

ORSON FOWLER  
THE DOMESTIC OCTAGON  
and  
"THE LITTLE HOUSE AT BLANDOME"

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"American Architecture"

In this paper, my purpose is to tell the story of a phenomenal, if short lived, fad in American Architecture; to relate a little about the man who began the fad and practiced his theories; and to describe an example, in Lexington, Virginia, of this architectural craze. The fad is that of the domestic octagon, the man is Orson Squire Fowler, and the example is the "Little House at Blandome". To best relate this story and to begin with the color and interest it deserves, I will first relate the history of O.S. Fowler and his writings, and then describe the fad and the example.

Orson Squire Fowler was born in Cohocton, New York on October 11, 1809. He received his pre-college training at Heath and at Buckland, both in Massachusetts; in the Ashfield Academy; and finally attended Amherst College where he graduated in 1834. Along with a college chum, Henry Ward Beecher, he began to pursue the study of phrenology. This was to become the major interest of his adult life. In 1837, along with his brother Lorenzo, he published Phrenology Proved, Illustrated, and Applied. In 1842, they published and assumed editorship of "American Phrenological Journal". During this period between 1842 and 1850 O.S. Fowler published many tracts dealing with varied topics such as philosophy, sociology, physiology, and medicine. He was untrained in these fields yet pursued them with undaunted energy. Throughout his middle and late years he lectured extensively across the United States and Canada. O.S. Fowler died, relatively forgotten, on August 18, 1887.

Perhaps at this point it would be advantageous to spark up

*1 you would prepared as for such an abrupt ending.*

the rather uninteresting biographical notes above with a description of Fowler's major preoccupation, phrenology. Perhaps a small bit of the color mentioned in the introduction will begin to appear. *No need to apologize*

Phrenology is a "science" in which the practitioner, after a vague course of study in the field, examines or "reads" the protuberances or "bumps" found on his subjects cranium. By determining the location and size of these "bumps", the phrenologist is able to determine variously endowed "qualities" inherent in the subject.<sup>2</sup> There are approximately forty of these faculties or "qualities" but this list should suffice as an example;

Amativeness- love between the sexes  
Inhabitiveness- love of home  
Spirituality- faith or credulity  
Constructiveness- mechanical ingenuity<sup>3</sup>

Life was also believed to be based on two major influences: physiological conditions and organic conditions. Examples of the physiological conditions are:

Walk as indicating character  
The mode of shaking hands  
Redness and paleness of the face  
Laugh as corresponding with character<sup>4</sup>

A few examples of the organic conditions affecting life are:

The Mental temperament  
Motive or muscular temperament  
The size of the brain<sup>5</sup>

In order to relate a bit of Fowler's rhetoric, I have included the following:

The mode of shaking hands expresses character. Thus, those who give a tame and loose hand, and shake lightly have a cold ... and are probably conservatives. But those who grasp firmly, and shake heartily, have a corresponding whole-souledness of character...<sup>6</sup>

Fowler practiced this "science" from 1842 until his death. His major income was <sup>from</sup> his extensive lecture tours on the subject and the classes which he taught at his home in Fishkill, N.Y. He also wrote on various subjects as mentioned earlier in such publications as: "Love and Parentage", "Amativeness, or Evils and Remedies of excessive and perverted Sensuality", and "Intemperance and Tight-lacing Considered in Relation to the laws of Life".<sup>7</sup> Although these books had a fairly great influence on life in America (at least among Fowler's followers) there was one book which had a phenomenal influence and was the spark that kindled the fad of the domestic octagon. The book was called A Home for All; or the Gravel Wall, and the Octagon Mode of Building and was first printed in 1849 by his own company Fowler & Wells.

A Home for All... (hereafter referred to as Home) was probably Fowler's most successful effort . It went through some forty editions and has ~~recently~~ been reprinted by Dover Books of New York in 1973. The book sets down Fowler's theories on the octagonal mode of building, especially with gravel wall construction and his feelings on domestic architecture in general. It is very similar to the pattern books of A.J. Downing and A.J. Davis which were published around the same period of time.

