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A House Shaped Like its Personalities

By Wendy Fox - Globe Staff



Sheryl Lindsell-Roberts and her husband, Jon Roberts, live in a house of circles and squares. Sheryl's son, Marc Lindsell, designed it with their personalities in mind.

"On some level, it comes down to artistic license," acknowledged Lindsell, an architect in San Francisco. Still, he realized that if the personalities of his mother and her husband were reduced to shapes, she would be a circle and he would be a square.

"I know my mom really well," Lindsell said in a recent telephone interview from his office. "She is kind of playful, a little bit of a free spirit. She has all kinds of

hobbies. She's done needlepoint, she paints, plays violin, dabbles in everything.

"Her husband, Jon, is very organized, very methodical. He's content to reinvest his time in things he's done over the years. He loves working with electronics, likes to build things. He's working on some cabinets now for the music room.

"I thought about the house and their relationship, because at least on the outside, they're very different people... But they seem to work really, really well together."

Lindsell wanted to translate all that into architecture: "I wanted the heart of the house to be about their marriage and how different qualities share together equally in a partnership. So I kind of interpreted their personalities as perfect forms: my mom as a circle, self-contained, curvy, soft, smooth... Where is the front, where is the side, where is it facing'? Whereas in a square, here's north, south, east, west. You can cut a square in half and it makes a grid, it expands logically.

"So I used this medieval squaring technique called 'squaring the circle.' They share an equal perimeter: Around the square is the same as the circumference of the circle."

The result is this house in Marlborough with curved and straight walls, a patio with curved lines and square planters.

"All the spaces intersect," said Lindsell. "The same circle inscribed in the floor would fit inside the vault of the ceiling. So it's not only a circle and square ... but also a cube and sphere, if you had constructed those as well."

His mother could not be more pleased.

"It's so much fun," she said. "We've been in the house for nine years, and my husband and I wake up every morning and we still walk around and look around... I truly feel that our spirits and our personalities, as well as his, are in this house."

Lindsell-Roberts is a business writer, author of "Business Writing for Dummies" and "Technical Writing for

Dummies" (Wiley Publishing), among other books. Jon Roberts is an engineer.

Lindsell acknowledged that "not every client asks for something like" the house he designed for his mother and her husband, but it's the way he likes to think about architecture.

"Apart from how big are the rooms ... I like to talk to clients about their childhood, things they remember about being little. One of the things Jon talked about was his dad's workshop. He wasn't allowed to go in without his dad there, but he would sneak in. He had to make sure the tools were back in exactly the right spot.

"I knew I wanted it [his workshop] to be a special place for him. That's where the spiral staircase comes in. He walks down and disappears from the house. It makes it a different experience. He's leaving the rest of the house, going down to his workshop."

Architecture, Lindsell said, shares much with poetry. "A poem has a structure," he said. "It could be a sonnet or a haiku or something like that. It also has turns of phrase. It could have rhyme, alliteration and architecture does, too. You have a grid ... a sphere ... a skylight ... nice little details. But a poem isn't a poem unless it has something it's about, not just a collection of just really nice words and nice sentences combined in the structure. There's something the poet is trying to say, and all those things contribute to what are you trying to communicate, what feelings are you trying to give... That's kind of the way I like to approach my work."

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