

Bucky Fuller: prophet, seer, marathon talker

By Peter F. Drucker

Reminiscence

I bumped into Bucky Fuller—literally — while working on the tenth anniversary issue of *Fortune* in 1940 with Henry Luce. I backed out of an editor's office and straight into something in the hall that skittered away. A soft heavy object came crashing down, knocking me off my feet. It pulled itself up into a sitting position next to where I lay sprawled on the floor, and said in a matter-of-fact voice, "You have set back the industrial development of South America by at least 10 years," got to its feet, and stalked off. Buckminster Fuller had been standing on top of a wheeled scaffolding to draw graphs of the

world's future economy on the ceiling and walls.

By now, Bucky — no one has ever called him anything else, though he lists himself in all reference books as "Richard" — is a world myth. He has the longest entry in "Who's Who in America," 75 lines. He has more honorary doctorates than anyone else I ever heard of, 37 of them, perhaps a few more than anyone really needs. His books are best-sellers, his lectures draw standing-room-only crowds, and he is a folk hero of the young.

But when I first met Bucky he was quite unknown, though nearing 50. He had worked obsessively for two decades turning out ideas and inventions. Yet for long years on end the family had to subsist on

BUCKY: *'What Bucky needed above all . .*

5 (Continued from Page G-1)

whatever his wife could earn as a secretary. Bucky's few friends — he was always a solitary — tended to be infuriated at his single-minded pursuit of harebrained ideas when he so easily could have made a good living. For Bucky had a deserved reputation as a forecaster and analyst of technology.

There was his forecast, for instance, of the developments that would make possible the airplane of the future. In 1929, so the story goes, Donald Douglas, already a leader among the younger designers, came to Bucky with a rough sketch of his "airplane of the future" for which then there was no aerodynamic theory, no engines, and no materials. And Bucky told him what was needed to build the airplane of his design — the theory, the engines, and the metals — and that it would be available 10 years hence, in 1939. Ten years later Douglas built the prototype of what became World War II's most advanced bomber, the Flying Fortress, to Bucky's specifications. A few years after that, Bucky performed a similar feat (to many people it smelled of witchcraft) in predicting and timing for one of the major copper companies the future emergence of what we now call "electronics."

He could have had any number of similar assignments, and at good fees. Yet he only took one of them when he was desperate — when, for instance, his daughter was very sick and he needed

money to pay the medical bills. Otherwise he stubbornly rode his hobby horse of geometric designs, to which he gave weird names, "Dymaxion," "Plydome," "Tetra-helix," or "Tensegrity," designs that did not seem to serve any purpose even when they worked, as they occasionally did.

Bucky was on a Fortune retainer as a "technical consultant" and had been hired by Henry Luce himself, though Luce, as he once told me, had no idea what Bucky was up to and did not understand a word he said.

Bucky calls himself a geometer. But he sees more than the order of the earth, which is what "geometry" means. He experiences the order and the rhythm of space, or to use an old-fashioned term, the "harmony of the spheres."

Even Bucky's friends and admirers in those early years used to consider him "impractical." Bucky always denied this — indeed the accusation was one of the few things that could make him indignant. Otherwise he was singularly even-tempered. But whenever anyone hinted at his being "impractical," he would get shrill and lose his temper. People, Bucky felt, were "impractical," not he. And indeed part of Bucky's trouble was that he tried too hard to be "practical"

He applied his strange designs to everyday objects in order to be practical: automobiles, houses, road maps. And he could not understand why people were not

willing to shift to a three-wheeler car that had to be entered from the top or crawled into from underneath for the sake of a little fuel-saving or "clean" aerodynamic lines.

The "Dymaxion House" — a half-sphere on a slab — combines the maximum floor area with the smallest surface and therefore the lowest requirements for heating or cooling. It also combines structural rigidity and stability close to the theoretical maximum, with extreme lightness of construction that needs practically no structural supports. Bucky could not understand why people still preferred to live in geometrically imperfect rectangular houses which had wall space and into which furniture fitted.

The "Dymaxion Map" was the first to portray portions of the surface of a globe, the earth for example, on a flat plane without distortion. But the map had to be a conic section with rounded edges and triangular points at both ends — and Bucky could not understand why people were willing to accept the slight distortion of a conventional area map rather than use undistorted maps that looked like cut-out paper dolls.

