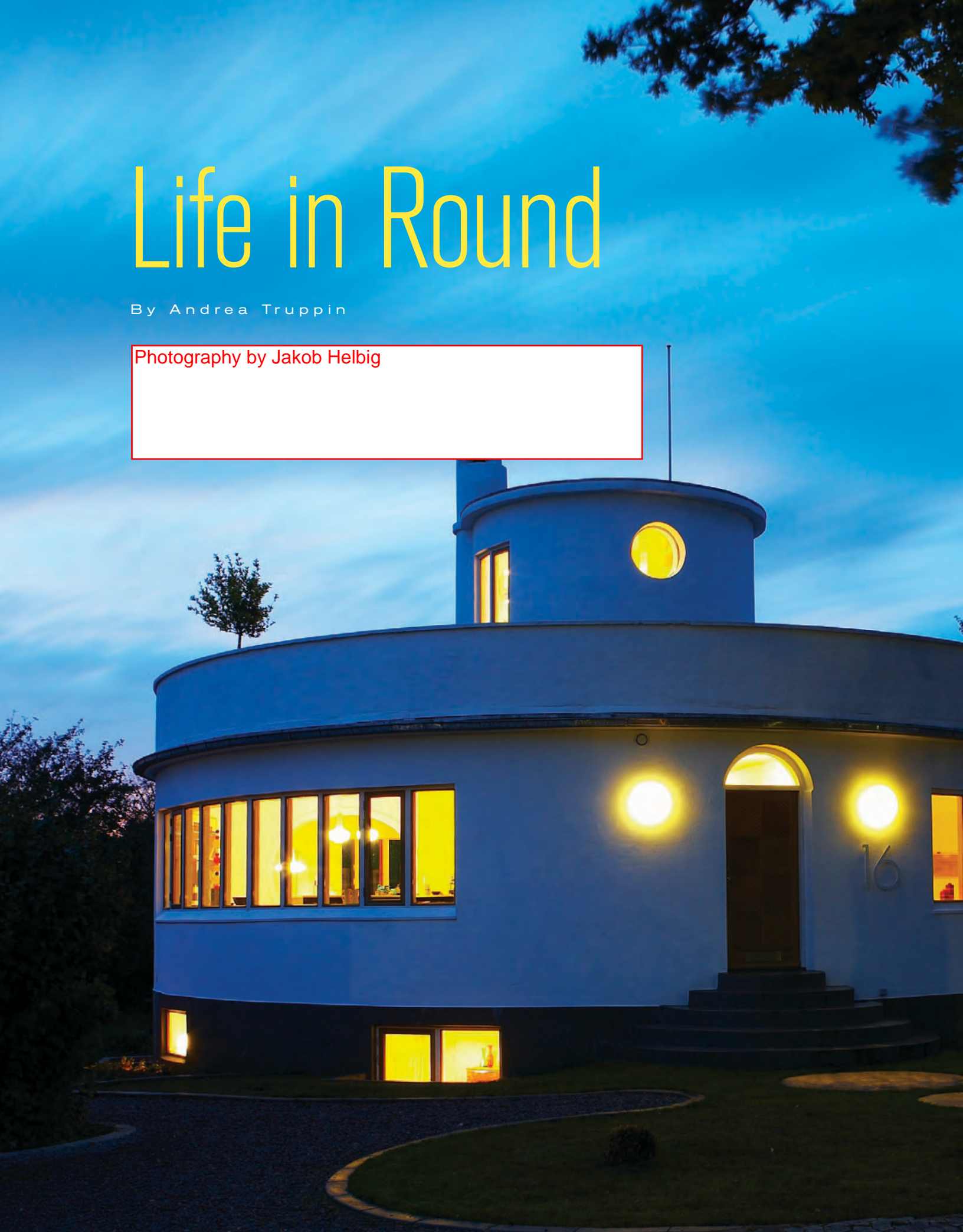


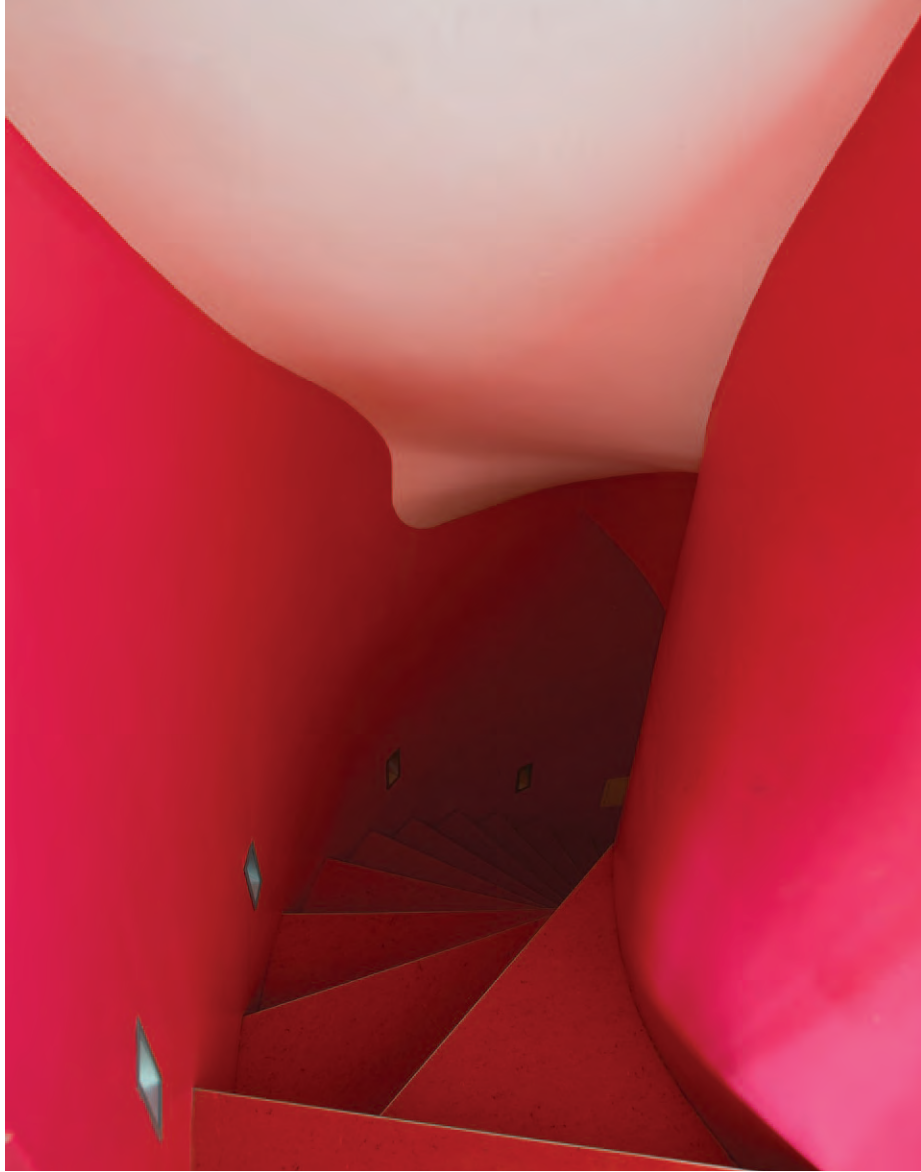
Life in Round

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By Andrea Truppin

Photography by Jakob Helbig





Round houses have always been objects of fascination. Yet from the circular homes of the ancient Celts to 19th-century American barns to [John Foster's](#) rotating residence of 1968 in Wilton, Connecticut, they have remained outliers. Danish modernist [even](#) Arne Jacobsen [launched](#) his career in 1929 with his circular "House of the Future" competition entry, but he didn't build it until 1957 — and only after he had paid a visit (as legend has it) to a modest round house completed six years earlier in the town of Søborg, outside Copenhagen, designed and hand-built by Carl Frederik Nielsen, a self-taught Renaissance man and jack-of-all-trades.

