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Barn Dwelling

A widow makes a fresh start just steps away from her longtime home.

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JOHANNA PATRI'S ROOTS ON her property in Sonoma run 48 years deep. She and her late husband, Remo, raised their family here in a wood-shingled home originally built in 1916 and surrounded by mature trees. Johanna has since moved on from that home — but not from her 23-acre property.

The old family home had been remodeled over the years, a joy for the Patris because Remo was an architect. But the big old wooden barn behind it, which had served as a sheep shed, workshop, and winemaking venue, was in its original condition and had been deemed beyond repair when Johanna decided to replace it. As the new barn neared completion, she was struck by the idea that it would be the perfect place to live.

That idea led to the construction of a residence within the new barn, where Johanna now lives, while her daughter Andrea occupies the older home with her young family. “I’ve never lived anywhere brand-new before,” says Johanna, and she loves her sparkling, light-filled quarters.

The steel barn is one of two structures on the property. It consists of Johanna Patri's dwelling at the back end, an artist studio for her daughter in the middle, and an open air carport on the opposite end.



The 2,200-square-foot steel barn was designed by Sonoma architect Robert Baumann and manufactured to Baumann's specifications by Garco Building Systems in Spokane, Washington. It was then built out by Steve Lanning Construction of Sonoma. When it came time to design her 840-square-foot home-within-a-barn, Johanna turned to San Francisco architect Andre Rothblatt, whom she has known since he was a boy.

Johanna's home has a great room, with a kitchen at one end and living area at the other, which adjoins a spacious bedroom and bath.

Rothblatt designed towering white cabinets for the kitchen, which is anchored by a lengthy maple island, built by Sonoma cabinetmaker Jerry Hanlon. The floors are gray polished concrete, and the ceiling is tongue-and-groove cedar.



Clockwise from top left: An array of potted plants surrounds the door to Johanna's bedroom. The sitting area on the barn patio offers a view of the adjoining vineyard. Among the treasured pieces on display in Johanna's new home are several works by her late father-in-law, Giacomo Patri, an Italian-born illustrator who founded the Patri School of Art Fundamentals in San Francisco.



Johanna moved from her larger home on the property into this new steel barn dwelling. The custom cabinets and vaulted open-beam ceilings are among her home's standout features. The furniture and decor preserve cherished links to Johanna's past.



“As small as this kitchen is, it’s got everything I need,” Johanna says. Her handmade walnut kitchen table belonged to her mother-in-law. Atop it is a bowl of shells collected by Johanna and Remo during the four years they lived in Hawaii early in their marriage. Red tin Hills Brothers coffee cans — symbolic of San Francisco, where the couple met — are stacked on the shelving in the living area.

Johanna has brought her memories with her. Not one furnishing is new, which is just how she planned it. Her 19-year-old cat, Tiger, snoozes on the sofa in the sun, comfortable on the familiar cushions. A long-owned print by famed Bay Area artist Richard Diebenkorn graces a wall.

A large window over the kitchen sink looks out over vineyards to Sonoma Mountain. Binoculars rest on the windowsill because she enjoys watching the birds. The entryway is glass, and there are large windows on three sides of the structure with endless views that allow Johanna to delight in both sunrise and sunset. Although she remains on the same property, this sense of seeing to forever is new, as the older home sits among trees and is closer to the road.

The exterior of the solar-powered barn is



The custom-built kitchen cabinets are an architectural highlight of the barn dwelling.



Nineteen-year-old Tiger loves basking in the sun on the couch in the entryway. Bailey, 5, enjoys helping her grandma, Johanna, in the kitchen.



The chicken coop was built with materials salvaged from the old barn.



corrugated steel with old-fashioned, farmhouse-style outdoor lights. The larger portion of it is used as Andrea's art studio, a place to make wine, and for general household storage. Some of the siding salvaged from the original barn lines its walls, and the entire structure is fully insulated.

"I don't feel lonely because at night I see the lights of houses in the distance," Johanna says. There's little reason to feel alone anyway, with Andrea and her husband, Gardner, right on this same land. Her grandson Giacomo, 13, often stops in after school and his sister Bailey, 5, rides her tricycle over to join Johanna for breakfast in the morning.

Johanna also has two sons with families who live in Sonoma and Redding.

The new barn sits on the exact



Bailey often rides her tricycle over to Grandma Johanna's house to join her for breakfast.

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footprint of the old, weathered one, and Johanna keeps her history alive in her new abode. She's retired from her career as a land use planner for the Marin County Community Development Agency, but she has planned a meaningful life in new surroundings, graced with family dinners, visits with longtime friends, and a busy volunteer work schedule. She misses Remo, who passed away five years ago after 47 years of marriage. Surely he would be proud of what she's created. 🍷



Johanna acquired a Japanese tansu chest (detail, right) when she was on a trip to Japan in 1961. Her parents gifted her a Prieto ceramic piece (far right) when she was attending Mills College. Antonio Prieto was an instructor at the college at the time.