

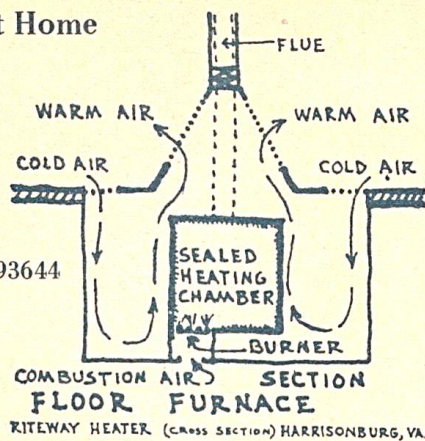
## The Owner-Built Home

Ken Kern

\$10.00 postpaid

From:

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This book is a compendium in four volumes of the functional considerations you will face in designing your own house. Kern's approach is organic if somewhat standardized--perhaps if design isn't intuitive it's bound to be like that. Chapters on salvage materials and rammed earth. Further reading is included. Actually, the book is a building library-in-one. Equipped with this, you can borrow books that go on where it leaves off.

In building with salvage materials I would anticipate that the materials themselves, in their own integral honesty, suggest the architectural style. Fuller's complicated and obscure mathematical formula carries with it little psychological sensitivity for me. And the degenerate mobile-home fabrication is an even more total turn-off. I would anticipate, further, that the scavenger-built structure would be completely free-form with undefinable flexibility, curvilinear and grotto-like. The space would be designed to serve many functions and allow for change in function. It would relate in a flexible manner to the quaint, unorthodox vision of its scavenger-builder.

Don't be mislead. Kern's book portrays a size and style of house that seems dated, even wasteful, by our standards. However, his planning is perfectly sensible:

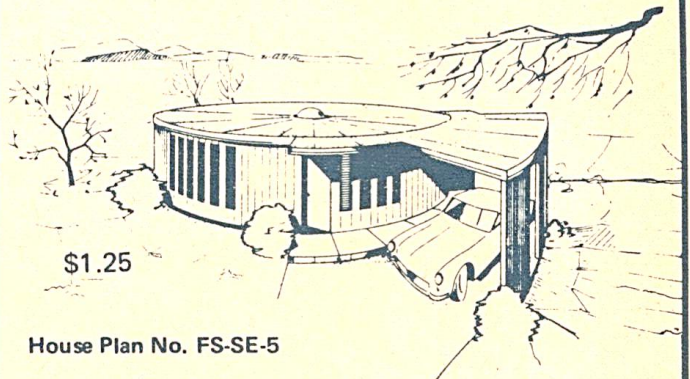
I put the Fuller-dome in the same class as the "mobile-home". Both are designed to be factory-produced and assembled; both have static and unyielding forms and are completely devoid of flexible spatial quality. The dome and mobile-home are both offered as solutions to physical space needs; they are touted as end-products in building! But psychologically balanced spaces are not "finished" end-products--they are catalytic agents for the creation of an ever-changing visual and functional order.

Kern intends *The Owner-Built Homestead*, which has yet to be released, to be a *how-to-think-it* as well as *how-to-do-it* book. He mentions a personalized layout service, and, if you can wait for them, he'll supply long-range site development plans to fit the homesteader's property, soil conditions, regional climate conditions, and specific personal requirements.

## Dave Harvey's Octagonal House

Make thee an ark of gopher wood; rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch. And this is the fashion which thou shalt make it of:

General: Each item of material and equipment shall equal or exceed that described or indicated. All work shall be performed in a workmanlike manner and in accordance with the best practice. Mention of commercial products and sources does not constitute an endorsement of such products by the Forest Service or the Department of Agriculture to the exclusion of ther equally acceptable products. (Dwelling Specifications, House Plan No. FS-SE-5, A Round House of Wood, Designs for Low-Cost Wood Homes)