The purpose of the book, in Fowler's words, was:

To cheapen and improve human homes, and especially to bring comfortable dwellings within the reach of the poorer classes, is the object of this volume—an object of the highest practical utility to man. It delineates a new mode of inclosing public edifices and private residences, far better, every way, and several hundred per cent

cheaper, than any other; and will enable the poor but ingenious man to erect a comfortable dwelling at a trifling cost, and almost without the aid or cost, as now, of mechanics. Except in a single particular, and this he has greatly improved, this mode is the invention of its author...

The single particular and the originality of the work will be discussed later in this paper. Should one wonder if Fowler had left aside phrenology for this new venture I again quote from his book

Let no one suppose that he has foresaken or even turned aside from, Phrenology-- that first and only occupation of his enthusiastic youth, and the idol of his matured and declining years, he has turned aside only to build him a good home, and in doing so, has made and learned improvements to adopt which will greatly increase home comforts.<sup>9</sup>

If you recall, earlier in the paper I mentioned two qualities determined by phrenology, Inhabitiveness and Constructiveness. These would certainly make O.S. Fowler <sup>qualified to</sup> ~~capable of being and~~ practicing architecture.

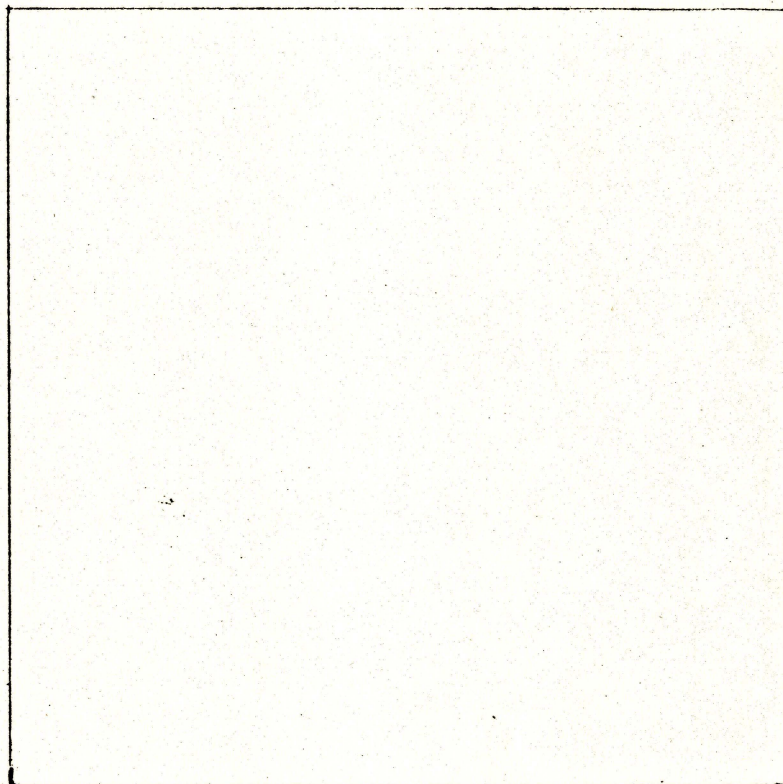
In Home..., Fowler gives directions for: choice of materials, mixing proportions (this pertains to his gravel or grout wall), foundations, framing his grout, scaffolding, windows and door frames, floors, chimneys, ventilation, outside and inside finish, and the approximate cost of the construction. All of the instructions are pertaining to the construction of octagonal structures which Fowler considered to be the ideal form for buildings;

Nature's forms are mostly spherical. She makes ten thousand curvilinear to one square figure. Since a circle encloses more space for its surface, than any other

form, of course the nearer spherical our houses, the more inside room for the outside wall, besides being more comfortable. Of course the octagon, by approximating to the circle, incloses more space for its wall than the square.<sup>10</sup>

In order to illustrate this fact, I have chosen the example Fowler himself uses in his book:

This figure is four inches square, each inch represents eight feet. Thus the figure is 128 feet in circumference and is 1,024 square feet.

