



Country sweet

SCOTT SHIGLEY PHOTO

A farm renovation turns a ramshackle property into a stylish haven, complete with peace, quiet and a pool

BY TATE GUNNERSON
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Michael Abrams and Doug Elliott had already been hunting for a second home when Elliott stumbled across the 10-acre property in 1998 while visiting friends near Fennville, Mich. Venturing onto the land for a quick peek, Elliott realized they had found their weekend retreat. "I wanted privacy and solitude, the exact opposite of what we have in the city," Elliott says of the

a nine-stall horse barn, all of which were clad in green asphalt tiles and infested with raccoons and other country critter. "The house was a dump, but it had good bones. I loved the idea of restoring it," Elliott says. "I knew it was a place we had to buy."

Abrams concurred, and within a month they had purchased the property and started the demolition. They soon hired Steve Darpel and Mark Schrock of Darpel & Associates Builders Inc. to renovate the

The pool, top, added luxury to Michael Abrams' 10-year-old farm. Layers of brick and stone on the chimney reveal the home's history.



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recalls Schrock. Over the next year, they completely rehabbed the two main houses, adding a new, screened-in porch and replacing the mechanicals, well and septic system. When they removed walls or added drywall, the crew was careful to preserve the home's original wainscoting, which they later reinstalled, most notably in the second-floor master bedroom where knotty pine paneling covers all four walls and the low, peaked ceiling. "At the end of the day, they took it apart and they put it back together with a little shoring up here and there," Abrams recalls. "It's all new, but we retained a lot of old elements."

The master bedroom has windows on both sides and a pair of French doors that overlook the great room where Abrams created a rustic Juliet balcony using a vintage side rail from a hay cart he purchased at a local salvage house. "It kind of feels like being in a birdhouse," Abrams says. Hanging above the bed is an antique log cabin-style quilt, which is just one example of how Abrams, an interior designer with his own firm based in Chicago, modified his more contemporary aesthetic to fit the home's country context. "The design needs to relate to the architecture, and this is a very laid-back, comfortable, casual farmhouse," Abrams says.

The couple decided against installing new flooring throughout most of the house, opting instead to refinish the subfloor they discovered underneath old linoleum tiles and a Masonite subfloor. "It mellows and changes color over the years, giving the house a patina," says Abrams. One of the few places where Abrams and Elliott covered the original floors was in the kitchen, which they opened to the living area and completely gutted, replacing the kitchen cabinets and appliances, and laying tumbled marble floor tiles that they continued into the dining area.

Perhaps the most dramatic change was made to the living room, which had relatively low 8-foot ceilings that didn't fit the line of the house. To remedy the issue, Abrams suggested the addition of a clear story, which more than doubled the ceiling height and created space for additional windows. "It was a '50s addition tacked on to an early 1900s farmhouse, so the roofline was really poor," Abrams says. "We popped in this clear story to raise the ceiling height in the great room." Adding the additional ceiling height revealed that three types of material had been used to build the chimney. Above the river rock mantel, the original builders had used two other types of brick, a decision likely made to cut costs. Rather than clad the entire structure, Abrams decided to leave the layers exposed. "The three materials really tell the story of the house," Abrams explains.

Though the fireplace makes for cozy winter evenings, Abrams and Elliott can often be found outside during the summer. The unsightly green asphalt tiles are long gone, replaced by cedar painted a cheerful



Details such as a salvaged balcony railing, comfortable wicker and barn red cabinetry set the farmhouse's casual style.



sunflower yellow, and a wood deck overlooks a Koi pond and an in-ground swimming pool that's conveniently located between the main house and guest cottage. Although Abrams and Elliott spend less time at the farm during the winter, they have a long-term plan to relocate to the property full time when they retire. Until then, they savor every summer weekend. "There's nothing like a Michigan summer," Abrams says. "This is where we truly feel at home."

Countrified

Abrams and Elliott looked to the past to design their weekend retreat. "The old pie give it a feeling of timelessness," Abrams says. A few of their favorite touches:

■ The screened-in porch, furnished with antique wicker furniture.

■ An antique quilt becomes a piece of when displayed above the headboard in the master bedroom, as side rail from a hay cart makes an unexpected railing for the window overlooking the kitchen and great room.

■ One table was originally a washbasin that belonged to Elliott's grandmother, and another was made by Abrams' grandfather in shop class.



Need design help? Send us your photos

Trib magazine's Spring Home Design issue is coming your way March 11, packed with help for your house. And while we're feeling helpful, we'd like to see a photo of a room in your place that needs a little assist on the details. (Think styling and accessorizing, not a whole room redo.) A panel of interior designers will review the best photos and suggest ideas for finishing touches to your room, and we'll publish the photos and their ideas in the Spring Home Design issue.

Send your high-resolution digital photo to TribHomeDesign@gmail.com by Feb. 19, to make your case for a designer assist.