



The treehouse

Description

A treehouse provides both [prospect](#) and [refuge](#). It's built to position its residents some distance above the ground. A treehouse is organic and improvised, structured to oblige its particular and uncertain superstructure — the tree.

The structure is usually additive. It looks as though it could extend further into the tree canopy, and even connect via platforms, walkways, ropes and bridges with other trees or a whole forest.

A tree house is a rough, rude and primal thing with little protection from weather, insects, birds and creatures that climb.

All buildings protect their occupants from something, but the treehouse provides a raw architecture whose protective function is reduced to a single attribute — elevation above the ground. It's safer up there than on the floor of the forest.

“Then for the first time we stood all together in our new home. I drew up the ladder, and, with a greater sense of security than I had enjoyed since we landed on the island, offered up our evening prayer, and retired for the night.”

That's an excerpt from Johann David Wyss's *Swiss Family Robinson* (Apple Books, p.171). Here's a tree house in the Mara North Conservancy in Kenya, built for safari enthusiasts who want to spend a night in the open air.



The treehouse recalls the roots of architecture in the [primitive hut](#), the trunks of four trees forming the four corners of the mythic first dwelling. But treehouses have other characteristics.

Entrapment

Anyone who has ever scrambled up a ladder, a tree or a rock face knows that it's easier to go up than down. On the way up the climber faces the direction of travel, can see the next secure hand hold, and has the destination in view. On the descent your body gets in the way of a clear view, and with the ground in focus [vertigo](#) sets in.

As well as providing refuge, a treehouse serves therefore as a kind of trap. It has this in common with its converse, a pit in the ground – the usual trapping apparatus.

Rock climbing

The National Geographic film *Free Solo* (2018) shows the rock climber Alex Honnold train for and then ascend El Capitan without ropes. That's inspirational and aspirational, but for good practical reasons he doesn't attempt to *climb* down the rock face.

I went to the top once, by road. Were it not for the plateau and road up there, a climber without ropes would be stuck at the top. Besides, a descent is less dramatic than an ascent.

Actions and ascent

It's rare to find an action film that's purely on a level. Here are two recent examples where action takes place in the vertical.

The Wandering Earth (2019) is a Chinese sci-fi action movie about a post apocalyptic Earth the survivors of which manage to build a series of giant rocket thrusters across the planet to stop the Earth's rotation, and shift it out of the orbit of the rapidly expanding sun.

The action takes place in or above a fractured landscape of ever shifting tectonic crevasses, the remnants of skyscrapers, and the unlikely megastructures of the rocket thrusters.

In a different vein, Disney's *Mary Poppins Returns* (2018) provides an example of the power of the vertical, as Jack the everyman lamplighter scales the Tower of Big Ben to change the clock. There's the inevitable moment where he looks down and realises the strife he's got himself into.

Mary Poppins emphasises the vertical challenge with her occasional ascent and descent via kite or umbrella. Then there's the truly scary moment where the virtuous characters ascend into the heavens via hand-held balloons.

For this viewer at least, it invoked the biblical rapture – the ascent of the blessed, or perhaps the deathly ascent in the carousel rite in *Logan's Run* (1976).

Vertigo adds to the drama of the moment. To intensify emotion, story-tellers can do worse than install their characters in physically precarious settings. See post: [Heidegger and vertigo](#).

The trickster and the tower

As attested by any number of cartoons (e.g. Wile E. Coyote's pursuit of Road Runner), action at and with height is also the preserve of the trickster. The trickster gets snared by his own traps and devices.

I mentioned trickster jackal building a stone tower to trick the lion in [my previous post](#). It's not beyond the wit and stupidity of the trickster to both exploit and fall victim to height – to get stuck in the tree.

Trickster can also get snared in his own devices. Trickster is at once culture hero and fool, clever predator and stupid prey (19).

A treehouse is both a refuge and a trap. An over-designed home security system traps nervous occupants into the fear that they can't escape quickly and safely enough if they have to. See post: [Unlocked](#).

Reference

- Hyde, Lewis. 1998. *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art*. New York: North Point Press



Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. ciphercity
2. primitive hut
3. tree
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