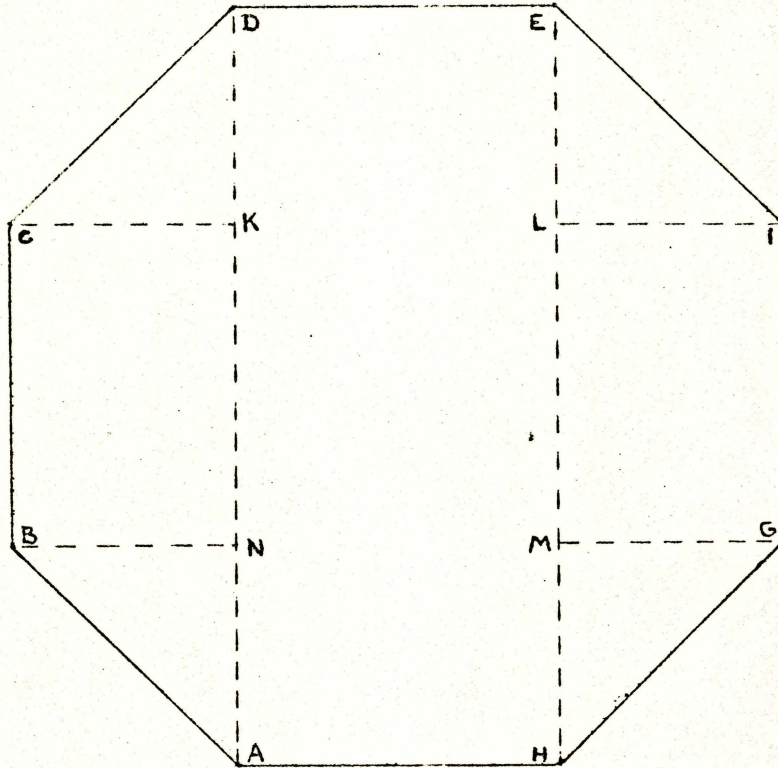


The octagon featured on the next page has 2 inch (or 16 foot) sides. It also has a circumference of 128 feet, yet its area is 1,218 sq. ft. The demonstration should prove this:

A,D,E,H, is 16 by 39 .....	624 sq. ft.
B,C,K,N, is 11 by 16 .....	176 sq. ft.
I,G,M,L, is 11 by 16 .....	176 sq. ft.

The four half-squares, ANB, CDK, EIL, GHM  
MAKE two squares, each 11 feet or 242 sq. ft.

The TOTAL area of the octagon then, is ... 1,218 sq. ft.



So, Fowler's defense of the octagon as opposed to the square stands up mathmatically. He further defends his point by comparing the octagon to an oblong of the same circumference.

Again the example is from Home...:

Take a house 24 ft. by 40 ft. Its circumference is, of course, 128 ft., the same as a 16 foot octagon, or a 32 foot square. But its area is 960 sq. ft.

Mathmatically the difference is:

$$\frac{1218}{960} \div 8 = \frac{152}{120} \div 8 = \frac{19}{15} \div 5 = \frac{4}{3} \div 3 = \frac{13}{1} \div 1 = \frac{1}{3}$$

So, agin Fowler's theory is proven. In comparison to a square of the same circumference the gain of area is one-fifth. The comparison with the oblong varies with its length and width

*good!*

relationship.<sup>11</sup>

Now that we have seen the basic theory proven, it is a good time to discuss the originality of the idea. Essentially it is not. When Fowler published his book and built his home based on the theories in the book (his home will be discussed later), the major example used by his critics to discredit the plan was that of a building in Washington, D.C. known as "The Octagon".<sup>12</sup> This was built circa 1800 by William Thornton and served as the Presidential mansion for James Madison when the White House was burned in 1814. Fowler's response to the critics was;

People of clear vision who could count up to six would find it a hexagon; and if they do not know what a hexagon is, then they can damn well look it up in the dictionary<sup>13</sup>

Fowler was correct. The building still stands in Washington and anyone who doubts can go count the sides. It now serves as the headquarters of the American Institute of Architects.