Actually, every one of these designs was eminently "practical," but for new and different uses. The "Dymaxion Car" has been used extensively in space design. The "Dymaxion House" became the prototype for "radomes," the automated sensing stations of the air-warning system in the Arctic,

was an audience, and preferably a large one.'

and in the last quarter century for pavilions, sports stadiums, and exhibition halls. And when the astronauts first went into orbit and needed maps without distortion, they began to use "Dymaxion Maps." But I believe Bucky finds it difficult to understand what people meant when they called him "impractical" 40 years ago.

I did see a good deal of Bucky over a 10-year span. He refused to join the faculty at Bennington College where I taught during

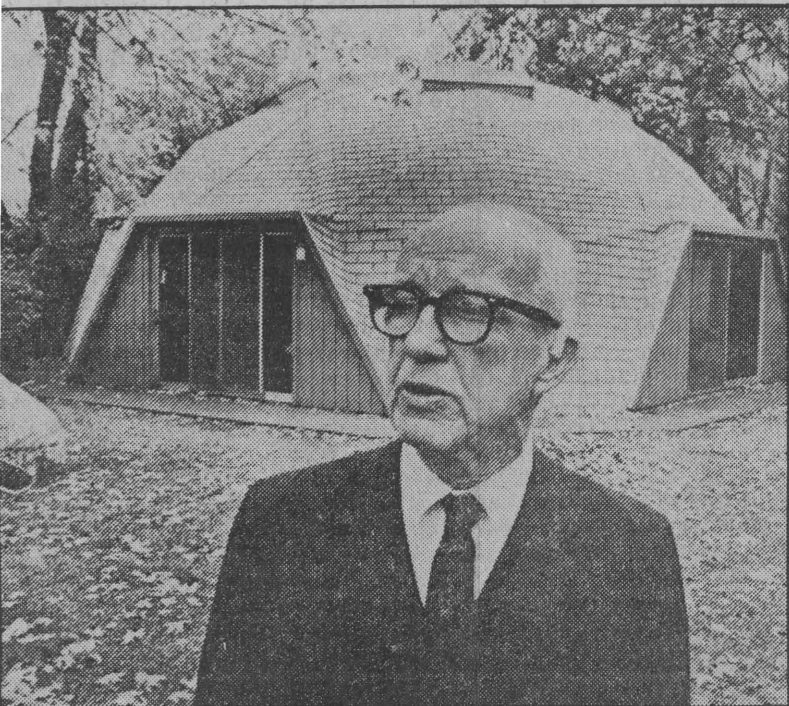
most of the '40s. But he often came to talk to the students — I believe the Bennington students were his first and for many years his main audience. For what Bucky needed above all — more than recognition, more than money — was an audience, and preferably a large one. He is awkward with small groups and uncomfortable with an individual; but give him a large group and he becomes a performer without peer.

When I introduced Bucky at his

first speech at Bennington, I told the audience that he would talk for 45 minutes and then answer questions. Four hours later Bucky was still talking, and when I tried to break in, he waved me aside and said, "I'm still on my introduction."

I think we forced him to stop around one in the morning. It was a mistake. We should have let him keep on talking — later on we did. There is no point setting a time limit on a Bucky Fuller "happening."

No one ever remembers a word Bucky says. But nobody ever forgets the experience. It is like being in a verbal Jacuzzi — a pool of warm, swirling water, relaxing yet constantly moving and challenging. And the experience is never about Buckminster Fuller. Indeed most of the people who listen to him do not remember too distinctly what he looks like, let alone how he speaks or moves or acts. What they experience — and what every audience, since those Bennington students almost 40 years ago, has experienced — is Bucky Fuller's vision. Bucky Fuller calls himself a geometer, but he is in fact a seer.



Bucky Fuller and his famous dome: A venerable 'world myth'

Peter Drucker is a well-known writer on modern business management and philosopher of American society. From the book "Adventures of a Bystander." Copyright © 1978; 1979 by Peter F. Drucker. Reprinted by permission of Harper & Row Publications, Inc.