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## Squaring the circle: How a house was built around its occupants

*By Peter C. Hotton - Globe Staff*

Squaring the circle is an old architectural technique, sometimes successful, sometimes not.

The ancient Greeks did it, and an example of such a success is a round dome on a square base. You see it in domed churches, and in mosques. Check out St. Peter's in Rome, the Blue mosque in Istanbul and the US Capitol.

Squaring the circle is what Mark Lindsell did when he designed a house for his clients, who happened to be his mother, Sheryl Roberts, and his stepfather, Jon Roberts. Marc, 30, practices in San Francisco and is just striking out on his own.

Sheryl and Jon commissioned Marc to design a house to fit their needs. The house is on 4 acres of country land in Marlborough [MA], and the Roberts happily moved in last June.

But in order to design the house, Marc interviewed the Roberts, to find out just who they are and what their tastes are. He gave them a questionnaire, asking about things like ballet and music, their childhood memories and what they bring to their relationship.

And, he discovered that Sheryl is the circle intense (no ends to a circle), romantic, artistic. Jon is the square, not in the contemporary sense but in the classic sense: calm and collected, laid-back and practical, and artistic as well.

Marc's analysis was confirmed when Sheryl and Jon bought hanging lanterns for the living room: Sheryl's are round, Jon's are square.

And it's the living room where Marc squared the circle: A huge, square room, soaring to 29 feet high, with heroic-sized wood posts, beams and brackets, and with curved walls. The window wall is curved, as is the window seat. The stairway wall is curved. The soaring fireplace, clad in manufactured stone, is curved. The hearth is curved in the opposite direction. The back wall of the master bedroom, behind the living room, is curved.

The living room is central to the house, and there are more circles there, too, one in each corner. Well, not exactly circles, but Marc calls them Mickey Mouse ears. One leads to the entry hall, the second holds a piano, the third contains a spiral staircase to the basement and the fourth leads to a library and the master bedroom.

The piano belongs to Jon; he plays it, too, and is building a harpsichord from a kit. Sheryl used to play the violin and says she's taking it up again. Jon works for Allegro Microsystems in Worcester, MA, Sheryl writes books, mostly manuals on computers and other electronic mysteries, but also one called "Looney Laws and Silly Statutes" and another called "Wacky Washington Waste", both published by Sterling.

The living room has a Southwestern theme, accented by a mail-order steer skull hanging over the fireplace. Sheryl bought, "Jon hates it," she said, "but he'd miss it if it weren't there." There is wood everywhere, including the posts, beams and brackets, oaken floor and wood ceiling. Walls are plain white. Oak floors also grace the dining room, library and a big kitchen with a breakfast nook.

The dining room has an Eastern theme, featuring Oriental artifacts collected by the Roberts in their travels. The bedroom is an Art Deco masterpiece, high ceilings lighted by a painting by Erte, that icon of the Art Deco movement. Upstairs are a guest bedroom and Sheryl's office.

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While construction progressed reasonably well, things did not always go that smoothly. “We didn’t give Marc any quarter,” said Jon. “We wanted stucco, and the builder said it would be expensive, but he found a good substitute, stucco laminated on plywood panels, which made it affordable.” It works well with the half-timbering of the Tudor-style exterior.

The Roberts wanted to eliminate a second-story porch, but Marc talked them out of it. They’re glad he did. Sheryl also wanted a lot of wall space and lots of windows. “Ma, you’re being contradictory,” said Marc. Funny, though, the house does have a lot of wall space and lots of windows.

It was Marc’s idea to build stepped shelves along the stairs, to house artifacts the Roberts collected in their travels. The Roberts are pleased with this touch.

While the builder, Sylvio Richard of Marlborough, did the work, as a builder should, there were bits of do-it-yourself work by the Roberts. Sheryl priced the draperies for all those windows, gasped at the price and, instead of buying, made them all. “And I hate to sew,” she said.

Jon made a valance for one of the large windows, and built the curved window seat, a tricky project, using 2x2 framing and plasterboard to follow the curve.

And, in order to get into the house on time, they hung those round and square lanterns themselves.

The Roberts named their edifice Parnassus, after the mountain in Greece, sacred to Apollo and the muses, and seat of music and literature.

They are quite content with their new house, and so is Marc, who will be able to use the project to expand his portfolio.

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