

# Active Boomer

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## Living Green in a Dome Home

Story and photos by  
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The geodesic dome home is truly a phenomenon of the baby-boom era.

Although the architectural concept was pioneered around 1920 in Germany — where it was applied chiefly to commercial structures as a more efficient use of raw materials — the idea for geodesic dwellings was born in the 1950s. The dome home was the brainchild of R. Buckminster Fuller, a controversial inventor and author who was an early advocate of sustainable living. Fuller, whose genera-

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RIGHT: Tessa Hill welcomes visitors to her dome home near North Branch.



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# Dome homes come of age with energy efficiency and amenities

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tion was grandparents to the burgeoning baby-boomer generation, thought dome homes could solve the housing crisis all of us little boomers were causing in the 1950s. Domes use about 60 percent less raw material per square feet of living space compared to traditional homes — but the quirky design never caught on with boomers' parents, who largely preferred the cookie-cutter look.

Fast-forward a couple of decades, when 20-something boomers started building their own homes. Fuller's environmentally friendly, unconventional architecture appealed to a large enough contingent of young baby boomers to create a niche market. Into this market stepped Dennis Odin Johnson, a young entrepreneur who arrived in North Branch in 1975 and built one of the first dome homes in East Central Minnesota.

Johnson and his wife, the late Janet Johnson, had already been building domes for a few years. Their experience with the existing technology of dome construction was frustrating, so Dennis set to work designing a better connection system for putting together a dome. In 1978 the Johnsons founded Natural Spaces Domes, using Dennis' patented, rust-proof hub (left), which provides a more secure connection that is faster and safer to install. In addition to her position with the family business, Janet served in the Minnesota Senate from 1991 until her death in 1999.



Today Natural Spaces is a world-wide producer of geodesic dome buildings. The dome Dennis built over 30 years ago is still his home — but not for long. Dennis and his fiancée, Tessa Hill, are putting the finishing touches on a new dome that is highly energy efficient and environmentally competent. They call it their green dome. Besides the features standard to all domes — better air flow, easier to heat and cool — the green dome utilizes many sustainable, non-toxic and energy-saving options.

Hill is an environmental activist and founder of Healthy Child Healthy World, an advocacy group for children's health. She put her knowledge of environmental concerns to good use in designing the new home. The green dome will serve as a model home for folks interested in building one for themselves.

Hill says dome homes still appeal to baby boomers, but perhaps for different reasons than they did in the 1970s. Energy efficiency, striking design and extra amenities are at the top of the list. She also stressed the versatility of the dome design. It's easy to add extensions for extra rooms, dome porches and kinds of space. With no internal load-bearing walls, reconfiguration of rooms in a dome is sometimes easier to do than in a traditionally constructed home.

"We have found there is a dome personality," Hill explained. "People who like dome homes are often scientific or artsy types, or environmentalists. It's still a niche market, but the niche is getting bigger all the time."

Natural Spaces conducts several dome workshops each year. People can spend a weekend at their complex near North Branch learning about dome construction and dome living. Workshops typically begin on Friday evening and run through Sunday afternoon. They include hands-on learning situations and a tour of several domes, as well as discussions of materials, blueprints and budgets. Dome school weekends are scheduled in June and September 2008; other dates may be added.

For more information about dome homes, contact Natural Spaces Domes at 651-674-4292 or 800-733-7107 or visit [www.naturalspacesdomes.com](http://www.naturalspacesdomes.com). To learn about the Healthy Child Healthy World initiative, go to [www.healthychild.org](http://www.healthychild.org).



LEFT: Dennis Odin Johnson in front of the green dome he is building for his new home. ABOVE: A view from the green dome's upper level. The triple-pane windows have low-emittance coatings and argon gas between panes. Windows are positioned to take advantage of morning solar gain and minimize hot southern and western sun.

BELOW: The green dome's kitchen features appliances with high Energy Star ratings and non-toxic Ikea cabinetry. Most of the wood is either from sustainable forests or down wood from the Johnson property.



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