

Old boards, new use

Homeowners' desire for vintage look drives demand for reclaimed wood

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When contractor Shawn Van Veghten built a house last year to show what he could do as a builder, he reached back in time to do something unique with the floors. The floorboards once made up the floor of a nearby barn, built in the 1930s. The barn foundation was crumbling, but the structure still held quality building materials, much like hundreds of barns around the Capital Region and in the Adirondacks. Look closely at the gleaming beech floor at the house Van Veghten built at 4 Battle Ridge Place in Stillwater, and you can see the boards are various widths and show a bit more character than off-the-shelf lumber.

Reclaimed materials — wood, metal and glass — have long been used for home decor, but demand is emerging in the custom home market for using salvaged wood for structural purposes.

"When I started, I was excited to get one call a month, then it was a call a week, now I'm two or three calls all day," said Tyler Russell, a co-owner of Lake George-based StoriedBoards.

Russell, his father and brother take apart barns and sell the lumber they salvage to homeowners, architects, interior designers and builders like Van Veghten. The service both removes a liability for a property owner who has a dilapidated barn on his land and rescues wood that might otherwise go to landfill.

Some beams become mantels or are reused as beams— either structural or decorative. Others the Russells send through a mill to create floorboards. The Russells also hand down a story with their projects, hence the name "StoriedBoards." They collect as much history on each barn as they can find — the family name, when the barn was built and what it was used for, and, in some cases, pictures of the family who farmed the land and animals who lived in the barn.

"Some people want the look and couldn't care less about the back story," Russell said. Others like the idea of running a hand along timber in their new house and imagining its old purpose.

But before you stop by that falling-down barn you pass on your way home from work and load your trunk with boards, know that reclaimed wood can contain insects and moisture, and both will lead to trouble if used in building construction. The Russells bake their wood products in a large kiln for a week. It kills stowaways and ensures the wood is dry.

Another option: Camille Gibeau, a co-owner of Silver Fox Salvage in Albany, recommends putting small pieces in a black plastic bag for a couple days, where the heat will kill bugs and bacteria.

Gibeau, who also said demand for reclaimed materials is booming, said the wood has a look that can't be re-created. The former owner of a demolition company, Gibeau started with wood from two Army depots in Rotterdam that were each 160 feet tall and 1,650 feet wide. They provided plenty of wood, all in the fir family. Much of the wood for sale at Silver Fox has nail holes, old saw marks and scratches that add to its appeal for a growing group of customers.

Knowing you're reusing material rather than cutting down a tree is part of the draw, Gibeau said.

"The look is enduring, and you can't get it artificially; people want the real thing," she said.

Gibeau's partner in the business, Jaime Walton, constructs furniture out of reclaimed wood and adds siding to walls from old barns.

Wood like this is also more expensive than new wood. Hardwood (oak, beech) from StoriedBoards costs \$12.50 per square foot; softwood (pine, spruce) costs \$8.50 per square foot. Off the shelf at Home Depot, oak is \$3.39 a square foot.

Annemarie Mitchell's Stillwater-based company, Legacy Timber Frames, recently used reclaimed wood for the first time at a home in Colonie, at the owner's request. They wanted their home to look like a 200-year-old farmhouse. The client met with Tyler Russell to select wood from a 1867 barn in Keeseville, in the northern Adirondacks. Workers for Legacy then used the beams to build the porch on the house and add a decorative beam to the ceiling inside. One of the posts came with a big hook imbedded in the wood that no one could remove, Mitchell said.

"The minute we saw it, we knew we had to use it. We put it as a corner post next to the front door so the homeowner can hang a plant there," Mitchell said.

lhornbeck@timesunion.com • 518-454-5352 • @leighhornbeck



A crew from StoriedBoards reclaimed beech flooring from this circa-1930 barn on Durham Road in Stillwater, which builder Shawn Van Veghten then used while building a new house nearby. (Photo provided by StoriedBoards)



Builder Shawn VanVeghten used 1,200 square feet of reclaimed beech flooring in a house he built in 2014 along Saratoga Lake in Stillwater. (Photo provided by VanVeghten Construction)