

# Hope Floats

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## EXTREME DIY

A SELF-TAUGHT DESIGNER EMBARKS UPON A SOLO MISSION TO RESUSCITATE A 19TH-CENTURY HOMESTEAD.

By Kelsey Keith  
PHOTOS BY MARK MAHANEY

Project: Floating Farmhouse  
Location: Eldred, New York  
Designer: Givone Home



In 2002, when Tom Givone bought a toppling 200-year-old farmhouse peeling with outdated neon blue paint, his new neighbors in upstate New York advised chucking it straight into a pit in the house's equally rundown backyard. Instead, the experience helped define the homeowner-turned-contractor's love of the picturesque and channel it into a newfound talent for renovation.

A former advertising copywriter, Givone cheekily gives credit for his roundabout career to the "quintessentially awful" landlord who ejected him from a rent-stabilized studio in the late '90s, which spurred his first home purchase. His self-described "strange and delightful" path to architectural design thus began on a narrow cobblestone lane in the upper reaches of Manhattan in a dilapidated row house, built in 1882 among a double row of identical clapboard abodes. From there, Givone edged ever northward, to the western edge of the Catskill Mountains, where he first spotted the locally infamous blue farmhouse, then three others that he also eventually rehabbed back to health. His current weekend abode, nicknamed the Floating Farmhouse, is—so far—his capstone project, a synthesis of personal taste, material experimentation, and historically sensitive restoration: a living laboratory for how to bring the vernacular past into the present. »

The Floating Farmhouse's semitransparent addition has a roofline that matches the pitch of the original 1820s farmhouse. A porch, tucked under the side eaves, is cantilevered over a stream that runs through the property. Ikea loungers are illuminated from the interior by commercial gymnasium lights repurposed as pendant lamps.



“The Floating Farmhouse is the culmination of a decade-long experiment in how opposites attract.”—Tom Givone

This labor in homemaking has been methodical, if not by choice then by financial necessity, owing to the economic depression of 2008. Instead of suspending all activity on the creek-adjacent farmhouse, Givone focused on perfecting his materials. For the lattice of oxidized tube steel that frames the back wall of the rear addition, three years of exposure to weather (aided by a daily acid bath) yielded a just-so leather-like patina, repeated in the central fireplace stack, which is finished in matching weathered Cor-Ten steel.

During that time, he also enlisted local laborers for help with the interior demolition, which Givone likens to “an archeological dig: messy but rewarding.” They removed two bays in the back of the house and erected a new wing, similar in proportion to the original gabled structure but finished with a transparent portal of 22-foot-tall skyscraper glass, the ne plus ultra of the picture window. The addition shelters the new kitchen—characterized by the steel-clad, cast concrete wood-burning oven and two massive salvaged ceiling beams—and a 12-by-50-foot covered side porch cantilevered over a meandering stream.

The mélange of old and new is the backbone of Givone’s design philosophy: “I peel back layers, expose what is inherent to the structure, and incorporate it into the final design; add by taking away.” Once uncovered, the farmhouse’s original cedar shake roof shingles and rough wall planks factored in as a visible design element in what are now the master bedroom and the guest bedroom

Tom Givone sits at a table of his own design, which he had fabricated from reclaimed wood by a local carpenter. The table is situated in front of the house’s rear wall of skyscraper glass. Laminate kitchen cabinets by Ikea are framed in wraparound bluestone; the 48-inch commercial range is by FiveStar. At right, Givone considers his pizza-cooking technique in front of the custom built wood-fired oven.

hallway. Eleven pine trees on the property, each over 150 feet tall and encroaching on the existing house, were cut and milled onsite, providing the raw material for most of its new custom woodwork, including wainscoting, the beaded boarding on the porch ceiling, door and window trim, and coffers in the first-floor living room. Bluestone, which wraps around the kitchen counters until it meets the floor, was quarried and manufactured locally.

