

When the future knocked on DeLand's door

By **Noah Hertz** - June 2, 2023



PHOTO COURTESY FULLER INSTITUTE

THE MAN AND HIS VISION — Futurist, inventor, writer and speaker R. Buckminster Fuller stands in front of the skeleton of a geodesic dome, a structure he popularized in the mid-20th century. Domes like this one can be found throughout Florida, and a number of smaller structures were built around DeLand in the 1980s when the visionary invested in a research park in the city.

Strange dome structures dot the landscape near the DeLand Municipal Airport. These geodesic domes, similar to the recognizable structure at Disney's EPCOT theme park, have a notable place in DeLand's history.

It all began in 1980, when futurist, philosopher and inventor R. Buckminster Fuller came to town.

Fuller was already well-known by then. Born in 1895 in Massachusetts, Fuller made a name for himself through his writings, inventions and optimistic outlook on the future of humanity. Fuller popularized the geodesic dome, a structure centered around geometric efficiency. One of the most famous domes is the iconic main attraction at Walt Disney World's EPCOT near Orlando. The large structure houses the "Spaceship Earth" ride, named for a phrase Fuller coined.



PHOTO COURTESY WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

LOOK FAMILIAR? — Walt Disney World's EPCOT theme park has used a 180-foot-tall geodesic dome as the park's logo since it opened in 1982. Inside the dome is *Spaceship Earth*, a ride about the development of humanity and evolutions in communication. While known by just the name EPCOT nowadays, the theme park's name was originally styled as an acronym that stood for "Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow" when it opened in 1982. And Disney definitely had Fuller on its mind. The ride's name comes from Fuller's 1969 book, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*. Fuller said he described Earth as one big spaceship to stress the importance of working together to steer it in the right direction.

Fuller appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, and he was even recognized with a Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Ronald Reagan.

Fuller's designs — not just for buildings, but for housing, cars and even how to work with other people — were based in geometry. Among other things, Fuller believed housing could be maximized to ensure all people had a place to live. He believed the same about relationships between people, too, coining the term "synergy," meaning, from Merriam-Webster: "a mutually advantageous conjunction or compatibility of distinct business participants or elements (such as resources or efforts)."

So when Stetson University announced the eccentric visionary was coming to the school's DeLand campus Oct. 10, 1980, there was plenty of excitement.

Especially since his visit was announced only a week in advance.

"This is an unexpected announcement," read a story in the Oct. 4, 1980, edition of the *DeLand Sun News*, "because Stetson learned about Fuller's appearance

only late last week, according to the university.”

“Internationally-acclaimed world-system genius and geodesic pioneer Buckminster Fuller will be the guest lecturer at Stetson University Tuesday, Oct. 7,” a press release from the university read. “An Evening with Buckminster Fuller’ will feature the renowned architectural designer, inventor, futurist, theoretician and teacher in a program open to the public at no charge beginning at 8 p.m. in Elizabeth Hall Auditorium.”

At the event, the 84-year-old’s worldview was on full display.

From an Oct. 11, 1980, article in the *DeLand Sun News*: “A silver-haired visionary who wears four watches to indicate his travels of and involvement in the world community, Fuller on a visit to Stetson University Friday, asked, ‘How do you as an individual face up to the truth?’”

Fuller’s lecture also included his opinions on energy (it’ll be cheaper to pay people to stay home than to keep producing gasoline to commute, he said), television (kids are getting poisoned by their outsized TV time) and the acceleration of technology.

The way technology was advancing, he said, travel by car would be a thing of the past, and something more akin to Star Trek’s vision of instant transport was likely on the horizon.



COURTESY STETSON ARCHIVESR.

Buckminster Fuller gives a lecture at Stetson University in October 1980, complete with geometric designs to illustrate his talk.

“By 1985,” the *DeLand Sun News* reported Fuller saying, “we’ll have to send you around by radio.”

Rumblings began less than a week after Fuller’s talk at Stetson that the futurist was considering permanent roots in DeLand.

In coming to West Volusia, Fuller worked closely with local partner James Patterson, who grew up in DeBary. Speaking with the *DeLand Sun News*, Patterson kept things close to the vest.

