

Recovering the Pieces of History

Reclaimed Lumber Comes Together in a Colorado House



LEFT: Constructed in part with reclaimed lumber, a Colorado house built by architect Joe Robbins and contractor Gary Cogswell blends into the surrounding landscape.

By Christopher Hall

WHEN A CONNECTICUT couple decided to build a second home on 155 remote Colorado acres, they envisioned a house of modern conveniences that looked as if it had been there, weathering to a nutty brown, since homesteader days. What

they wanted may have seemed a paradox—a brand-new, 100-year-old home—but by building with reclaimed lumber, that's effectively what they got.

Using wood salvaged from older structures is nothing new, but only in recent years has there been a significant demand for reclaimed lumber in high-end residential construc-

tion. "People are realizing that with old wood they'll get the kind of look they just can't achieve with new lumber," says Bryce Jacobson, of the Building Materials Reuse Association, a nonprofit, educational group. "In the past 10 years it's evolved to the point where there are brokers who search out old buildings, carefully take

them apart and then mark, store and market the wood. Whole buildings are sometimes advertised for deconstruction on the Internet, and specialists in flooring and other products have cropped up."

According to Jeff Husted, of Vintage Timberworks, a Temecula, California, firm, old-wood customers are principally located in mountain resort areas. "We supply old beams for large Spanish- and Tuscan-style suburban homes,"

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RIGHT: Beams from a 19th-century Wisconsin barn (above, during disassembly) became the great room's man-

tel. The market for old timbers is growing rapidly, in large part because of the material's aesthetic appeal.



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he says, “but most of our business is in dark brown, rough-looking wood with lots of Old West character for mountain cabins.” Price is not the main attraction, since high-quality reclaimed lumber typically costs at least as much as new.

At the couple’s 6,500-square-foot house near Steamboat Springs, the list of reclaimed lumber reads like a tour of historical America—interior siding from a St. Louis feedlot; soffits from Wyoming snow fences; window and door trim from an Astoria, Oregon, pier; and smaller beams from a Stockton, California, grain elevator. “It’s much harder to use old wood in building a new

house,” says the architect, Joe Robbins, a veteran of 15 reclaimed-lumber residential projects. “A special engineer has to inspect and certify each structural piece, and there’s often far more craftsmanship needed during construction, because the wood can be slightly twisted or warped. But in terms of the structural strength of the old-growth wood and its beauty, the payoff is terrific.”

Reclaimed lumber is often remilled, giving it entirely new surfaces and exposing grain

RIGHT: For the great room, designer Lynne Bier selected furnishings to match the rustic spirit of the house.



RIGHT: To create a stacked-timber effect for the enclosed porch, two-by-12 boards from rodeo grounds (above) in Pendleton, Oregon, were used. Working with reclaimed lumber often requires additional craftsmanship.



that is far tighter and clearer than that of recently harvested wood. For many customers, however, the unique patina—the nail holes, dings and coloration produced by use and by exposure to the elements—is the attraction. Old grain elevators, for example, yield a particularly desirable and costly product called “grain-washed wood,” named for its wavelike, serpentine surface created over the years by the movement of corn or wheat kernels. Barn boards, too, are often prized for their patina. In the Colorado residence, the floors are all made of yellow pine from an 1860s barn in Somerset County, Pennsylvania. “The boards got only a light sanding,” says contractor Gary Cogswell, “so they didn’t lose their rich character.”

The stories behind reclaimed lumber are also driving its popularity, and shipments of old wood are sometimes accompanied by photos of the building from which it came. “The history of the material is very important to my

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ABOVE: A Rochester, New York, Kodak plant supplied fasciae and beams for the caretaker's house. **RIGHT:** Lumber for the garage (bottom) was provided by a circa 1870 barn in Rapids City, Illinois, built by a veteran of the Civil War on a government land grant.



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customers," says Gary Engman, of Sun Valley, Idaho-based Yellowstone Timber. "It's the same feeling as furnishing your house with antiques. The old wood is beautiful, but it's the stories about where it came from and how it was

used that add a whole new level of interest."

As the demand increases each year and the pool of available buildings grows smaller, some preservationists have become concerned that buildings of historic merit, or buildings that are prime candidates for more costly adaptive reuse projects, may be torn down. "We in the reclaimed-lumber business have to be very sensitive to those concerns," says Engman. "We simply can't be in the business of harming our heritage. But when there are buildings that can't be saved, we can make sure they won't be munched up by a backhoe and taken to the dump. It's a meaningful way to reuse important resources, create something beautiful and preserve a part of the past." □