

**EXCLUSIVE FREE ONLINE CHAPTER
GEORGE'S TREE HOUSE**



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The tree houses of my childhood were simple things: a few sticks, impromptu structures, more or less a shed in a tree. They were great times and gave my friends and me a lot of fun and enjoyment. I therefore wanted the major project in Series 2 of 'Amazing Spaces' to be a tree house. It was fantastic to tap into that feeling again by creating something really special, not just for us but also to enable other people to experience great design, get outside and connect with the natural world, especially people for whom the joys of camping and the great outdoors are not usually available. I wanted this to be accessible to people with disabilities as well as their families.

In my caravan project from Series 1, we used the bare bones of a static caravan that was past its best to create a modern and inspirational design which opened up and engaged with nature. It wasn't just a dry, comfortable bolthole at the end of the day, it was also technically and creatively challenging. With the Tree House, I wanted to take the concept of blurring indoor and outdoor spaces even further, creating a space that really engages with the landscape and embraces the cleverest cutting-edge design while capturing the magic of camping.

Each project in Series 1 taught me different things, opening my eyes to the skills, inspiration and effort of so many talented people, and because of the small-scale nature of these projects, thinking the impossible often became the opposite – the possible. The Tree Tent was a case in point – a spherical canvas structure hanging from ropes below the tree canopy. Apart from its design qualities, I loved the sense of freedom, escapism and adventure at being above the ground; it was a different world up there.

THE FREEDOM OF BEING UP IN THE
TREES IS SOMETHING I ALWAYS ENVY.



The Plan

Our brief was to create an accessible tree house with separate spaces. We wanted to use rational, simple forms – the most basic shapes as building blocks – and then played with how to hold them up in the air. The more we could do to break down the boundaries between man and nature the better. The location was within a national park, and the natural qualities of its environment provided our three key inspirations: water, trees and a vast sky with minimal light pollution. Each pod would relate individually to these elements.

A triangular ‘A’ frame, the simplest of building shapes, would open up to engage with the outdoors. The two sloping sides would open to the vertical via hydraulics, to create an open roof and clear view of the sky. The interior would contain a simple sleeping platform.

A practical cube would be a sleek, minimal building, visually connecting with the woodland by means of a deck and a large wall of windows opening directly onto the treetops, creating a curtain of green.

A cylindrical pod would provide a ‘wild camping’ feel. Open-ended and looking straight up the course of the river, it brings the light and sound, as well as the view, of the water directly into the space.

FOR ME, ONE OF THE MOST AMAZING THINGS ABOUT ANY CREATIVE PROJECT IS HOW IT ACTS AS A KIND OF FUEL. AS WELL AS GIVING ME GREAT SATISFACTION, I LEARN THINGS, DEVELOP MY IDEAS AND BENEFIT FROM WORKING IN A TEAM. IT STRETCHES ME AND INEVITABLY LEADS TO THE QUESTION: ‘OK, THAT’S FINISHED, SO WHAT’S NEXT?’

Development

There was no doubt in my mind that William Hardie, a talented master craftsman and designer, was the right person for this project. Apart from incredible workmanship, he brings remarkable conceptual elements to the design process. The man is a genius.

Our creative ramblings and scribbles led to some wacky and wild ideas, but although this process is key, our creativity has to work in tandem with practicalities. The location was challenging: a wooded site sloping steeply down to a small flood plain and a river, with trees not structurally strong enough to support a tree house.

Technically, we needed the expertise of a structural engineer. Our plan was to use sturdy oak posts, securely anchored to the ground, as supports. The posts would need cross-bracing with the vertical struts supporting the building, potentially underwater, as the site suffers from seasonal flooding.

This was no whimsical tree house; it had to have serious design credibility as well as work with the topography of the area, the climate and the accessibility requirements of people with disabilities.



The tree house aims to combine the indoors with the great outdoors as harmoniously as possible.



Every unique space in the three pods of the tree house is used wisely and with a view to comfort, functionality and aesthetics. Each pod bears its own style – the cube, for example, displays Nordic and Quaker influences.



Materials

Our choice of materials had to be sympathetic to the environment, aesthetically pleasing, practical, honest and capable of weathering.

The triangle was the most engineered of the structures but the one that retained a rustic cabin feel and look. Using state-of-the-art steelwork and hydraulics in the most simple and pastoral of buildings is very appealing. The interior is plywood-lined and the large walls/sloping sides of the building are clad in a traditional repeat pattern of cedar shingle, which will weather over time to a lovely silvery grey. Because of the stairs, this is the only shape that isn't accessible by wheelchair.

The cube is simplicity itself – a modernist box. The exterior is clad in blackened vertical planks of rough-sawn green oak, and here William's inspired thinking and practical knowledge were instrumental in achieving an ingenious finish. By harnessing one of the natural properties of oak, a blackened surface was created by brushing it with a solution of iron sulphate (tomato feed mixed with water). Reacting with the natural tannins in the oak, the surface blackened within hours.

