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# A Photographer's Childhood Dream of Living in a Round House Comes Full Circle

It started as a fun school assignment. Years later, Richard James and Annette Koberlein-James spent \$3.05 million bringing the home to life

*By Vaishnavi Nayel Talawadekar*

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Owning a round house had always been high on fine-art photographer Richard James's wishlist. "It started when I was a little boy," says Richard, 65. "A teacher at school asked the class to design a house. I pulled out a compass and drew a big circle and divided that circle up into areas for living and dining and sleeping. This drawing still exists, buried away in my memory boxes."

The childhood fantasy took on a life of its own some years later when a 50-something Richard took a tour of the Philip Johnson Glass House in New Canaan, Conn., and returned with photos to show his wife, equity trader Annette Koberlein-James, now 56.



The home's interior highlights nature with a curved, forest-inspired print by Richard on one side and a 20-foot living wall featuring over 1,000 individual plants on the other.

JULIE BIDWELL FOR WSJ (2)

As Annette recalls, seeing those images inspired in her an epiphany. "As I checked out the pictures and heard his stories about the place, I could actually imagine myself living there. That was a shock since I'm big on privacy. The house had this cool vibe

—open and spacious but still quiet and cozy. I loved how the natural landscape wrapped around the glass structure, making it feel really peaceful,” she says.

As people who enjoy being near nature and animals, the couple—who lived between homes in Garden City, N.Y., and Manhattan’s Upper West Side—took their time finding the perfect spot. In 2016, after multiple weekend visits, they found a 36-acre property in the tranquil Connecticut town of Kent. “This little town met all our requirements: good restaurants, art galleries, a cheese shop and a bookstore. We couldn’t think of a better place to build the cottage of our dreams,” says Annette. The couple purchased the property the same year for \$1.4 million.

Although they didn’t know what they wanted their new round home to look like, they did know what they wanted it to feel like: cocooning and calm, with nature on either side of the threshold. They hired Okan Oncel of POP Architecture for the architecture and Rod Pleasants of McIver Morgan for the interior design. The brief was to create a house with expansive views, a meditative aura, and clean, straight lines—all in a budget of \$2.67 million.

“We didn’t enter the process with a long list of must-haves,” says Annette. “Rich has worked with creative pros for a long time and really respects the artistic process. During the project, he was great about letting the design team have the freedom to treat the house as their own and get as creative as they wanted.”

Inspired by the naturally sloping topography, Oncel designed the home to grow out of the landscape, shaping it like a circle and arranging the bedrooms, bathrooms, powder room, kitchen, study, lounge and living and dining areas around the edges. Even so, the final version was the result of several iterations.

“The initial blueprint suggested an interior of 5,000 square feet, but construction cost was a concern, so we decided to pivot,” says Annette. But downsizing didn’t mean downgrading, and the new 2,600-square-foot, double-height home stayed true to the couple’s vision. The radial floor plan ensured that every element, from structure to staircase to windows, followed the curvature of the house, while also keeping nature front and center by way of a 21-foot-high circular gallery with a skylight that reveals the emerald forest above. The couple also summoned nature indoors with a 20-foot living wall comprising over 1,000 individual plants and a curved print by Richard, placed opposite, that mirrors it in scale and signature.



The study, staircase, gallery and kitchen all echo the curvature of the home.

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Despite its sweeping proportions, not everything inside is round. Exceptions include the walls in the primary bedrooms and common areas. “While I might hang work on some curved walls in the future, mostly in the gallery, for now most of my work appears on the home’s straight walls, with the exception of the 20-foot mural, which does curve. It’s pretty cool!” he says, adding that the rationale was to keep the focus on the ultimate artist: nature.

The couple agrees that the home, which cost them \$3.05 million and took one year to design and additional two to build, was worth the wait; the structure was finally completed in June 2023. “We love living here full time,” says Annette. “One day, I woke up around 4 a.m. and wandered out of the bedroom to the lower level of the open gallery. There were no lights on, just moonlight pouring in from the skylight and the big curved windows upstairs. Walking through this incredible moonlit space with its 21-foot-high curved walls felt like a scene out of a futuristic movie.”

The couple also enjoys the company of some wonderful neighbors—none human. There is a gaggle of wild turkeys, a bobcat and a big bear they have christened Ro-Bear. “They’re the best neighbors. As for human ones? It’s a big change from living in the city; there’s not a single soul in sight,” says Richard.

### **Corrections & Amplifications**

An earlier version of this article incorrectly spelled Annette Koberlein-James’s last name. An earlier version of this article incorrectly spelled Philip Johnson’s first name. (Corrected on Sept. 18)