

These reinvisioned metal-frame homes are trending among Bluebonnet area landowners

Booming Barn dor Life

By Kristin Finan

WHEN MARK AND SUNNY Woelfel settled onto 3 acres of family land in Giddings in 2014, it was clear they were right where they were meant to be.

“It was always a lifelong dream to move to Grandpa’s place,” said Mark Woelfel, a Bluebonnet member.

But as they researched ideas for building a home on the Lee County property, they were drawn to a particular concept: the “barndominium.” The word, popularized in the 1980s, is the name given to the transformation of a barn-like space into a home. In recent years, barndominiums are often built from a variety of metal-frame buildings.

After removing an existing mobile home from the property, the Woelfels spent a year living on-site in an RV with three of their five children — the other two are adults who visit frequently — while the home was built. Last summer, they moved into their new Pinterest-worthy, two-story 3,200-square-foot barndominium, which centers around a sprawling great room and is adorned with lovingly restored furniture that has been in the family for generations.

It was custom built by Exner & Snyder Custom Homes. The company, based in Giddings, works on both barndominiums

and traditional houses across the Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative service area. Both styles of homes average about \$135 per square foot, said owner and founder Jonathan Snyder of the company. The Woelfel house, however, cost roughly \$100 per square foot to build.

The concept of barndominiums (“barn” plus “condominium”) is not new. Rural homeowners have transformed wood or metal barn structures into living spaces for generations. In recent years, however, thanks to websites like Pinterest and home design shows such as Chip and Joanna Gaines’ HGTV series “Fixer Upper,” (which first featured a barndominium in 2016), the trend has gotten bigger and grander.

Stacey Lynn Bell, aka “The Barndominium Lady,” has designed nearly 150 barndominiums across the country, including some being constructed in the Bluebonnet area.

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Mark and Sunny Woelfel built this 3,200-square-foot barndominium on family land in Giddings.

Sarah Beal photos



Amanda and John Hart did all the work themselves in building their barndominium in Winchester, 13 miles east of Smithville. See more photos on pages 22-23.

minium



Bluebonnet



Stacee Lynn Bell designs barndominiums, some of which are in Bluebonnet's service area. Her own home in East Texas is The Creek House plan, which has 5,200 square feet of interior living space. Below, her home also features a 2,000-square-foot covered porch.

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Bell, who is based in the small East Texas town of Cleveland 45 miles northeast of Houston, said that in the South, especially in Texas, “barndos” are typically steel-frame structures that often include a workshop or garage. They can be built within an existing



Stacee Lynn Bell

metal structure or completely from scratch. They generally feature a metal, rectangular frame that has been finished out on the inside, meaning the inside has the feel of a traditional house but is centered around an open-concept great room. In

other parts of the country, she said, wooden “pole barns” or engineered wood frame structures are more common. The exteriors of barndominiums can vary greatly, ranging from a traditional, barn-like feel to a more modern metal façade.

Although the barndominium trend is nationwide, it is especially popular in Texas, Oklahoma and Georgia, the website barndominiumlife.com states. Although the cost of building a new metal-frame home tends to be comparable to that of a basic wood-frame home, people are drawn to the aesthetics of barndominiums and the fact that their design – which typically

Photos from ourbarndominiumlife.com



features energy-efficient windows, lots of natural light and spray-foam insulated walls and attics – can be as energy efficient as their wood counterparts. They are also more durable and resistant to heat, weather and pests than wood-frame structures, said Elliott Lukasik, owner of Pristine Designs, which creates floor plans for about a dozen home builders in Central Texas.

Lukasik, who has been drawing floor plans for 28 years, has been asked to design metal-frame homes since the early 2000s. He didn't regularly start hearing the word barndominium until seven or eight

years ago. These days, he said, nearly half of the 100 plans he draws each year are for barndominiums, and most are in the Bluebonnet area.

