



MIRRORCUBE.
PHOTO ÅKE E:SON LINDMAN

CANOPY BEDS

SUSPENDED ABOVE GROUND, SIX HOTEL ROOMS HUGGING THE TRUNKS OF TREES IN NORTHERN SWEDEN HELP GUESTS RETURN TO THEIR ROOTS.

Text Shonquis Moreno



They say we came down from the trees – the ascent of man being rather more of a descent – but since then we have seemed bound and determined to clamber right back up. Not so long ago, islanders inhabited thatched arboreal platforms in the South Pacific, the mad Roman emperor Caligula entertained 15 friends in a plane tree and the Medicis furnished their 17th-century tree house with marble. A series of restaurants outside Paris in the mid-19th century took a more commercial approach, using ropes and pulleys to serve diners in the tops of trees. They're gone, but a Tudor cottage built amidst the branches of a Shropshire lime tree 250 years ago stands to this day. Recently, restaurants, bars and hotels across the wooded globe have been returning both our nightlife and our values to the canopy. The latest example is the Treehotel, a loftily and playfully conceived accommodation offering six discrete 'rooms' designed by five architects and suspended in a boreal forest in the northern reaches of Sweden, near the village of Harads, where until last year most of the natives had both feet planted

firmly on the ground.

In Harads, Kent and Britta Lindvall run Britta's Pensionat, a laudably conventional bed and breakfast. The seed for their new hotel concept came from the documentary film *Trädälskaren* (tree-lover), which was shot nearby and presents the tree as a symbol of rootedness in an uprooted modern world. In like mind, the Treehotel offers visitors a return to nature while minimizing the environmental impact of that return. It also offers what may be one of the few 'tree saunas' in the world – if not the first and only. Rooms range from 15 to 30 m², hang from 4 to 6 m off the ground, are equipped with incineration toilets and water-efficient washbasins, and are accessed via ramp, stairway or footbridge. Apart from these generalities, each room has its particular virtues: for stellar views, guests might opt for the Blue Cone (which is actually red and shaped like a cabin), the Cabin (shaped more like part of a space station) or the UFO (aptly named). The windows perforating A Room with a View point in all directions over the

DESIGN FOR THE UFO BY INREDNINGSGRUPPEN / BERTIL HARSTRÖM.

crowns of the trees, onto river and forest and into the northern lights. Those wishing to wrestle primarily with their own natures rather than Mother Nature may choose the Bird's Nest, with its armature of branches breached by only a handful of small, circular openings. Similarly, the Mirrorcube offers strategic exposure to the outdoors, but from the sanctuary of a piece of reflective op art. Cube and Nest – the first two cabins to be completed last summer – demonstrate the range of (avant-garde) expression that can be used to articulate sustainable values today. Eco-friendly design now has as many faces as eco-antipathy has had since the Industrial Revolution made our belongings disposable.

The first cabin to be hung was a lightweight 4-x-4-x-4-m aluminium box whose exterior is clad entirely in one-way mirrored glass, the reflections of which make it recede into the surrounding forest and sky, so much so that the glass had to be laminated with a transparent infrared layer visible only to birds in order to prevent collisions. The Cube's plywood interior, punctuated with carefully cut-out windows and



skylights, contains a double bed, a kitchenette and bath, a living room and a roof terrace. Guests reach it, 5 m above the ground, by a rope ladder or a footbridge connected to the neighbouring tree. Designed by Martin Videgård and Bolle Tham of Tham & Videgård Arkitekter, in collaboration with Mia Nygren, the Mirrorcube – all 5000 kg of it – was mounted on a single tree without biting into or injuring its host. The cabins are all hung this way: clamped to a tree or trees by means of a simple suspension system consisting of belt-like bent steel plates joined by nuts and bolts, a method that allows the suspender to be widened as the tree grows.

