

**A landscape architect drew on his rural roots to transform his home into a rustic farmstead in the heart of the city.**

## FARM FRESH

By KIM PALMER • kpalmer@startribune.com

Homeowners planning to remodel often seek inspiration by looking at other people's houses.

Not Bruce Chamberlain. He looked at old barns.

"I've always had a fascination with them," he said. He attributes it, in part, to growing up on an organic dairy farm near Hastings. But he appreciates distinctive barns wherever he can find them.

"I've done a lot of traveling through Europe, and it sounds a little geeky, but I seek out barns," he said.

When Chamberlain bought a house in Minneapolis' Linden Hills neighborhood 14 years ago, he chose a 1914 Dutch Colonial, an architectural style sometimes referred to as a "barn house," for its distinctive gambrel roof.

"I loved the character, the bones of the house," he recalled, although it

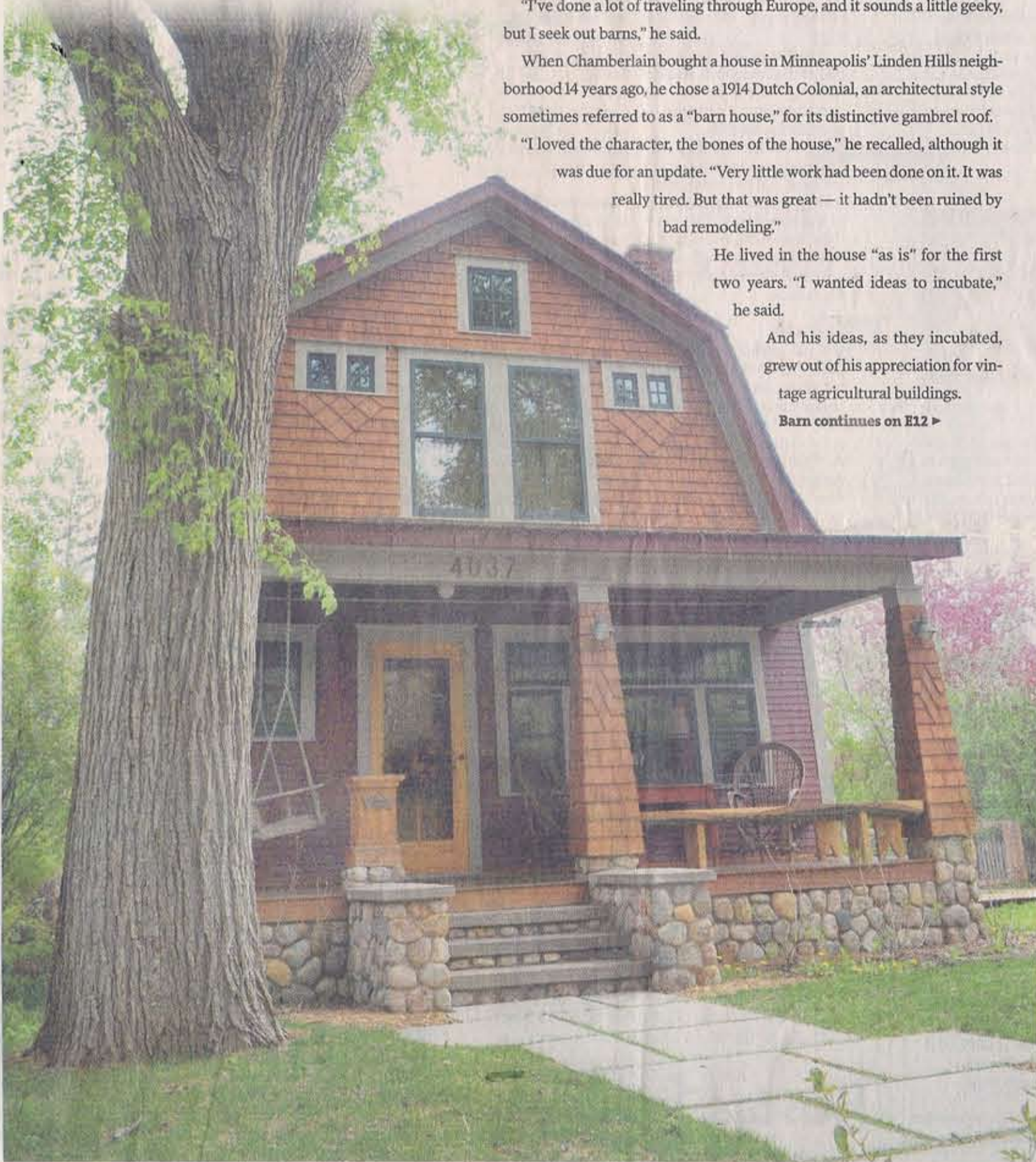
was due for an update. "Very little work had been done on it. It was really tired. But that was great — it hadn't been ruined by

bad remodeling."

He lived in the house "as is" for the first two years. "I wanted ideas to incubate," he said.

And his ideas, as they incubated, grew out of his appreciation for vintage agricultural buildings.

**Barn continues on E12 ►**



Wood from downed urban trees often has attractive grain and works in a variety of applications.

### Harvesting the 'urban forest'

• A local company turns downed trees into lumber and wood products.

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Losing a big tree is a sad — and expensive — experience for most homeowners. But some are turning that loss into a gain. They're transforming their downed trees into tabletops, flooring or kitchen cabinets, with help from a local business, Wood From the Hood.

