



CONSTRUCTION OF A WALLACE NEFF
DOME HOUSE
PHOTO AIRFORM ARCHIVES COLLECTION

FUTURISTIC HOUSES

Katya Tylevich goes on a ‘futuristic concept’ binge through Southern California, meets three passionate homeowners and talks to one very passionate architect.

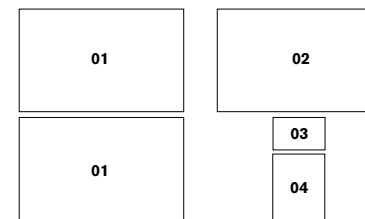
Text **Katya Tylevich** / Photos **Alexei Tylevich**





Airform Dome House

Architect: Wallace Neff
Pasadena (CA) / USA
1946



01 THE HOUSE WAS BUILT BY SPRAYING A RUBBER BALLOON WITH INSULATION AND CONCRETE.

02 STEVE RODEN, OWNER OF THE DOME HOUSE SINCE 1999.

03 THE 90-M² HOUSE ALLOWS ITS INHABITANTS LITTLE PRIVACY.

04 A SPACE AT THE CENTRE OF THE CIRCULAR PLAN ACCOMMODATES A FIREPLACE.



I'm doing some light procrastinating, googling avant-garde '70s' architecture, when I come across that futuristic centrefold – 'House of the Century' – a 1972 ferrocement home on Mojo Lake in Texas by Ant Farm (specifically, by Doug Michels and Chip Lord, in collaboration with Richard Jost), an experimental San Francisco arts collective active in the late '60s and '70s.

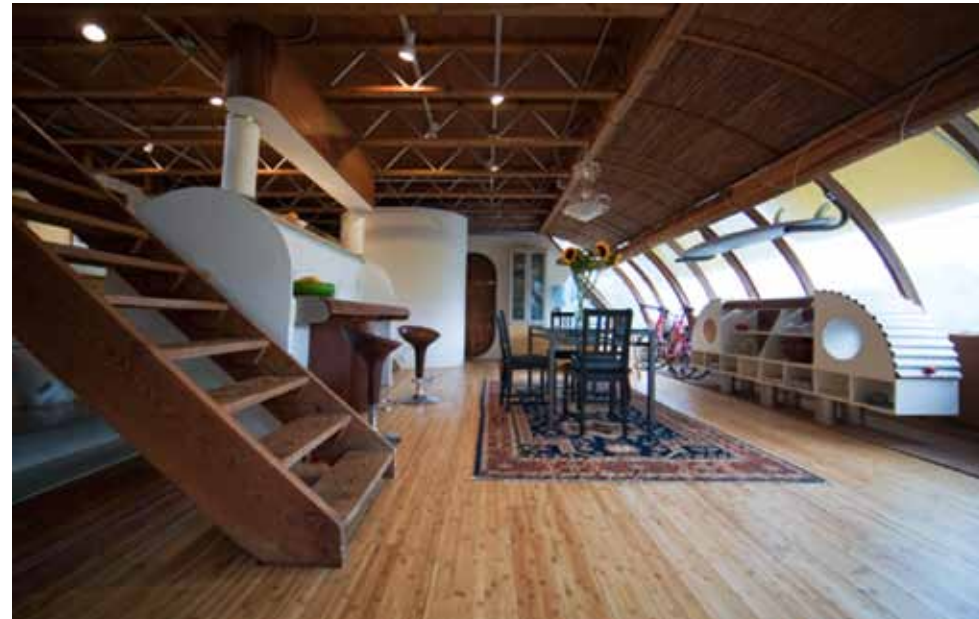
This is not the first time I've eyed this architectural goody – whose exterior is equal parts rocket ship and lunar single-family phallus, and whose interior has all the dramatically lit tubing and bulbous nooks of a super-slick extraterrestrial uterus. But on previous bouts of procrastination (nay, research), I've recoiled from blogs stating that House of the Century now sits abandoned and unfit for habitation. This time I bravely click on the circulating making-of clip of the house, a fantastic '70s' head-rush that ends on a downer. Black screen, white text. I quote: 'In the mid-1980s, a flood caused severe damage to the house interior, which to this day has not been restored. The concrete shell, however, remains intact as part of the landscape, now overgrown with lichens and vines, and a haven to spiders and vultures.'

