

An aerial photograph of a vast, dense forest with a rich green canopy. The trees are packed closely together, creating a textured, undulating surface of foliage. The lighting is soft, highlighting the various shades of green from deep emerald to bright lime.

# Lorien in the Hambacher Forst

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## Lorien in the Hambacher Forst - why is the architecture of those treehouses suitable for defense?

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„Frodo looked and saw,  
still at some distance,  
a hill of many might trees, or a city of green  
towers:  
which it was he could not tell...  
There rose to a great height a green wall  
encircling a green hill thronged with Mal-  
low-trees taller than any they had yet seen  
in the land.  
Their height could not be guessed, but they  
stood up in the twilight like living towers.  
In their many-tiered branches and aimed  
their ever moving leaves  
countless lights were gleaming,  
green and gold and silver.“

This is how the author J.R.R. Tolkien described his main character Frodo's first encounter with the elvish village Lorien in his books „Lord of the Rings“. Little did he know that almost 60 years later his description of this magical place in Middle Earth would inspire a community of eco activists to move into the woods near the German city Aachen and build a village of treehouses with the same name as an act of resistance against a powerful opponent.

This powerful opponent is the German power supply enterprise RWE. With more than 20 million customers in Europe, it is one of the most influential companies in Germany. More than 40 years ago the company bought the site of the Hambach Forest (Schulzki-Haddouti, C. 2018) which is with its 12.000 years proven to be one of the oldest forests of the country (Ziehm, C. 2018) to build a large open-pit coal mine. Over the years, this pit slowly engulfed 4800 acres of the old forest (Schulzki-Haddouti, C. 2018) leaving only 200 acres to its native animals and fauna.

As an act of resistance against coal mining and to preserve the poor leftovers of the formerly grand forest, eco activists came to the Hambacher Forest and started building treehouses in the woods in 2012 (Leue, V. 2018). It began with just a few simple wooden platforms but soon extended to more than 51 treehouses (Schulzki-Haddouti, C. 2018) creating entire neighborhoods called Oaktown, Beech Town, Gallien, Cozy Town and Lorien in dizzying height between the branches of the trees (Cwiertnia, L. & Pinzler, P. 2018).

To some people these activists might seem delusional, giving up their safe living situation to move illegally to the woods and even risking getting arrested for their actions which would make it hard for them to find a job after their occupation just for a few trees (Schulzki-Haddouti, C. 2018).

To others, these people were living their childhood dream in remoteness between the trees within a community without leaders, a day without routine, fighting against climate change and for a better future.

No matter which side you are on, it is without question that since the activists moved to the forest and started building their treehouses as an act of resistance the whole republic is looking

at this tiny piece of forest that seems to turn into the scene for the next big conflict of the German environmental policy (Cwiertnia, L. & Pinzler, P. 2018).

Not one day went by where there was not a new article about the activists in the woods because it was an easy story to tell: just like Julia Hill who occupied a 1.000 year old redwood called Luna in California for almost two years back in December 1997, people in the Hambacher Forest are saving the trees with their bodies and lives from being chopped down by a greedy company (Habekuß, F. 2017).

### **But why was the architecture of these treehouses so suitable for defense?**

For a long time treehouses were looked at as a quirk in the architectural context and a way to go back in time to the carefree days of our childhood where the simple self build platform in the trees became a place of protection, escape and peace within nature (Simmonds, C. 2013). But with its concept of raised levels, vertical upright-ness, and its views, the treehouse resembles a lot of architectural characteristics that we also know from loft spaces such as Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye with its stilts and pedestals (Swanson, S. 2013). Especially in the last years these architectural qualities made for a boom of luxury treehouses as a space of retreat from the cities in the United States and Europe (Walker, T. 2014). Often these futuristic looking structures of aluminum beams and bend wood are built into the tree like a spaceship that just landed on planet earth (Figure 1). Well hidden in the woods they float above the ground and offer their residents on different levels amazing views through wide windows in the remoteness of nature (Figure 2).

Well equipped with designer furniture, open kitchen spaces and sound systems, these micro retreats give the opportunity to escape the boundaries of society for a weekend or two (Temmen, J. 2013) which makes them very attractive to tourists as new hotel buildings.

Suddenly the treehouse evolves from its Do It Yourself character and becomes a part of the respectable architectural scene of the twenty-first century which leads to a lot of architects like Anthony Gibben (Figure2), Andreas Wenning (Figure 1) or Simon Storey of Anonymous Architects (Figure 3) to jump on this new trend of



Figure 1 // Andreas Wenning, Baumraum



Figure 2 // Anthony Gibben



Figure 3 // Simon Storey

adult treehouse architecture as luxury retreats. Now the dream of „recapturing the days when there were few worries and anything seemed possible“ (Simmonds, C. 2013) is within everybody’s grasp.

