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ILLUSTRATION BY PATRICK THOMAS. ANIMATED PORTRAIT BY TINA BERNING.



Fir Fetish

THE HOT MATERIAL IN HOME BUILDING IS OLD WOOD. BY ALEX KUCZYNSKI

A friend of mine in Idaho recently tore down his house and is constructing a new one on its footprint. The funny thing is that the old house looked new and the new house will look old, because he is building it with reclaimed wood.

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Gathered from sources as various as railroad tracks, barns, industrial barrels, bridges, shipping pallets, churches, beer vats, warehouses, stables, mills and high school gymnasiums, old wood is being refinished to fit new spaces, and can bestow upon a virginal McMansion that lived-in-for-centuries feel. It offers aesthetic advantages that fourth-growth plantation pine for \$3.99 a foot will not: the grain runs deep, and the wood is marked with knots, nail holes, bird's-eyes, blisters, whorls and cathedrals, those ghostlike ovoid shapes that billow out in shadowy waves. It is chic to use reclaimed wood: Calvin Klein used some in an apartment in Miami, Julian Schnabel did the same in his West Village apartment, and, most famously, Bill Gates's Seattle house (built in the 1990s, ahead of the curve) is made almost entirely of reclaimed wood.

Janet Jarvis, the architect for my friend's new/old house, and I drove three hours from Ketchum, through the Craters of the Moon — a massive basalt lava formation in southern Idaho where NASA astronauts trained before their first moonwalk — to Blackfoot, to visit one of the West's most exclusive providers of reclaimed wood, Trestlewood.

There we were greeted by Neil Birch. I imagine he gets a lot of jokes about his name, so I didn't make any. We crunched through the snow at the 25-acre lumberyard, past stacks of Southern yellow pine

salvaged from a Spiegel warehouse outside of Chicago and Douglas fir from a plywood plant in British Columbia, and stopped at an enormous tree, lying on its side on its own bench.

"This is a Doug fir," he said, using wood-man lingo for Douglas fir. It had been part of a bridge structure in British Columbia. Janet asked him how old it was. "We know it was cut down from the bridge about 80 years ago, and we counted the growth rings and figured that it was a sapling around 1475." I ran my hands across its width, feeling the ridges of decades upon decades, stopping at the heart of the trunk, a pale circle the circumference of my pinky that represented its first year of life.

"So, could someone just come in and buy this?" I asked.

Birch shook his head. "A lot of the people in this business are wood fanatics, and I'm the worst of the bunch," he said. "It would have to be the right client, with the right idea, who was doing something that captured the tree's character in an appropriate way."

"Even for, like, \$100,000?"

He shook his head again. Much of Trestlewood's wood comes from a 12-mile-long support structure, the Lucin Cutoff Trestle, over which the Southern Pacific Railroad crossed the Great Salt Lake from 1904 until the 1950s, when it was replaced with concrete and stone. Since 1993, the company has been salvaging and refinishing the tens of

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millions of feet of Douglas fir and redwood that made up the trestle. But that's not the least of their unusual sources.

Birch pointed to a stack of neatly piled planks. "For the first 50 years of its life, this was a beer vat," he said. "For the second 50 years of its life, it was a pickle tank." The pickle industry has in recent years abandoned wood in favor of fiberglass — apparently, unlike with wine, it doesn't matter what material you pickle pickles in — so pickle wood has presented a boon for people like Birch. Occasionally, though, they have to let it air out for a couple of years. Inside the finishing warehouse, a stack of wood was labeled "Pickle wood: vinegar scent."

"Stuff like that we have to keep around for a while until the smell goes away," Birch said. "We bought a Seagram whiskey rack, and that had to sit for a couple of years because not everyone wants their house to smell like whiskey."

Many reclaimed-wood aficionados believe that old wood saves new trees from being cut down and is therefore good for the environment, but Birch think that's just overhyped green marketing. The fuel costs for transporting old wood from all over the country cuts down on the environmental benefit. "And when you're putting this wood into a home with showers that run 20 gallons a minute, well, you're not really saving the environment, are you?"

Sometimes Birch's clientele want a very specific look. A recent client

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wanted only timber that had been used as railroad pilings in the Great Salt Lake. Because it was submerged in the lake for so long, it exudes an attractive, dusky shadow of salt that is very desirable when planed and finished. And very expensive. Unfortunately, the client who built his house with the old pilings hired a cleanup crew before he moved in. When he arrived, Birch said, "he was real disappointed." The housekeepers greeted him with the news that the wood planks had been covered in this terrible, dirty, salty brine. And so, they proudly announced, they put in extra hours to clean it all off. ■

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