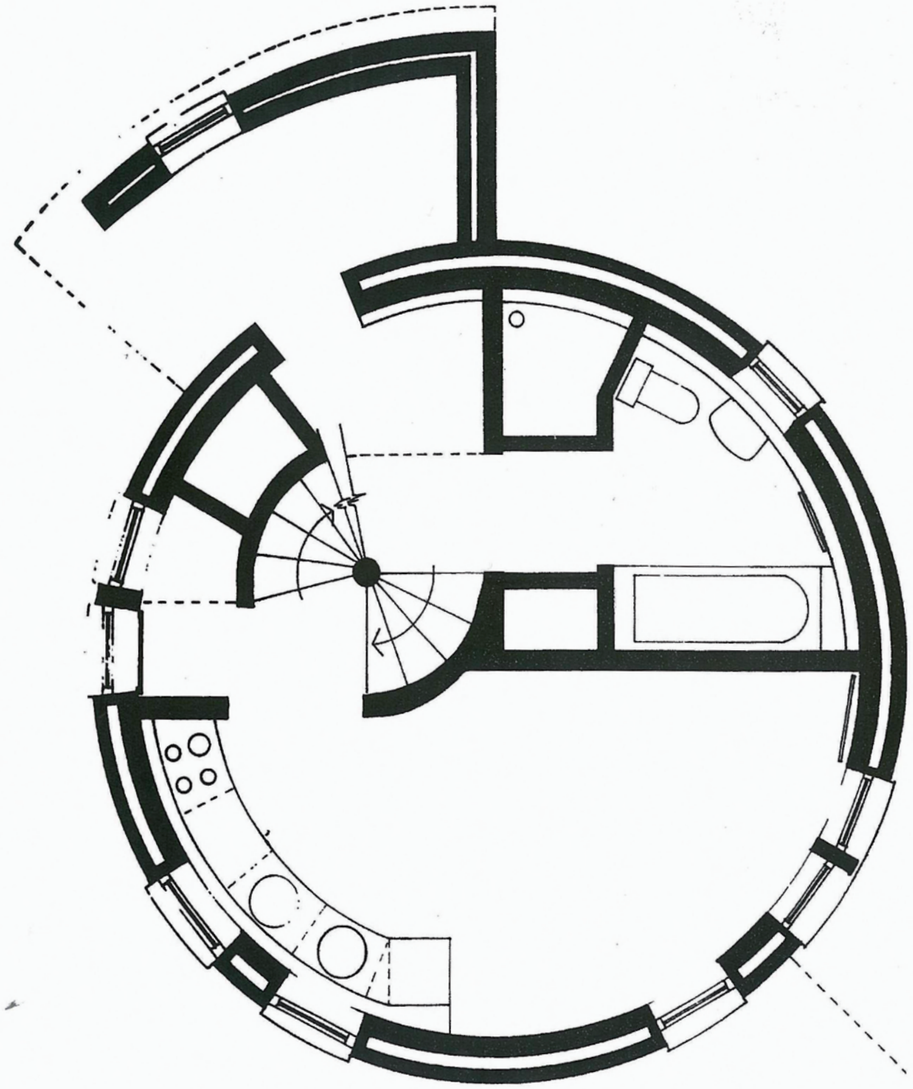
location Findhorn
Moray
Scotland
UK
date commissioned 1994
architect Nicole Edmonds

construction The Findhorn Foundation/Philip Stewart
area 65m² (700 sq ft)
cost £52,000



above Living-room balcony with storage underneath (not shown in the plan). The original barrel's form does not dominate the composition from any viewpoint.

right The first-floor plan: the sleeping platform is over the bathroom, and the main bedroom is beneath the living room/kitchen.

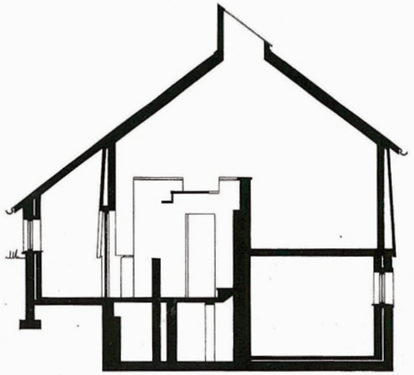
far right top View of the sleeping platform and living room with the balcony beyond. The skylight is directed towards the sunset.

far right A section shows the architect's inventive use of levels to achieve spatial complexity within the small volume of the barrel.

The Findhorn Community was founded as the result of the work of Eileen Caddy and her husband, who, from 1962 onwards, lived in a caravan and created a garden out of what was a rubbish dump next to the runway of the military airbase near the village of Findhorn on the Moray Firth. Out of this unlikely situation has grown a community which now has over 150 people committed to spiritual research and achieving an environmentally conscious, socially cohesive lifestyle. During the formative years community members occupied static vans in an adjacent caravan park, but during the last 25 years a number of permanent houses have been built by the Foundation for long-term residents.

Grania Oi is the most recent of a group of six barrel houses, the first of which was constructed by Roger Doudna in the 1970s as the first permanent house at Findhorn. The basis of the latest house is a single 6.8 metre- (22 foot-) diameter whiskey vat from a Speyside distillery. Whereas earlier barrel houses were single-storey, Nicole Edmonds decided to lift the barrels components onto a plinth and, in combination with excavation, effectively create a two-storey house with the Douglas fir base of the barrel as the main first floor.

However, the internal organization of the house is more complex than this simple description implies. In section, there are four levels: the lowest is the main bedroom, in a semi-basement, the next up being the entry level and bathroom with the cut-out third-of-a-circle of the barrel base as the floor. The main floor contains the kitchen and living area and 1.3 metres (4 feet) up from this again is a sleeping platform which occupies the space over the bathroom. This compact, interlocking series of spaces is linked by a spiral stair. The only addition to the circular plan form is the entrance lobby that, through its location, gives a strong connection between the rear of the house and an adjacent earth bank. Within a very small plot, this creates an entry sequence on one side of the house, and on the other a sheltered garden with a raised sundeck that has views across the woodland beyond.

The staves of the original barrel are used structurally and held together by an external galvanized steel band around its base. The barrel and the stone plinth are both lined to allow for extensive use of blown recycled newsprint as insulation, which, used in conjunction with air-permeable vapour barriers, produces a breathing wall construction. The roof is clad in titanium zinc and has a directional (south-west-facing but centrally placed) skylight which gives the sleeping platform an evening view of the sunset or a night-time glimpse of the moon. The external doors and windows are all made-to-order from surplus Douglas fir taken from the barrel and some have low emissivity glass to further reduce heat loss.

Findhorn has a 75-kilowatt windmill which supplements electricity supplied to all its houses from the National Grid. In addition, sewage is treated at its own environmental plant called the Living Machine. In this sensitive transformation of the redundant component of a semi-industrial process, Edmonds and her builder have neither destroyed the integrity of the original object nor let its form dominate the composition. This project is not a sentimental retreat from the practical realities of contemporary living, but a serious attempt, in the spirit of Eileen Caddy, to visualize hitherto unseen possibilities latent in our own culture's detritus.