“Originally it was something really simple, something cheap to get into, something to live in. Now, some of the barndominiums are Taj Mahals, big and elaborate and really nice,” he said. “If you think you're living in a barn, it's really not a barn. These can be more expensive than doing a conventional wood-frame build. It's really what you want to put into it.”

Most Texans opt for metal frames rather

than wood frames, in part because they like the look, Lukasik said. For do-it-yourself projects, metal-frame home kits are easier to assemble than wood-frame kits.

The average barndominium buyer is looking for a home in the 1,500- to 2,200-square-foot range, although some go as big as 4,000 square feet. The most requested plan is a one-story rectangular home, Lukasik said, but upstairs lofts are also popular.

Snyder of Exner & Snyder Custom Homes has seen demand for barndominiums increase in the past 15 years.

The company works on six or seven barndominiums a year, concentrating on the area between Brenham and Bastrop. “The lending was really hard to get on them before, because the banks didn’t know what to do with them as far as taxing and values on the building, but they’ve become a lot more mainstream on the market,” Snyder said.

They are popular in part because metal exteriors allow for less upkeep (you don’t have to paint them, for example) but the interiors allow for greater creativity.

“You start out with a big main structure and then really you can build anything you want on the inside,” he said. “They can be simple buildings, but they can be super extravagant on the inside. It’s really about your imagination.”

Most of the houses take 6 to 8 months to build, Snyder added. “We are a complete custom builder, so we are customer-first driven,” Snyder said. “We sit down with the customer to help them envision what they want and make sure they get the product

Sarah Beal/photos



The Woelfels’ barndominium is more energy efficient thanks to 8 inches of foam insulation in the attic, left, and 6 inches in the exterior walls, energy-efficient windows, an upgraded HVAC unit and black metal roof.

on paper and ask a lot of questions. I had my notepad with me all the time. Think of questions and shoot them over right away.”

Bluebonnet member Christa Wilson, who lives in Cypress near Houston, dreamed of building a place where she and her twin sister, Corrin Wilcox, could retreat with their families on weekends. After falling in love with Brenham, the sisters purchased 7 acres there to build a traditional house they could share. Then they watched the “Fixer Upper” barndominium episode in 2016 and changed directions.

“We wanted the big grand room that had everything,” said Wilson, who has five children. Her sister has three children. “We wanted a space for our family to hang out. It’s like a party barn pretty much.”

Wilson and Wilcox, both former teachers turned stay-at-home moms, decided to be their own general contractors, purchasing one large red metal building frame from Mueller, Inc., a West Texas-based steel manufacturer with 33 locations across the Southwest. Construction of the building — which includes 4,000 square feet downstairs, half of which is the great room, and 1,000 square feet upstairs — took about four months.

The barndo, which also includes a

they envisioned.”

Bluebonnet member Kathy Anderson and her husband, Jay Anderson, are building a barndominium outside Giddings with the help of Exner & Snyder. They expect their 2,200-square-foot home to cost around \$300,000. The couple will live next door to Kathy Anderson’s sister.

“It took me a long time to find a floor plan for what we wanted,” said Anderson, who hopes to eventually add a large garden, chickens and a small orchard on the property. “You want to maximize your best views. Don’t be afraid to draw it out

The Woelfel family savors movie night, below. Sunny and Mark flank their children, Jay, 11, second from left, Layna, 14, and Rayli, 10. Dogs are, from left, Molly, Flower, Gracie and Lucy.

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The Harts added on to their barndominium in Winchester in 2019, turning what was their living room into a dining room. The add-on became their new living room. The wood behind the TV comes from an old farm house on their family's property.

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1,500-square-foot covered patio, was ready in January 2017. Since the house can sleep 28 people, Wilson and Wilcox decided to rent it out when they weren't using it. You can get a taste of their barndo life by booking a stay on their website, 12armadillos.com, or by searching "barndominiums" in Central Texas on home rental websites Airbnb or VRBO.