There were other octagonal structures in America long before Fowler claimed credit for the idea. In Philadelphia, Latrobe's "Center House" was an octagonal design and Thomas Jefferson designed his home at Poplar Forest as a perfect octagon. During the Federal period in American architecture, octagonal forms were frequently used to enhance possibilities of mass and space. Even during the Colonial period, in which symmetry was almost always used, the octagonal bay or room was one of the few variants.<sup>14</sup> So, it seems obvious to me that Fowler's idea was not quite as original as he claimed yet he must be given credit for spreading the possibilities to the American public.



At this point, we should look at that "one particular" which Fowler admitted was not original but which he claimed "he has greatly improved". He was referring to the material which he advocated as the best possible structural material, grout or what we call today, concrete. Fowler said that this was truly "Nature's building material" and "is abundant everywhere, cheap, durable, and complete throughout... The superiority of this plan must certainly revolutionize building, and especially enable poor men to build their own homes"<sup>15</sup>

O.S. Fowler discovered this material in use while on a lecture tour in Jaynesville, Wisconsin, in 1850. While there he met a Joseph Goodrich who had built, in 1844, a combination tavern, store, and residence of this grout or gravel wall. The material is a mixture of gravel, sand, and lime. Goodrich allowed Fowler to "pound with a sledge hammer on the wall till he was tired" at the mere price of six cents per blow which Goodrich claimed would easily cover the repair costs. Fowler did so and was convinced.<sup>16</sup>

When Fowler returned to the East, he published a revised edition of Home... and included his discovery. He did improve on the material by finding the proper proportions for the mixtures <sup>used</sup> many uses. He also went into great detail describing the methods for mixing, for setting up the wooden molds, and for finishing the interior and exterior.

To defend his claim that he had found "Nature's building material", he compared it with brick and wood. Of wood he says,

"Wood decays, whereas economy requires that houses, once up, endure like time, and improve by age... wood houses burn down often in half an hour, the accumulated toil of years, consumed in a moment, perhaps a beloved child or companion scathed by flame and suffocated by smoke, burned to a crisp.<sup>17</sup>" He says of bricks "... very laborious to hew them into shape, very cold in winter, and damp in wet weather, either expensive or else unsightly —"<sup>18</sup> But what of gravel walls? "mixed with sand, formed with brick or stone to any shape we please, it petrifies and remains forever. How simple! How effectual! How infinitely useful!"<sup>19</sup>

Now that we have seen Fowler's theories, it would be best to see them in use. The best example by far is his own home in Fishkill, New York. The house was built between 1850 and 1853. Its form was, of course, octagonal and it was comprised of a basement, three stories, a twenty-foot glass domed cupola, and approximately sixty rooms. Fowler firmly believed that no room should serve more than one function so each bedroom had its own dressing room, and there were various specialty rooms such as: a gymnastic room for "unlaced" ladies, a playroom for children (far away from the rooms occupied by the adults), a lumber room, a room for minerals, shells, and portraits, an authors studio, and a "prophet's chamber".<sup>20</sup>

In his usual fashion, Fowler elaborated on each room, giving his reasons for their existence. By way of example, I quote his reasons for an authors studio which he claimed must be uniformly heated because, "... that all-powerful exercise (causes) the blood to foresake the extremities and skin, and mount to the

head, leaving all the outer walls a prey to cold..."<sup>21</sup>

When we look at the details of Fowler's home we can see the many contributions which he made to domestic architecture. Among his innovations were: having the entrance in the basement, use of a glass roof, indoor toilets, hot and cold running water, and central heat.

He placed his entrance in the basement so that draughts and cold would be kept below the main floors and rather distributed into the various service rooms in the basement.