The cylindrical pod, by nature of its shape, had to be metal. A section of corrugated steel motorway drainage tube was the ideal solution. Ready formed, its surface reflects the light and sound of the river and will oxidise over time. Left open-ended, it is a pure and simple form.



Design

I love the multi-functioning, inventive design and space-saving devices that many of the designers have devised for the projects in this book. The Barcelona Lego Apartment and The Beach Hut, for instance, are stunningly clever in how they use a small space. Squeezing the most out of every inch without making a space feel cramped or haphazard is a challenge.

Here we tried to apply what we had learnt from those clever contributors and amp it up! Walk into the cube pod and it looks like a minimal plywood-lined box, with bi-fold doors spanning the width and a deck running along the outside. There is very little obvious detail.



The triangular pod acts as observatory, play room and additional bedroom.

One of the two fold-down beds in the cube pod serves to separate off the kitchen area.



However, along one wall is a simple cantilevered, adjustable-height kitchen. Look carefully at the wall surface and the fine lines in the CNC cut plywood indicate cut-out forms. Lift the pieces out and they slot together cleverly into stools and benches. On the opposite wall, lines suggest openings, brackets hinge open and shelves fold down onto them to create a traditional dresser. There is a small gesture of a mantelpiece. Pull this out and the wall surface pulls down and out too, becoming the dining table with small shelves in the wall behind. The hidden surface exposed when the furniture is in use is a textural rustic cabin-style oak planking adapted from the oak-engineered floorboards, lightly sand-blasted to expose the grain.

The two single beds can be used as beds or a bed and a sofa. One folds down and swings out, separating off the kitchen area and, in a simple reminder of its original form, small cut logs function as legs. The second bed folds down from the opposite wall and rests on two small swing-out cupboard doors. This is a really cunning flexible space: you can pull out the pieces of furniture you want when you need them.

Styling

Jane, our stylist (and my co-author of the *Amazing Spaces* book), felt that the interior styling should echo and reflect the character of each individual pod. She loved the architecture and design of the tree house and felt that should lead the way. Each space needed a few carefully chosen additions to create an interior that was comfortable, beautiful, simple and as practical and stylish as the builds themselves. In their own way all the pods are clean-lined structures which only need minimal furniture, so we selected small items that were in keeping with their design ethos and purpose.

The cube pod has a modern Nordic feel with echoes of Shaker practicality and aesthetics along with rustic cabin elements. The two modern Vitra chairs on the deck are a simple, elegant nod to the tradition of a rocking chair, together with a telescope for stargazing. The bed/sofa upholstery is a simple grey felt, the blankets a colourful graphic weave, and china, mugs and lanterns are white.

The triangular pod is part additional bedroom, part observatory: a place to daydream and chill out; a comfortable and flexible space. Roll-up camping futons covered in traditional striped linen, big cushions and a box of vintage dominos create a suitably relaxed but fun environment.

The cylindrical pod is an outdoorsy semi-camping experience. It has a monastic feel with the small wood-burning stove and benches creating a contemplative and conversational space. A mixture of traditionally woven wool tartan blankets are piled up and there are enough logs to keep the fire going all night.

If you want to sleep out, there are outdoor waterproof sleeping bag covers.

Behind the fold-down shelves hides a surface of rustic oak planking.



In order to maximise space, essential furniture, such as a table, seating and shelving, is cut out of walls and folded out effortlessly when needed.

AMAZING SPACE ESSENTIALS

- 1 If you are considering constructing a tree house, do ensure that the trees are strong enough structurally to support it – consult a structural engineer.
- 2 When you aim to bring together indoor and outdoor spaces, remember to make provisions for the cold, with warm blankets and waterproof materials.
- 3 Consider aspects of accessibility and safety for all ages if this is a tree house for the whole family.
- 4 Choose your spot carefully! Try to position the tree house with the best possible view of your surroundings.

The cylindrical pod recreates the camping experience inside its corrugated steel space.

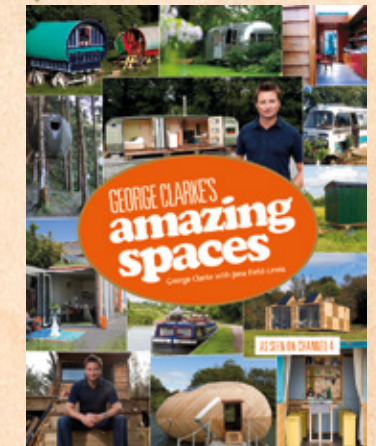


The Tree House is designed for everyone to be able to connect with the natural world.



THE OFFICIAL TIE-IN TO 'GEORGE CLARKE'S AMAZING SPACES' WRITTEN BY GEORGE CLARKE WITH JANE FIELD-LEWIS IS OUT NOW, PUBLISHED BY QUADRILLE, £20.

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