

HOME DESIGN

Builder's vision took shape in custom Carousel House

By Madeleine McDermott Hamm

A few houses in Houston are so individualistic the public gives them names. The funky Beer Can House in the West End, the stately Queen of the Sabine in Old Sixth Ward and the now-demolished Witch's Hat House on Fannin come to mind.

And in Meyerland, there's Bob and Jean Cohen's home, known as the Carousel House.

The home gets its name from the unusual round section, with white Fiberglas panels and a pleated roof, that dominates the corner property.

"This is a quite extraordinary production, a circular, steel-framed pavilion, capped with a folded plate roof, which is only part of a much larger contemporary style house," states the American Institute of Architects' 1999 *Houston Architectural Guide* under a picture of the house on page 283.

Bob Cohen, 85, designed and built boats, banks and other commercial structures in his lifetime, but it's his house that defines his accomplishments.

"It's my baby," he says, lovingly, as he stands in the rotunda that includes a curving living room with a bar and a kitchen behind a Brazilian rosewood wall that stops far short of the center skylight 16 feet overhead.

"Sometimes people ask if this room rotates, and I say, 'No, the rest of the house rotates around it.'"

That's a hint at the impish sense of humor and the need to do something different that have long driven Cohen. His designing days began during World War II, when he built poker tables and bars. That led to Starcrafters pleasure boats, which eventually became Triumph Industries. "I loved building something that moves," he says.

While the house really doesn't rotate, you do feel as if you're going in circles as Cohen leads a tour of the residence he built in 1964.

"I spent about 10 months designing the house in my spare time, and about another 10 months building it. It was all very exacting," he recalls. The details definitely don't sound like most residen-



Bob and Jean Cohen sit in the curl of the 32-foot-long custom velour sofa.



Ann Cohen
A rosewood divider wall and a skylight are visible from the entry.



Steve Campbell photos / Chronicle
Because of its unusual round shape, the Cohens' home has been dubbed the Carousel House.



With glass above and below, the curved, silk-paneled wall seems to float. More than 183,000 tiny squares of walnut cover the floor in the living and dining rooms.

tial projects.

- Approximately 104 piers support the house, which contains more than 15,000 pounds of steel in the structure.

- The rotunda cantilevers out seven feet from the circular center base. Around the perimeter, steel beams called bents rise to meet the railroad tracks that support the pleated roof. The tracks radiate from the steel ring around the skylight, sandwiched between plywood finished with a polyurethane coating outside and Sheetrock and acoustical plaster inside.

- Outside, the rotunda's white roof and white marine-Fiberglas panels contrast with the dark brown steel frame. Inside, the curving wall is lined with horizontal shikii silk-covered panels designed to facilitate hanging and rearranging artwork. Gray glass above and below the paneled wall lets in daylight and makes the wall appear to float.

- More than 183,000 tiny squares of walnut cover the floor in the living room and dining room.

- Electrical outlets, hinges and other hardware, even air-conditioning vents, are cleverly concealed.

- Many cabinets, dressers, bookshelves and a see-through aquarium are either built in or were made by Cohen just for the house. A custom 32-foot sofa upholstered in deep blue velour follows the contour of the round wall until its end curls into a semicircle.

- Staggered Arkansas ledge stone used as the linear exterior facade gives texture to one wall in a guest bedroom and in the dining room.

- A glassed-in sunken tub and adjoining shower feel like a private garden surrounded on two sides by palms and other tropical plants.

- For the Cohens' two sons — both now grown — a walnut accordion-pleated door could be opened or closed to separate identical bedroom spaces with built-in desks.

These days the back room, which leads to the swimming pool, contains a 61-inch television, and it's called the media room. When the boys were growing up, it also held a pool table and was more of a game room.

The Cohens love to entertain and fondly remember hosting 250 people for a seated dinner once.

There are only three steps between the two levels of the house, but negotiating them is too difficult for Jean Cohen these days. So the Cohens are currently living in a Galleria-area high rise. The views are spectacular and the staff spoils them, but they left their hearts and favorite memories in Meyerland on Moonlight Street.



Modeleine McDermott Hamm is the *Chronicle's* home design editor.