



Forests, it's been said, are the shadows of civilisation.

Imagine living there.

Architect Steve Johnson did, and saw a new forest future.



Photo Steve Johnson

Into the tree dreamhouse

By Steve Johnson

Nature has remained constant during this ten thousand year period of climatic peace. She has cradled man and allowed him to develop and radically change the world around him, to the point that the current earth has little to do with the one of even a century ago. For some time now, we have been able to dominate the environment through our sciences and kill the competition that other animals presented to us for food, territory and life. The question, until recently, was not about survival so much as about the quality of life and the drive for more leisure and convenience during the time we've been given. In all our wisdom we have missed the obvious and, some might say, inevitable event in human history where, one day, we will notice that all of our good work and toil has led us down a path of great uncertainty. We've squatted the party we were invited to, told the other guests to go home, and trashed the house. We must now choose between cleaning the mess, or waiting for the demolition crews to begin work.

For me, the most enchanting periods of human history are transitional; such as the slow, unstructured progression through European medieval to the Enlightenment, where people laid bare the nature of their fears and dreams while testing their ability to transcend the material world, in so convincing a manner that we are only now beginning seriously to consider some of the most beautiful aspects of the old world we've worked so hard to change. Within this newest period of transition, the comforts of technological change have brought on some serious unease. We are nervous that our advances may land us in an abyss of other technologies we may not be able to control and for which we may not be able to afford the price of correction should something go wrong. While we have begun to believe that science is the cure to all our ills, in reality it may actually be mutating into an undiagnosed terminal bug. I believe that science, and her resulting technologies, are a bit like snake venom, in that, in its pure state it could be fatal, but through restructuring, it could become the antidote for many of our current poisons.

The sorts of projects we have become involved with, are for the moment gestural, in that they are exercises of a theoretical but practical nature. They allow us the

opportunity to race ahead of the current way of practice developing methods of working with environments, in such a way as not only to create architecture but to redefine the science of building in order to reverse some of the ecological damage which has come to be accepted as a necessary evil of land development. One of the prime drives behind our work is to combine the sciences of engineering and architecture to create a natural form of art. These are buildings planned to force a direct interface between man's intellect and the outside world in such a way that the resulting projects would not only enhance the land around them, but would help advance man's understanding of his role within nature's play on any given stage, or night. While the ideas are not linked to a set location, they are linked to environments and climates and once these factors are forged together with the human activities each building is meant to accommodate, we end up with what is hoped will be architecture as close to art as we can make it. It will tell a story of an understanding of how human activity can serve not only to create infrastructure for yet more human activity, but also, begin to address, if not reverse, some of the actions which have made the whole prospect of human survival uncertain. Rather than the relentless pushing back of nature, we wish to celebrate it and invite it back to the party.

The Forest House

Have you ever wanted to live in a tree? There was a period during the mid 1990s where it seemed that all objects whether art, craft, or industrial had to have some sort of wings attached. Tree houses may have something to do with this modern day urge to fly above everything. To look down at ugliness is a way of escaping it and this psychological wish often manifested itself in the tree dwellers common to the anti-roads lobby. It was a way of escape while saying come up here and get me down, or better yet, come up here and join me. This project is saying something more akin to the latter.

There is no uglier feature on this planet's surface than mass deforestation. We look upon scenes of the smouldering remnants of the Amazonian or Madagascan rainforests, or the bare, water eroded landscape of Northern China, and a tear comes to our eyes. We do nothing about it, save perhaps, writing to our