

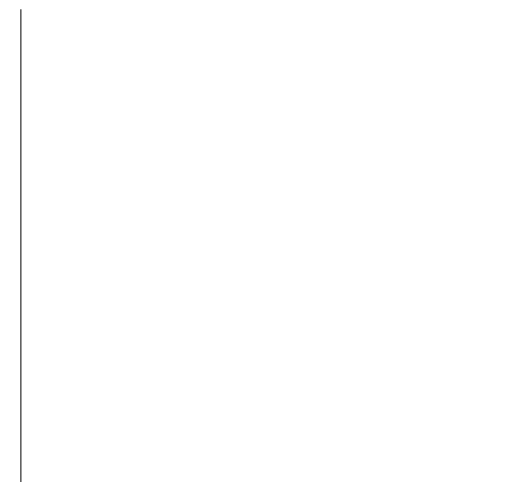


CONSTRUCTION OF A WALLACE NEFF
DOME HOUSE
PHOTO AIRFORM ARCHIVES COLLECTION

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**





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.'

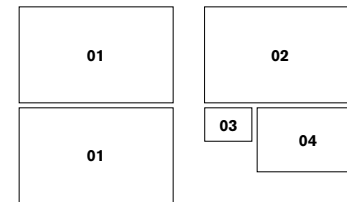
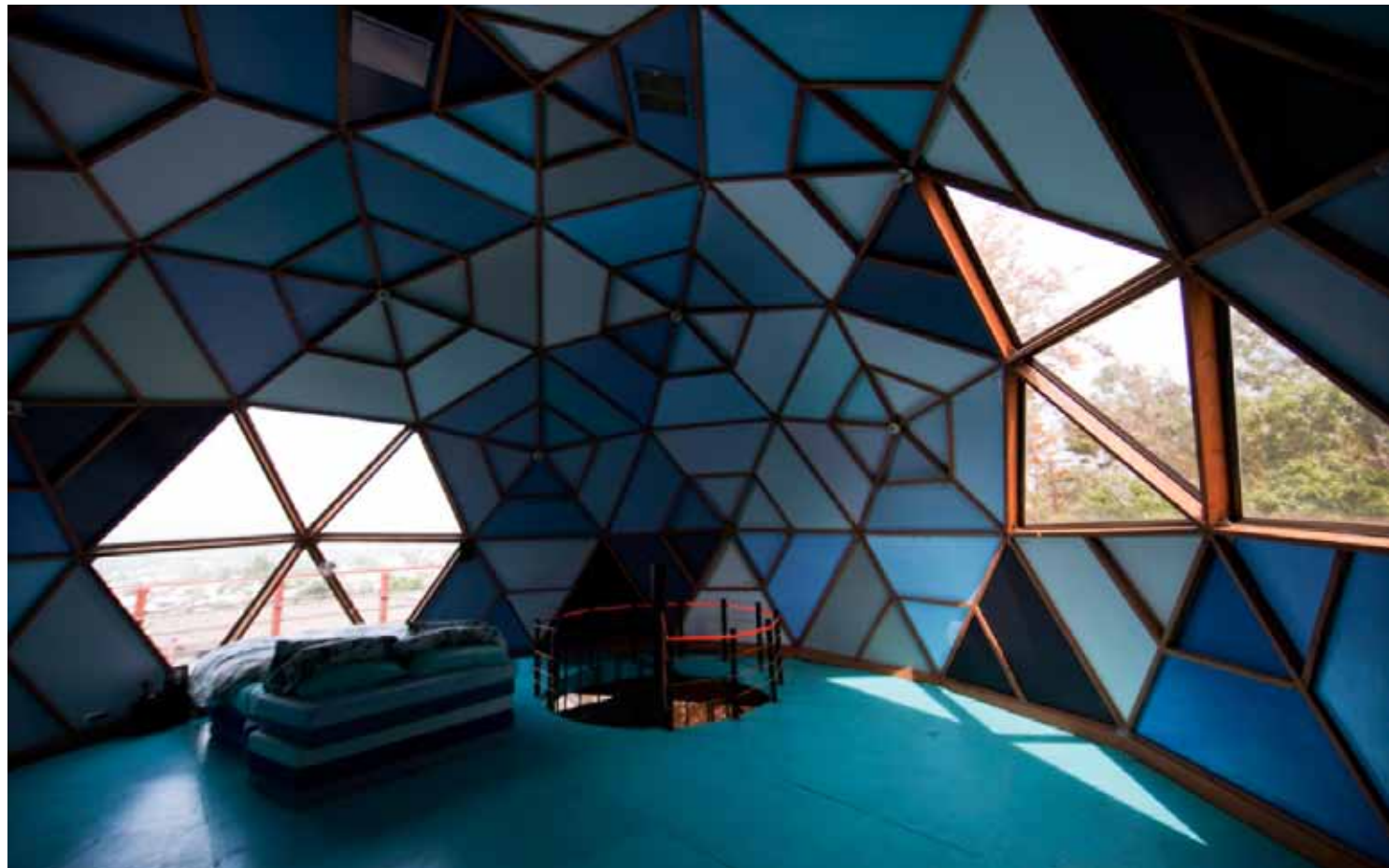
'This house is extreme,' Haeg concedes. 'More than others, it can swallow you up. But I guess I'm an extremist. I can be really hungry, but if there's nothing I want to eat, I will wait a long time for exactly what I want. It's the same with this house. I waited for a long time until I found a house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