Salvage features strongly in the decor as well. A deceased uncle’s collection of vintage and industrial furniture makes an appearance as a therapist’s leather chaise longue, a baroque mirror in the otherwise-austere master bedroom, and a 19th-century wood-and-zinc soaking tub rescued from a New York City tenement building. Givone wrapped the latter artifact with shiny stainless steel; the metallic sheen contrasts the guest bathroom’s plain white walls (sealed with Thoroseal plaster to prevent water migration and mitigate the need for ceramic tile). Hand-hewn beams scouted from a centuries-old barn in neighboring Pennsylvania add texture to





"The hope has been to combine archaic and modern elements in a way that would enhance the beauty of each by virtue of its contrast with the other."



\*Coined in the 1930s, a "heat sink" describes a device that absorbs or dissipates unwanted heat. In the case of Givone's cast-iron radiators, a heat sink refers to their ability to retain and continually release heat long after water has passed through the pipes. Givone explains that "the boiler doesn't have to fire as frequently to maintain a room's temperature and for that reason, converted antique radiators are more efficient than standard hot-water baseboards."



In the guest bathroom, Givone installed a hand-chiseled sink made of 17th-century marble quarried from the hills outside of Rome. Below, a section of the farmhouse's original shingled roof peeks out from under the new, raised ceiling in the master bedroom.

"I wanted to create tension between polished and raw, primitive and industrial, sophisticated and simple."

the kitchen and master bedroom, both intentionally spare though cozy, thanks in part to the antique cast-iron radiators Givone had converted to hot water use, a "win-win-win situation: aesthetically beautiful, recycled, and very efficient as a heat sink\*."

An improved building envelope and circulation system shield the home from brutal winters in the Catskills: The building's frame is sealed with soy-based expanding foam insulation, and the original wavy-glass windows have been hung with an additional layer of coated compression-fit glass, making them as airtight as new double-pane units. The heating system runs on biodiesel fuel, fired by a low-consumption Buderus boiler, and wide-plank wood floorboards in the master bedroom benefit from radiant heat.

Givone categorizes the Floating Farmhouse not as an experiment in greening but as an exercise in responsible building; its low carbon footprint was cast back in the 1820s, when the home was built with local materials, delivered by horse and wagon, and fashioned by hand. Such a sensitive restoration-meets-renovation pays homage to that past, both aesthetically and environmentally. It also speaks to an innate desire in this particular homeowner: "A derelict structure inspires possibility where any rational soul would walk (if not run) away. For me, an 'impossible' project enables a more intuitive, process-based approach to architecture: remaining open to what the structure and the process reveal and evolving the design in real time." And while locals may not understand such lengthy efforts to revive a dilapidated rural manor, they surely appreciate the result: a successful marriage of vernacular design to modern domesticity. ■■■

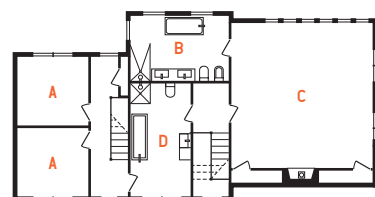


**Floating Farmhouse Floor Plans**

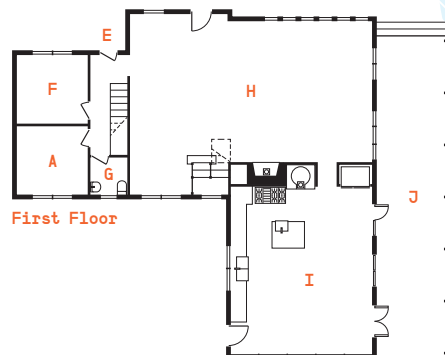
- A Guest Room
- B Master Bathroom
- C Master Bedroom
- D Guest Bathroom
- E Entry
- F Utility Room
- G Bathroom
- H Living Area
- I Kitchen/Dining Area
- J Cantilevered Porch



A salvaged 19th-century soaking tub wrapped in stainless steel (left) is topped by Hudson Reed faucets. Above, a gas fireplace fronted in weathered steel warms up the lofty master bedroom, whose spare decor is framed with beams discovered in a Pennsylvania barn. The Tizio desk lamp is by Artemide.



Second Floor



First Floor