"Most people don't like the idea of a big, beautiful tree going into a chipper or the dump," said Jon Buck, who handles custom sales and product development. Wood From the Hood offers an alternative: milling, drying and fabricating those trees into lumber. Even diseased trees, such as elms with Dutch elm or ash hit by the emerald ash borer, still yield usable wood.

"People ask, 'Is the wood still good?'" said founder Rick Siewert. "The bug is only skin deep." It infests the bark but not the wood itself; once the wood has been treated and kiln-dried, beetles and borers aren't an issue.

And while elm and ash aren't as popular as, say, walnut or cherry, both have an attractive grain and look good in a variety of applications, Buck said. "Most people are surprised how nice a wood it is."

Minneapolis homeowners Bruce Chamberlain and Melissa Mrachek contacted Wood From the Hood after a huge elm in their front yard succumbed to Dutch elm disease last year. "It was a beautiful, perfect vase-shaped elm," Chamberlain said. "It's such a waste to throw it all away."

#### Furniture with a story

Wood From the Hood coordinated the tree-cutting, then kiln-dried the wood and fabricated a giant slab that Chamberlain turned into a dining-room table. He also got lumber for a play loft he built for their 2-year-old son, and logs that he used to build porch benches. "The tree lives on," he said. "We use the table every day. We love it, and the story behind it."

**Wood continues on E12 ►**



Photos by RICHARD SENNOTT • rsennott@startribune.com  
Bruce Chamberlain made his patio benches out of logs from his former elm tree. He hired a local company, Wood From the Hood, that specializes in turning downed trees into usable lumber.



Chamberlain, Melissa Mrachek and their son, Ben, are seated at their dining table, which is new but has a history. The tabletop was fabricated by Wood From the Hood from a giant elm that once stood in the family's yard.

# FARM FRESH

## ◀ BARN FROM E1

Chamberlain analyzed "great old barns" and their features, then incorporated those elements into his plans, including dormers and a side entry redesigned as a sliding barn door below a transom window.

"The design intent was urban farmstead," he said. "I wanted to walk the delicate line between historic integrity and modern convenience."

Chamberlain, a landscape architect with Hoisington Kogler Group, also planned to tackle his remodeling the old-fashioned rural way, doing most of the hands-on work himself. Growing up on the farm, he lived in the house that his grandfather built, and learned construction "by osmosis," he said.

So about 12 years ago, he "jumped right in," beginning the long process of gutting and rebuilding the second floor and re-siding the exterior with radial-sawn clapboards and cedar shakes.

Once he started digging into his house, he decided there was something uncomfortable about the second floor. It was the ceilings, which were sagging about 6 inches, he discovered. To remedy that and open up the master bedroom, Chamberlain created a vaulted ceiling with cross ties made from resawn Douglas fir reclaimed from old warehouse buildings.

## Living under a tarp

Doing the work himself meant the project "took a long time," he said, but his lifestyle at the time accommodated a drawn-out construction schedule. "I was single when I bought it, so I could live under a blue tarp for a while, which I did."

By the time Chamberlain was ready to tackle the next phase of his remodeling, he was married. He and his wife, Melissa Mrachek, wanted to make the most of their 1,200 square feet of space, so Chamberlain rebuilt the front porch and added a back porch to match it, with a deck on top. Next came gutting and rebuilding the main level, turning a former buffet nook into a back-porch entry, and a dark pantry into a light-filled reading nook.

"We took off the woodwork and labeled it, so we could put it back," Chamberlain said. "Melissa was very involved in that. The house was basically taken apart and reassembled."

The most recent upgrade, in 2008, involved gutting and remodeling the kitchen, building a new garage with a workshop, a green roof and play loft for the couple's son, Ben, now 2, and adding hardscape outdoors.

This time, Chamberlain had more professional help, including hiring stonemasons to build the stone walls, and artist David Culver to create limestone "ruins" in their back yard. The couple also hired professionals to install the tile backsplash



Photos by RICHARD SENNOTT • rsennott@startribune.com

The master bedroom is now Bruce Chamberlain's favorite space in the house, after he added a vaulted ceiling, cross ties and new windows.



The two-story house is 1,200 square feet. "We use every nook and cranny," Chamberlain said.



The remodeled kitchen has a modern edge that contrasts with the historical character of the house. Glass tiles, stainless steel appliances and bamboo-patterned cabinets create a contemporary aesthetic. To see more photos, visit [startribune.com/homegarden](http://startribune.com/homegarden).

in their kitchen.

Unlike the rest of the house, the kitchen is thoroughly modern in style, with contemporary red glass tiles, stainless steel appliances and cabinets made of Formica in a pattern that resembles bamboo. In that room, "we were trying to push the edges of contemporary design,"

Chamberlain said. "It's a tightrope — to be true to the historic character of the house but to give it a little edge, so it's not just a historic home. Sometimes I think we went a little too far," he said.

They may expand the house someday, when budget permits, and have commissioned plans for an addition.

For now it works for them. "We've used every nook and cranny. It's very livable," Chamberlain said.

And when strangers who admire the house strike up a conversation, they get an old-fashioned rural welcome.

"The nicest compliment is when people drive by, circle around, then

ask if they can see it," Chamberlain said.

Some even get out of their cars and knock on his door, asking for a look. Does he oblige them? "Oh, yeah, absolutely!" he said. "We love that, that people are interested."

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