

A Cozy, Minimalist Retreat Perched Among the Treetops

In upstate New York, one family's treehouse mimics its rustic environment.



The Willow Treehouse, clad in repurposed cedar and perched above Avner and Maskit Ronen's swimming pond in upstate New York, is surrounded by pine, oak, birch and maple trees. Credit...Blaine Davis

By Alice Newell-Hanson

WHEN AVNER AND Maskit Ronen decided in 2014 to build a [treehouse](#) at the eastern edge of their 34-acre property in Willow, N.Y. — a hippie-ish hamlet in the northern foothills of the [Catskill Mountains](#) — they solicited suggestions from their four children, then aged 2 to 11. After growing up in Israel and moving to New York from Tel Aviv two decades ago, the parents envisioned something all-American for their family, a handcrafted hide-out where they could whittle twigs and learn birdcalls.

The children had other ideas. Beguiled by the fantasy of a cozy, self-sufficient home in the trees — perhaps best embodied by the jury-rigged Falcon's Nest in Johann David Wyss's "[The Swiss Family Robinson](#)" (1812), with its banyan-tree stairwell and turtle-shell sinks — they requested an open-air bathtub, a ladder leading to a lofted bed and a zip-line that would careen across the property's pond.

The project quickly "took on a life of its own," Avner says. He began researching treehouses online and discovered the work of the British interior and furniture designer [Antony Gibbon](#), whose renderings of biomorphic floating cabins — often shaped like human-size beehives — had until then remained largely unbuilt. Avner, 44, a tech entrepreneur, and Maskit, 43, a high school teacher, were impressed by Gibbon's commitment to designing structures that minimally affect, and even mimic, their environment. So they commissioned him to create a 500-square-foot idyll suspended amid a copse of silvery eastern white pines and towering lichen-wrapped oaks at the edge of their pond, a five-minute walk — through a column of fragrant pear, apple and cherry trees — from their main weekend home, a five-bedroom house built in 1996 from recycled concrete blocks.



The relaxation room at the back of the treehouse is decorated with patchwork floor cushions. Credit...Blaine Davis

The Willow Treehouse, named after its hometown, is a six-sided structure with an angular sloping face that resembles a gargantuan snake's head peeking through the leaves. The exterior is clad in cedar — salvaged by the local woodworker William Johnson, who oversaw the construction — and raw pine lines the interior, lending the space a honeyed glow. In the open-plan living area, a 12-foot-wide window offers views of the trees and the purple-tinged northern slope of Mount Tobias in the distance. As the children demanded, a ladder leads up to a lofted king-size bed (and there's a wood-fired cedar hot tub a short walk from the shaded deck below). Minimalist but snug — furnished with patchwork floor cushions, cowhide rugs and a log-burning Danish steel stove — the space recalls a '70s-era Laurel Canyon crash pad, albeit with a full modern kitchen and slate-tiled shower room.



The interior designer Antony Gibbon installed a Danish steel stove from the New York-based company Wittus in the main living space; its lines echo the slope of the pine wood interior. Credit...Blaine Davis

At the Willow Treehouse, there are no curtains covering the 10 windows (nor is there reliable cellphone service), and so its inhabitants have no choice but to follow nature's rhythms, waking with the sun. Hidden in their roost, the Ronens have observed deer, rabbits, coyotes and black bears walking undisturbed below them; so integrated does the building feel that, beneath the eave of the rearmost window, a family of yellow jackets built a papery summer home of their own, not unlike one of Gibbon's designs. And while climbing back into the trees sounds undoubtedly nostalgic, it is equally motivated by the question of our planet's uncertain future: a bid to savor the splendor while we still can.