“Patterson refused to confirm that Dr. Fuller is considering a research site in West Volusia, but conceded that he and Fuller were being ‘shown’ area properties during the weekend,” an Oct. 13, 1980, article in the *DeLand Sun News* said. “According to Patterson, ‘literally hundreds of people’ would finance Fuller’s research and ‘thousands of places in the world want Dr. Fuller.’”

However, Patterson himself bought property locally, he told the newspaper.

Less than a month later, Patterson was before the DeLand City Commission seeking approval on a lease for 12 acres of land near the DeLand Municipal Airport.

The intent for the property, the *DeLand Sun News* reported, was for Fuller's "scientific community and two domes." The DeLand City Commission, the *Sun News* said, couldn't approve the project any faster.

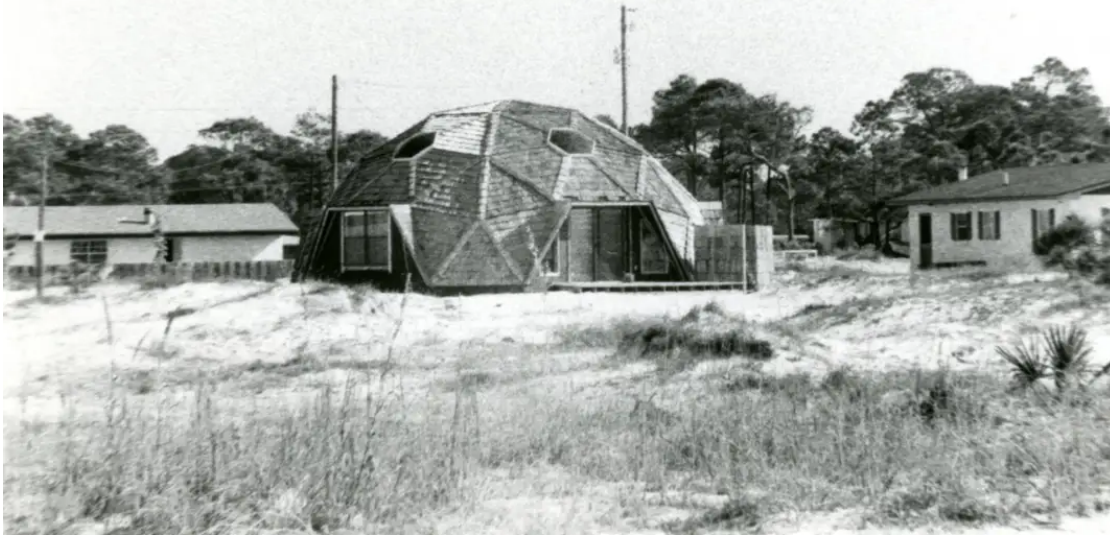
Fuller's presence in the city, then City Manager Phil Penland was reported saying, would boost the value of the industrial properties around the city's airport.

"But as important, Penland said, is the prestige a man of Fuller's stature could lend to DeLand," the *Sun News* reported. "It lends credence to this town,' he [Penland] said."

By April 1981, Fuller's plans had changed. What started as a 12-acre scientific park had morphed into a 20-acre proposal. While the City of DeLand's airport advisory committee was all for the project, Fuller had to scale back his plans from 20 acres to just 5.

The reason? Part of the acreage Patterson and Fuller were eyeing was often used, the *Sun News* reported, "by about 800 soccer players and for the city recreation department's football teams."

While Penland was reported as saying that Fuller's project wouldn't "evict them all," he hoped Fuller and the City Commission would come to an agreement on the scaled-back plan.



A Stetson University archival photo of the first Fuller dome built at the research park near the City of DeLand's Municipal Airport

By February of the following year, DeLand had come to a deal: Fuller got a whopping 60 acres of land for “Fuller’s archives, a science institute and the Fuller-Patterson Corp., a development laboratory for the futurist’s ideas,” the *Sun News* reported.

Construction began quickly, and the Fuller Patterson Corp. dream of DeLand domes was on full display.

A March 16, 1982, article published in the *DeLand Sun News* said the first dome built was intended as the first of many.

“Last month workers put a 39-foot dome at the research park in about six hours. On the ground the building looked like nothing but stacks and stacks of wooden triangles,” the *Sun News* reported. “Patterson hopes domes like this one will become a familiar sight in residential and business areas the world over.”

At the time, Fuller was preoccupied with his busy schedule of lecturing around the country.

Once construction was underway in March 1982, Fuller said he had seen photos and was looking forward to visiting the site in DeLand.

