

# R. BUCKMINSTER FULLER



In 1927, R. Buckminster (“Bucky”) Fuller was a failed businessman who was drinking too much, depressed about the death of his first daughter, and worried about how to take care of his family. That winter, while living in Chicago, he walked out to Lake Michigan to throw himself into its icy waters. “I said to myself, ‘I’ve done the best I know how and it hasn’t worked. I guess I’m just no good,’” he remembered. Fuller gave himself a choice: jump or think. He stood on the lakeshore for hours, finally deciding that he didn’t have the right to kill himself. And so began Fuller’s career as an inventor, thinker, and futurist.

From that point on, Fuller thought of his life as an experiment designed to discover what he could “do effectively on behalf of all humanity that could not be accomplished by great nations, great religions or private enterprise.” He christened himself “Guinea Pig B” (B for Bucky) and started “thinking about our total planet Earth and thinking realistically about how to operate it on an enduringly sustainable basis as the magnificent human-passengered spaceship that it is.” The results of Fuller’s lifelong experiment include the geodesic dome, new types of houses and cars, and a new kind of geometry. Underlying all of his work was the profound realization he had come to that night in Chicago, that he could “find ways of giving human beings more energy-effective” systems and machines that would create a higher quality of living for everyone. “Under those more favorable physical circumstances,” he wrote, “humans would dare to be less selfish and more genuinely thoughtful toward one another.”

Anyone who had watched Fuller growing up would have been surprised at his desperate circumstances in 1927. Richard Buckminster Fuller, Jr., was born in 1895 to a wealthy and long-established Massachusetts family. Although his father died in 1907, Bucky had an active and fairly happy childhood.

*Fig:5.*

INVENTOR  
BY RICHARD BUCKMINSTER FULLER

The family spent its summers on a private island off the coast of Maine, and as a teenager he attended Milton Academy, a prestigious prep school. In 1913, like four generations of Fullers before him, he entered Harvard University.

Fuller never really fit into Harvard's rigid social structure, and he earned only a C average. At the end of his freshman year, he took the college money his mother had put away and went to New York City, where he spent all of it and more trying to romance a Ziegfeld Follies dancer. The university expelled him for "irresponsible conduct."

After getting kicked out of Harvard a second time, Fuller met and married Anne Hewlett, who also came from a venerable family. During World War I, his mother secured him an officer's commission in the navy by donating one of the family's boats. Fuller loved the navy; he patrolled the northeastern coast for much of the war, and later designed a mast-and-winch system to rescue seaplane pilots. After the war, he began working with his father-in-law on a concrete-block building system. Although their investors had high hopes, the American construction industry stuck to traditional techniques, and in 1927, with the company failing, Fuller was forced to quit. He was a new father, jobless, and broke when he walked out to Lake Michigan.

After his epiphany, Bucky Fuller resolved to think before he did anything. For a year he kept silent, speaking only when he was sure he had something important to say. He thought about what he could do to help people live better. He started with something he already knew a bit about, and which was also a basic human need: building shelter. And he had an idea for a new way to build. Fuller knew that while conventional buildings' strength came from compression—stacking bricks on top of each other—tension was far more efficient. Steel, for example, can support twenty times more weight suspended from it (as with the steel cables of a suspension bridge) than placed on top of it.

In 1929, Fuller unveiled the Dymaxion House, a residence unlike anything that had ever been built. (An advertising writer dreamed up the word Dymaxion, from "dynamic," "maximum," and "tension.") At the center of the house was a tall pole, the "mast," from which the body of the six-sided house

In 1959, Buckminster Fuller and his wife, Anne, built a geodesic dome that served as their home in Carbondale, Illinois, where he taught at Southern Illinois University.

