

A WEEKLY REPORT FOCUSED ON NEW CONSTRUCTION

SATURDAY REAL ESTATE

THE SEATTLE TIMES **SECTION E** SATURDAY, MARCH 6, 1999



WOOD

WITH A PAST

THE OLD-GROWTH TIMBERS THAT BUILT THE NORTHWEST ARE TAKING ON A NEW LIFE

By KATHERINE LONG
Seattle Times staff reporter

Some of the priciest lumber you can buy for a home project contains worm holes, nail holes, rust stains and hairline cracks. Sometimes it's full of knots and marks from the sawmill. It may have been part of a factory, or a barn, or a big industrial warehouse.

And it's old — a hundred years or more.

Although it's still not common in the Northwest, reclaimed wood for home construction is growing in popularity — not only because sources of old-growth timber are drying up, but because many homeowners are bringing an environmentalist sensibility to their new home projects.

Reusing old wood is responsible, they reason, and the quality is superior.

"New hardwoods can't hold a candle to this," said Sara Van Fleet, who is using antique Australian eucalyptus for flooring in a remodel of her Vashon Island home. The wood comes from dismantled, century-old warehouses in southern Australia. "They just don't make wood like this anymore," she said.

At \$5.50 a square foot, the dense, chestnut-colored wood is double the price of a new hardwood floor. But Van Fleet and her husband, Sam, thought it was worth it.

The Van Fleets have plenty of company. The waterfront Medina home of Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates includes timbers that were salvaged from the enor-

mous, barnlike LongBell lumber mill buildings in Longview. On the retail side, REI Inc. used wood reclaimed from a demolition site throughout its Seattle flagship store.

Tom Salisbury, a Bainbridge Island flooring expert, built his own island home — which he recently sold — using beams salvaged from a Seattle pier and heavy timbers from a Tacoma brewery damaged by fire. The timber-framed home, designed by architect Richard Dunbar, has recycled Douglas fir cabinets and a front door pieced together from old wood planks.

Old wood can come from demolished homes, but more often it's salvaged from big warehouses and factories in the Pacific Northwest. In the Northeast, where the trend originated, old wood often comes from dismantled barns, schools, factories and industrial sites.

Especially prized are massive support beams, which can be used for timber-framed houses, or sliced up into individual boards for flooring. These beams come in sizes that are unmatched in today's lumber yards. But smaller pieces of wood can be used, too; a recent new source of old wood is aged pickle barrels made of redwood and cedar.

What makes old wood superior? Chalk it up to the hardships of growing in an old-growth forest.

When trees are young, they grow quickly, with wide-



GENE GILBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Recycled beams and a door made from old planking
grace the former Salisbury home on Bainbridge Island.

PLEASE SEE **Wood** ON E 2

Wood With A Past

The Old-Growth Timbers That Built The Northwest Are Taking On A New Life

Mar 6, 1999, by Katherine Long - Seattle Times Staff Reporter

Some of the priciest lumber you can buy for a home project contains worm holes, nail holes, rust stains and hairline cracks. Sometimes it's full of knots and marks from the sawmill. It may have been part of a factory, or a barn, or a big industrial warehouse.

And it's old - a hundred years or more.

Although it's still not common in the Northwest, reclaimed wood for home construction is growing in popularity - not only because sources of old-growth timber are drying up, but because many homeowners are bringing an environmentalist sensibility to their new home projects.

Reusing old wood is responsible, they reason, and the quality is superior.

"New hardwoods can't hold a candle to this," said Sara Van Fleet, who is using antique Australian eucalyptus for flooring in a remodel of her Vashon Island home. The wood comes from dismantled, century-old warehouses in southern Australia. "They just don't make wood like this anymore," she said.

At \$5.50 a square foot, the dense, chestnut-colored wood is double the price of a new hardwood floor. But Van Fleet and her husband, Sam, thought it was worth it.

The Van Fleets have plenty of company. The waterfront Medina home of Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates includes timbers that were salvaged from the enormous, barnlike LongBell lumber mill buildings in Longview. On the retail side, REI Inc. used wood reclaimed from a demolition site throughout its Seattle flagship store.

Tom Salisbury, a Bainbridge Island flooring expert, built his own island home - which he recently sold - using beams salvaged from a Seattle pier and heavy timbers from a Tacoma brewery damaged by fire. The timber-framed home, designed by architect Richard Dunbar, has recycled Douglas fir cabinets and a front door pieced together from old wood planks.

Old wood can come from demolished homes, but more often it's salvaged from big warehouses and factories in the Pacific Northwest. In the Northeast, where the trend originated, old wood often comes from dismantled barns, schools, factories and industrial sites.

Especially prized are massive support beams, which can be used for timber-framed houses, or sliced up into individual boards for flooring. These beams come in sizes that are unmatched in today's lumber yards. But smaller pieces of wood can be used, too; a recent new source of old wood is aged pickle barrels made of redwood and cedar.

