The inimitable elegance of reclaimed wood

by Charles Finn

It looked like crap. In fact, there was dung ground into the grain. Stacked up in the back of my pickup, the boards were 1x4 tongue and groove fir that had come out of an old goat shed in Dixon. Any sensible woodworker would have thought I was on my way to the dump. For at least 20 years, the wood had been kicked and chewed and pissed on and lay rotting and absorbing every insult a goat could offer. The nails that once held them down were rusted and broken off, and when I ran the first piece through my planer I hit at least half a dozen. It took hours to wire brush each board, dig the dirt out of the grooves, run a metal detector over each piece and trim off the split ends. But planed, sand-

ed and oiled, my Dixon goat shed wood made the best looking wall of paneling I've ever seen. Each board was streaked with rich mahoganies, sky-bruise purples and dunn- mans. Long black ovals stood out around the old nail holes and faint yellows bleached through. Shop till you drop at Home Depot and Lowe's, that old wood was worth every drop of sweat invested and all the cursing and cursing that came out of me.

For the last five years I've been working exclusively with reclaimed lumber, collecting scavenge[d] building materials from all over Montana and beyond and turning them into small cabins people call microhouses. Along the way, I've been accused of many things, and to set the record straight my motivations for working with salvaged lumber are not entirely masochistic and not solely "green." I won't deny having a penchant for doing things the hard way, and I readily admit that it hurts my heart as much as I hate being a tree-hugging sensibility to see the extent of waste in this culture. Watching a bulldozer crawl over a 100-year-old homestead sets my teeth on edge. Still, when it comes right down to it, my devotion to scavenge[d] lumber lies in the fact that I have a warped sense of aesthetics when it comes to warped wood.

You have to like gaps. You have to like splits and checks and warps and cracks. When using salvaged wood, you have to put aside—or rather, change—your idea about perfection and embrace the notion that the flaws are not flaws at all but the character and the nature of what you're looking for. George Ander, a woodworker I met in Lolo once put it this way: "I didn't make the wood. God made the wood. You've got to work with that. Let what's in the wood come out." He went on to say, "There's something beautiful about a big, old, ugly knot hole in the middle of a piece of wood." Amen George. You hit the nail right on the head.

Look around Missoula and you begin to see reclaimed lumber being used everywhere—from the doors of Break Expresso on Higgins Avenue to the frame for the mirror in the men's room at Bernice's Bakery. Just the other night, I showed up at a dinner party in Alberton, where Mary Rausch and Kerry Maier had remodeled their home using a variety of salvaged pieces, including some handsome beach wood beams. Cleverly re-purposing the ends of the beams, Rausch chiseled them into 3x6's and planed them to make a dining table. The legs of the table were the stumpy flaps with the mortise notches still visible. Everyone, absolutely everyone on the table and Rausch had to tell his story about where the wood came from and how he made the table a dozen times. Why? Because it wasn't boring. It wasn't another slapped together thing from Russia. It had character, it had soul, and it spoke volumes about Maier's and Rausch's values and aesthetics.

In Japan, where I lived for three years, they revered what is called the Kisaemon tea bowl, a small clay bowl crafted by an unknown Korean. The simplicity of it, the slight inelegance, radiates an authentic beauty that speaks of a true heart. It is plain, unadorned, uncalculating, straightforward, natural and modest. Where does beauty lie if not in these qualities—the natural characteristics of affection and respect? Such, I feel, is the indefatigable quality of using reclaimed wood, and how incorporating even a single piece can change the feeling of a room. Much of today's woodworking fashion is novelty for novelty's sake, but there's a time-tested beauty to the things of the past. They've survived because there's something to them, even if we can't name what that is.

I believe the indefatigable has a hold on us. I think it informs everything we do. Every day I drive past farms leaning into the sunshine as if that was the only thing holding them up, and I see their weathered siding and sagging roofs as uniquely personal as the faces of the men who built them. To build with such wood is to not let their stories die. Here in Missoula my final reason for using reclaimed lumber: for the history, for the stories in the wood. In my other life, as a writer, I collect stories, and the small cabins I build are essentially poems. Each wall or floorboard or piece of trim comes from someplace around Montana and each has a history, often one I know and can pass on to the customer. There's a degree of pride in that historical bond, and the owner adopts the wood's heritage into their own history, adding to the chapters it's already lived through. I've been with homeowners who tour me through their houses and invariably they stop to point out the pair of salvaged beams pocketed into a wall or holding up a walkway. There's a beat up elegance to the old wood to be sure, but it's the history the owners are most excited to share. Say what you will about living in the past, in my experience bringing the past forward into your living space is the best, and most elegant, way to build.

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