The house, inhabited only by Nielsen and his family for more than half a century, survived unaltered until 2008, when it was purchased and renovated by Jacob Holm and Pia Milwertz for themselves and their three young children. Fascinated by Nielsen, the couple has researched the origins of their unusual home, learning much from their elderly neighbors, who remember the curious man with the round house.

Born in 1909, Nielsen composed symphonies, played multiple instruments (the tuba was his favorite) and wrote satirical plays that were performed in Copenhagen. His knowledge of chemicals was reportedly so extensive, that he was hired by Danish refrigerator manufacturer Atlas; he also invented worker safety devices for the company. Nielsen taught himself architectural design, drafting and



construction techniques, building his house with the help of his seven-year-old son Curt. Nielsen even made his own tools, and recuperated brick from old houses in the area for building materials. He also devised a crane that he placed at the center of the foundation; he stood at the end of the crane's rotating arm to place the bricks, ensuring a perfectly circular wall. He ~~even~~ considered mounting the house on steel bars, so that it could turn with the sun.

Nielsen, whose inspiration likely came from a *Reader's Digest* article about a round house in the United States, had trouble getting building permits, because his design did not conform to the local building codes. But he persevered, arguing that a house without corners would better withstand the extremes of the Scandinavian weather, and would use 30% less material — a wise approach, he suggested, in light of postwar shortages.

After Nielsen died in 1972 — sadly, only hours before he was to be interviewed about his life on Danish television — his wife, Merri, remained in the house until her death ten years later. Then Curt

moved in, turning the house into a swinging bachelor pad, a party cave in the half-basement, with a high end sound system and disco lights. He lived at the house until his death in 2007.

The Round House had always attracted its share of sightseers, including ~~the Holms~~ [the Holms](#), who lived nearby. In 2008, Milwertz, who has a degree in cultural studies with a focus in Danish design history, learned that it was for sale. The couple purchased it immediately. They spent about \$610,000 to buy it and another \$630,000 for the renovation, which included 58 new windows, a geo-thermal heating system, modern insulation, drainage and electrical systems, landscaping, a new kitchen and modernized bathrooms.

The [Holms](#) brought a relaxed attitude towards the renovation, retaining the elements they loved, but transforming the house to suit their tastes and lifestyle. Working with Jacob Holm's brother, architect Anders Bay Holm of Kant Architects and his colleagues, architect Steen Rosendahl and builder Jesper Møgelhøj, they transformed the damp, low-ceilinged half-basement — which did offer multiple windows and a door into the lower part of the garden on the



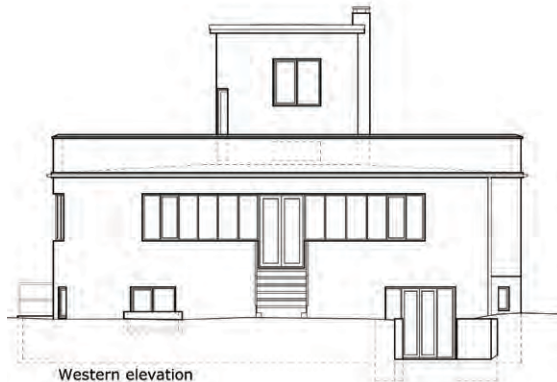
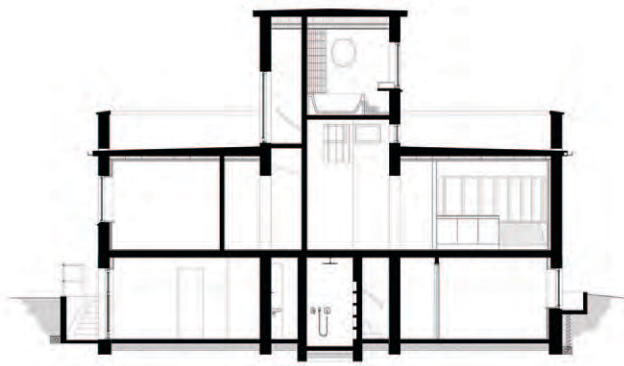


