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Living a well-rounded life Geodesic home meets couple's needs

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Barry Brown comes out of his geodesic dome home in Cheney, as his dog, Montana, waits for him in the front yard April 22. (PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON / The Spokesman-Review)

Home, sweet dome.

That's been the mantra for Barry and Mary Brown since 1977, when they moved into their geodesic dome home in Cheney.

While it may look like a novelty – an igloo, a deflating volleyball or a somewhat squished snowball – it is in fact a roomy, comfortable and efficient home.

"I'm the modern one," said Mary Brown, "the one who wanted something different."

And different it is – so much so that strangers stop by to ask about the house, including an STA bus driver who upon retiring, dropped in and told the Browns that he had driven by the house for so many years that he just had to find out about it.

The Browns are proud of their home in the Salnave Elementary School neighborhood, but they don't conduct tours, nor do they welcome knocks on the door at 10 p.m. A friendly conversation out in the yard is OK, however.

“Every summer 10 to 15 people come by,” Barry Brown said. “One man wanted to buy it and move it to Seattle, another person wanted to build one at his lake place.”

The term “geodesic dome” was developed in the 1940s by inventor-engineer-poet-cosmologist R. Buckminster Fuller, who idealized the natural world. Round objects occur in nature; squares, like most homes, don’t. Dome homes, however, never attained the huge popularity he expected for them.

But it was a natural for the Browns, who were living in an apartment in Spokane Valley back in the 1970s when they decided to build in Cheney. In addition to that something different that Mary Brown sought, they also wanted an efficient home.

The Browns met when they were teaching at Cheney High School, but back in those days, a husband and wife couldn’t work at the same school. So, he moved out to the Mead School District, where he taught mathematics and industrial arts until retiring in 2001. She taught home and family life classes in Cheney until retiring in the mid-1990s.

In 1977 they bought part of a dealership that built geodesic homes. They purchased their double lot in Cheney, ordered the panels (six left, six right) for their dome home and dug the circular foundation and basement.

“People in Cheney thought we were putting in a big swimming pool,” Mary Brown, 60, remembers.

But then the company failed, and they waited and waited hoping that the forms would come. Just about the time they thought it was a lost cause and they planned a different kind of structure for the property, the fiberglass forms arrived.

The house is 50 feet across and contains six window inserts. The panels don’t come together at the center of the building, so there is an 11-foot joining section that looks from the outside like a six-sided roof. “It’s kind of like the top of a cookie jar,” Mary Brown said.

Mary Brown designed the inside walls and interior space to suit their needs and taste, including a small but efficient kitchen. “I really don’t like people in the kitchen helping me, so the size is just right for one,” she said.

On the main floor, there are a living room, dining room, kitchen, three bedrooms, a laundry room and three bathrooms. Downstairs are a recreation room, two-plus bedrooms and a bathroom. The rooms are much larger than the exterior might indicate.

“Well, there is a lot more room in an arch than in a square,” said Barry Brown, 63.

And the home is tremendously energy efficient, with utility costs half that of their neighbors. “Plus, we don’t have to worry about snow on the roof,” Barry Brown said.

From the outside in, there are several inches of urethane foam containing a silicate sand that keeps the glare down, the fiberglass panels that give the dome its shape, another two inches of foam, a layer of fireproofing material and then plaster. “We are pretty sound proof, too,” Barry Brown noted.

The only drawback they've ever encountered with the unconventional design has been with carpeting. They've just recarpeted the living room "and since carpet comes in rolls with square edges, we had to buy more carpet to get it to fit the space," Mary Brown said.

But that's their only complaint.

Now that they are retired, the Browns have their home projects that keep them busy. Mary Brown belongs to the Country Samples Quilters in Reardan, and her home is filled with the beautiful quilts she has made. She also has a lovely garden she maintains along with a vegetable garden that includes beans, potatoes carrots and squash.

Barry Brown works at assorted projects in his shop, which, Mary Brown points out, is the very first structure he erected on the property, even before the house. A man has to have his workshop.

Their dome home has had a few moments of publicity in its 32 years, from some write-ups in newspapers (especially when neighbors thought it was going to be a huge neighborhood swimming pool) to being one of the houses on a May 2006 National Historic Preservation Month poster that featured residential architecture in the state of Washington.

On that poster, right there among a group of older, stately historic houses sits the Brown's very own home sweet dome.