The *house* of the century has become a *vestige* of it? If only I had an architectural gossip blog, I would surely issue a barrage of WTFs and make the completely unfounded claim that House of the Century just hasn't »



Silver Ship

Architect: Eugene Ray
La Jolla (CA) / USA
1980



01

02

03

01 THE HOUSE IS BUILT ON THE SIDE OF A STEEP HILL.

02 COOLEEN COONEY WITH TED SPYROPOULOS, THE OWNER OF SILVER SHIP SINCE 2006.

03 A LARGE DINING ROOM AND AN OPEN KITCHEN OCCUPY THE GROUND FLOOR.



found the right owner, yet – some benevolent idea-lifeguard willing to perform CPR on the drowning concept.

I am an architect-sympathizer. I get the saddies when built visions of the future become overgrown with vines or unsightly adjectives like ‘funny’, ‘retro’ or – God forbid – ‘wacky’. When, for example, Finnish architect Matti Suuronen’s Futuro Home (a ‘60s’ prefab UFO of polyester and fibreglass) pops up as a ‘lighter side of the news’ item, I want to punch the heavier side of my fist through a wall.

I suppose it’s pent-up anger, then, that drives me to go on a ‘futuristic concept’ binge through Southern California. To seek out forward-looking homes, which, though realized in ‘the past’, continue to function as experimental homes at present – not as architectural roadkill, not as ‘second homes’ (a.k.a. pieces of ‘don’t touch me’ art or investment). How do the people inside such houses grapple with the enormous and sometimes clunky responsibilities of defending the XXL ideas that ‘come with the territory’? How flexible are these homeowners to the cerebral and physical stretches of architectural test sites? Are inconveniences a matter of semantics? Are storage spaces and bedrooms hype? When architectural voyeurs gawk, can the gawked-at simply draw the blinds, or must they shout from the curvilinear rooftops, ‘Stare a little harder!’ And do their exclamations match those of the original architects?

Artist Steve Roden hopes so. ‘I want to converse with the architect,’ he says, referring to the late Wallace Neff (1895-1982), who designed the reinforced-concrete dome in Pasadena that Roden and his wife have owned for 11 years. ‘I have a hard time seeing an owner put his stamp on a significant home. Something like this is not a private possession.’

Realized in 1946, the home is Neff’s stab at inexpensive housing; a Goodyear rubber balloon sprayed with insulation and concrete, it is the only such structure remaining in the United States, although there are examples in the deserts of Mexico and Africa, among others.

Neff is remembered for the mansions he built for Hollywood’s rich and famous, but Roden says the architect wanted his legacy to be those Airform domes. Motion denied.

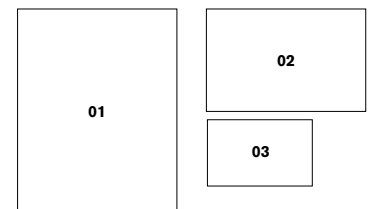
‘Most modern architects of Neff’s generation, who I met after I got this house, pooh-poohed it,’ says Roden. ‘The house was never written about in the context of design; it never appeared in magazines like *Arts & Architecture* as anything other than an “odddity”. In terms of contemporary architectural culture, Neff was an outsider. That’s why this home is perfect for me.’ The artist smiles, knowing his definition of ‘perfect’ doesn’t match that of the *OED*.

The dome, which clocks in at just over 90 m², allows its inhabitants and their possessions very little privacy. The walls in the master bedroom do not reach the ceiling, and ‘storage’

amounts to two narrow closets. The previous owners had two teenaged daughters sharing a bunk bed in the second bedroom. ‘They outgrew the space, and not just physically,’ Roden says. ‘Those girls probably wanted to talk without their parents hearing every word. To have more than two people in this house,’ he says, then pauses. ‘It takes a certain kind.’

