

Barn Again

The New Jersey Barn Company is bringing the dilapidated barns of America's Northeast back from the brink of collapse.

As rallying cries go, "Save the Barn!" might not prick the conscience as forcefully as, say, "Save the Manatee!" The barn is inanimate, prosaic, a foursquare structure built for work. As Elric Endersby and Alex Greenwood put it in *Barn: Preservation & Adaptation* (Universe, 2003), "the barn is chaste...a space rubbed by livestock, worn by labor, redolent with the pungent odors of hay, oil, harness, flesh, sweat and dung." They mean that in the nicest possible way: Endersby and Greenwood are passionate barn preservationists, the founders of the New Jersey Barn Company, a 30-year-old outfit dedicated to dismantling, repairing and relocating endangered historic barns. They regard the Northeast's old barns as noble artifacts of the industry and ingenuity of America's early settlers, and have resurrected dozens of them as homes or workspaces for clients from New Jersey to North Carolina to California.

It all starts with a call from a developer, historical society or concerned individual: An old barn is about to be demolished. The Northeast is dotted with these oak-timbered structures cut from long-gone virgin forests and raised by 18th- and 19th-century Dutch, English and German master craftsmen. Most are intriguing hybrids of cultural architectural traditions; the area near the Barn Company's office in Ringoes, NJ, for instance, has a rich selection of Anglo-Dutch barns, whereas in Pennsylvania, German and Swiss influences prevail. Greenwood estimates that only two to three percent of the area's original barns survive.

"Compared to Europe, our tradition is less pure but more interesting," he says. "Each barn is different. They

Suitable for framing: a relocated mid-19th-century, English-style barn in western New Jersey



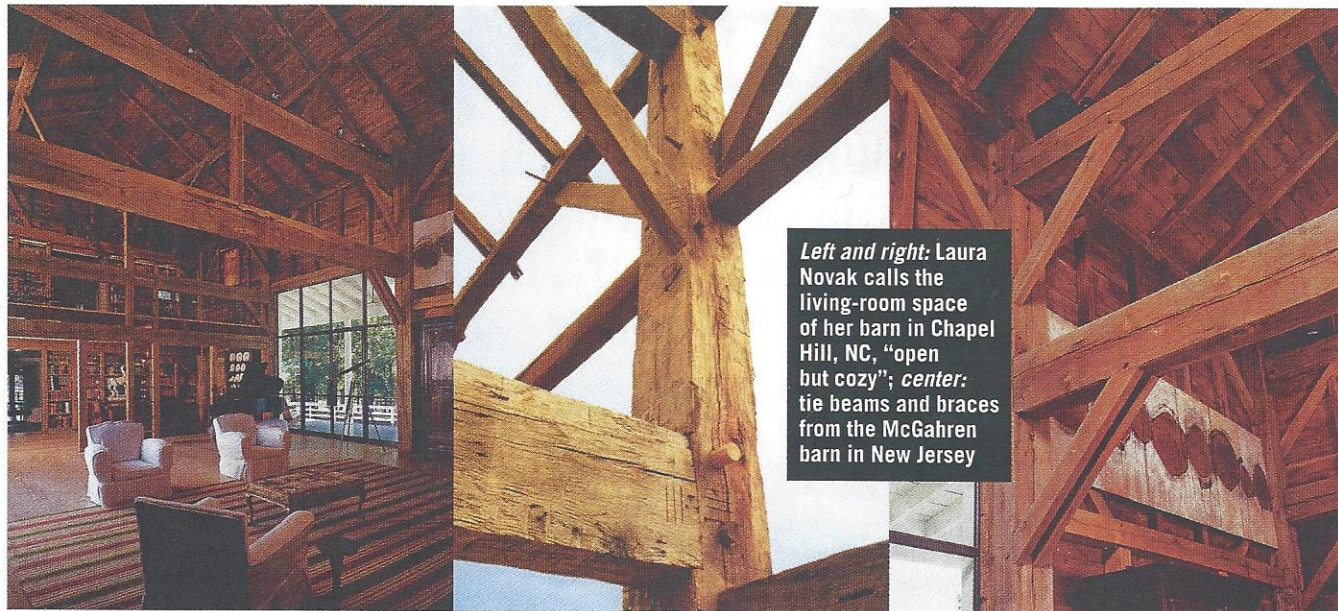
weren't mass-produced. And it's sad that they're going away."

