



Gluck+ family retreat in
upstate New York



NATURAL HIGHS

Rural dwellers looking to connect with nature at a higher level are commissioning innovative tower houses with magnificent vistas.

Dominic Bradbury reports on the soaring properties splicing architectural traditions – and redefining the modern country home

Elevation offers many special – and often sublime – advantages. Living up high provides a feeling of openness and light, as well as a greater sense of space and freedom. But it also offers the temptation of a home that engages with a vista full of interest and promise. This is especially true of a fresh generation of rural tower houses.

Like their urban cousins, they offer an enticing vantage point, yet are also belvederes with a powerful and intimate connection with their bucolic surroundings.

These engaging, contemporary houses splice many beguiling traditions. On the one hand, there is the romantic precedent of soaring rural follies and hunting lodges, along with examples of historic tower houses in Scotland, Tuscany and other parts of the world, with their solid, defensive character. Then there's the more organic notion of treehouses and floating structures bound into the landscape itself. Agricultural and industrial buildings such as grain silos, water towers and fire-watch platforms have a peculiar and charismatic beauty all of their own. Today's newly conceived tower homes owe much to this complex but intriguing jumble of influences.

Architect Thomas Gluck fused the inspiration of treehouse living with his experience of elevated urban apartments when he designed an extraordinary floating retreat in upstate New York for himself, his wife, Anne Langston, and their two children. The tower house is located on a property the family has owned for over 40 years and where Gluck's father Peter – the founder and one of five principals of the architectural firm Gluck+ – had already designed and built an addition to the original farmhouse, plus a number of other structures, including a guest house and library. Father and son then set about constructing a new home (pictured on these pages) on a forested plateau, designed to create a panoramic platform facing north towards the Catskill Mountains.

"Accessing the view and creating a living experience in the treetops became the generator for the whole project," says Gluck, who lives in New York City, where the practice is based. "Looking towards the mountains, you can see for up to 25 miles on a clear day. But on the other



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three sides of the house there are trees, so when you look in that direction, you can see them swaying in the wind.”

The small bedroom and bath suites are contained in the lower body of the tower, while the upper level – which cantilevers outwards into the sky – contains the main living spaces, along with an outdoor roof deck. The house exterior is partially clad in dark-green, back-painted glass, which reflects the trees, allowing the house to blend into the forest. “We wanted the building to feel as though it was in the woods, but obviously we have chosen this very artificial and geometric form,” says Gluck. “One of the under-appreciated aspects of glass is its reflectivity, and by having the building coated in it you mirror everything around, so that it becomes this instant camouflage. And it’s amazing being in the living room at the top because it’s constantly changing – at dawn, at dusk, when it rains, during a snowstorm. There’s something very peaceful about getting away from our crazy lives in the city and being able to relax in such a contemplative space.”

British architect Roz Barr embraced a very different source of inspiration when she was commissioned to design a tower house (pictured overleaf) on the west coast of Scotland. It sits close to a quiet shore, with the new structure forming an extension to the existing

early-19th-century stone farmstead that is also being restored. The clients’ family have owned the surrounding land for the past 70 years. The new addition has four bedrooms and is built using local stone; its commanding but enigmatic form is a contemporary reinterpretation of traditional Scottish tower houses. “Originally found in agricultural settings in the 17th and 18th centuries, it’s a building type that is still a fairly commonplace feature in Scotland,” says Barr. “Most often there was a simple rectangular plan with a principal room per floor that was accessed from a central staircase. By the late 17th century, most of the new tower residences were not being built for defence, but as comfortable country homes. So this one is a response to the historic landscape, mediating between the old and the new.”

The building is a beautifully crafted presence, with long slot windows that echo the original tower houses but with a more modern, linear appearance. The larger windows face south, while the tower itself is part of a small collection of complementary structures, including two existing boathouses by the water that are also being restored.

Likewise, Scottish tower houses offered one important source of reference for Sergison Bates





This picture: Christian Pottgiesser
Architecturepossibles five-tower
family home near Versailles. Far
left: Ellis Williams Architects
Lymm Water Tower in Cheshire



This idea of a platform for observing nature is particularly alluring today, offering the possibility of an escapist belvedere – a retreat from the world beyond



Architects, when it designed a modern elevated home (pictured overleaf) for Viscount Lymington, the son of the 10th Earl of Portsmouth, on the family estate of Farleigh Wallop in Hampshire. The new building won planning permission under a special clause that allows for one-off new countryside homes to be constructed if they are shown to be “truly outstanding and innovative”, as well as being sensitive to the local area and an enhancement to their setting.

The Farleigh Wallop property replaces an existing water tower dating from the 1930s and stands on the crest of a hill at the edge of farmland and woods. The house adopts a similar outline to the original tower and is built in cast stone. The carefully considered

design statement written for it refers to historic Scottish tower houses, such as Smailholm Tower, near Kelso, but also to hunting lodges and the tall follies and “prospect towers” that sometimes appeared on period English estates, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries. “Rather than transform or adapt the redundant water tower by enveloping it or cutting into it, we chose to re-use not the structure itself but its image, thus retaining the mark of its physical presence within the landscape,” explains architect Stephen Bates.

