

The Geodesic Dome

As the previous examples have shown, Hinman has for virtually all of its existence been open to experimenting in new and sometimes even wild concepts. While this mostly involves social regulations concerning housing policy, sometimes it even included the construction of new structures. One example comes from the earliest days of Hinman history and concerns the construction of a geodesic dome on the grounds of Hinman.

In 1969, a commune from Colorado called Libre visited the SUNY Binghamton campus and preached a message of love and peace. Although they did not stay long, the message of the commune affected students so much that it inspired them into action. At first it was suggested that students at Binghamton start their own commune. Faculty Master Pete Gruber offered an alternative. Gruber suggested that the group build a structure on campus that reflected the message of the commune and offered space on Hinman College grounds for construction and even money from Hinman College's coffers to pay for materials needed to build the structure. Walter D. Lowen, who at the time was the Dean of Advanced Technology, even offered technical advice for the students. It was decided upon by the students that the structure that was best able to represent the message that they wanted to get across would be a geodesic dome.¹

The geodesic dome was a structural concept that was created and made popular by one of the most famous renaissance men of that generation: R. Buckminster Fuller. Fuller was born in Milton, Massachusetts in 1895, and adapted the beliefs of the New England Transcendentalists. He was an architect by profession, though he was never officially trained as an architect and in fact never even earned a degree and didn't even receive a license until he was well into his 60's. Besides being an architect, he was also a mathematician, inventor, philosopher, and poet. He coined the term "Spaceship Earth" and throughout his life preached that only by fully

understanding technology and its implications could humanity find enlightenment and salvation. Fuller, while creating many novel new concepts in architecture, was most famous for his geodesic dome, which could stand on the ground as a complete structure and had no limiting dimensions. “The strength of the frame actually increases in ratio to its size, enclosing the largest volume of space with the least area of surface.”² The dome was a revolutionary development in architecture and the perfect structure to build that would represent the message that the students were trying to get across.

Three individuals stood up as leaders in the construction of the dome. Oddly enough none of them were Hinmanites and none of them were even enrolled at SUNY Binghamton. They were Michael Bomstein, a junior at Syracuse University, Joseph Hryvniak, a junior at Rochester, and Naomi Aronson, a junior at SUNY Albany.³ At first, many students were interested in the structure and assisted in its construction. As time went by, though, and the dome slowly rose, students began to lose interest and eventually only the three originators of the project were left to finish its construction. The total cost of the dome was around \$200, most of which came from a grant given by Hinman College to the student contractors.⁴ Construction was finally completed in the Spring of 1970.⁵

There were many ideas on what the dome would be used for. Pete Gruber saw the dome as a “center for community activities of Hinman College, and a storage area for student belongings during summers.”⁶ Gruber supported the project because it was not that expensive, and he saw the dome as a way for students to come together and complete a difficult and worthwhile project together. He also saw it as a way for students to learn about where money in institutions like a university comes from and how to use those funds effectively. The

construction of the dome also served as a recreational activity, as would the finished structure itself.⁷

The students saw the dome in a different light. They imagined the completed dome as a sort of sanctuary from the rest of the college experience. They saw it as a place where higher learning could take place and where more artistic concepts of dance, sensory awareness, design and other non-verbal forms of expression and education could be taught and discussed. They also saw the construction of the dome itself as an educational experience. Each individual part of the dome relied upon another structural part, illustrating the concept that the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. The dome also had a more spiritual function. It was a testament of the philosophy of Buckminster Fuller that humanity could use its environment and its resources to not only design structures but to shape their destiny for the better.⁸

The dome, like many other of the pioneering ventures of Hinman College, would not last. The dome was originally located where the Hinman Library is currently located, and when construction of that building began it was moved to a spot adjacent to the Hinman Commons building (where the Dynamo Monument currently stands). There was a great deal of protest concerning the movement of the dome. Angry letters to the editor came into the *Hinman Halitosis* newsletter and students voiced their concerns. Some students even pulled up the surveyor's stakes in the construction area, which besides delaying construction also cost the university an extra \$1,000.⁹ Sometime between 1974 and 1975 the dome was permanently dismantled and removed from Hinman grounds.

The sad reality is that the dome never really lived up to anyone's expectations. It never really became a center for community activities as Faculty Master Gruber envisioned and it never became the symbol of peace, love and togetherness the world over as the student body

believed it would. At most, the dome was a spectacle, an interesting marvel to admire as one walked toward Hinman College.¹⁰ Still, whatever the dome lacked it was but another example of the eagerness for experimentation with novel concepts within Hinman.

¹ Jeff Pleva, "Harpur's Own Geodesic Dome," *The Colonial News*, September 16, 1969.

² E.J. Applewhite, "Who Was Buckminster Fuller?" Buckminster Fuller Institute, <http://bfi.org/node/587>.

³ Jay Urwitz, "SUAB 'People' Dome Rises," *The Press*, Binghamton, NY, August 8, 1969 and Pleva, "Harpur's Own Geodesic Dome," *The Colonial News*, September 16, 1969.

⁴ Jay Urwitz, "SUAB 'People' Dome Rises," *The Press*, Binghamton, NY, August 8, 1969.

⁵ C.P. Gruber et al, "Programming," *Brief Overview of Hinman College Development*, Hinman Archives.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jeff Pleva, "Harpur's Own Geodesic Dome," *The Colonial News*, September 16, 1969.

⁹ "Editor's Note," *Hinman Halitosis*, Vol. I, no. 17, May 6, 1971.

¹⁰ Bob Giomi, telephone conversation with author, November 29, 2006.