

## [Peninsula salvager gives old wood new lease on life](#)

- Emily Wilson, Special to The Chronicle  
Friday, November 7, 2003



Ever since he was a kid growing up in Menlo Park, Jim Steinmetz has believed in recycling. In second grade he won an aluminum can collecting contest, and since then he has been hooked. But now Steinmetz has moved beyond recycling paper and cans. After working in construction and seeing literally tons of material thrown into the dump when a building is torn down, Steinmetz decided to recycle houses.

"A demolition of a full home is an incredible amount of weight and mass being thrown out," he said.

Steinmetz started his Reusable Lumber Co. in Woodside to reduce the need for virgin wood as well as to keep perfectly good wood from the dump. Often, Steinmetz said, the wood he salvages and reuses is better than perfectly good -- the old redwood and fir he gets when he deconstructs houses is higher quality than the new wood on the market.

"All the best wood is now buried in homes and buildings," he said. "There's only 2 percent of old growth left, if that . . . People say trees are this renewable resource. Yeah, you can grow 'em up and fast again but you're not going to get that quality."

David Schrom, a volunteer at the Palo Alto ecological nonprofit Magic Inc. , has first-hand experience of the quality of wood that Steinmetz uses. The siding used on the group's building came from a house that was being torn down in Hillsborough.

"People stop and come and knock on our door and ask, 'Where did you get that siding?' " he said. "We explain to them we got it from the dump. There is an immense amount of embedded wealth in trash, and Jim is recovering that wealth."

Steinmetz compares what he does to mining and says finding old growth redwood is like striking gold. This happened recently on a job he was doing at the company's lumber storage facility in Pescadero. Steinmetz was deconstructing some ranch houses and found

redwood posts under the fir floor.

"They're at least 100 years old and in better shape than the floor. They're so hard the bugs don't even want to touch them," he said. "They were about to just roll that building and no one ever would have known or could have known."

Steinmetz's jobs range from taking apart a deck to installing maple flooring for a high school gymnasium and providing the siding and brick for trellis -- both recycled -- for the Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve at Stanford University, which won a green building award.

His work is demanding, Steinmetz says, and projects like these are ones that make it worthwhile.

"We eat a lot of dust, you cut your hands all the time and there's a lot of pain involved," he said. "But when I walk past the Jasper Ridge building my heart swells up."

Wood isn't the only thing that Steinmetz recycles when he deconstructs a house. He also salvages doors, windows, sinks, bathroom and kitchen appliances and pipes. But Steinmetz said lumber is his primary focus.

"I love any kind of building with a lot of redwood in it," he said. "The older the building the better. There are techniques you need to develop and it's a good challenge. If some building is going to be run over by an excavator it makes you feel good to get that redwood out."

Steinmetz does a lot of his work on the Peninsula, but he says he will travel hundreds of miles for an interesting job. He has done deconstructions in Carmel, Salinas, Marin and Tahoe.

"No job is too big for us to get involved with," he said. "We move material by the semi truck or the pickup truck. I love creative projects. We've worked with people to not only solve your problem, but to get you exactly what you want. I like to see the product get used."

This is something that Schrom confirms. "They have enormous integrity," he said about the employees at the Reusable Lumber Company. "They are enormously flexible and (Steinmetz) has always delivered on his promises to us.

He bends over backward to make everybody happy."

Palo Alto architect and builder David Solnick is another satisfied customer.

The two weeks that Steinmetz took to take apart his house by hand, rather than having the house demolished in a couple hours was all worth it, he said.

"I felt good about doing it," he said. "Why throw away a house if you can recycle it?"

Solnick added that Steinmetz is providing an important service.

"He's providing a way to not fill up the dumps," he said. "A very large percentage of dumps are construction waste -- 10 or 15 percent. To the extent that that number can be reduced is benefiting everybody."

Being able to write off some of the expense of deconstructing the house made the deconstruction cheaper than a demolition, Solnick added. He believes recycling houses rather than tearing them down will only gain in popularity.

"The vast majority of people would happily use recycled wood if they could," he said. "Recycling is one of those things -- it's hard to say 'Oh, I hate recycling'."

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