Amanda Hart embraced the barndominium life well before it became a trend. She and her husband, Jon, a Bluebonnet member and welder, started hand-building their first barndominium on their 10-acre property in Winchester in 2005. The initial structure was 26 feet by 50 feet, half of which the couple enclosed to be their home, which they moved into in 2007. The couple used the other half of the building as a welding shop.

"It was literally going to be a barn and a shop, but then we decided, 'Why have this big space and wait to build a house later when we could just make this our house?'" she said.

After their family expanded to include three kids, they enclosed the rest of the 26-by-50-foot structure for living space and started an 18-by-36-foot add-on completed in 2019. They also added a back porch, carport and another bathroom.

"We had a kitchen and a living room, but we didn't have anywhere to sit down and eat as a family," she said. "We wanted to be together and we needed the additional space to be able to do that. I love it. To be able to do it yourself really gives you another level

Area builders in and near the Bluebonnet service area

- **Texas Barndominiums** (texasbarndominiums.com)
- **Exner & Snyder Custom Homes** (512-304-8928)
- **Tello Welding and Construction** (979-716-0343 or facebook.com/TelloWeldingAndConstructionLLC)

READ UP: There are multiple books about barndo designs and layouts online, or read "Barndominium Lifestyle," a bimonthly magazine (barndominiumlifestyle.com).

ON THE WEB: There are Facebook groups dedicated to barndominiums, including "Texas Barndominiums," "Barndominium Homes" and "Barndominium Life" (by barndominiumlife.com). Texas Barndominiums has a YouTube channel where you can learn more: <https://bit.ly/39qkD3a>.

of appreciation for what you have."

Hart estimates that hiring a contractor for the work would have cost twice as much.

Bluebonnet member Dawn Hedgpeth and her husband, Jesse, also plan to embrace the do-it-yourself barndominium approach, downsizing from a 3,500-square-foot house in Dickinson, 30 miles southeast of Houston, to live temporarily in a 320-square-foot shed-house on 8 acres in Bastrop. They purchased the property because it has an empty 2,000-square-foot metal building they plan to convert to a barndominium over several years.

"We're hoping to do most of the work ourselves," she said, but they are working

with Tello Welding and Construction of Giddings on the project.

The estimated cost for their property and construction is about \$300,000. The Hedgpeths have been interested in barndominiums for more than 20 years and are excited to work on the project. After living through hurricanes on the Gulf coast, Dawn Hedgpeth can tile and build cabinets.

"We're in our mid-50s. We could just as easily buy a little condo somewhere and have money set aside and travel, but this is an adventure, and we like doing this sort of stuff together," she said. "We get to do something together and say, 'Look what we did. This is ours. We built it.'" ■

Sarah Beal photos



Amanda Hart holds a sheet of metal steady as husband John, a welder, cuts the piece with metal shears to cover the kick space under the bar in their kitchen.

Home Kits, a do-it-yourself option

Folks who want to build a barndominium but are on a budget may opt for a home kit.

What does a home kit include? Typically a floor plan and prefabricated components to build a one-, two- or three-bedroom home including a bathroom, great room, kitchen, dining room and laundry room.

How much does it cost to build a barndominium using a kit? Barndo home kits can be significantly cheaper than building a traditional home or hiring a contractor if you do it yourself.

Pros: If you plan to hire help, expect to pay a general contractor less if you use a home kit. Kits cut construction time as well as labor and building costs.

Cons: Home kits and what they include vary from company to company, so do a lot of research. Even if you plan a DIY, you'll likely need to hire subcontractors for items such as a septic system, plumbing, electrical, fireplace and HVAC. On average, expect to pay \$60 to \$135 per square foot with a home kit.

Where to buy: A few Texas-based companies that offer home kits are General Steel Corp. (gensteel.com), Absolute Steel Texas (absolutesteeltx.com), Capital Steel Industries (csisteelbuildings.com), Mueller Inc. (muellerinc.com/kits) and Texas Barndominiums (texasbarndominiums.com).

Sources: barndominiumlife.com and gensteel.com