In a manner of speaking, the Cube is a product of the paradox presented by nature versus nurture. Our romantic notion of wilderness as a pristine Arcadia unaltered (and unalterable) by man contrasts sharply with our actual experiences of nature, which are usually heavily mediated by high-tech equipment and elaborately engineered materials like Gore-Tex, carbon fibre, featherweight aluminium and

heat-reflective coatings. 'The Mirrorbox acts on these two levels,' explains Videgård. 'It reflects the surroundings, providing a camouflaged hide-out that blends in completely with nature, but it also stands out, precise and industrial, in complete contrast to its context.'

Architect Bertil Harström of Inredningsgruppen made wonder the foundation of his design after someone suggested that Treehotel guests would, of course, include children. 'I asked myself: what is the most natural thing you can think of that also thrilled you as a child?' recalls Harström. 'My answer was a bird's nest, perhaps one of the oldest structures ever built.'

Harström constructed a wooden cylinder, much like a tall water tank and big enough to hold four people, and threaded its façade with a metal mesh into which fallen branches from surrounding trees could be woven. Harström perched the hotel's 3600-kg Bird's Nest 4 m above the forest floor and, to obscure its entrance – in keeping with the mystery of what a nest hides and guards – used retractable elec-

DESIGN FOR A ROOM WITH A VIEW BY MARGE ARKITEKTER.

tric stairs that can be tucked up into the floor. 'The Bird's Nest is an introverted building. It's for cocooning,' he says. 'When you're inside it, you're inside it; when you're out, you're out.' Harström imbued the interior with a sophisticated cosiness, lining the walls and floor with pale pine and the ceiling with birch before fleshing it out with blond-wood furnishings and plush wool textiles by Lena Bergström.

In the end, this trend – which embraces the idea of choose-your-own-adventure lodgings and the selection of a room to suit a specific mood – means that a greater variety of architecture is being not just commissioned and built but also experienced, with both curiosity and wonder. If Harström's Bird's Nest cups guests in nature's hands, his second Treehotel room, the UFO, takes the opposite tack, resembling instead a vehicle that has tumbled from outer space and is stranded in a Swedish forest. In this case, the retractable electric stairs take on a whole new meaning. <

‘THE MIRRORBOX REFLECTS THE SURROUNDINGS, BUT IT ALSO STANDS OUT’

– Martin Videgård –



PHOTO ULF B JONSSON

Mirrorcube

Tham & Videgård Arkitekter
One double bed

The Mirrorcube is a lightweight aluminium box clad in mirrored glass and mounted on a tree trunk. The interior is constructed from plywood. A footbridge provides access to the cube, which holds two people. To prevent birds from crashing into the Mirrorcube, the architects had the glass laminated with an infrared film visible only to birds.

PHOTO ÅKE E:SON LINDMAN



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Blue Cone

Sandell Sandberg
One double bed and two single adult beds

The Blue Cone balances on three points of support. To access the room, guests cross a footbridge that extends from the mountain behind. The building is a traditional wood construction with a façade of split birch. Windows and cupola are made of plastic.

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PHOTO ULF B. JONSSON



The Cabin

Mårten Cyren & Gustav Cyren
One double bed

The Cabin hangs over high ground with a steep slope, providing a great view of the Luleå River valley. The façades of the capsule-like structure are covered with engineered fabrics of the type seen on lorries and trailer covers. Fasteners, fixtures and construction techniques commonly used in the container business complete the picture.



PHOTO ÅKE E:SON LINDMAN

‘A BIRD’S NEST IS PERHAPS ONE OF THE OLDEST STRUCTURES EVER BUILT’

– Bertil Harström –



Bird's Nest

Inredningsgruppen / Bertil Harström
One double bed and two single children's beds

The walls and windows of the Bird's Nest are hidden by a network of branches. Walls inside the cabin, an accommodation large enough for a family with two children, are finished in coachwood. Sliding doors separate the master bedroom from a space containing a bunk bed for the children. A retractable staircase lends access to the Bird's Nest.

PHOTO ULF B. JONSSON



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