His glass roof was about one-half inch thick of "Crystal Palace Glass"<sup>22</sup> and provided light to the entire house. They were sufficiently strong to be walked on and had depressions in strategic locations so that water would collect and run into cisterns. These cisterns were located in the upper part of the closets and in the roof. They worked on the same principle as our water towers. The pressure of water from great heights is sufficient, when released and allowed to fall, to push it back up again and be distributed to various rooms. One of these cisterns was connected to a boiler in the kitchen and with every room so that when the water was released, it pushed the water in the boiler up to the rooms.

Perhaps the most innovative element was the indoor toilet. This was not a new invention, but it had yet to be accepted. Fowler, of course, had his reasons:

You have an infirm guest, whom you would treat with all possible hospitality. Obligated, during a cold, rainy night, to respond to one of nature's imperious calls, to go out to the usual place exposes him to take cold, besides being so disagreeable.

To employ any vessel in his room, besides being repulsive to many, obliges him to breathe noxious and offensive air the balance of the night. Then is it not an "inside" water-closet a real necessity in a prime house?... to squeamish maidens and fastidious beaux this point is not submitted, but matrons, the aged and feeble, are asked, is not such a closet a real household necessity and luxury?<sup>23</sup>

Fowler's central heating system is not as advanced as those which we have today but it worked and was simple. He first of all placed a furnace in the basement and had it connected to various heating vents which went up the walls and under the floors. Also, the octagonal plan of the house allowed the heat to radiate very efficiently.

Unfortunately these innovations did not save the house from a sad fate. Fowler was forced to rent the entire house and its furnishings in 1857 to a W.A. Riker for \$2,500 annually. The house was converted to a boarding house at this time and during this period it suffered its worst blow. An epidemic of typhoid broke out in the house causing its inhabitants to flee. The cause was later found to be seepage from a cistern built of grout which served as a cesspool. At this point Fowler sold the house to his daughter in 1859. After this sale, the house went through various owners and purposes, such as "The Cuban Institute and Military Academy", a boarding house once again, and finally when it became deserted, it was used by the youth of Fishkill as the scene for torchlight revels. Finally, in August, 1897, the town officials deemed the building a hazard and had it dynamited. Truly this was a sad fate for so illustrious a home.<sup>24</sup>

↑ point out why I had to be destroyed in this manner

Even though Fowler's own home was not a rousing success, his book and his home did create a rash of octagonal buildings in America. It is estimated that nearly one thousand octagon houses were built by 1857.<sup>25</sup> There were very few building manuals in the 1850's that did not have some reference to Fowler's plans and theories.

Some notable examples in the East are:

The Octagon House; Ardsley, New York; 1870  
The Octagon House; Williamsburgh, New York; c. 1870  
Longwood; Natchez, Mississippi; 1860  
The Octagon House; Greene, New York; c. 1870

True, all of these were built after the heyday of the fad, but they were obviously influenced by Fowler and are exemplary.

There was also a fad of octagon barns, churches, and schools all of which Fowler advocated in his book. He of course elaborated on the need for these structures in this shape:

On churches —

seat them in the octagonal form, the seats all partly facing all, thus allowing all to see each, and the benign smile of recognition and good feeling ... expressed in the countenance, will spread from face to face. This form will also accommodate those who go to see and be seen... Let a congregation worship in the octagon, and then in the square, and they will "feel" the difference most delightfully in favor of the octagon<sup>26</sup>

On schools —

This form will enable teacher to see scholar as much better than the square, as scholar teacher, and allow him to take in the whole room at one furtive glance<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting result of the fad was an ambitious project known as "The Vegetarian Settlement Co." begun by a Henry Clubb as a permanent home for vegetarians.

This project took place in the mid-1850's in Kansas. Clubb's plan was to construct an "Octagon City" to be made up of four octagonal villages radiating from a 584 acre octagonal common green. In the green was to be an agricultural school and a the main Octagonal Building. Land was sold to anyone who would sign a pledge to abstain from liquor, tobacco, and meat, at \$1.25 per acre. Due to poverty, fever, and lack of interest the project failed.

Orson Squire Fowler was a very influential if not altogether successful "architect". His influence spread all over America, Canada, and according to him to many foreign nations as far away as the Sandwich Islands.<sup>28</sup> Long before Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright he upheld the idea of "form follows function".