Only 1 in every 10 to 20 endangered barns they encounter is worth saving. "We're looking for good condition, the less repair needed the better and the more original the building the better," says Greenwood. Gauging the potential in

able "inventory"—lie side by side, covered with tarps at the headquarters in Ringoes. Clients are advised to come to the office, an atmospheric 18th-century tavern the pair is slowly rehabilitating (excavating Revolutionary War-era pennies, musket balls and "lots of bones and teeth" from the basement). Clients sit down with the two

dramatic 26-foot beams and quixotic accents like hay ladders and an original lean-to at one end. "It instantly felt wonderful, open but cozy, I don't know why," says Laura Novak. "Perhaps it's the history of the structure."

Greenwood and Endersby aren't interested in selling barns piecemeal, a beam



Left and right: Laura Novak calls the living-room space of her barn in Chapel Hill, NC, "open but cozy"; center: tie beams and braces from the McGahren barn in New Jersey

these often-dilapidated structures, which range from relatively small wagon houses to cavernous barns, takes a practiced eye. Refurbishments or decades of neglect can obscure the original frames. One client, Jennifer Bryson McGahren, recalls visiting an 1850s English-style banked barn in its original location in Clinton, NJ. "It didn't look that great, but Elric enabled me to see what it could be," she says. It had been converted into a dairy barn in the early 20th century, and so the timbers were largely obscured by concrete and whitewash. Saved from being demolished by the Barn Company, it now stands regally on McGahren's property 18 miles away. She and her husband plan to use it as a barn/party space/office. "You have to have an imagination," McGahren says of the process. "I had to see past the cement, past the six inches of bat guano and bird bones in the attic."

Endersby and Greenwood painstakingly document each barn they dismantle with photographs, drawings and scale models, and they label every piece with a code to guide reassembly. Ten or 12 dormant barns—the Barn Company's avail-

men, look at scale models, pictures and drawings, and then examine the timbers themselves. Inevitably, the decision to buy is a leap of faith. "There's no model home you can go see," says Barbara Johnsen, who had a circa-1840 New Jersey wagon house relocated and rebuilt as her home in Sonoma, California. "They lifted up a tarp and showed me a pile of lumber. I said, okay, and what am I paying for this, again?"

That would be about three times what you'd pay for a structure of two-by-fours and two-by-sixes, or \$80,000 for a modest-sized barn frame. "It'll wreck your framing budget," says Greenwood, "but for an overall construction budget, it's a bit of a blip." In addition to selling the barn, Endersby and Greenwood offer their clients design services, in collaboration with an architect, to achieve a larger vision for a home. Laura and Rich Novak went through a two-and-a-half-year design process with the two men to create a rambling residential complex on their farm outside Chapel Hill, NC, anchored by an 1856 New Jersey barn. Lavishly photographed in *Barn* (the second of Endersby and Greenwood's two books), the heart of the Novaks' home has

here, a piece of siding there, nor do they like to see the barns modified or sited inappropriately, amid, for instance, tidy landscaping. "We like to work on a property that has an agricultural feel," says Greenwood. "The barn should fit in the landscape." Both McGahren and Novak describe the pair as purists. "They're very attached to [their barns]," Novak says, "to the point where I think that if your project didn't suit them they might not sell the barn to you." Greenwood puts it this way: "It's our mission to put the thing back together again in a way that is respectful to the original builder." And that mission trumps even the whims of the rich and famous. In 1988, architect Charles Gwathmey, working for Steven Spielberg, inquired after a barn, and Endersby and Greenwood supplied an 18th-century Dutch version for the director's home in East Hampton, NY. Then another request came: Spielberg wanted more beams. More beams? "We had to decline," says Greenwood. "It was too disturbing." •

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