The role of the treehouses built in the Hambacher Forest could not be more opposite. The activists here were not looking for childish amusement or a luxurious hide-away in the woods. It took a very unique person or community in order to bring together likeminded people who were willing to give up their well-ordered lives and move to the forest to establish not just one single treehouse but a whole treehouse village (Simmonds, C. 2013). For the activists, occupying a tree was the last act of a non-violent, civil disobedience, their last loophole. „When you see someone sitting in a tree to save it, then you know that the last instance of our society has failed. So people climb into the trees,“ said Julia Hill about her reasons for occupying Luna in 1997 (Habekuß, F. 2017).

The life in the treehouse villages of the Hambacher Forest was simple. Most of the structures were built from leftover pieces of wood, scrap metal and plastic instead of the futuristic aluminium and glass which is used for the luxury-treehouses. Their dwellings were more humble and consistent with their surrounding nature. So instead of invasively attaching their platforms with nails to the trees, the activists decided to build substructures with wooden beams and ropes which they tied to the trees (Figure 4). Because the platforms were built up to 28 meters above the ground (Leue, V. 2018) to make them impregnable for their opponents, a mesh was fixed around the platforms to give extra security and prevent people from falling off the trees (Figure 5).

Almost like the drawbridges of a castle, each treehouse was connected to the ground with a ladder that could be pulled up in case of emergency or an abrupt clearing through the local police. But in these situations the eco activists were not stuck on their single platform. Through suspension bridges that connect the treehouses with each other they could still move through the village in the branches of the trees (Figure 6). Some of the more violent activists also used these bridges to throw Molotov cocktails, rocks and





Figure 4 //



Figure 5 //



Figure 6 //



Figure 7 //



Figure 8 //



Figure 9 //



other objects at the police from a safe distance (Petter, J. 2018).

Goods that helpers brought to the forest could be transported up to the treehouses through freight trains that were mounted to the platforms (Figure 7).

The constructions of the actual houses on the platforms differed from very simple huts built from bended branches that were covered with plastic (Figure 8) to nicely insulated accommodations with kitchenettes, heaters and wide windows (Figure 9) that offered a great view through the tree village (Leue, V. 2018). The wooden floors were covered with thick carpets to keep the cold out during the rough winters (Figure 10) and big mattresses with blankets and pillows offered a sleeping space for several people (Figure 11). Each treehouse was equipped with water tanks and camping stoves, so the residents could prepare food and wash dishes (Figure 12). Some of the activists even installed solar panels on the roofs of their treehouses to supply the villages with power (Figure 13). Others started planting vegetables in pots on the platforms to grow produce for the residents (Figure 14) and filtered their own drinking water with plastic covers (Figure 15) which took away the opportunity for the besiegers to cut the occupants off from their food and water supply in order to get them out of their entrenchment.

Each of these little measurements made the activists in their fortification in the trees more independent from the outside world and allowed at least one more day of resistance against the coal mining in the forest.

The aim of the activists was not to hurt their opponents but to save the trees and the forest. That was why they chose a mostly non-violent way of resistance by occupying the trees with their treehouses. The trees protected them by becoming their towers and the suspension bridges their fortification walls to fend off their opponents. When pulling up their drawbridges they entrenched themselves in the safety of the trees. Their well build dwellings full of food and water supply enabled them to stay in the trees for a long period of time without having to set one foot on the ground which made it the perfect architecture for defense. In return, the activists saved the trees from being chopped down with their own bodies whereby their relationship became the perfect usufruct in their resistance against RWE and their coal mining for more than



Figure 10 //



Figure 13 //





Figure 11 //



Figure 12 //



Figure 14 //



Figure 15 //

six years.

### **So why was it still possible for their opponents to drive the activists out of their entrenchment and to win over these treehouses?**

The answer is as simple and bureaucratic as it gets: The German fire protection regulations. After already six years of activists living in the treehouses of the Hambacher Forest the federal state government of Nordrhein-Westfalen declared in 2018 that the treehouses are architectural buildings which means that they have to be fire-proof and offer escape ways, fire escapes and emergency handrails in order for the activists to live in them (Geyer, C. 2018).

The treehouses of Lorien, Gallien, Oak Town and the other neighborhoods could not live up to these regulations which allowed the local police to declare the forest as a 'dangerous place' for its occupants and an immediate clearing was instructed by the architectural control on the grounds that it was not safe for people to live in the treehouses anymore (Cwiertnia, L. & Pinzler, P. 2018).

As a last act of resistance activists chained themselves to the trees to hinder the authorities from clearing the forest but they were powerless against the biggest police operation in the history of the state of Nordrhein-Westfalen (Burger, R. 2018). The whole community that the activists established within six years between the branches of these trees was cleared within a few days and barriers around the area keep them from occupying their forest again.

In the end the treehouses' classification as architecture became fatal for them and they turned into the victims of the German bureaucracy with all of its rules and loop holes which made a greedy company even more powerful instead of saving an ancient forest that became the republic's fire signal for a rapid exit of the dirty fossil fuels.

Everywhere in the country the protest marches are still going on and activists are gathering to show their disapproval with the current climate policy. It became quiet in the Hambacher Forest. All you can hear is the menacing buzzing of the open cut mining. But behind the barriers they are still standing. A hill of many mighty trees, or a city of green towers: which it was he could not tell...



Figure 16 //

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