



Carpenters turned an old chest into a bathroom sink cabinet with bluestone shelf. (Opposite page) The home's natural materials fit the lakeside setting.



RE-BARN

Transforming a ready-for-demolition structure into a one-of-a-kind getaway.

Story by **Marci Diehl** | Photos by **Matt Wittmeyer**

AT THE FAR END OF EAST LAKE ROAD, A 150-YEAR-OLD BARN BEGINS ITS SECOND LIFE IN AN UNLIKELY fashion: as a stylish getaway on Canandaigua Lake. From the outside, it looks nothing like its former self. Only when you walk inside does the house show its agricultural DNA.

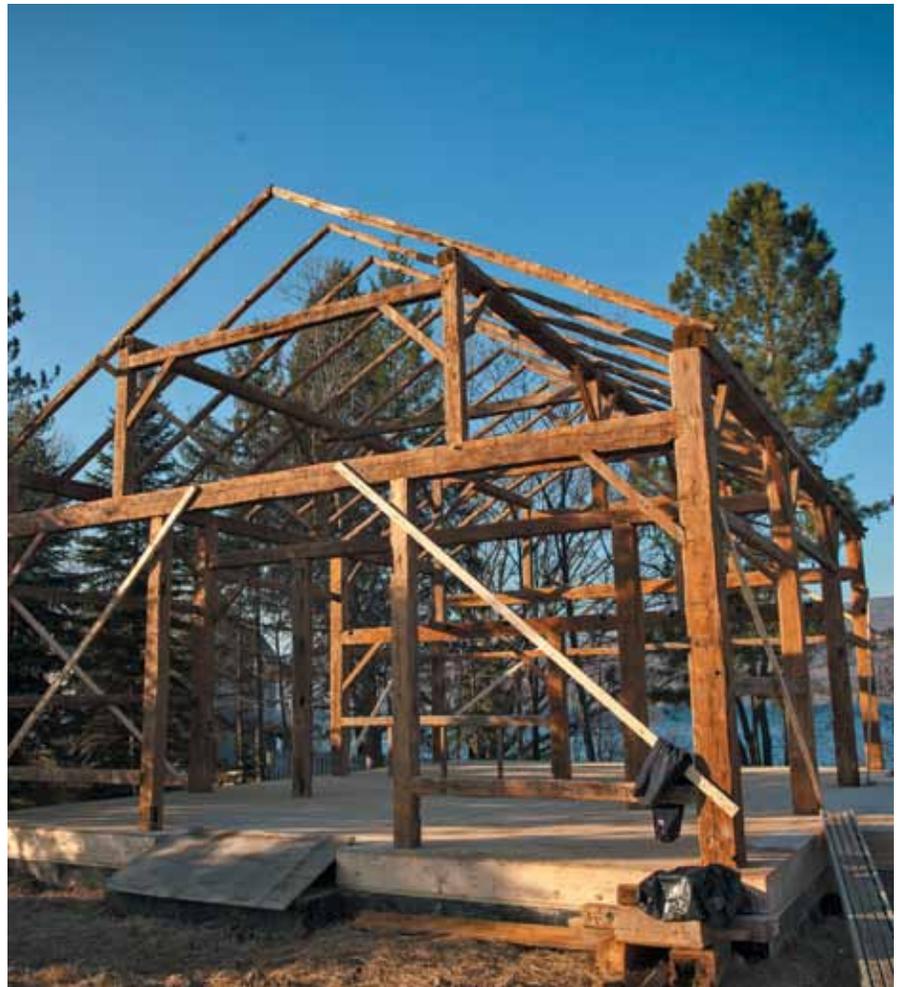
That is exactly what architectural designer Tom Johnson intended. After all, he built his own home—set in the middle of a 41-acre vineyard overlooking Keuka Lake—from the bones of a barn brought from Canada. Since then, Johnson has transformed three other Penn Yan barns into contemporary “vineyard homes,” each with a unique meld of stylish elegance and rustic charm.

