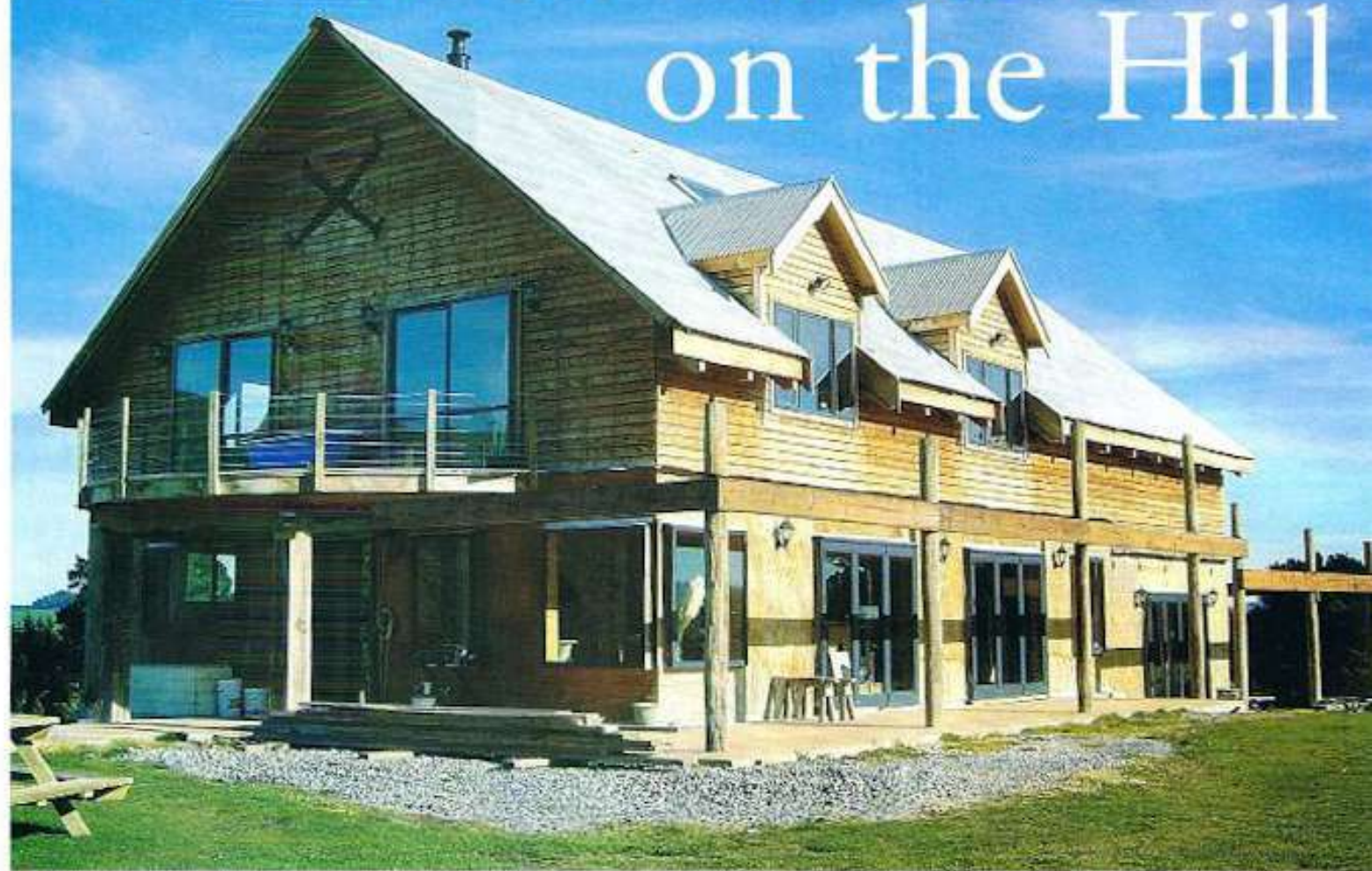
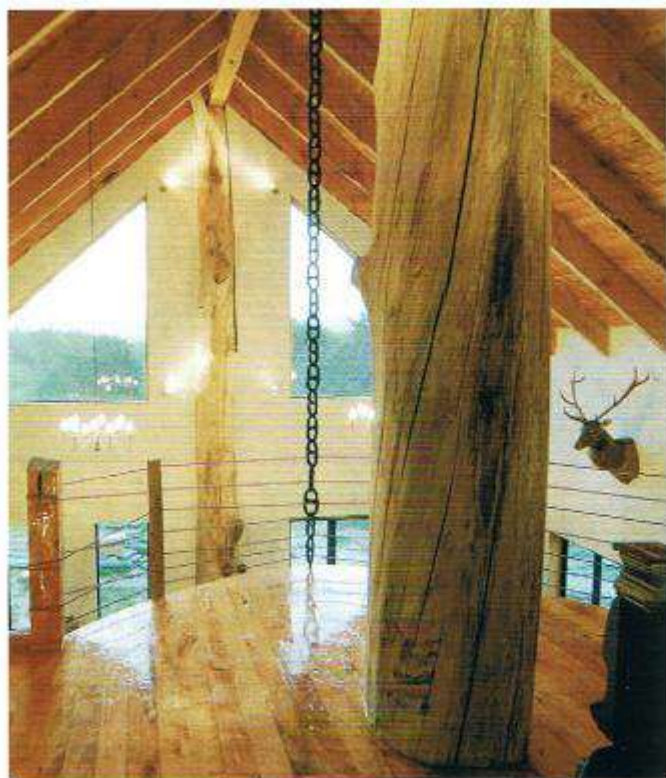