Roden and his wife are two people who shape-shift to fit their balloon. Roden cut the size of his book and record collection (which numbered in the thousands) in half. The couple had to acclimatize to the sight of strangers at the front gates, taking photos. Beyond that, walls crack and moisture collects with nowhere to go. The place needs attention. ‘But you don’t just redo this house. People should have a chance to experience what it was like,’ says Roden. ‘Besides, I don’t want to live in a home that looks like a movie star after plastic surgery. There are defects here, but defects are not problems.’ Roden nods towards a wall. ‘I mean, I love how the moulding there just ends randomly. That’s Neff, trying to resolve something unfamiliar.’

In La Jolla, San Diego, on a steep hillside above ocean and winding road, another ‘something unfamiliar’ hovers in the region’s brush. Architect Eugene Ray realized this Silver Ship in 1980, after three years of defending and pushing for his design. ‘Early on, the city informed me that the site was unbuildable. »



‘IT TAKES A SPECIAL PERSON TO LIVE HERE’

– Cooleen Cooney –

01 MANY DOORS IN THE HOUSE ARE OVAL.
 02 THE LIVING ROOM ON THE FIRST FLOOR IS FREE OF COLUMNS, THANKS TO THE USE OF FLOOR-TO-CEILING WOODEN TRUSSES IN THE EXTERIOR WALLS, BOTH FRONT AND BACK.
 03 CLEARLY VISIBLE IN THE GIGANTIC LOFT AT THE TOP OF THE HOUSE IS THE HANDSOME WOODEN ROOF STRUCTURE.



But I know there's no such thing as an unbuildable site,' Ray tells me by phone. 'Later, the Zoning Department told me the house *looked* too unusual. You have to understand, La Jolla is a very conservative community. I did get threats, some not so subtle, from moneyed interests who were none too happy with what I was doing. I was associated with advanced thinking.'

Indeed, the house is the architectural translation of an advanced moment in Ray's life. At age 14, the architect saw a UFO over his home in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. 'A silent, silver craft,' says Ray. 'Aerodynamic, stretched, cylindrical. Immediately, I felt the transcendent quality of a high-technology concept.' The feeling lingered.

Ray lived and worked in his Silver Ship for 25 years, but after his wife died and their three children moved out, he sold the house. He no longer considers the structure his – not least because of changes the current owners made to his design. Still, the idea remains dear to Ray.

'In several ways, it is perhaps the most important building in La Jolla. Built at a price that's almost unheard of [US\$45,000 total], it was published and exhibited in nine countries for good reason,' he says. Ray's experiments with the vertically designed tensile structure included a lamella roof, extra-thick interlocked wooden floor panels to withstand earthquakes, and 12-m-long x 3-m-high trusses 'that form

bridges between the building's two ends for a clear spanned space without columns'. He used 'humble materials' like corrugated metal, re-sawn cedar, and Plexiglas. A cantilevered three-car parking deck sits an upward hike away from the lightweight vessel. Inside, the steps have no railings, and under Ray's ownership the doors were all oval and most walls were painted deep blue: 'a peaceful colour'. The house has no central heating or air conditioning, relying instead on a passive system (and the occasional space heater). Ray's house guests included Paolo Soleri and Bruce Goff, names synonymous with architectural mad science.

When Ray put Silver Ship on the market in 2006, he issued an open letter online seeking 'a new owner who will appreciate and nurture this unique structure'. Real estate agents, meanwhile, issued one-liners like 'Not for the faint-hearted or conventional' and 'Dare to be different'.

Ted Spyropoulos, a painting contractor who studied architecture under Ray for one year, answered the call. He remembered Silver Ship from slides Professor Ray had shown in class, decades ago. 'It inspires innovation, this house,' Spyropoulos says after I board today's version of Silver Ship – the walls now white, the exterior and interior resurfaced.