House Plan No. FS-SE-5

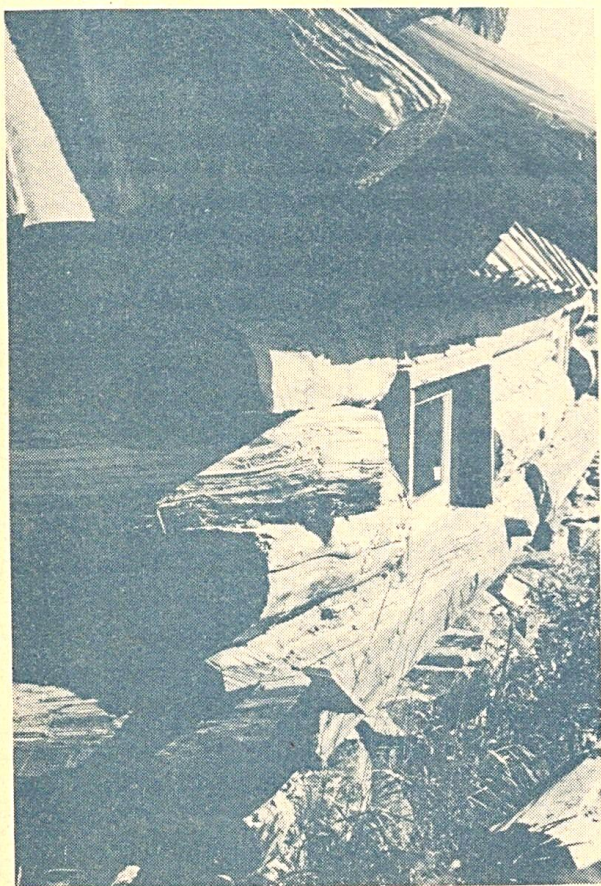
Fear no further injunctions. If the reader were to attempt to duplicate our building, he would negate the purpose of this article, which is merely to be suggestive and he would cut himself out of the fun I had in building, for there has been much fun mixed into the agony. I could simply say I wanted to build something the likes of which, even to small particulars, hadn't to my knowledge been built before. That's part of it, and when visitors now notice resemblances, they tend to be race-memory affinities (particularly frequent is reference to Indian hogans), which can lead you to believe that all buildings have been built before. To my great good fortune I didn't need to trouble myself with building codes nor, on the other hand, with the codes of building drummed into the heads of modern carpenters, masons, etc., for I have been building on my own 100 acre farm, and with no previous training or experience (apart from a tree-house at age 9). The only curious qualifications I brought to the job, I think, were a compulsive determination and a devotion to work, the latter largely the inheritance of a 19th-century grandmother. Indeed, my feelings about the joy of meaningful work are more rooted in Morris and Ruskin than in Zen. A further cautionary note: I applaud the Almanac's advice--"it's groovy to build spontaneously, but a model can really pull your understanding together"--I tried models, without much success; mainly by temperament (Scorpionic). I could and would do little pre-planning--if I had done more I would have saved much money and anxiety, but enjoyed it all the less.



Acting like a *donnée* for a Henry James novel (I wonder if I shall ever read one again! ), the phrase "octagonal log cabin" was introduced into conversation in April, 1969. I'd never heard of such a thing and immediately repressed it for later reference (my mode of handling essential novelties in those days). The phrase, having in the meantime gathered no accretions of suggestion or of information, resuscitated itself accidentally on a slope in Ontario on which we had just decided to build.

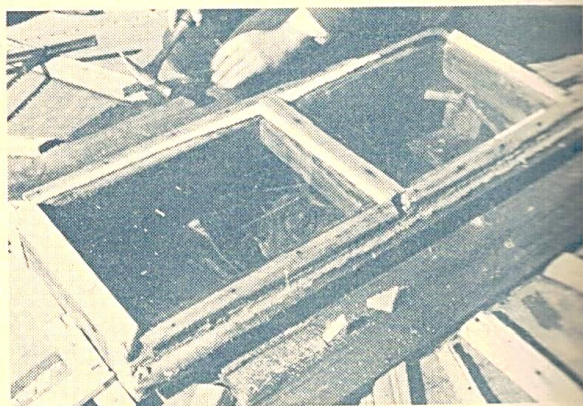
Why there should be magic in the mere idea, I still do not know and hope to discover some of the answer by living in it through one of these long winters.

Two "houseraisings" (one day apiece, involving two casts of thousands, à la Hollywood or Hanoi) resulted in much good feeling and the raising of 24 logs, that is, 3 logs up from the ground, notched into each other (the agony of angles! ), spiked then after notching--I really feel secure about those corners. We were using logs from a haybarn 100 yards from the building site. Most of them were in the diameter range of 12 inches, and each side was to be 15 feet long (as it concluded, no side is nearly the same length as the next, but it doesn't seem to matter). We rebuilt an old wagon found on the property, and those warm September days you might see eight bodies hauling over the precipitous land three logs at a time, at least one of those bodies beautifully bare-breasted as was then the fashion. And then in the evening good rhythm sessions, perhaps 30 people packed into our small farmhouse kitchen.

