

Home



From rustic to glam

Renovated barns become a new way of living

By Joe Meyers

If you think a barn can only be a dream house for a horse, you haven't been checking out Pinterest or the slicker shelter magazines lately, where the once strictly rural fixture has taken on a whole new life as upscale quarters for us humans.

In her new book, "Home" (Grand Central), TV talk show host/designer Ellen DeGeneres shows off a sleek barn residence on one of her properties.

A few months ago, in a New York Times real estate section feature, a Pennsylvania couple talked about their decision to turn a rundown \$9,000 barn in Nockamixon into a \$1.5 million showplace.

Interior designer Alicia Orrick has received a lot of attention for the work she did on a Greenwich project involving a group of restored barns dating from the late 18th century. Clients who are interested in barn restoration projects tend to have grown up in or previously owned older homes, Orrick says.

"Sometimes they have interesting antiques that they want to mix with the interior design in an older house," the Greenwich designer says. "The clients who did the (Greenwich) barn house in the past had always sought out older homes."

It is usually a mistake to fill an old structure with antiques, Orrick believes. "What brings an older building to life is new furniture."

Checking out the converted barns in Greenwich is part of the fun of the Barn and House Tour run by the Greenwich Riding and Trails Association every other year. Last spring's tour included barns of the equestrian variety, as well as

those that people live in.

Lindsay Thune, who is on the board of the association and who supervised this year's tour, says some of the barns are used as guest houses. The character and variety of the structures always impress visitors.

Kevin Durkin, the founder of Heritage Restorations, which has offices in Connecticut, Texas and Montana, believes it is hard to characterize the people who fall in love with the idea of restoring a barn as their home.

"It's a pretty wide variety of people, but they are usually high-end projects," he says of the barn restoration work his company has done in Greenwich and the surrounding area.

"What people are looking for is character. No two barns are the same. Once in 300 barns you might find two identical ones next to each other. We are able to give folks a lot of history along with their home."

A process known as dendrochronology, which is similar to the carbon dating of fossils, allows barn restorers to determine the season and year that the wood was cut and used for building.

"I can tell you that it dates to the spring of 1775," Durkin says of the very detailed provenance of a wooden structure.

"That's the DNA of a barn," he adds of researchers being able to zero in on details such as knowing that the building's wood was harvested during a drought between 1720 and 1723. "We'll get timber dating back to the 1400s."

In Durkin's opinion, the best barn-building tradition was in the Northeastern states during America's early years. "They used virgin wood and

they had the finest European craftsmen," he says. By the time the country expanded to the Missouri River, timber farming had petered out and the construction techniques didn't produce the durability or the quality of the barns in the original colonial areas, he adds.

It usually takes about a year to move a barn from its original site through completion on a new piece of property.

"There are weather constraints. You build with the seasons," Durkin says.

Think of it as the ultimate IKEA assembly nightmare. Heritage Restorations dismantles the original barn, unpegging it all, so that the pieces can be cleaned, repaired and fumigated. Only then are those bits of barn shipped to the new location.

Restored barns typically cost about \$250 per square foot, but Durkin says that price will rise for anyone looking to buy and move a barn to Greenwich (the same holds true for recent projects in Pound Ridge, N.Y., and Purchase, N.Y.). Land and construction costs are considerably higher in this part of the country.

Durkin says interest in East Coast barns has been increasing overseas in recent years. "They love anything American. We moved four barns to a tea plantation in Tibet."

The mixing of old and new was what excited Orrick about her Greenwich barn project.

"The presence of other life is there" in a classic barn, she believes, but "it creates another dimension when you combine things in a warm new way."

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Contributed photos

A barn converted into a home in Greenwich designed by Orrick & Co.