Spyropoulos realizes he and his former prof do not see eye to eye on many changes he's made. 'But I have to live here and pay for it,'

says Spyropoulos. 'I have to think practically. We wanted drywall and insulation. I wouldn't take the structure itself apart,' he stresses. 'I love the original design. I'd like to get the house historically designated.'

'This is a landmark,' adds Cooleen Cooney, who lives with Spyropoulos in Silver Ship. 'What if someone else had gotten to it first and chose to...?' She makes a gesture that I interpret as 'Sayonara, architecture.'

'That happens a lot around here,' she says. 'It takes a special person to live here. This house is special. Cars stop on the road below. A charter bus pulls into the middle lane so people can take pictures.'

'Do you mind?' I ask.

'We wave to them.'

Back in Los Angeles, in the eastside hills, Fritz Haeg – an artist, designer, writer, and pro-garden activist who trained as an architect – has actually waved the curious *inside*, inviting the public to regular events in his mid-'80s' scoop of geodesic dome atop subterranean concrete cave.

'When I bought it in 2000, it felt like more than a house, almost an institution,' says Haeg, who began hosting 'Sundown Salon' arts events and social gatherings in his home shortly after moving in. Since 2007, however, Haeg's frequent travels have made regular events impossible. There was even a point when he put the home on the market.



Sundown Residence

Architect: William King
Los Angeles (CA) / USA
1984

'I'm so happy I didn't sell it,' he says now. 'I can't imagine going through with it. I can't just hand it over to anyone. Then again, not just anyone could live here. The dome is probably the most normal part of the house, and everything gets weirder from there. People are curious, but few can face the reality of not hav-

'THIS HOUSE IS EXTREME; IT CAN SWALLOW YOU UP'

– Fritz Haeg –

ing bedrooms, closets or doors.'

Haeg explains that originally he was shopping for a fixer-upper and had a 'really conventional, architect's idea of dominating and taking control of a space'. This home, however, forced Haeg to 'surrender' to its

architecture. 'The house is so dominant; you can't ever hope to remake it in your own vision,' he says. 'Its personality is too powerful. What I've done to the place has simply melted into it.' He's referring to the sleeping hole (now a 'guest bedroom') in the cave, the wall of bookshelves, the distinctive palettes marking each floor (green, brown, blue – from bottom to top) and the Dutch doors. 'I like the contrast of old-fashioned doors in a primitive-slash-futuristic house,' he says.

Haeg knows little about the architect, William King, who contacted Haeg after reading about him in the press. They have tried to arrange for King to visit, but the reunion has yet to happen. Haeg knows this much: King designed the house for a doctor who died only a few months after its completion. 'I think a lot of details weren't finished,' says Haeg. 'Now the home looks lived-in. It can photograph in a way that might seem slick, but it's not slick at all. I like the rough floors, things that are a little bit beaten up. I'm diametrically opposed to the modernist ideal of being blind to the eccentricities of a place.'