The Tree House on the Hill





Ellis Emmet always wanted a special house. Now he's finally built it. Jane Buxton takes a look inside in his tree house.



Profile

Name: Ellis & Sanna Emmet
 Occupation: Amateur builders
 Live: Cheviot, North Canterbury
 Family: Daughter Michelle (10)
 Ambition: To finish building the family home in its unique style.



Ellis Emmet always knew that one day he'd build his own house to his own design. So when people ask him how long he has spent planning his nearly-completed three storey home, that sits on top of a hill near Cheviot, he answers, "All my life."

"Basically it's just about keeping your eyes open wherever you go. I've travelled a lot and taken ideas from everywhere."

It was on his travels three years ago that he first met Sanna, who is now his wife. He was working in South America for a Canadian TV production company as a presenter for a travel programme.

"Sanna and her friend were holidaying there. She hunted me down and I was like a lamb to the slaughter," he jokes. "Little did she know that back in New Zealand there was a three-and-a-half-year-long project awaiting her!"

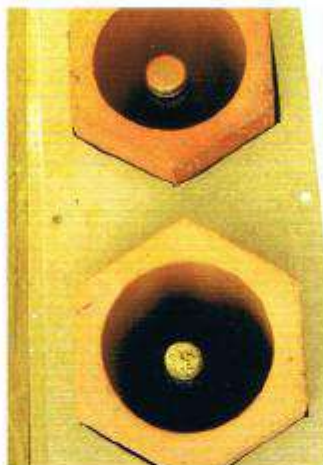
When Sanna first visited New Zealand and saw what was to be her and Ellis's home, it was just a huge concrete pad with breathtaking views over rolling hills and tree-lined waterways right out to the snowy peaks of the inland Kaikoura Ranges and Mount Lyford.

Innocent and undaunted, Sanna and her daughter, Michelle, stayed six weeks on their first visit, and from then on went to and fro many times because of immigration rules which made it impossible for them to stay for very long at a time.

Right from the beginning, Emmet handed Sanna a hammer and nails. She'd come into his life at the right time. The house was being built at the height of New Zealand's housing boom and he



Left: The Emmet's unusual homestead isn't quite finished but already features some unique detailing, including two tree trunks, 30 tonnes of schist and an anchor chain salvaged from the Mikhail Lermantov.



Two tree trunks tower over the living room.

could never get a builder when he needed one.

"One day I noticed that her long, manicured fingernails had been hacked back to stumps so she could wield a hammer properly and get the exterior cladding on," recalls Emmet. "That was the moment I realised she loved me."

