



Tree Houses That Are Not For the Birds

By Lewis Lorini

For many adults, tree houses conjure only fond childhood memories of secret clubs and the movie "The Swiss Family Robinson."

But for some, according to Seth Tibbotts, tree houses are home.

Tibbotts, a tree house dweller, is currently researching a book on tree houses of the world with Laura Ewig and Marsha Earbarrentine. He estimates that as many as 400 "serious" tree houses with electricity and plumbing are in the United States.

This count does not include the crude platforms made by adolescents. It only considers multilevel structures with between 1,000 and 3,500 square feet of living area.

The tree house pictured here, for instance, is as typical as this idiosyncratic form of housing can be. It has about 1,000 square feet of living space on three levels. The owner

and builder is an artist who lives in this house year-round somewhere in the Pacific Northwest.

Like nearly all tree house owners, this man agreed to allow photos of the house to be published (here and in Tibbotts eventual book) on the condition of total anonymity.

"Tree houses are pretty controversial in most places. I think a lot of the book will deal with the legal aspects of tree houses," Tibbotts said.

The most common legal problems of tree houses relate to the fact that building codes do not specifically address tree-house construction. But building officials are usually not the first to come down on a tree house — it is often the neighbors, Tibbotts said.

"The typical scenario involves a neighbor of a tree house being denied a permit to put an addition or deck on his house. Then, he'll point



The beams supporting the main platform of a typical tree house are attached to the tree with 1-inch threaded rod (left) that runs through a hole drilled through the trunk. This method does not harm the tree, which grows around the bolt. For lighter parts of the tree house, such as a deck, 4- or 5-inch long, 1-inch thick lag bolts are used (right). Since trees grow from the top, the height of these bolts never changes.



This three-level tree house somewhere in the Pacific Northwest is occupied year-round. The 1,000-square-foot dwelling is hooked up to electricity and heated with a wood stove. The kitchen is equipped with a refrigerator, microwave oven, and propane stove. The living room has a big-screen television, videocassette recorder, and stereo system.

to the tree house next door as a reason he should be allowed to build whatever he wants," Tibbotts said.

Often the tree house controversies receive extensive local press coverage, which makes the building department look bad and forces some kind of legal action against the tree house builder, Tibbotts added. Disputes have ended in a variety of ways ranging from the tree house being allowed to the owner being forced to tear it down.

Tibbotts said he knows of one guy who even went to jail over his tree house.

"Tree houses seem to bring out the creative child in an adult. They are sort of a rebellion against the seriousness of the life," Tibbotts said. That playfulness is reflected in the design, or more accurately, evolution, of tree houses.

Tree houses are never finished, Tibbotts said. The dwellers are always wondering whether they went up high enough, and always seem to be

adding walkways to an adjacent stand of trees for a possible addition.

A typical tree house starts as a platform about 35 feet above the ground. Cross members that support joists for the main platform are often attached with 1-inch threaded rod put in holes drilled through the trunk. This method does not hurt the tree. The joists are often made of pressure-treated lumber to protect against insects. Once a platform is decked, the rest of the structure is framed in a relatively conventional manner. From here, however, the designs become as unique as the builders themselves. But a common advantage of all tree houses is the view.

"At the very least, tree houses offer a different perspective on the world," Tibbotts said. ■

Seth Tibbotts encourages anyone with a tree house to contact him at P.O. Box 218, Husum, WA 98623 for possible inclusion in his book.

Windows, a prominent feature of many tree houses, typically offer a great view.



Building a walkway to nowhere is the way most tree house dwellers begin to expand their living area.