If that sounds a bit like a Ralph Lauren commercial, there’s good reason. While still in his mid-20s, Johnson became director of development at Ralph Lauren for all Polo stores worldwide, overseeing design and installation. Next came 14 years in Tokyo, where he created retail store designs (including for Polo Ralph Lauren and Hugo Boss), high-end custom residences, office buildings and luxury apartment high-rises. He still travels often to Japan and the Pacific Rim, working on high-end design projects.

So there’s great variety in his work, yet the barn homes seem to capture his personality and imagination in a special way.



The barn's frame was made up of four large, H-shaped "bents" of columns, beams and Y-braces. A team of Mennonite craftsmen hoisted the barn at its new location, piece by piece as it was done a century and a half ago. All the structural elements in the house are original to the barn.



In dismantling the barn, the craftsmen knocked or drilled out tenons from the old mortises that attached beams to each other. New tenons were made to connect into the numbered, corresponding mortises.

The old hay barn destined to become a Canandaigua Lake house for Jay Yates and Heidi Piper and their three children once stood on a farm in Penn Yan. When Johnson saw it, the two-story barn was approaching collapse and up for demolition. But to his eye, the structure was perfect.

“The sad thing about old New York state barns is that, if the roof goes, you lose the whole thing,” says Johnson. But, he notes, what held that barn together—hand-hewn 2-foot-by-6-foot beams with tenon-and-mortise joists, where beams are essentially notched and plugged into each other—can be as solid as ever.

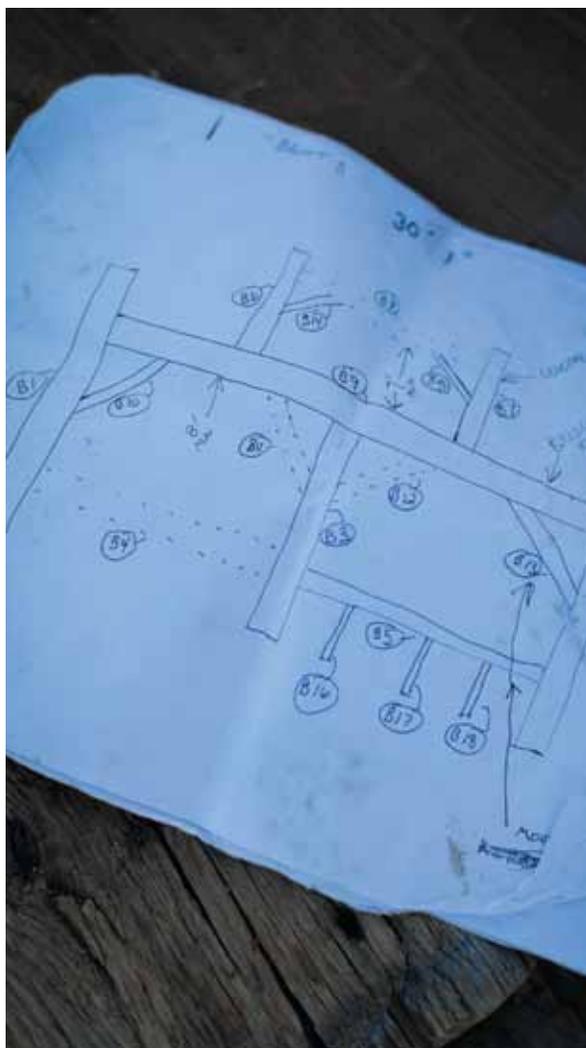
Enlisting John Martin and his team of Mennonite builders, Johnson deconstructed the barn piece-by-piece from the top down. Every last beam and board of the barn’s skeleton was numbered for reassembling later.

The parts were shipped to the new site, where the craftsmen used the numbered “jigsaw puzzle” to reassemble sections of the frame then hoist them back up onto the new foundation.

The homeowners, residents of Victor, originally thought about building a timber-frame house. But later they decided they “wanted something a little more unique—something understated, yet beautiful,” explains Yates, a surgeon at Lakeside ENT & Allergy (Piper is a surgeon at The Eye Care Center in Canandaigua). “We met Tom and just hit it off with him from the start. We loved the simplicity of his design.”

They had owned the property on the lakeshore for four years and built a dock for their boat so they could enjoy their beach while planning to build.

