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Why do men buy country property?

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Many good reasons exist for men to buy country property—investment appreciation, family bonding and environmental stewardship.

Among motives not adequately researched by academics and real-estate organizations are the T factor and the S factor.

Tree house and sandbox.

I'm now about to step into the minefields of evolutionary biology and gender. Parental guidance is too late for me.

The typical suburban house meets none of our early evolutionary needs. It does not camouflage our whereabouts at night. It does not grow breakfast without effort on our part. It does not raise us above our own garbage. It does not provide protection against airwave predators who roost in our brains like Billy Mays.

Our houses no longer even resemble our ancestral caves, which, according to my 22-year-old daughter, I fondly recall. When's the last time you saw a hand-painted buffalo on a dining room wall in a four-bedroom colonial? How about a short-faced bear? How many split-levels do you know that will be named UNESCO World Heritage Sites based solely on interior accents?

Modern houses do not measure up to the functional caves in our past. For one thing, they're too clean. We've taught ourselves to stop throwing chicken bones in the utility area. Future archeologists will scold us for our tidiness. Dirt floors are rarely employed in McMansions, except in cutting-edge Green construction. Today, the French guys at the Cave of Lascaux would be fined for graffiti and their fire pit closed down for exceeding national indoor air-quality standards.

We've lived in trees and caves for hundreds of thousands of years. We've only lived in bungalows for a blink of an eye. But our genes remember the good old days.

Evolutionary history tells us to live in a tree, which is a no-no under the rules of most homeowner associations with which I am familiar. I am informed, however, that a back-to-the-trees movement is catching on among our more earnest anthropology undergraduates, particularly those who wear peasant tunics woven inadvertently from the fibers of the stinging nettle.

The way many of us resolve the conflict between our biological imperatives to live in trees and our modern obligations to live in MarthaStewartland is to buy a second-home in the country.

The country gives the city male a place to find his inner tree house.

(Since I am not female --even though I've tried over the years to be in touch with various feminine sides -- I offer no opinion as to why sensible women go along with this. Sensible women are encouraged to begin a correspondence with me on this subject.)

Male readers may recall the tree house of their youth. Dress was pre-pubescent grunge. The neighborhood supplied materials, some of which were scavenged without formal consent and with only passing regard for what would support the room air conditioners once the props were pulled. Many nails were used on each board. You discovered that your father's handsaw could cut through metal with good old-fashioned elbow grease. Girls were not allowed inside, except years later when you were still too young to drive.

Country places are similar. They're hideouts. Dress is scruffy. Tailored bib overalls dishonor the real ones. Out here, an old urban guy can run around in skins or fig leaves. No one says much if they can see it; a lot is said, however, when they can't.

The smell of sweat is allowed, even expected. Owners can do things themselves under the pretense of adding value. Girls are welcome now that they've become women and run the show.

Adult males, I've concluded, have evolved a biological and emotional need to find their tree house. Why Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies ignores this fruitful line of research escapes me.

The second motive never discussed is our need to reconnect with the lost toys of our sandbox.

Consider the big, wonderful, growling, smoky, expensive stuff that replaces the simple pail of our youth, the humble plastic shovel, the self-effacing stick.

Tractors and pickup trucks come with their own internal commotion systems, so we no longer have to supply vocals.

We can get dozers, backhoes, front-end loaders, skidders, knucklebooms, mowers, tillers, hydraulic log splitters, post drivers, chainsaws and power tools that cut everything from stainless steel to ear hair.

We can slice, cut, weld, shape, buff, shine, grind, turn, hammer, pry, screw, pound, bolt, chain, tow, plow, bale, whack, yank, winch, drill, glue and gloat.

We can even smoke cigars, which is a whole lot more fun than getting sand up wet pants.

We build stuff that lasts longer than sand castles.

We win the admiration of our spouse, or the equivalent, when we move a large and heavy object using mechanical advantage first employed by the Egyptian pyramid builders.

And sooner or later circumstances arise where we need to do something slightly heroic.

Country tree houses and sandboxes are easy to make fun of, but, as things go, both are pretty wholesome, often harmless and occasionally useful.

More than that, they provide respite from daily stress, from the clank and clamor of routine urban life, from the load of being a fairly functional adult male. They give us back some childhood, usually, hopefully in a different form.

The trick is to maintain a balance between the tree house where you spend money and the townhouse where you make it.

Most of us have lost the ability we once had of making a living out of a tree. It's plenty hard to do even with a cell phone.

So the next time you see one of my brothers using the hydraulic forks on his tractor to lift something heavy for the sheer joy of lifting something heavy, sneer not. He is simply being true to himself.

You can, however, draw the line on short-faced bears in the living room.

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