He says in Home...

It is hardly possible to have a truly handsome house without its being capable of being made as handy inside as it is beautiful outside... I repeat, beauty and utility are as closely united in architecture as they are throughout all of Nature<sup>29</sup>

No, his is talking about utility not design. It's a concept used a lot by Dunning too.

He was also influential in his endeavors in the social sciences. His interest and emphasis on hereditary and physiological factors in matrimony are very similar to our present science of eugenics which is the study of hereditary improvement through genetic control.<sup>30</sup>

As a final note concerning Fowler's interest in social sciences particularly love and marriage, I would like to include a quote from an associate of Fowler, Max Bachert who accused him of "sexual intrigues" and:

...sustaining the most disreputable relationship with certain female quacks, and writing to them grossly immoral letters, which actually undertook to systemize sexual vice<sup>31</sup>

*Why put this in? Explain what it could be used for. See notes to Fowler!*

Having looked at O.S. Fowler the "architect", phrenologist, and social scientist, his home, his book, and the fad which resulted, I would now like to give an example of the octagonal domestic structure, "The Little House at Blandome".

By way of organization I will discuss the house from standpoints of social history — deed and ownership, various uses of the structure, and historical significance; and from the standpoints of physical description and history — location, exterior, interior, and chronology of construction.

On September 14, 1872, Laura Tucker, wife of John Randolph Tucker, bought the land known as Blandome from Jacob and Rachel Fuller for \$6,500.00.<sup>32</sup>

Laura Tucker sold the land through St. George Tucker on October 27, 1904 to W.N. Key.<sup>33</sup>

On November 7, 1910, W.N. Key sold the land to one R.A. DePriest.<sup>34</sup>

At this point, I found a gap in the deeds and the next one I found states that on April 28, 1917 one H.L. Walker bought the land for \$4,000.00 from Washington & Lee University through Paul M. Penick who was entrusted by the university to sell the lot if the owner D.C. Humphreys did not pay the semi-annual coupons due to W & L on December 1, 1916. Humphreys did not pay and therefore, Penick put the house and land up for public auction after four weeks notice in the Rockbridge County News.<sup>35</sup>

H.L. Walker was the father of the present owner Mrs. C.M. Wood. The land and house have been in the family since 1917 then.

"The Little House at Blandome" was completed during the week of May 12, 1890, and was constructed by John Randolph Tucker who was at that time president of the Washington & Lee University Law School and a professor. The following announcement appeared in "The Lexington Gazette" on May 12, 1890

Honorable J.R. Tucker has had an office building erected on the south side of his dwelling. We understand that the law class of Washington & Lee will meet Mr. Tucker at his law office in the future<sup>36</sup>

The original use of the building, hereafter referred to as the cottage, was as a law office and classroom for W & L students of law. From the time that J.R. Tucker sold the house and cottage in 1904 and the time that H.L. Walker bought the estate, I was unable to discover the use of the cottage. It would be safe to assume that it was either used as an office or a family retreat. When H.L. Walker bought the estate, the cottage became used as a guest house, office, and a rather elegant playhouse. In 1970, the cottage was renovated by Mrs. C.M. Wood and her son Mr. H. Wood, to be used as student housing. That is its function to date.

*fits in with  
Tucker's  
School  
idea?*

The only major historical significance of the cottage is that it served as the office for J.R. Tucker who was a very influential resident and professor.

The cottage has several names including, "The Little House at Blandome", "The Octagon House", and "The Cottage". The only official naming that I know of comes from the Lexington Post



Office. The way this came about is as follows: I was fortunate enough to rent the cottage in June of 1972. Until then no one had ever established a mailing address for the cottage so I went to the Post Office to request an official street number. The Post official, in the quaint manner of many a small town public servant, suggested no number but rather two names, "The Little House at Blandome" or "The Octagon House", either of which would suffice for the mails. I chose "The Little House at Blandome" and still receive mail at that address. I did receive a street number later, 101<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> Tucker St., but use both at whim.