Johnson’s plans for the 2,600-square-foot house called for a contemporary exterior of gray cedar blending naturally



with the surrounding meadow, conifers and shale beach.

“It’s a tricky mix to create between modern and rustic. Too rustic, and it starts to feel fake,” Johnson says. “It’s meant to be a lake house. I’m not trying to do a ‘Disney Barn’ style.”

The house is environmentally friendly and energy-efficient—words not often associated with barns converted into homes. Johnson believes strongly in using all-wood and natural materials, like the cedar shingled roof, and high U-value windows, floors with radiant heat and geothermal hot water on demand.

Inside, historic and timeless meet bright, open, modern and—most important for a lake house—livable.

The great thick beams and posts of the barn now create a soaring, two-story ceiling over the living area. The tongue-and-groove pine plank walls are white-washed. Over the years, the knots will bleed through and create a distinctive

pattern. The dark-stained, wide-plank floor is new but looks original. It’s made to stand up to years of pets, traffic and the inevitable tracking in of beach shale on bare feet. This is a family getaway for all seasons.

The large fireplace, faced with local split river rock, warms the room by reflecting heat outward. In fact, it kept Johnson and his team from Benton Builders warm during construction over the winter.

The house sits diagonally on the lakefront, and Johnson took full advantage of the expansive pastoral view of the lake’s western hills. In the southwest corner of the house, two floor-to-ceiling glass walls create a space that seems to float—just large enough to sit and read or contemplate the changing seasons.

Light streams in from everywhere, with large west-facing windows and sliding doors leading to a covered deck just right for gathering around a long



Architectural designer Tom Johnson designs kitchens to be clean-lined, yet subtly vintage. (Opposite page) The 150-year-old beams bring a rustic charm, while the frame lends an airy, open feeling.

table. Everything is thought out: The deck, for example, has sliding slatted doors at the south end to block wind and sun. And the bluestone patio on the lower level brings the outside in on the home's lakefront side.

The kitchen blends farmhouse warmth with 21st-century chic. The cabinets are handcrafted, quarter-sawn white oak with finger-jointed drawers. A large, solid maple butcher-block island is destined to become the place where family and friends congregate.

Johnson doesn't use hanging cupboards in his kitchens. "The goal is to make it less kitchen-y, and more like a spacious room," he explains. A countertop of raw, rough granite—actually the underside of polished granite—has been slightly honed and sealed to keep the feel of natural stone.

An old farm trestle table found new life as a dining table. Other repurposed finds appear throughout the house. Salvaged floor joists from the old Watkins Glen train station form the staircase to the master bedroom loft. The handcrafted black iron railings came from a cattle gate, bringing an open and slightly contemporary feel to the stairway.

A glass-windowed double door with its original hardware and knobs came from Historic House Parts in Rochester—now reincarnated as the master bedroom door. To preserve space, a sliding barn door closes off the bedroom from the master bath. Johnson found a rickety antique chest for \$100, had the carpenters cut out the bottom two drawers and make legs: Now it's the bathroom sink cabinet, topped by a bluestone shelf. White subway tile covers the shower walls.



The gray-slate shower floor contains a "Japanese style" gutter with drain.

Johnson loves the organic beauty of stone and uses it throughout his barn houses. On the lake house's lower level, slabs of slate give the floors an artistic, patchwork feel. The family room and two bedrooms for the Yates teenagers, Paige and Tristan, and 8-year-old Camryn, are warmed by unpainted pine walls. A sliding barn door closes off the family room for overnight guests.

Maybe it's his connection to Japanese culture; the artist in Johnson honors what is simple, useful, uncluttered, yet possessed of inherent grace and dignity. He steers clear of "over-the-top" design, believing a structure should speak to the

"texture" of a community.

"I want things to be appropriate for what they are," he says. "I want people to walk in and say: 'Of course! If I lived here, this is what I'd want it to be,' whether it's a lake house or a building in Japan." Above all, he believes, "You can build the most fantastic house in the world and it can still be empty. It matters who is sitting around at the table. The most important thing is the people in the house."

As for the people in *this* house, they love the result and the history resonating from it. As Yates says, "Sometimes I stand in the house and think: 'What was it like for this to have been a barn more than 100 years ago?'" **C**