### HERITAGE

# *Eight is Enough*
## *An octagonal folie on Hi Mount Road is a GEOMETRIC GEM*

By Marie Penny

Architectural trends come and go, but believe it or not, there was a time when octagonal houses were thought to have unique benefits—from accommodating more floor space to allowing for more sunlight than typical square houses. They became popular in the U.S. after Orson Fowler's book *The Octagon House: A Home for All* was published in 1848. The trend didn't last long, tapering off in the early 1900s—though many of the remaining eight-sided structures are on the National Register of Historic Places. And, although tucked away, one still exists here in Palm Beach.

The French artist Bernard Boutet de Monvel commissioned Swiss architect Maurice Fatio to design his *folie*, a French term meaning "madness" that was used to describe eccentric structures that were built in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Monvel was known as a photorealistic painter of society portraits, but he was also a precisionist painter of industrial landscapes and a fashion illustrator for *Vogue*. His portraits included many of Palm Beach's elite, and while he lived at his *folie*, he painted portraits of the family of Otto Hermman Kahn, who commissioned him to design his Villa Oheka at 122 North Ocean Boulevard.

Monvel asked Fatio to design a home in a pure geometrical form (in his choice of square, circle, or octagon) that was private and had good northern light. Fatio fulfilled Monvel's wish by building on the only hill in Palm Beach and designing a large north-facing window that provided ample light that poured into the artist's studio. In a letter to his wife, Delphine, Fatio wrote: "It's utterly, utterly ravishing. Not just the house, but the position, which is incredible, and the garden, which is exquisite."

This was not Monvel's first octagonal space. The French architect and designer Louis Süe had designed an octagonal dining room in Monvel's home in Paris, and Monvel created an octagonal dining table. The Palm Beach house was inspired by a pair of octagonal pavilions Süe had designed for the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in 1925 (where the term Art Deco was coined).

The eight-sided structure originally had four square wings extending from the main studio: a kitchen, a bathroom, and two bedrooms, with each wing separated by a terrace. In keeping with the octagon theme, eight palm trees were planted around the home, the pool was octagonal, and even the floorboards ran octagonally.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: THE OCTAGON HOUSE BOASTS SHUTTERS WITH HEART-SHAPED CUTOUTS AND PORTHOLE WINDOWS; MONVEL PAINTING IN HIS STUDIO; PORTRAIT OF ALEXANDRA TAYLOR FATIO BY MONVEL; ARCHITECT MAURICE FATIO.

After Monvel passed away in 1949, artist Gertrude Schweitzer, a New Yorker and seasonal resident who was known for her modern watercolors, took up residence in the *folie*. Her work was often exhibited at the Norton Museum of Art and can be found in several museum collections. A 1958 *Miami Herald* article featured Schweitzer at work in her home; it said that "since it was designed by an artist for an artist, it is ideal for Mrs. Schweitzer who considers herself very lucky to have found it."

After Schweitzer passed away in 1989, the Landmarks Preservation Commission recommended to the town council that the structure be protected with a historical designation. The central octagon (but not the square wings) was designated as a landmark in 1990. The four wings were removed, the structure was moved to another part of the property, and the new owner built a Monterrey-style home on the site to use as a main residence.

The house is both traditional and modern, and it is the only Fatio building designed in the wood frame, American Classical Revival tradition. It is a rare combination of a mid-nineteenth century style influenced by Art Deco. While the house no longer functions as an artist's studio, it connects us to the lives of the prominent artists and architects who dot Palm Beach's history.

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