KID'S HIDEOUT

I must admit that I never thought that I would do a sustainable column on living in a tree house, but, like the current rage over tiny homes, this type of living is available and it's not just in the southern climates. A quick internet trip to AirBnB will offer you 20 tree houses for rent during your travels, all of them in Canada and the majority right here in Ontario.

First, a little history on tree houses. It's a remarkable history. Tribes in New Guinea were well known for tree top living. Captain James Cook recorded tree dwellers in Tasmania. The roman emperor Caligula was known to hold large banquets in a huge tree house. Queen Elizabeth I was known to have had a banquet in a huge tree platform dining area. Tree houses have been used as a quick outlook during the numerous activist fights over logging in California and British Columbia, and have often been lived in for months. This type of residence, so to speak, gained some ground a couple of years ago when Animal Plant ran a series for a couple of years called "Treehouse Masters." There is an International Treehouse Association web site. The information on the site is a bit dated, 2013 seems to be its most recent activity, but the contact address still works.

Today's tree house is an eco-friendly example of recycled, sustainable living. Water can be collected and recycled; weather tight envelopes utilized; electricity provided by solar panels and hot water supported by thermal solar panels. Here in North America, the desire is to get some peace and quiet from our "connected world," to get closer to nature and live a sustainable life style. This attracts eco-minded off grid owners and retirement inspired baby boomers, who might own one of these reasonably priced homes in our northern climate and another in the south, making it summer year round.

So what are the perks of living above the crowd? Peace and privacy are obvious, security comes in as a close third on the list; you are simply not accessible to the criminal element. The fourth benefit is the use of low cost materials, often recycled. Assembly is pretty much manual and low tech. One of the challenges is to get past the municipal government. This is a major challenge in most localities and you can bet the local building official will roll his/her eyes on this one. That said, as noted earlier, there are examples right here in Ontario, so it's not impossible.

How do you go about building a tree home? There are some basics to follow. The first one is finding a good tree. In fact, one reference I got said that two trees close together is the best base and if you can find 3 or 4 in a cluster, all the better. The trees will dictate the size to some degree. I did find a number where the tree was a major factor, but either timber or concrete pillars were also in the assembly design. While in the warmer climates treated wood is a necessity, in our part of the world attention to a well-insulated floor is paramount.

This is not a business without those who have gone before, as they say. There are builders and owners who will offer their help. One suggestion was to call a certified arborist. A tree is alive and you would want to know how old the tree is, the health of the tree and the strength of the overall type of tree. When using a tree with a shallow root pattern, drilling or cutting into the tree may compromise the health and overall life span of the tree.

This was kind of a fun column to research and write about. Not in my wildest dreams did I expect I would find a “subdivision in the trees” available for purchase. How wrong I was. Nestled in the Costa Rica rain forest is just such a tree house community. Started in 2006 by Erica Andrews and Mateo Hogan, today the Finca Bellvista community encompasses some 600 acres including an entire peninsula. They have built 25 homes in this community and have sold 51 additional sites for tree homes. They call this a “planned treehouse resort community” and have a set of guidelines with respect to the type, amount of site preparation and very limited tree clearance for assembly. No motorized vehicles are permitted and the main access road, where vehicles are permitted, is for construction deliveries and emergency vehicles only. Mateo built the first homes with local labor and, today, they have an actual crew of carpenters and other workers who handle the entire build, from base assembly, solar panels and even water systems.

The Finca Bellvista community has a completely functional infrastructure including community buildings, suspension bridges, trails and storm water management, which, in a rain forest, would be a primary concern, along with canopy platforms for privacy. You can buy a site ranging from  $\frac{1}{4}$  to three acres and then sit down with Mateo and his crew. No two are alike, as no two trees are alike. Some trees in the community are 200 feet high. The most difficult process is getting materials, which can take months. Then you must build connecting trails or bridges, a bio-digester and rain water storage capacity. The whole process can take upwards of eight months and they only build in the dry season, which is December to July. If you are looking for a small resort style winter recreational

home, this idea is above the clouds, so to speak. Go to [www.fincabellavista.com](http://www.fincabellavista.com) for more information.

Cam Allen L.I.W. NHI ACI can be reached at [alltechconsultinggroup@gmail.com](mailto:alltechconsultinggroup@gmail.com) for questions or comments.