

# GARDEN & GUN



## Old Barn, New Life



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How an Alabama family turned a wooden shell into a genteel home

The Bodnar residence, a salvaged barn set on a sloping piece of farmland outside of Birmingham, Alabama, is the kind of place that seems almost sepia toned, like those charming vintage photographs taken a century ago.

That notion of time, of recognizing one's place in it, is important to John Michael Bodnar, a restaurateur, and his wife, Shay. So is the sense of the word *land*—having respect for it, feeling a connection to it, being aware that they are part of a bigger picture.

All that idealism aside, when it came time to pick a place to raise her children—Francie, five; Isabella, three; and Lila, two—living in barn wasn't

exactly what Shay had in mind. Slowly, John Michael convinced her that the idea made perfect sense. It made sense for the environment because they were repurposing old materials, and it made sense for their family because John Michael had long ties to farming. When the decision was finally made to go through with it, he had a Pennsylvania barn trucked to Alabama, and he soon turned to architect Jeff Dungan of the Birmingham firm Dungan & Nequette for help transforming the wooden shell into a home.

“I went to Jeff and I said, ‘I want to build a barn. Here are the dimensions, and here are my general ideas,’” recalls John Michael. “I was expecting him to be like, ‘What? Are you nuts?’ But he just said, ‘Okay, let’s do it.’”

Working from a crude sketch, Dungan created a set of plans. The general structure of the barn remained unchanged, but the architects added a windowed cupola that pours light into the main room, designed four bedrooms and three bathrooms that constitute roughly a third of the home’s 3,300 square feet, and punched windows into the sides of the barn to provide views of the woods, the fields of vegetables and fruit trees, the chicken coop, and John Michael’s workshop.

The process was collaborative by necessity, because John Michael held strong ideas about energy efficiency and sustainability. For instance, he dictated the use of SIPs—structural insulated panels, which are essentially six inches of foam insulation sandwiched between plywood—to envelop the entire barn. John Michael also wanted—and got—a cutting-edge heating and cooling system, which consists of a massive wood-burning “Russian stove” and a complex geothermal setup with pipes circulating from the house through a series of six 200-foot-deep wells.

“I felt like a midwife with this home,” Dungan says. “It was different than 99 percent of the other projects I do, where I get input from the client, go away, and then deliver plans to them, saying, ‘Well, here it is!’ With this project, I was more of an assistant! I would say to John Michael, ‘I don’t know anything about a Russian stove!’ Or ‘Well, I’ve read about geothermal heating and cooling systems, but I’ve never put one in.’ This house was out in front of anything I’d seen or done before.”

“When I describe our place to people, it’s hard for them to grasp,” Shay says.

“You can’t really put a lot of makeup on it. It is what it is. It’s just a barefoot house. We’re beyond casual, and we’re always together as a family. This big open room is where we spend most of our time.”

It is also where they swing—literally, on an old-fashioned rope design, complete with a wooden seat. It hangs from one of the crossbeams, adding a touch of whimsy to the room. “Everybody swings on it,” Shay says. “The kids love it. The swing just kind of describes who we are.”

The swing is playful for sure, but when visitors arrive—and when they depart—they must pass by something even more in spirit with the Bodnar philosophy: a six-foot-tall chicken sculpture sitting atop a hill next to the house.

The sculpture, of course, guards the chicken coop. “It’s great for the kids,” Shay says. “They get to know how things grow.”

Which is yet another lesson in understanding that all of it—from the eggs to the chickens, to the old barn itself—is part of a great big circle they call home.