Later that month, Fuller's facility opened its doors. *The Sun News* reported that rains drew Fuller and the gaggle of reporters inside, and what followed was an "intimate" interview with the visionary about what he hoped to see in the future.

He touted a world where factories automated themselves, and what he called "livingry," or technology focused on preserving life and health, directly juxtaposed with weaponry.

The Fuller-Patterson project near the DeLand airport moved along after its construction finished. Businesses moved in, and more domes were built.



And then, on July 1, 1983, Buckminster Fuller died of a heart attack at the age of 87. The futurist was visiting his wife, who was hospitalized in Los Angeles, and died at her bedside.

Patterson told reporters there would be no immediate changes at the DeLand facility.

"The DeLand businessman said research on the geodesic dome and some of Fuller's other inventions continues at the one-year old DeLand complex," then-*Sun News* writer Barb Shepherd reported. "Patterson said he may be able to arrange to bring some of Fuller's Philadelphia research staff to work in DeLand, but added, 'everything right now is in a state of flux.'"

Even with Fuller gone, the development named for him in DeLand kept going. Businesses kept moving in — Daytona State College opened an office at the park in 1984, and an automotive manufacturer moved in in 1986 — more domes kept going up, and business was good.



PHOTO COURTESY STETSON UNIVERSITY
ARCHIVES

R. Buckminster Fuller, pictured at right, stands outside the Carlton Union Building in October 1980 around the time he gave a lecture to Stetson University students.

Former DeLand Economic Development Director Steve Burley worked in workforce development in Volusia County in the 1980s. He met Fuller and Patterson several times and remembered the meetings well.

“Fuller was pretty neat, because he was an internationally famous guy,” Burley told *The Beacon*. “Patterson and I developed a relationship. We were friends. It was nice to have somebody with money providing a tax base and jobs.”

One reason business remained good through the 1980s, Burley said, was that it began to drift away from Fuller’s original vision.

“You didn’t have room to build a dome big enough to build a big manufacturing facility out there,” Burley said. “They weren’t necessarily conducive to heavy equipment. Things with the domes kind of limped along, but it didn’t really start picking up until Patterson started building regular concrete buildings.”

By the late 1980s, the research park, filled with industrial development, shed the name of its visionary founder. R. Buckminster Fuller Park was rebranded as the DeLand Business and Industrial Park, and it still bears that name today.

In 1990, according to the *Sun News*, a foreclosure lawsuit was filed against Patterson for not keeping up with loan payments on the industrial park. The following year, Barnett Bank purchased the 10 lots that made up R. Buckminster Fuller Park for \$1.8 million. Nowadays, a number of different entities own parcels of land in the park.

While Fuller's name is gone from the property, his legacy is still there. The design of a geodesic dome adorns the sign that welcomes visitors and businesspeople into the industrial park — on Patterson Avenue, named for the park's other founder, who passed away in 2022 — and a number of the Fuller domes still stand today.

And, while the kind of research Fuller specialized in isn't being done at the park these days, there are still exciting businesses and other developments, DeLand's Economic Development Director Nick Conte told *The Beacon*.

What makes DeLand special, he said, is the unique spirit the city brings out of everyone, from businessmen to future-looking visionaries.

"There's a certain element," Conte said, "and it attracts real creative entrepreneurship."

One of the latest businesses to open up shop in the business park is DeLand's own Persimmon Hollow Brewing Co. The brewer still has its storefront in Downtown DeLand, but the recently opened beer garden at 1635 Patterson Ave. is an exciting addition to the roster of businesses near the city's municipal airport, Conte said.

Ultimately, Fuller's visit to and investment in DeLand was an episode that left quite an impact, even if the existing evidence is only visible to eagle-eyed DeLandites.

Buckminster Fuller's life

- Richard Buckminster Fuller was born July 12, 1895, in Milton, Massachusetts. He died July 1, 1983, in Los Angeles.
- Fuller was expelled twice from Harvard College, once for spending all of his money partying with a

vaudeville troupe, and then, after being readmitted, for “irresponsibility and lack of interest.”

- Fuller’s interest in efficient and affordable housing may have stemmed from the death of his daughter, Alexandra, who died in 1922 at the age of 3 of complications from polio and spinal meningitis, which Fuller connected to damp and drafty conditions in which he and his wife lived.

