

When sense prevails over a treehouse

If I hadn't become a journalist I'm pretty sure I would have been a builder. I've been an amateur carpenter ever since Dad bought me a toolset and let me build things like houses for the cats from butter boxes.

There were many happy hours spent making things like carts and imitation machine guns...and treehouses.

I was reminded of those recently when things took an interesting turn down the end of our street, where it turns into Victoria Rd and is graced by nine magnificent old puriri trees that run down its middle and give it exceptional panache.

Someone built a treehouse in one of the trees. I saw it happening. While passing on a walk down to Pukekura Park, I was startled by a nail-gun, the shots coming from a man up the tree, fixing a platform into the dish where its boughs spread.

He knew what he was doing. It was dead level and sturdy, an ideal place for kids to stand after they'd clambered three metres up the rope ladder he'd hung from a branch. Alongside was a swing. Wow, I thought: the audacity of this dad...on several counts.

The first was his flouting of our overbearing health and safety culture, which banished bull-rush from playgrounds and prevents tradies from using ladders to do anything more than get up and down to the scaffolds that encase every building job.

The second was the thought he was building his kids' eyrie in a public place, one of a line of trees no doubt venerated by generations of residents and passersby. Was he damaging the tree? How long before someone potted him to the council? How long before they made him take it down?

I was torn. I'd not only built treehouses of some complexity in the big trees at the back of my parents' place, but I made one for my own son years later. They involved a lot of nails being hammered into trunks and branches, but the trees never seemed to notice. Some of them are still standing, the scars long mended.

And I like the idea of modern kids being encouraged to take a few risks by climbing up to a treehouse, perhaps even repelling invaders. In my day, that involved lethal shanghais firing acorns, massive versions using tractor inner tubes that propelled pine cones half a mile, slug guns (only shots below the waist allowed), and home-made rifles firing cartridges packed with gunpowder prised out of Double Happy crackers.

These were fired for effect only, the home-made lead bullets smashing into something close to "enemies" from the neighbouring street gang to frighten them away. Nobody ever seemed to get hurt, although bird populations suffered a bit.



JT column for Sept 30 2017 – treehouse sense

Our treehouses had walls, windows and tin roofs, and housed families of wetas that caused much greater angst than the missiles of rival kids. Below one treehouse, we dug a cave that had a fireplace for roasting chestnuts that fell out of the tree above. Drizzled with butter and salt, they were heaven.

So part of me egged on this bold treehouse constructor, while another part accepted that playing loose and fast with a public tree was asking for trouble. We've got a thing about trees, haven't we.

I recall bringing a class of Auckland journalism students to New Plymouth on a field trip once and the biggest story they did was about the fate of a pohutukawa in Fitzroy. When I came back a year later with another lot, the same tree was still attracting controversy.

Trees occupy endless space in news columns. In recent times, there's been the ongoing row about the Italian alders fouling the CBD footpaths, John Matthews' pohutukawas needing to be trimmed for power lines, Housing NZ cutting down trees at Marfell, pohutukawas being poisoned at East End, native trees being mysteriously felled at Opunake, half-cut trees in a Waitara street, a puriri that got in the way of a new entrance to the Bowl of Brooklands, the regional council's tree cutting on the Waitara River banks, and so on.

What would happen in this case, then? Nothing, for three months. Then the treehouse vanished. The kids seemed to be gone from the house nearby, so I assume the family moved away, taking their treehouse with them.

But no. It was the council. A parks department staffer noticed the treehouse when passing one day and asked its builder to take it down. Sense prevailed...I suppose.