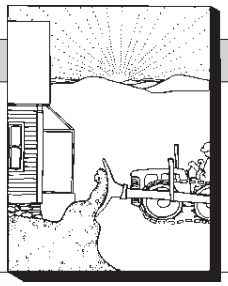


The Only One Around

Boston hardware manufacturer Enoch Robinson took great pride in his individualism. He dropped out of the Masons and Odd Fellows when they became too popular for his liking. And when his first house, a large Greek Revival with an octagonal cupola, was copied by a neighbor, he was incensed. He determined to build a house that no one could duplicate.

On a then-rural hillside overlooking the Boston skyline, Robinson chose an uncommon shape—round—and an uncommon building system—horizontal planks laid in a running bond, like brickwork—that assured him of a place in building history. In 135 or so years, the house has yet to be copied.

The walls of the house consist of thousands of 1 3/4-inch-thick wood "bricks," each three to six feet long, stacked and nailed one on top of the other. Each short plank is eight inches wide at the widest point, and curves along its outer edge to follow the arc of the 40-foot-diameter building.

The shallow, conical roof of the original two-story structure was formed from coopered one-inch planking laid on purlins and covered with painted canvas, similar to boat-deck construction. It was topped with a central, circular skylight, which lit the second-floor rotunda and the main, elliptical stairwell.

Robinson added a third story about ten years later, probably for servants' quarters, and topped it with a soldered-seam tin roof and, again, a round skylight with radial mullions.

Other unusual features are single-hung, arch-headed windows that slide up into pockets; the second-story pockets are covered in tin and project up from the roof.

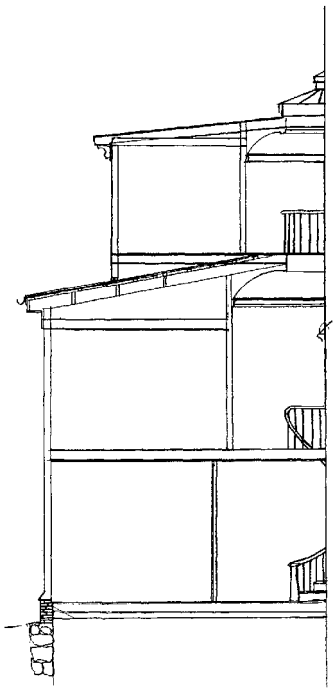
The clear-pine clapboard siding is divided into 32 equal segments by vertical astragal moldings that align with the windows. The vertical moldings and offset foundation give the structure the look of a truncated, fluted column.

The "round house" had seen better days when preservation work began last fall under the auspices of the North Bennett Street School in Boston. Ugly asphalt siding concealed the original clapboards. The interior had suffered extensive water damage. And the building showed a disturbing bulge near the top of the first story. Restoration director Robert Adam feels that the bulge resulted largely from the added loading of the third story, combined with the weakness caused by the double-high window openings (window plus pocket). The second-floor joists merely poke through the wall, and offer no support.

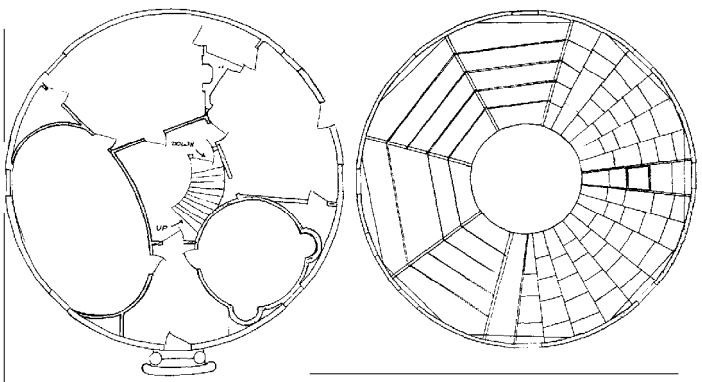
To stabilize the structure and control the bulge, the North Bennett Street School plans to reinforce the window openings with steel angle, and band the perimeter—much like a barrel hoop. The clapboards and exterior trim will be removed and repaired after all parts are tagged and inventoried. Many of the deteriorated window parts will be reproduced in the school shop.

Several years of work are expected before the round house can again show off its uniqueness. Enoch would be pleased. ■

The round house in its heyday (above) shows off its arched windows and fancy rooftop balustrades. Tin-covered boxes on the lower roof are window pockets; boxes on the upper roof are purely ornamental. How it looks is undergoing restoration today (left).



Section through the house (above) shows the original coopered roof, now hidden between the second and third floors. Note, also, the round cutout and circular railing in the third-floor rotunda. The hole was originally for a circular skylight.



The first-floor plan (above left) features an oval living room, a round library with two alcoves, and an elegant elliptical stair. Floors and ceilings were framed radially (above right) like a spiderweb. Foundation parging colored to mimic brownstone (right) awaits repair, as do the tagged and catalogued pine clapboards.