



Caring for the

Highest Tree in Vancouver

By Rebecca Fater



The Eugenia Place high rise in Vancouver, British Columbia's well-heeled West End is an attractive landmark that sits on English Bay. The building is surrounded by manicured grounds and a sweeping 360-degree view. The most eye-catching feature of the landscape, however, isn't actually on the "land" at all – it is a 37-foot-high pin oak sprouting from the building's roof, more than 200 feet from the ground.

Last June, when the oak needed attention, a single, scary thought flashed through the mind of arborist John Martyn when the Eugenia Place property manager found his number in the local yellow pages and called him.

"What does a fall from (approximately) 200 feet feel like?" Martyn recalls wondering.

The pin oak, *Quercus palustris*, is technically the highest, if not tallest, tree in Vancouver, thanks to its lofty placement. And, it is actually a tribute to the Beach Avenue neighborhood's past, according to architect Richard Henriquez. A man with a love for history, he says he designed Eugenia Place to include details reflecting the site's storied past. A cluster of cabins stood on the site around the turn of the twentieth century. They were razed more than 60 years ago to make way for a four-story apartment building, which stood until the late 1980s. Footprints of those former structures can be found surrounding the present high rise.

"I'm interested in history. I thought it would be really neat to have on the site representations of everything that had ever been on the site prior to us building the building," says Henriquez, who founded Henriquez Partners Architects in Vancouver in 1969.

The oak is a nod to the site's purest, earliest existence: the old-growth trees that stood on the shore of the English Bay before loggers made their mark on the land.

"In order to round out the history, I thought it would be good to have a tree up at the same height as where the old-growth forest (reached)," says Henriquez. "It's sort

The 37-foot pin oak sits 19 floors, about 200 feet, above Beach Avenue in downtown Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Photos courtesy of John Martyn, unless otherwise noted.

of a poetic kind of response to the history of the site.” Old-growth (also referred to as “first-growth” by Henriquez) cedar, spruce and Douglas-fir were commonly 200 to 250 tall – some even taller.

Understanding that the old-growth trees were likely Douglas-fir and cedar, the architect deliberately chose a non-native deciduous oak, realizing that he needed a tree able to withstand the strong winds and wild weather likely to accompany life at 200 feet. The pin oak was 15 years old when construction began on Eugenia Place, Henriquez says. The tree was planted on the roof in 1987 and packed down with 100,000 pounds of soil.

But, while Henriquez spent a good deal of thought on the tree itself, there was one piece of the vision he admits he neglected to consider: the chore of caring for it.

“I never thought about it,” Henriquez says simply.

The tree’s well-being became a serious question after brutal wind storms whipped through Vancouver in December 2006 and January 2007, dealing massive damage to trees and buildings across the region. Nearby Stanley Park had more than 10,000 trees downed by the wind storms.

Enter Martyn, owner of TCIA-member JPM Tree Service in Vancouver, who has never fallen more than seven feet on a job and never seriously injured himself. And he decided to push his luck a bit farther.

Steeling his nerves and scaling Eugenia Place’s 19 floors, Martyn was surprised to learn that gazing at the tree from the ground is quite a different experience from standing right next to it.

“Strangely enough, when you get up on the roof, it’s nothing spectacular,” he says. “If you put that tree on the street or in front of a home, it’s just a regular tree. But up in the sky it looks huge! It’s an optical illusion.”

Martyn found no such luck, however, when it came to caring for the tree. His initial inspection found no significant wind damage – a testament to the oak’s wiry nature. He did, however, discover some minor caterpillar feeding and an infestation of *Leucanium* scale, an insect that damages the tree by sucking juice from its leaves. Then there was the matter of pruning the tree, which grows out of a metal pot approximately 3 feet deep in the roof, its



If and when anything should happen to the current tree, shown here being planted in 1987, it would have to be replaced by order of the original building permit issued by the city’s planning department. Courtesy of Henriquez Partners Architects.

At a Glance

Name: JPM Tree Service

Owner: John Martyn

Location: Vancouver, British Columbia

Founded: 1991 in Toronto; In Vancouver since 1996

Other: Nine-year TCIA member

Web: www.jpmtree.com

crown blossoming out into the wide blue nothingness.