sloping property — into living space. The concrete floor was dug out to raise the ceiling and under-floor heating installed to banish the dampness. The half-basement now contains a bedroom for each child, a laundry room, wine cellar and living room. In the original first-floor living space, the team created a master bedroom and an office and open plan living and dining areas and kitchen. The roof of the ground floor is a 1200 square foot terrace; it encircles the topmost level: a small tower containing only a bright yellow-tiled bathroom with a large round tub.

A staircase spirals up through a cylindrical shaft from the lower level to the bathroom at the top. With all the rooms on both floors arrayed in linear fashion along the outer wall of the house, an encircling hallway runs between the rooms' inner walls and the stair shaft. Nielsen had installed a hyper-efficient kitchen in the cylinder under the stairs on the first floor; one had only to stand in the center and pivot to reach everything: sink, stove, counters. This kitchen was too small for the Holm-Milwertz family, however, so they turned the space into a cozy, pillow-strewn TV room and playroom for the children.

The tower bathroom is raised a few feet above the terrace level, making space just below for windows into the cylinder that send daylight onto the stairs. Windows lower down on the shaft, within the house, send borrowed daylight from the stairs into the first-floor hallway.

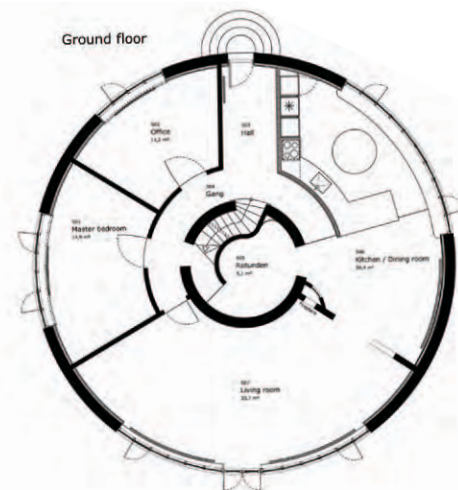
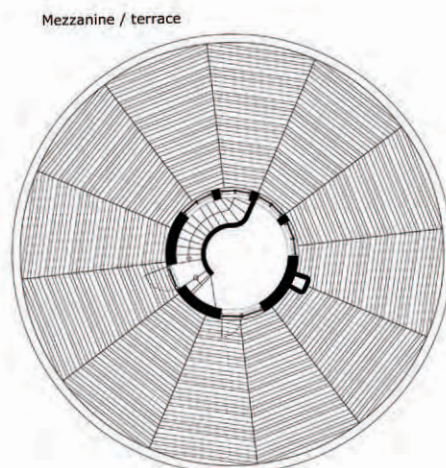
Nielsen had left the structural red and yellow brick exposed both inside and out, a throwback to the Danish Functionalist style, called Funkis, of the 1930s — an interesting choice at a time when modern architecture had moved on to concrete and steel; perhaps brick was



Switch to eastern elevation

an easier material to work with by hand. When [the Holms](#) realized that it would be too expensive to restore the brick — attempts to remove the crumbling mortar were breaking the bricks — they plastered it over, both outside and in. They retained a distinctive curved opening between the dining and living rooms, “to tease a little,” says Holm; the shape is considered unsophisticated, a “farmer’s curve,” in Denmark, where the preferred look is clean and rational.

