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Salvaging building materials preserves past, and wallet

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Demolition fits right in with modern American culture. Knock down the old and put up something new!

The antithesis of demolition is salvaging, which actually has a longer history in this country. Salvaging has experienced a revival in recent years because it conserves resources and helps build the future.

Demolishing an old house or building usually just creates a lot of mixed waste. Careful advance salvaging, also known as deconstruction, preserves lumber, doors, windows, hardware, fixtures and more. But salvaging only succeeds if those items get used, so today we'll explore the best ways to turn salvaged building materials into resources for your home projects.

Q: It seems easier to just use new materials for home remodeling. Why should I bother with salvaged stuff?

A: In addition to the environmental benefits from conservation and waste reduction, you may be able to save some money. Many folks also like the aesthetics of salvaged items such as detailed woodwork or ornate doorknobs, especially for an older home, says Kinley Deller, a deconstruction expert with King County's green building program (www.GreenTools.us).

Another plus is that every salvaged item has a history, Deller adds, and you can often learn it from the seller. Then it becomes part of your own story: "This big cedar beam in our kitchen ceiling came from a 100-year-old warehouse in South Seattle."

Q: How much money can I save?

A: That varies hugely, and although the initial cost is often cheaper, using salvaged materials probably won't save you big bucks. You may need to spend more time finding salvaged materials, and time is money for most of us.

Salvaged materials may also have hidden costs. Deller describes how a homeowner bought a salvaged door for less than he would have paid for a similar door new, but then had to pay his contractor for four hours of labor to make a new frame for the door, and "it still doesn't close quite right." He suggests buying salvaged doors with frames.

Q: How do I avoid other problems when using salvaged building materials?

A: Deller, who has used many reclaimed materials in his own home, offers these tips:

• Start your search for salvaged materials for your project as early as possible. Don't expect to find exactly what you're looking for at the last minute. If you can be flexible in what you use, you'll have more choices.

• Inspect materials carefully, especially if you don't get them from one of the main salvage stores. Be leery of items with mold, mildew, musty smells or insect damage.

• Avoid reclaimed materials that could compromise your home's safety or energy efficiency, such as wood with lead paint, or drafty windows.

• Measure twice, buy once (adapted from the old builders' saying, "Measure twice, cut once"). There's nothing worse than bringing home a beautiful and very heavy salvaged bathtub and discovering it doesn't fit.

â€¢ When hiring contractors, make sure they support the concept of using salvaged materials and understand your vision.

Q: Where can I find these materials?

A: Three salvaged building materials stores in Seattle have been going strong for more than a decade:

â€¢ RE Store. 1440 N.W. 52nd St., 206-297-9119, www.re-store.org

â€¢ Second Use Building Materials. 7953 2nd Ave. S., 206-763-6929, www.seconduse.com

â€¢ Earthwise. 3447 4th Ave. S., 206-624-4510, www.earthwise-salvage.com (behind the Aqua Quip building)

Their Web sites include useful resources and photos of selected inventory.

Search online to locate other businesses throughout the region offering salvaged building materials. Some specialize in items such as reclaimed timbers. Online exchanges or newspaper classified ads can also help you round up materials.

For more tips, check out the comprehensive Green Home Remodel guide on this topic from Seattle and King County (find it online by searching for "Salvage & Reuse Guide").

Achieving salvage salvation in your home-remodeling projects may not always be a smooth road, but you'll be glad you took the trip.

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