To begin the physical history and description, the official address, as stated above, is 101<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> Tucker Street, Lexington, Virginia, 24450. It is part of the estate known as "Blandome" owned by Mrs. C.M. Wood, which is located between Fuller and Tucker Streets.

The general form of the exterior may seem like a slight deviation from the paper, <sup>since</sup> but it is a septagon, <sup>but</sup> The interior is an octagon which makes it a worthwhile example for the paper. The linear dimensions of the walls are paired as can be seen on the floor plan at the end of the paper; there are two walls 12 ft. 7 in., two walls 12 ft. 9 in., two walls 10 ft. 6 in., and one wall 4 ft. 4 in. All the exterior walls are 10 ft. tall crowned by a continuous cornice and a tin roof. There is only one story and no basement.

The structure of the house is the basic frame method popular since colonial times in America. The foundation of the cottage is brick in common bond, except for the added bathroom

*possibly a ballroom frame  
with a porch  
a porch +  
joined on.*

which will be mentioned later. The exterior walls are covered with clapboards from ground to cornice.

The cottage has excellent cross-ventilation with two windows and one door. The largest window is located on the western side of the house, is of the sash type, and measures 3 ft. 4 in. by 7 ft. 0 in. The smaller window faces northeast and is also of the sash type, measuring 2 ft. 8 in. by 3 ft. 9 in. This smaller window was added during the renovation in 1970. The front door is 6 ft. 7 in. by 3 ft. 5 in. and consists of four panels and two windows. On the south end of the added bathroom is a sash window measuring 1 ft. 11 in. by 3 ft. 2 in.

The only decorative architectural details are the cornice and a porch on the north side. At one time, previous to the renovation, there were large shutters on the large window. One utilitarian feature is the chimney which rises out of the roof and extends about two feet. The tin roof, mentioned earlier, is very low and at this writing is painted green. The entire remainder of the cottage is white.

The interior, as mentioned earlier, is an octagon. The eighth wall comes from a 4 ft. 10 in. wall between the two south walls which are 12 ft. 7 in. on the exterior and 8 ft. 3 in. on the interior. The interior walls are 9 ft. 9 in. and have a 3 ft. wainscoting capped by a simple molding. The upper sections of the walls are plaster as is the ceiling. The floors are hardwood painted brown.

The only interior access is a door (hollow core) between the main room and the added bathroom. It measures 2 ft. 0 in. by 6 ft. 8 in.

There is a fire place extending from floor to ceiling on the 4 ft. 10 in. wall. The fireplace was originally brick but was covered by wallboard during the renovation. In 1972, I covered the walboard with rough plaster so that it would harmonize with the rest of the house. Also during the renovation, the fireplace was plugged and a gas heater was installed.