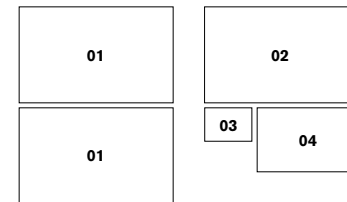
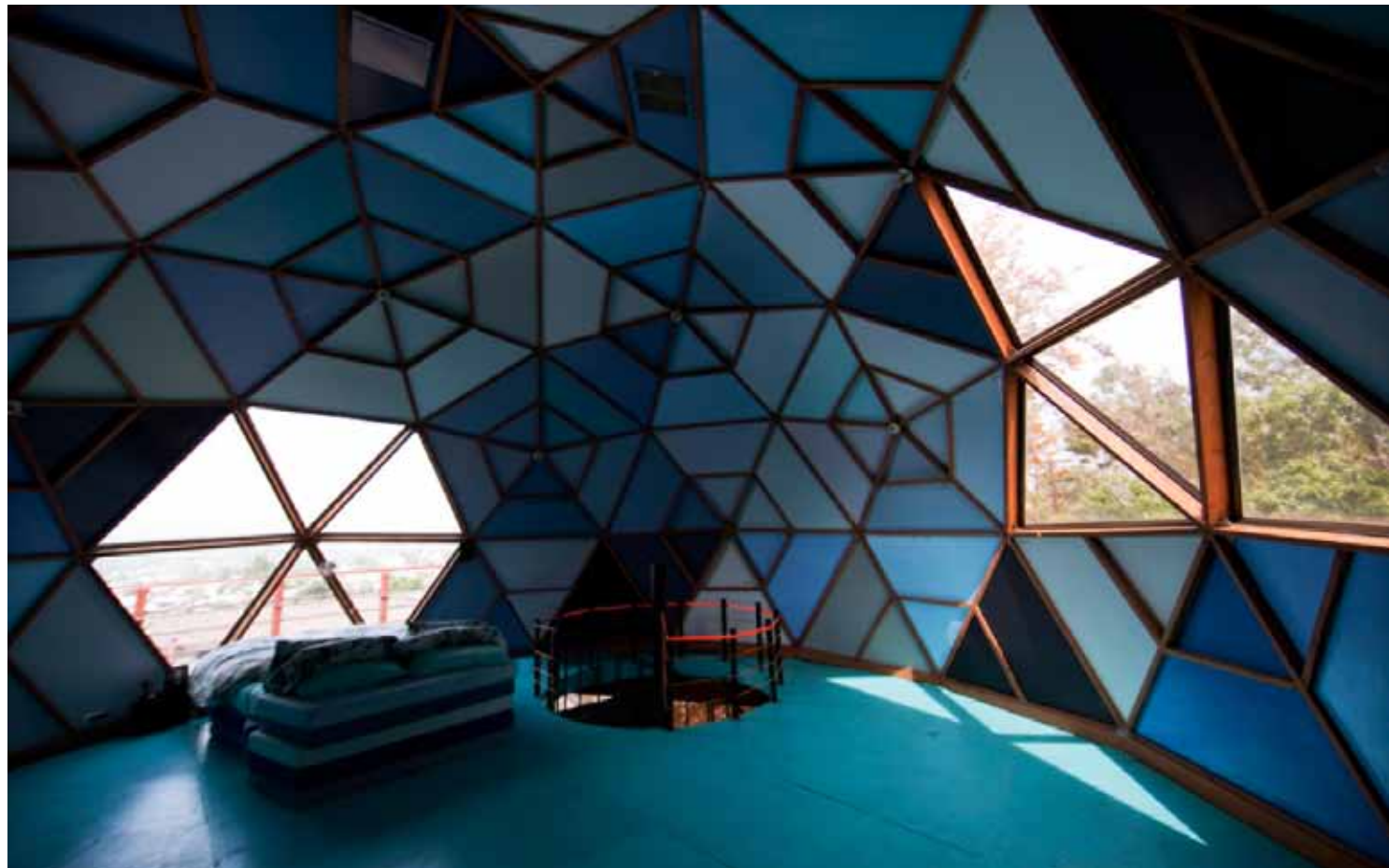
'This house is extreme,' Haeg concedes. 'More than others, it can swallow you up. But I guess I'm an extremist. I can be really hungry, but if there's nothing I want to eat, I will wait a long time for exactly what I want. It's the same with this house. I waited for a long time until I found a house that moved me.' «

01

02

01 THE HOUSE FEATURES A SMALL GEODESIC DOME ON TOP OF A SUBTERRANEAN CONCRETE CAVE.

02 FRITZ HAEG, OWNER SINCE 2000.



01 THE DOME IS NOW USED AS THE MASTER BEDROOM.

02 KITCHEN AND DINING ROOM.

03 A HOLE IN THE WALL OF THE CAVE LEADS TO A GUEST BEDROOM.

04 THE LOWER PART OF THE HOUSE HAS A CAVE-LIKE APPEARANCE.