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HOME, REIMAGINED

Adaptive reuse can provide a new life for old structures—and can create distinctive dwellings for those fortunate enough to own them

From barns to warehouses to churches, timeworn buildings are gaining new identities as residences. Renewed and reimagined, the structures offer the best of both worlds: a sense of history, along with the comforts that come with new construction. They're often soaring spaces with plenty of room for art and sculpture, making them perfect for collectors.



From vaulted ceilings to rustic wood flooring, this home in the Hamptons is a dramatic example of the power of reimagining a space. [Click here](#) or contact Beate V. Moore, Sotheby's International Realty – Bridgehampton Brokerage.



Owners relocated and restored this antique Dutch Pete barn to complete their lush 17-acre Titusville, New Jersey, parcel. [Click here](#) or contact Norman Callaway, Callaway Henderson Sotheby's International Realty.

They're also the ideal projects for architects such as John Blackburn, who has a passion for preserving historic buildings. Reenvisioning a grain storehouse was Blackburn's first foray into adaptive reuse, as his specialty was horse farms. "When my son was young, I went to a B&B and the owners were looking for an architect to convert an old granary into a residence. I told them I do barns and I do houses, so I should be able to convert one to the other," says Blackburn. He and his firm Blackburn Architects did just that, using the unique elements of the granary while making the space work for the needs of the owner.



John Blackburn and team at Blackburn Architects turned original structural features into modern design at this Leesburg, Virginia, farm.
Photo: Maxwell MacKenzie

The process of turning drafty, leaky old structures into homes isn't for the faint of heart. Before converting a historic German bank barn located on a Christmas tree farm in Ohio, Blackburn and his colleagues moved it to another spot on the property, which involved cementing the stones from the old foundation into a brand-new foundation. Says Blackburn, "A wall was caving in, and the barn was too close to the road. We relocated it to a spot with a better orientation."

Next came the challenge of weatherproofing the structure without losing the patina or the unique features of the barn. "I wrapped the building in structural insulated panels, which both insulates the building and stabilizes it. Inside, you don't lose the wood or the depth of the frame," says Blackburn. The old hay rack rail is still there, and ladders to the rafters were kept. As for the exterior, with the three original front bays, the doors couldn't all be opened at the same time. Blackburn's solution: "We replaced the barn doors using a steel frame so they now can be fully opened and closed—over a new glass façade."



A nighttime view of the Ohio Party Barn project in Cleveland, Ohio.
Photo: Cesar Lujan

The painstaking efforts paid off, says the architect. "The clients wanted to look out over the farm and have beautiful views. This design was all about fulfilling their goal of having a place for the family to gather." Comfort and modern amenities haven't been sacrificed. "We use high-efficiency systems. It's the old wood flooring, but it's heated. We also worked with a local foundry to create special iron railings, as we wanted something unique and sculptural."



From left: Interior view of the dining room. Close-up of the iron railings. Interior preview of the original ladders, wood flooring, and hay rack rail but with a modern twist.

Photo: Cesar Lujan

It's richly rewarding to design and live in a reimagined space like this, says Blackburn, who finds that too often these barns are either neglected, or taken apart and used for salvaged wood. For clients, the juxtaposition of old and new is immensely appealing. Says Blackburn, "A contemporary space isn't always relaxing, but old barns are. This gives you the patina of an old building but a comfortable place to get together. It just works."

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