What makes old wood superior? Chalk it up to the hardships of growing in an old-growth forest.

When trees are young, they grow quickly, with widely-spaced growth rings. As a tree ages, it grows more slowly. The growth rings - which form the wood's grain - become smaller and smaller. A tree grown on a tree farm doesn't have to compete for space and light, and it will be harvested before it gets very old, so its growth rings will be widely spaced. But a tree that grew in an ancient forest had to compete with other trees, so it grew more slowly. That's why old-growth timber is strong and dense, often with as many as 30 growth rings per inch.

Old wood is also dry wood; it's much less likely to twist, warp or shrink.

Getting salvaged wood cleaned and ready to market is a labor-intensive job, which is why reclaimed wood is often double, triple or quadruple the price of new wood.

The boards and timbers salvaged from a factory may be rough-sawn, painted with lead paint, embedded with dirt and stains and bristling with nails or bolts. The wood may be riddled with worm holes and bisected by big cracks.

Duluth Timber Company (motto: "Logging the Industrial Forest") has been reclaiming wood from barns and industrial sites since 1985. The Minnesota-based company, which has a showroom in downtown Seattle and a mill in Skagit County, cuts or planes the timbers and removes nails and paint to reveal fresh wood underneath.

Duluth has supplied wood for a number of recent projects in the Seattle area, and is working with REI on a new Denver store, said Patti Southard, director of sales for the Seattle showroom for Duluth Timber.

Companies like Duluth find salvage projects through word of mouth. But plenty of salvageable wood is still going into landfills, sent there by demolition contractors who are in a hurry or who don't realize they could be making money off material they treat as trash, Southard said.

Salisbury, who is co-owner of Salisbury Wood Floors, recently employed a crew of up to six workers to remove 4,000 square feet of fir flooring from downtown Seattle's Imperial Hotel. It took more than a week, and the work was exhausting, Salisbury said. But without that kind of rescue effort, the wood would have landed in the dump, he said.

"If you can remove it, it is one of the most gorgeous floors," said Salisbury of old-growth Douglas fir. The orange-red wood has a lovely patina, and Salisbury thinks the marks, stains and nail holes add to the character.

The most expensive reclaimed wood is American chestnut, an important source of lumber in the Northeast in the 1800s. American chestnuts are almost completely extinct because of a fungus, the chestnut blight (the common local horse chestnut is not affected by the fungus). Often riddled with worm holes, the wood costs more than \$12 a square foot at Duluth Timber. It's popular with architects and designers building high-end homes because it goes well with modern metal furniture, Southard said.

Heart pine, a dense wood that was grown in the Southeast and is salvaged from Eastern warehouses and factories, sells for \$5.50 to \$7.75 a square foot at Duluth. Douglas fir, the wood of choice in the west, ranges from \$3 to \$5.50 a square foot. Southard is enthusiastic about Australian eucalyptus because its look is similar to chestnut but the price, \$5.50 a square foot, is low for reclaimed wood, putting it in the price range of homeowners with modest budgets.

Fir beams are the only reclaimed wood product that compares favorably in price with new wood, and they can be purchased in mammoth sizes - up to 50 feet long, said Jason Omenn with the Environmental Home Center, a south Seattle store that specializes in environmentally friendly products.

Shoppers with an Earth-friendly bent but a modest allowance often buy sustainably harvested hardwood flooring, instead of reclaimed wood flooring, because the price is lower, Omenn said. Hardwood flooring at the store is certified as sustainably harvested by the nonprofit Forest Stewardship Council.

Although most reclaimed wood customers are well-to-do clients looking for a particular rustic or modern look, people with modest budgets also come seeking wood they can feel good about, Southard said. Often, they're trying to balance their love of a natural building material with a philosophical desire to avoid contributing to the environmental problems that can be caused by logging.

Duluth Timber's Seattle store also sells furniture made of reclaimed wood -everything from simple bookshelves to big dining room tables. One of its rarest pieces is a bench made entirely of a single piece of carved elm.

Woodworkers sometimes wander into the Duluth store, a few blocks up from the Pike Place Market, stopping to admire the wood on display in the much same way that people who like cars will admire a perfectly restored classic auto.

"This is really special wood," Southard said. "People who work with it love it."

Looking for reincarnated wood?

Here is a sampling of local companies that sell reclaimed wood: Duluth Timber, 125 Stewart St., Seattle, 206-448-1982. <http://www.duluthtimber.com>. Reclaimed wood floors, timbers and furniture.

Salisbury Wood Floors, 206-842-9999. Reclaimed wood floors and timbers.

Environmental Home Center, 1724 Fourth Ave. S., Seattle, 206-682-7332 or 800-281-9785. <http://www.enviresource.com>. Reclaimed and recycled wood, as well as sustainably harvested, certified woods.