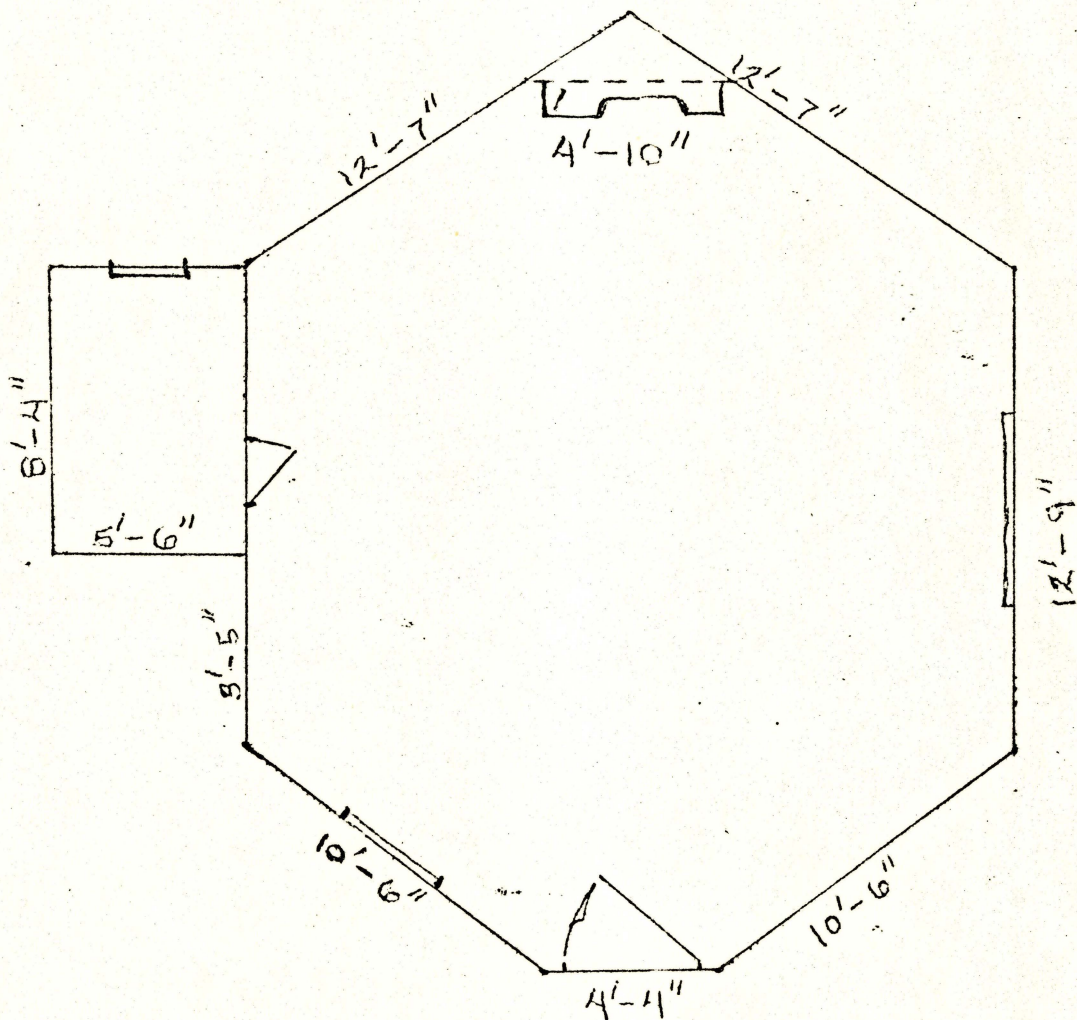
The only decorative features of the interior is a very simple molding which goes around both windows of the main room. There is no mantel over the fireplace.

The only major alterations were the addition of the bathroom in 1970 which measures 5 ft. 6 in. by 8 ft. 4 in. Its foundation is concrete and the walls are the same as the rest of the cottage except that there is no wainscoting on the interior. Also at this time there were repairs made to the floor.

As mentioned earlier I now live in the cottage. I must admit that its octagonal design makes for interesting planning and arrangement. I believe some of Fowler's ideas about the octagon were sound, such as the abundance of light and the ease of movement. I will leave all other decisions to those who should study Fowler and his Home for All...

All my information about the physical aspects of the cottage came from my own measurements and from the owner, Mrs. C.M. Wood and her son Harry Wood.

*Good!  
A very interesting  
Paper  
A 95*



APPROXIMATE FLOOR PLAN : BLANDOME

FOOTNOTES

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4. Ibid., p. xv.
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6. Ibid., p. 48.
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10. Ibid., p. 82.
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16. Ibid.
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18. Ibid., p. 18.
19. Ibid., p. 19.
20. Heads & Headlines, p. 89.
21. A Home for All, p. 130.
22. Ibid., p. 150.
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26. A Home for All, p. 157.
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28. Heads & Headlines, p. 93.
29. A Home for All, p. 87.
30. Dictionary of American Biographies, p. 566.
31. Heads & Headlines, p. 242.
32. Records of the County of Rockbridge, Virginia, Deed Book MM, pp. 391-392.
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5. Holbrook, Stewart H., Dreamers of the American Dream, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1957.
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