



Lumber from the past is so today

BY BRETT S. MARTIN | PHOTOS BY ALEX STEINBERG

# In With the Old



Lumber that has already lived a full life in old barns and railroad trestles—and even timber long entombed underwater—is being reincarnated in Minnesota homes. The timbers, typically more than a century old, possess colors, markings, and characteristics that cannot be replicated.

But the unique look of reclaimed timber isn't the only attraction for designers and homeowners. "There's a sense of conservatism in reusing something from the past," says Sarah Londerville, co-owner of Manomin Resawn Timbers in Hugo. "I see a trend toward the Old World look. People are reaching back in time. They want their homes to look aged."

That look is harder to create with today's timber, now harvested at a younger age than in centuries past when trees reached full maturity. The differences are significant. Older trees can have as many as 5 times more rings per inch than their younger counterparts, creating greater contrast in wood tone and richer color. "The wood of the past has a much more celebrated character because the rings are much closer," says Jeff Stark, owner of Superior Woods in Minneapolis.

#### OLD MATERIALS, NEW LIFE

In rural areas, old barns are the primary sources for reclaimed lumber as family farms make way for suburban developments. "It's sad because the structures are absolutely beautiful, but this is significantly better than seeing them end up in a landfill," says Kevin Coffel, president of Antique Woodworks in Plato.

When barn owners don't want to invest in improving deteriorating structures, they call on Coffel to deconstruct barns, thus saving themselves the demolition costs. Rising demand from barn owners and developers has created a boom in business for Coffel—he had a waiting list of 50 barns ready to be dismantled this past summer—and forced him to become more selective, he says. He looks for hard wood, mostly oak and elm, that can be reused.

Coffel takes down the barns, kiln dries and sterilizes the wood to kill bugs and bacteria, mills it, then sells the finished product. Flooring, joists, beams, and roof sheathing can all be reused. "You want to have as little waste as possible," he says.

Former factories and warehouses yield valuable timbers in urban areas. Faded paint, nail and bolt holes, peg mortises, and ax marks from hand-hewing serve as testimony to the lumber's initial use. Re-milling often determines the wood's renewed appearance. "You can get different looks from the same material, depending on how it's finished," Londerville explains. A skip plane, for example, literally "skips" across the surface, resulting in a board that exhibits both old and new surfaces and emphasizes blade marks or gouges deep in the wood.

Bill Brisley installed former warehouse timbers "dirty-side" up to create a floor with character. The posts were reclaimed from another source—trees that once stood on the site of his Afton house.



THIS PAGE Reclaimed Douglas fir runs from one end of the Brisley's main level to another, bringing a venerable patina to a striking modern kitchen. RIGHT The stair treads and buffet countertop also are clad in reused wood.

Beams from old barns and bridges provide better quality than newer timbers, says Mike Wiener, owner of Wiener Custom Craft in Long Prairie, which mills and sells reclaimed timber. “The old beams are a better grade than the new ones I could buy in a store. They’re straight, and they’re not moving.”

Newly milled wood contorts or shrinks to a greater degree as it cures. “When you have wood that old, it has already twisted and turned and moved. Now it’s stable. For an architect and contractor, that’s a very important feature,” Wiener says. Some expansion and contraction will still occur from temperature fluctuation.

The reclaiming trend has expanded to other reusable lumber as well. Wiener is reusing old Douglas fir telephone poles. Superior Woods’ Stark has sold a variety of reclaimed timbers, from tobacco warehouses in the Carolinas to an ostrich barn in Australia.

“There’s a lot of wood out there yet, and that’s just what’s above ground,” Stark says.

### SUNKEN TREASURES

From the 1700s to the early 1900s, lakes and rivers were used to transport logs from forests to sawmills. A good number of those logs sank in transit and, ever since, have been absorbing minerals from the water, giving the wood an abundance of rich colors.

“The minerals bring out the sapphire colors, distinctive grays, ebony blacks, rich golds,” Stark says. “You just can’t get this any other way in any other place.”

