

Home Is Where the Barn Is

BY DUO DICKINSON

With a lot of love — and a lot of time — a Madison family reclaims a once-‘unshowable’ antique

ATHOME

When Gio and Pam Meier came to realize that their relationship was going to be more than dating, they got pretty serious about finding a place to live. Their initial two-year search proved fruitless.

“We didn’t even think about living in Madison because we thought it was just too expensive,” recalls Pam Meier. “We were looking for an antique fixer-upper” — meaning a real wreck — “but we couldn’t even afford one of those, it seemed.”

During yet another phone call with the real estate agent that was ending badly, a light bulb went off in their agent’s mind: There was one antique house on four acres in Madison that was so compromised by neglect that it was “unshowable.”

The previous occupants were New York City expatriates who had fled the late 1980s real estate bust and had no money for upkeep after they moved in. The house went into foreclosure in 1992. But one family’s disaster is another’s opportunity, and Pam and Gio were able to pick up a completely depressed but well located

property for what they could afford — precious little cash for a couple that had yet to in fact actually get married.

Not only was the house in utter disrepair, it was barely serviceable even as a tent for a young couple aiming to start a new life together. The property had history: It was a 1,000-square-foot Cape built in 1739 of heavy timbers. Although some rot had been repaired around the house’s perimeter, the bottom of virtually every post was serving as a hearty meal for hungry wood-munching bacteria. Its ground floor hovered over damp soil, further encouraging mold and rot.

PHOTOS: ANTHONY DECARLO





The built-in benches for family dining (right center) nestle in the open informal living area that surrounds the kitchen and its maple island designed to accommodate an impromptu nosh.

The once-cute home had been completely stripped of virtually everything of value by its previous owners. "Even electrical switches and outlets had been removed and the whirlpool tub's motor had been removed and presumably sold — God knows why," says Gio, who himself is an electrical engineer. When the couple moved in, the house had no doors — they had been mysteriously removed and set outside.

The site itself was overgrown to the extent that one could see the surface of the land on perhaps one quarter of its four acres. But for the Meiers this represented a real step up from where they lived in New Haven, where the early '90s recession had fueled a crime wave that made the couple desperate to find a place to start a family safe from drive-by shootings and break-ins.

"We realized that because we had our own businesses, we could live anywhere as long as it was close to New Haven where most of our clients were," says Pam Meier, a graphic designer and environmental educator.



In the first decade of their young marriage, the Meiers set out to accomplish two things: start a family and tame their landscape. They did both with exquisite success. Pam gave birth to three beautiful daughters: twins Katharine and Eva, followed by



An imposing maple tree that stood obdurately where the Meiers planned to expand their home was cut down (mostly) from the top, but then integrated into the open living area where it serves to divide the wide array of activities of busy family members. The careful sculpting of the trunk allows for full support at the center of the timber frame, and turns the site's history into structural art.

The renovated living room of the 1,000-square-foot 1739 heavy timber Cape that served as home for the first decade of the Meiers' occupancy. Its expressive structure served to inspire the addition that tripled the overall size of the home.



Danica. Over time they also got rid of all the Cape's rot, and dirt subfloors.

But five people living in a two-bedroom house has a brief window of viability.

A seminal event happened that transformed the future of this property, and its occupants. Gio Meier attended a timber frame seminar at the famed Yesterday School in Warren, Vt. — perhaps the premier design-build school in America. In that one-week session, Gio gained the knowledge but also the courage to think that their antique could in fact triple in size and yet maintain its dignity.

Newly emboldened, the Meiers looked to find a timber frame company that would actually listen to Gio's design ideas and work with them to get a timber frame out of the ground. After some searching they found Vermont Frames, of Hinesburg, Vt. Gio Meier worked with the firm to create a plan for a 25- by 40-foot "barn" directly modeled on the barn already on the property and set the new structure to a rebuilt single-story "ell" off the back of the Cape, creating a two-part harmony — new to one side of the low entry, ancient to the other.

If done on a "retail" basis, this would be a pricey proposition unless you had a fearless family. Not only could they

live for a decade in extremely tight and originally dysfunctional surroundings while slaving away to tame the landscape (and raise goats and chickens as well as three babies), but the Meiers also found the time to design, contract or build every element of this major renovation. Over a three-year construction period, Gio and Pam contracted out excavation, concrete and the occasional electrical and plumbing assistance and of course, the timber frame.