"And I could tell he loved me," counters Sanna with a smile, "because once a week he'd take me on a romantic Sunday outing. However we always stopped in at a stone quarry or a salvage yard somewhere along the way!"

When Emmet tried to explain his ideas for having two huge trees inside the building, Sanna didn't fully understand.

"I nodded, but I had no idea what he was talking about," she admits. "In Finland I was a secretary. Now all of a sudden I was a builder's labourer, and I hadn't a clue about anything - especially not trees inside a house!"

In fact the trees were two enormous, 100-year-old Stringy Bark eucalypts that Ellis bought from the local domain board for \$50 each. It took two 15 tonne diggers and almost a day of work to position the gums and concrete them in.

Ellis left the bark on them for a while to encourage the grubs that were chewing tracks through the wood beneath. When he

finally stripped the bark off, he was pleased with the natural artwork etched into the exterior of the trees. (The artists have since been evicted.)

"Gums are great," says Ellis. "They're a hardwood which means you don't have to treat them, so they're in line with council regulations. And they'll certainly outlast me and my grandchildren's children."

Sanna and Ellis milled over 100 ceiling rafters with an Alaskan chainsaw mill, from 18 tonnes of raw pine logs.

"We did it ourselves because the cost of buying beams like these was prohibitive," Ellis says. "We've done everything ourselves. It's been a long, hard slog, working 24/7 virtually for 3 years. And we've put every ounce of our energy, mind power, physical, mental and emotional resources into it. For me every wall, every beam and every scar holds a story, which for us gives the house all the more character and a sense of achievement. Although I have to admit it's a bit of a love-hate relationship at times!"

"We're not unusual. What it takes is hard work and Kiwi ingenuity. I'm a firm believer that anything is possible if you have the passion and the endurance."

Ideas Ellis brought back from overseas have been translated

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into a home that's unusual but is still a recognisably New Zealand-style building.

"You have lots of help from family and friends and you do everything on a low budget. For example, we couldn't afford to buy a kitchen bench so, using a chainsaw, we carved one ourselves out of a log and this bench has far more character than any we could have bought. Lack of finance is sometimes a good thing because you end up with a lot more creativity."

Creativity is certainly evident in the balcony. When planning it Ellis realised it was too high to be supported from below, so he imagined having a ship's anchor chain suspended from the ceiling to hold it up. But where on earth do you get an anchor chain big enough? Within a few months a friend on an island offered a huge rusting chain. It had had been salvaged from the Mikhail Lermantov, a Russian cruise liner that sank in the Marlborough Sounds around 20 years ago. Removing the rust was time consuming. Ellis dragged the chain behind his vehicle along a gravel road and then he used a hammer and coal chisel. Finally he spray-painted it.

The large, cavernous fireplace on the south wall is based on a Finnish design. The Emmets bought 30 tonnes of schist stone from the West Coast - the hearthstone alone weighs 1.2 tonnes. Medieval-looking, it is not just a showpiece, but throws its heat well

out into the vast living area. Its thermal mass continues to give out heat long after the fire is out.

Ellis likes the atmosphere such a big fire creates.

"I wanted it to feel as though you were sitting outside around a big campfire, whilst still having the comforts of home."

The fire is not the only form of heating. Two kilometres of pipe-work have gone into the floor to carry hot water from the wetback on the wood-burner - a system designed by a heating engineer. In future, all day sun streaming in will heat up the long schist wall which is yet to be built below the kitchen bench. This thermal mass will also release heat at night.

The wall and floor tiles in warm, yellow-brown tones, are a type of marble.

"It's kind of humbling to think that millions of years ago this floor was part of the seabed," Ellis reflects. "It reminds me how small and insignificant we all are. And I love the raw, natural feel of it against my skin."

The Emmets are both very social people and enjoy having visitors from all over the world.

"The house is not finished yet. It's a work in progress," Ellis says. "So whoever comes to stay always ends up with a job. We listen to their suggestions and sometimes we make changes. These people become part of the house and they all leave their mark." ■



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