- Fuller often spoke of an experience he had in 1927 during a time of depression when he contemplated suicide. He reported feeling as though he were suspended above ground in a sphere of light, and hearing a voice declare, in part, “You do not have the right to eliminate yourself. You do not belong to you. You belong to the Universe.” Following that experience, Fuller said he embarked on “an experiment, to find what a single individual could contribute to changing the world and benefiting all humanity.”

— Info collected from Wikipedia

Trying out the dome for himself

The year is 1973.

Oil crises are in the news, and people across the world are worried that if they don’t shape up, they could be one of the last generations on Planet Earth. That’s what was on Tim De Palma’s mind.

A 20-year-old Stetson University student in 1973, De Palma became fascinated with the philosophy and ideas of R. Buckminster Fuller. He saw him speak in Washington, D.C., he read his writings and, as was documented in an edition of the university publication the *Stetson Cupola*, he tried his hand at building a geodesic dome of his own.

As part of a project in studying alternative urban lifestyles, De Palma built and lived in a dome for a little more than a month in the middle of the winter.



PHOTO COURTESY TIM DE PALMA
GIVING IT A SHOT — Then 20-year-old
Stetson University student Tim De Palma
built a geodesic dome of his own on the
university's campus in 1973. Built on a
concrete pad outside of Conrad Hall, De
Palma lived in the dome for a full
“minimester” for a project inspired by
Henry David Thoreau.

Talking to the *Cupola*, De Palma said the experience was a mixed bag.

From the *Cupola*:

“‘Well, it leaked,’ laughed Tim. The first few days brought rain, and sent Tim scurrying into a nearby dorm. ‘I almost scrapped the project,’ he said, ‘because everything inside and out was saturated.’ Luckily, however, a fellow student came up with enough plastic to cover the entire dome. After he dried it out, he set up housekeeping again. On sunny days, the plastic ‘umbrella’ comes off.”

Building the dome cost De Palma \$80, he told the *Cupola*, \$25 of which was just for nuts and bolts.

“I had no money, so I built it out of scrap lumber, and a friend was nice enough to let me use his table saw,” De Palma said, speaking to *The Beacon* 50 years later. “The surfaces were corrugated boards that I got from one or more of the appliance stores up and down Woodland Boulevard.”

De Palma laughed, “I would go dumpster diving and get their big pieces of cardboard. I cut them up with razor blades and then stapled them onto the triangles and painted them with orange paint and covered that with floor wax to make it waterproof.”

So what did De Palma take from the experience of living under the dome for two months?

At 20 years old, De Palma told the *Cupola* that his rickety dome set his imagination spinning with ideas of what he could do with more money and time. It wouldn't be homey, he told the *Cupola*, but it would be a good use of raw materials.

They're nice ecologically, because they use materials more efficiently,” he said in 1973.

Fifty years later, De Palma said the experience inspired an interest in city planning. He got his master's degree in community development and worked as a lawyer for almost 40 years. And while he tried to start a geodesic-dome-building business after he graduated from Stetson, that didn't stick the way his law career did.



BEACON PHOTOS/NOAH HERTZ

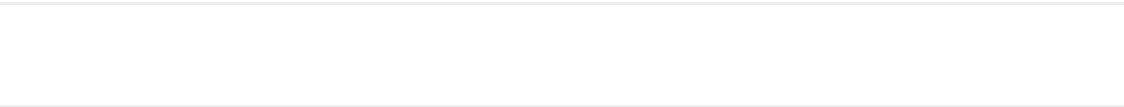
NOW — While it's not the hub for scientific research R. Buckminster Fuller imagined it as in the 1980s, the DeLand Business and Industrial Park on the city's northeast side is still bustling. A number of the geodesic domes built in the 1980s are still standing, too. Above, Kingdom Animalia, a pet store specializing in snakes off of Patterson Avenue, operates out of one.

Nowadays, De Palma lives right in the heart of Downtown Orlando. He can draw a direct line from his interest in Fuller to his digs in Downtown Orlando.

“One of the lessons I learned is I don't like sprawl,” De Palma said. “I don't like commuting. I always wanted to live close to my office.”

But more than that, De Palma was always struck by how Fuller was able to take complicated ideas, and bring them down to Earth.

“When you read about it,” De Palma said, “it’s like, ‘Oh, yeah, why didn’t I think about that?’”



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