“The house is rooted in a very specific context, which includes the surrounding countryside, but also historical precedents. We were excited by the idea of revisiting these precedents to make them relevant to

modern living. The building is conceived as a ‘house of rooms’ – a constellation of large and smaller spaces – that are revealed as one moves through it, with a staircase winding its way through the interconnected rooms, without the use of corridors.”

The main living area is positioned at the top of the house to capture the best perspectives across the landscape; it features high ceilings and has more intimate alcoves around the edges, as well as a focal-point fireplace. The kitchen and day room are on the ground floor, with bedrooms on the remaining two storeys in between. It’s intended as a legacy project, providing an important new addition to a historic estate that has been in the same family for 500 years.

Television producer/presenter Russell Harris and his family enlisted the help of Ellis Williams Architects to convert a derelict water tower (pictured on previous pages) in rural Cheshire. Harris was walking his dogs in the area when he came across the tower, overgrown with ivy and brambles. It was, says Harris, like something out of a fairytale. The family bought it and created five bedrooms inside, plus a roof terrace and garden at the summit. Open-plan living spaces were incorporated into a new addition at the base of the building.

“I love the marriage between the old and the new,” says Harris. “And despite the fact that the tower was falling down when I first saw it, there was this setting to die for with idyllic views from the roof garden: on the horizon in one direction you can see Liverpool’s two cathedrals, and in the other Manchester’s Beetham Tower. On a clear day you can also see the Welsh hills and the Peak District.”

For many architects and designers, tower houses offer a completely fresh and original way of looking at the form of the modern country home. When French architect Christian Pottgiesser was asked to extend an 18th-century orangery near Versailles, on the site of a former château, the

combination of a complex site, complex brief and various local planning restrictions created quite a challenge. Yet the resulting family house (pictured on previous pages), for a couple and their four children, has been lauded as a contemporary masterpiece. It combines living spaces in the original orangery with a low-slung pavilion at ground-floor level and five separate towers that rise like periscopes, peering out across the surrounding countryside.

Each tower frames a different view from the large picture windows in the bedrooms at the top, while one also includes a roof terrace. The parents and children all have a self-contained private world, looking out upon the surroundings, yet the family can come

From top: Roz Barr Architects tower house in Scotland. Balance Associates Architects holiday home in Michigan

together easily in the pavilion or the orangery. "The window openings are designed to be more expansive the higher up the building you go," says Pottgiesser. "The ground floor of each tower is opaque, then the staircase landings have bathrooms with several small windows, and the upper floor is largely open to the mature landscape. What pleases me most about the towers is that you can use them in many different ways and that you can easily construct others. Recently, the clients asked us for an extension of the extension, so after nearly 10 years of working together, there are still new projects to consider."

A number of pioneering mid-century-modernist architects have experimented with the tower house as nature lookout. Most famously, perhaps, was the Italian-Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi, who created an elevated glass house for herself among the trees just outside São Paulo in the late 1940s. The house was specifically designed to connect directly with nature and included a mature tree growing through a floating courtyard that punctured the building.

This idea of a platform for observing the countryside is particularly alluring today, offering the possibility of an escapist belvedere – a retreat from the world beyond, where you are quite literally away from everything, including the ground. Two North American tower houses illustrate the seductive appeal of the watchtower.

Arthur Andersson is president of Andersson-Wise Architects, which designed a rural weekend getaway (pictured right) overlooking Lake Travis in Texas. Originally, the clients were considering extending an existing 1920s cottage on the site. But they ultimately decided to embrace the idea of a new building close by, with two bedrooms on the lower floors and a partially sheltered roof terrace on the upper floor, complete with a kitchenette and dining area – a lookout space that makes the most of the sweeping views across the lake.

Similarly, Balance Associates Architects was approached by clients Joseph Lada and Gary Cozette to

From top: Andersson-Wise Architects rural getaway in Texas. Sergison Bates Architects tower house in Hampshire



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design a small cabin (pictured on previous page) for use as a holiday home in Michigan. Curious to see what the vistas would be like from above the tree line on this hilltop site surrounded by woodland, the couple hired a bucket lift to take them up high, and the open prospect of Lake Glen and the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore sent the project in a whole new direction.

"They liked what they saw and sent us a film of the experience," says architect Tom Lenckek. "The next thing I knew, I was going up in the bucket truck and the idea for a tower house was born. When I started on the design, I began sketching fire-lookout towers and other vernacular forms, but as the project developed the whole concept took a different course. As you ascend the stairs, each level brings its own particular view of the surroundings, culminating in a breathtaking finale over the treetops from the fourth floor."

Contemporary tower houses combine an intense love of the landscape with striking architectural forms, as well as a rich and varied range of design references and points of inspiration. They have a tall beauty all of their own. ♦

KEEPING A LOOKOUT

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