“It’s the fear that keeps you alive and makes you check and double check every piece of equipment you have,” says Martyn, who describes any ascension high-

er than 40 feet as “the Mount Everest zone.” “If you fall (from anything as high as 40 feet), you’re going to have a serious injury.”

The first pruning Martyn performed last September proved to be a painstaking exercise in patience – due not only to the tree’s high perch, but also the fact that the only access to it is through the penthouse apartment and patio where the tree is planted.

With the assistance of a ground man, Martyn pruned about 15 percent of the tree and cut the waste into one- to two-foot lengths to fit into a garbage pail. That pail then had to be schlepped down a set of stairs with a glass railing, out the suite’s front door and down the elevator. Unhappily for the ground man, there was



Though it appears lonely at the top, at least from the perspective of its peers along Beach Avenue, the pin oak is well known and liked in the neighborhood, according to Paul Montpellier, Vancouver's city arborist.

enough waste to fill 20 garbage pails.

"It was up and down the elevator," remembers Martyn. "We had to walk through the (penthouse) apartment and make sure nothing was scratched or dropped. Thank God it wasn't raining."

And just in case the height wasn't enough to make Martyn's nerves quake, the pressure of caring for the most notable tree in the city was an extra reason to swallow hard.

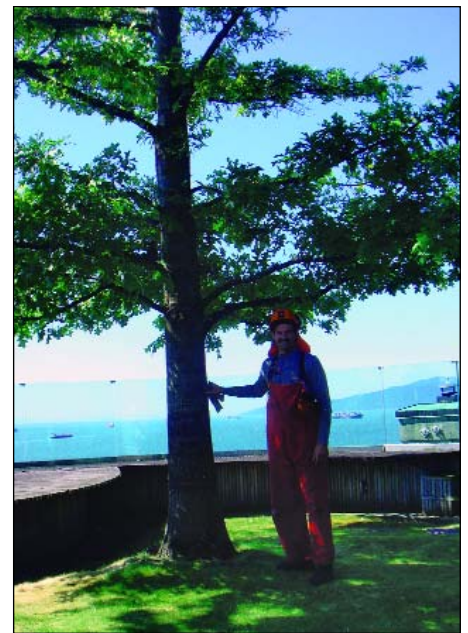
"I think people would really miss it, because it really is a focal point," says Pamela Morais, who lives at Eugenia Place and serves as the current property manager. "People are constantly taking pictures of

the tree and the building. It's the talk of the town."

"It's extremely well known," says Paul Montpellier, Vancouver's city arborist. "It has quite a jarring effect as you drive down there and notice it."

But all the skill in the world won't make the oak last forever. Martyn predicts the tree's dwelling place will spell an early end to its existence. The oak is naturally programmed to grow 100 feet tall, but the pot will likely prove too small to allow much growth beyond its present size, he says.

"It definitely has a limited life span," says Martyn. "I just say, 'We're treating the patient.' And the patient isn't going to live



John Martyn with the pin oak, which has "a view to die for," according to Martyn.

forever."

In addition to the pruning, Martyn plans a spring and summer watering regime to prevent heat stress to the tree, and will apply a dormant oil spray in early spring to address the scale. He will only resort to spraying with insecticide if the scale population continues to thrive through the summer.

For the moment, the tree is in fair to good condition, says Martyn. For "added insurance," he plans to anchor the tree to the roof with synthetic cable, specifically SherrillTree's Black Widow rope, a thin, strong rope that has a gray color to blend into Vancouver's rainy skies. He believes the tree is at little risk of uprooting, but, given the unusual conditions, stops short of a guarantee.

"How many oak trees are on buildings to compare it with?" he says.

According to architect Henriquez, the tree must be replaced if it dies, as dictated in the original building permit issued by the city's planning department. Aside from the legality, he adds, the tree is a valued part of the neighborhood.

"It's also part of the folklore," he says. "People come up to me and say, 'Oh, I asked my wife to marry me under that tree.' It's famous."

For Martyn, the climb and the risk is worth every bit of effort.

"I hate heights, but I love views," he says. "And it's a view to die for." 🌲