Like sunken treasure, submerged lumber is located using sonar equipment. Divers tag the logs underwater and document their location. In Minnesota, the company needs a permit from the Department of Natural Resources to resurrect the lumber. The logs are lifted to the surface and floated to shore by boat or crane. Popular species found in Minnesota waterways include red oak, cypress, ponderosa pine, white pine, birch, maple, and ash.

Londerville also sells so-called “salty” timbers from Utah’s Great Salt Lake. Years of steeping in the alkaline waters give the timbers a unique patina. “The wood has subtle colors of ambers, greens, reds, golds and purples, with grays and blacks really standing out,” she says.

Petrified wood offers another spectrum of colors and textures. Preserved for millions of years, the wood has actually turned into quartz crystal. The wood is split along veins, similar to marble, and made ready for home applications.

Stark sells petrified wood from Arizona that’s more than 200 million years old. The wood can be reclaimed only from private property whose owner holds mineral rights.

### CENTER OF ATTENTION

William and Sandra Brisley used reclaimed Douglas fir joists for the flooring throughout their Afton home, but gave it an extra twist. Rather than use the lumber’s cut side, they opted for the so-called “dirty side” to further emphasize the dark, aged look. Stain was applied to the wood, dirt and all. Machine marks and nail holes also are preserved in the wood, which was salvaged from an early 1800s New Jersey warehouse.

“What it did do was give it a real dark patina that comes from the aging of the wood. It’s a one of a kind floor. Nothing repeats itself,” says William Brisley, an architect who designed the home. The stair treads, a built-in bookcase, and a buffet also feature various reclaimed woods.

The stories behind the lumber are often as intriguing as the wood itself. Coffel cites quarter-sawn white oak that was reclaimed from a Hamm’s brewery vat during prohibition and used in a Minnetonka home. The home was recently destroyed to make room for a boat landing, but the flooring was reclaimed yet again and reused in another house.

Flooring is the most common application for reclaimed timbers, although it’s also used for exposed roof beams, paneling, countertops, doors, mantels, and cabinetry.

In Mark Smith and Sherri Mazario’s Credit River home, located on a former horse farm, reclaimed Douglas fir appears underfoot and overhead. The great room and kitchen floors feature 18-inch wide planks, while ceilings throughout the house contain exposed wooden beams and narrow tongue-and-groove strips—all wood reclaimed from an old warehouse.





The contemporary home features soaring windows and natural materials, including more than 1 million pounds of limestone. The reclaimed lumber warms up the glass, concrete, and limestone. "It balances everything," Smith says. "If you don't bring in natural elements, it ruins the entire feel of the house."

Surprisingly, reclaimed wood is not cost-prohibitive. It's usually a bit more expensive than traditional wood and about the same price as exotic lumber. The catch is getting it while it lasts. Although there will always be barns and warehouses to dismantle and salvage, old wood quantities are limited.

"When something's available, you have to buy it," Londerville says. "There is a finite amount of it." ■

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FOR MORE INFORMATION ON RESOURCES FEATURED IN THIS STORY, PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 159.



A former warehouse finds new life in the wide-planked floors and exposed beams of this thoroughly modern Credit River home. The wood balances the towering windows and generous limestone.



## Know Your Timbers

The look reclaimed timbers produce in their new lives depends on species, age, and past uses. Some of the most popular found locally are:



### SPECIES

**DOUGLAS FIR (1):** Reddish brown to near white

**YELLOW PINE (2):** Yellow to amber

**RED AND WHITE PINE:** Cream to medium brown

**AMERICAN CHESTNUT:** Nearly extinct. Frequent wormholes. Blond to deep brown

### CUTS

**QUARTER-SAWN:** Long, radiated strips give a speckled look

**END GRAIN:** Tiles cut from beams on end. Light to dark browns

### AGING

**SALTY TIMBERS (3):** Multi-colored from salt water

**TOBACCO WOOD (4):** From old tobacco barns. Amber and red tones from tobacco curing

**PETRIFIED WOOD:** Hundreds of millions years old. Turned to crystal, exhibiting rainbow of colors

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BLACK'S FARMWOOD AND TRESTLEWOOD