To take advantage of the copious natural light and the reflectiveness of the newly white walls, Anders Bay Holm suggested adding bright colors to the interior walls, keeping the window walls opposite white to pick up the reflected color. The Holms chose the intense shades of yellow, green, pink and red by studying a Pantone color book; they also clad parts of the floor in blue, grey, brown or pink linoleum, the strong colors and the material a nostalgic nod to the style of the public schools that Holm and Milwertz attended in the 1960s. “Our secret was not always to choose colors that we’d like immediately,” says Holm, who works as an art director in an advertising firm. “Choose colors that provoke you.” Thus, the inner walls of the staircase cylinder are an intense pink, while the staircase [treads are](#) red, creating a throbbing contrast just right for the secret heart of the house. The yellow of the kitchen wall continues around the corner to brighten the hallway wall. “That way it is an object instead of just a colored wall,” says Holm. Apart from the intense illumination from



Use Danish o with line through it:



Use ae joined character

all the windows, the quality of the light is simply different in a round house, Holm points out, because it creates gradual gradations of light to shadow as it curves along the walls.

The new geothermal heating obviated the need for the oil burner, and where its chimney once penetrated the first floor wall, the Holms installed an appropriately circular fireplace, open to one side, glassed in on the other. A circular cutout holds logs.

The house is furnished with vintage pieces from the 1940s to the 1970s. While Jacob Holm's favorite designers are Finn Juhl and Verner Panton, and Milwertz embraces kitsch — she has a collection of Danish-made African busts and figures, culled from flea markets over the years — the couple has lived with furniture by a wide range of Danish designers, including Hans Wegner, Ole Vanscher, Borge Mogensen, Herbert Krenchel, Poul Kjaerholm, Poul Henningsen, Piet Hein and Kay Bojesen. But far from setting up a museum-like display, Holm and Milwertz see vintage furniture as an affordable means of living with beauty and functionality. "The pieces are more beautiful with damage," Holm asserts. "My wife is afraid of everything being too right and finished." Sometimes, the couple gifts a piece to a friend who admires it, because "it's not a treasure and we like to renew it," says Holm, who considers it "lazy" to simply purchase a new, expensive designer chair. "Personality can't be bought," he says, "and I would even take this as far as saying, 'If I had unlimited funds for design, I would be afraid to lose my good taste.' We love Danish design, but in Denmark, with all this good design, we like to disrupt it." They are particularly fond of prototypes.

Jacob Holm is used to living in unusual spaces. Before meeting his wife, he occupied an old assembly hall with 20-foot ceilings, his kayak hoisted overhead. He and his friends would play indoor soccer around the vintage furniture. "From my childhood in Jutland, I knew of a house with an open circular plan and had always been fascinated by the thought of experiencing it," he says. "I had this dream for my children of living in a round house." His children certainly love living there. "Every member of the family has his own way of going through the house," says Holm. "My son always takes the longest way so he can run and



get some speed. My 10-year-old daughter goes straight through the middle to take the shortest route. There are many possibilities of getting from point A to point B. You can slide through the hallway; it is a soft movement, you slide rather than walk through the house.” The curved walls also offer some unexpected advantages, allowing the display of a eight-foot-wide painting, for example.

Since moving into the house, the Holms have found that they want to share it. Even now, total strangers knock on the door asking so tour the interior, and they are always welcome. “The house invites people,” says Holm, and has made the family more hospitable. They envisage a future of making it available for weddings, in part because it resembles wedding cake, concerts — the acoustics are great — and other happenings, or simply renting it to people who want to experience life in a round house. The Holms have also turned an adjacent square garage into a multipurpose studio, where they hold small exhibitions and plan to offer for cultural events. “We call it the Square Room,” says Holm, who sometimes paints there. “It is a wonderful refuge to go to whenever you feel like being rational.”

The Holms have developed a deep appreciation for Carl Frederik Nielsen. “All the facts about him are hard to believe,” says Holm. “He must have been a genius. He did not have formal education and there was a lot of snobbishness if you were not a professor or an architect. Who is he? Just a product of his ideas.” ■



Photo by Michael von Jakobsen.