Vermont Frame supplied all the pieces, but the Meiers organized a old-fashioned barnraising event where friends and family put it all together. Another subcontractor clad that frame in what are called Structural Insulated Panels (SIPs) that are spiked to the frame and provide an extremely tight insulating shell that shrouds the large pieces of Douglas fir construction.

When these panels were laminated around the frame, the Meiers realized that their traditional design of carefully located single windows was crazy given the fact that they had spent the last decade opening up their property. As they peered out through one of those isolated windows, the chainsaw was quickly brought out and that window became a window wall facing out over a field that they had literally unearthed while clearing the land.

That single act is the metaphor for the entire project. Pam and Gio Meier literally built everything that is seen in these photographs with the exception of cabinetry and a few other elements.

This extreme personal devotion fulfilled one of the great aphorisms that almost anyone who works in a project-based environment knows: There are three positive evaluations of anything that gets created:

- 1) It can be done to a high standard (vs. shoddy)
- 2) It can be done quickly (vs. slowly)
- 3) It can be affordable (vs. costly).

Good, fast and cheap. But no matter how hard you try, you can achieve only *two* of those positive qualities on any given project. It can be fast and good and therefore it will *not* be cheap. It can be fast and cheap and therefore it will not be good. Or, like the Meiers and millions of intrepid house creators, even in the worst of recessions, a project can be good and cheap but it will not be fast — it will take time to be designed, built and finished.

Taking on so much over such a long time, the Meiers saved a great deal of money, but they also had the time to control the final product. This meant that when they had to cut down a tree to build their

2,000-square-foot extension, they had the time to realize they could save the trunk and use it as the centerpiece column for their living area.



Another byproduct of the hands-on, trading-time-for-money approach can be frustration and burnout as deferred gratification gets old the longer it is deferred. "In year three, I told Gio that if I didn't have a kitchen, I'd literally go out of my mind," recalls Pam — and thus a kitchen was created. But fully four years elapsed after completion for the built-in dining area to be created.

The built home is a very simple diad. The existing antique with its low ceilings and relative darkness is the perfect location for nighttime gatherings to watch movies, Pam's office, a bathroom and the entry/mud room. The attic became a project room for the girls. So the renovated antique effectively "took care of business" for the messier activities of family life — leaving the new completely open first floor of the "barn" for all social activities. Kitchen and informal dining is set to the

south, a new open stair intervenes and the larger family table directly address the terrace that Gio and Pam built overlooking the westerly three acres of their property. To the north is a large open living area. Above all this are three bedrooms and a bath (one of the bedrooms shared by the twin girls). And (finally) Gio and Pam have a discrete (and discreet) space for themselves.

The new interior is fully wood with beautiful huge timbers with beams that carefully lead into columns distinctly to avoid the diagonal knee braces that Gio hates (and were serendipitously absent in the original Cape's timber frame). The second floor's solid maple flooring (which in a timber frame is also the first floor's ceiling) was maple cut at a local saw mill, Zuwalick & Sons. The stair and balcony railings were filled in with salvaged wood from Wood, Steel & Glass of Madison. Exposed nailing patterns on the plank walls adds a level of detail that is refreshing and expressive openings in hallway walls above eye-level let light and air share the large lofted open space that a timber frame provides.

The outdoor environment is equally rich, if just a little raw. The existing barn and out building house chickens and goats that provide milk and eggs for the family. The unrelenting work ethic of Gio Meier is seen in beautifully restored snaking fieldstone walls. And Pam's passion for gardening can be seen in tightly formed gardens.

As the Meier girls grow into young women, the construction has slowed and there are a few projects that will get done when there's time (shed dormers need to have the final siding put on them; the occasional naked pipe needs to be trimmed out), but progress is unrelenting and inevitable. "Once we got into the house and it was finished, the extreme push to get everything done all at once relaxed," says Gio. But the energy of the Meier family remains palpable.

There's a lesson in this house for anyone willing to see it — that while money makes most things possible, it is simply not as important as the passion that allow couples to have the courage to build its ultimate, physical expression — a place to come home to.