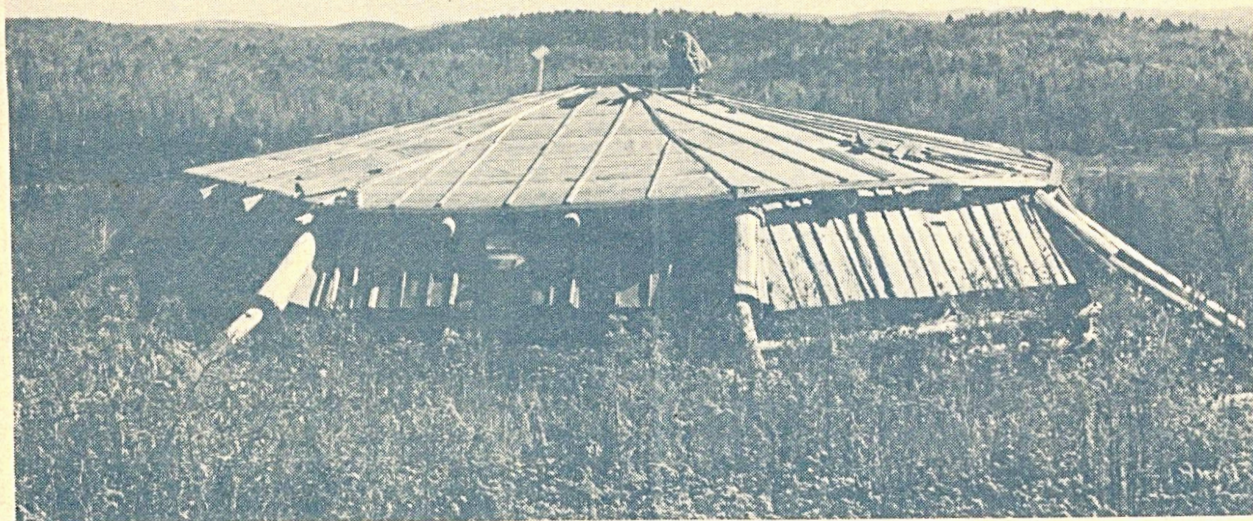


We've been using materials drawn as much as possible from the pre-existing, somewhat tumbledown farm sites: cedar logs that were probably virgin timber and that need no seasoning (highly insect and rot-resistant)--lumber from 3 other outbuildings--stones, which are never lacking in this area, for foundations and ornament--a treasure of rags left behind by the previous farmer, for chinking--parts of cars also abandoned, strewn about the property (a Model A wheel which tops the centerpost, into which the roof beams are bolted; a 1964 Dodge window right about the wheel, forming a small skylight), etc.

Using what has been abandoned is an undoubted groove, our perverse creative way of picking up where the old ones left off. What one learns from the yet older ones, in studying their buildings, is stuff for other articles and books. It is to be lamented that I, at least, had to spend as much money as I did, about \$500, all on relatively shoddy store goods: about \$100 for nails, bolts and spikes; about \$200 for cement (for chinking, yes, but primarily for concrete--hand-mixed and poured walls, non-bearing, up against the earth after I dug out the interior, walls as high as 4 feet against the hill; also concrete for a partly stone floor); about \$200 for roofing material, a third of which should never have been spent. The roof, I am convinced, is the most "challenging" part of most structures, but particularly of an octagon, and what we achieved is something of a wonder--aesthetically satisfying and yet stable (or it will be by December, by damn! ). But there were more agonies (begging







the generation's pardon, "hassles" does not do it justice) involved in this than in any other part of the enterprise. First, there was the problem of support: I didn't want more than one supporting post running from floor the ceiling. This decision was undoubtedly influenced in part by the strange experience of playing basketball against the Royal Navy at Plymouth in 1951: some 8 pillars supporting the roof were part of the court; amazingly, the home team wasn't into using the pillars as a screen, so we "romped" all over them, redeeming the obstacle course.

But roofs of large structures up here need quite a bit of support, if only because of the quantity of snow that can be counted on. We finally decided on flying-buttress type beams that would go into the ground at each of the 8 corners, mainly to support an inner octagon of horizontal beams from which the beams to the centerpost would lead (thence to be bolted into the Model A wheel). The buttresses were grounded deeply and cemented. The roof itself, then, comes up in two levels, the first sharply pitched, the second with a precarious lack of pitch. We covered both with the cheapest tarpaper available (still expensive--\$3 per roll), mainly because we thought, last December, that we still might be able to move in during the winter, and could "make do". The stages of relative innocence one goes through in building are beyond belief! My next task, after finishing the concrete, will be redoing the roof, i.e., applying tin to the second, steeper pitched level. An inch of beadboard board (styrofoam) scraps will go on first, for insulation. Except for the tin, and the windows bought at an auction, the unnatural materials will not be visible in the finished product.

What is the poetry of styrofoam? I preferred throughout to use those materials which bound the structure to the natural environment--the last thing I wanted it to be was an arrogant assertion of apartness from nature. Even the frustrations of working with irregular matter are dear: the knots and twistiness of the logs, the 3 large rocks that wouldn't budge as I was burrowing into the hillside and thus remain part of our furniture, the search for odd bits of wood and oakum to stop up the holes in that corner you never noticed till the sun started angling in there. One wrests some modicum of order from the material (most visitors are particularly pleased by the orderly progression of roof boards, moving in sections of pie toward the apex of the ceiling at the centerpost); the point, though, was not to make this wresting of order the primary feature of both process and product.

Eight months of rather intense labor have gone into it so far, with about two more to go. Remaining to be done are a third of the concrete work, the roof, the floors (on 2 levels--five eighths of the area a double wooden floor resting on barn logs, with a layer of beadboard between; the rest, on a lower level against the hillside, a flagstone pavement), an entranceway modelled on the orthodox local pattern, and an outhouse (likewise). At our leisure, relatively speaking, an inner wall of barn boards will cover the styrofoam and concrete but not the four tiers of logs above it. If all goes according to non-plan, we should be snug this winter without the usual claustrophobia--inevitably, certain activities will have their focal situations in the house, but there will be no room dividers. And, as our neighboring farmer has told us, in a house without corners the Devil can't catch you!

--David Harvey