



## green home-wrecking

› Seth Portner

Recycle a newspaper but throw away a perfect home? That's what my mother would call "penny wise and pound foolish." It's also precisely what's happening in many Western communities. Good homes—no, great homes—are being demolished to make room for newer and bigger ones. I don't care to antagonize those who choose to build and reside in these mansions, but I do wonder how much space is enough? 50 years ago a family of four would reside comfortably in a 1,000 square foot home. Today it's common for a couple to share a 4,000 square foot home. Big houses don't bother me. But their energy use, the trees felled to build them and the home that was "scraped" to create space for them *does*.

"Scraped?" It means that the home is scraped off the landscape, like a dead bug off the windshield. The term has always reminded me of how you clean your shoe after stepping in dog poop, because it is used in an equally disdainful fashion by the building community. "Oh, that home? It's a scraper." The home is trash, destined for the landfill, where every square foot of the home equals around 100 pounds of waste.

The homes being scraped are not the dilapidated shacks you might expect. When someone wants to build their dream home, a space needs to be made. Usually this means removing an existing home. In realtor's parlance: location, location, location. If you want to build that dream home, chances are it is going to be atop yesterday's dream home, not next to the local trailer park. What is interesting to me is that it's not just the 100-year old cottages or bungalows that are being knocked down to make room for someone's five bedroom south-western, neo-classical dream. It's often a newer, larger home.

So what can we do with yesterday's dreams, destined for today's (and tomorrow's) landfills? First we must look at what makes up a house. Lumber is a large component. Cabinets, windows, flooring, doors, wire, sinks and tubs. It's a long list, but most of the items share a trait; they're usually recyclable, even reusable. And often, the materials heading to the trash heap are actually of better quality than newly purchased materials. The quality of old lumber attracts furniture makers. Old cabinets are usually higher quality, and are not laden with toxic chemicals like today's cabinets. You can't find antique fixtures and heartwood

flooring at your local Homogeneous-Home-O-Rama. There are materials that are not presently recyclable, and other materials not desirable for reuse, like a 30-year old toilet—but the majority of the home is full of good, reusable stuff.

Fortunately, reusing building materials in new projects and remodels is gaining momentum. In most areas, deconstruction services can help provide materials to used building material sales facilities (deconstruction involves taking a home apart in a conscientious fashion while maintaining the integrity of the materials). Economically, quality and conservation-minded building professionals generally understand the value and beauty found in old building materials as the quality of new materials continue to diminish and prices continue to rise. Reuse of materials is becoming more practical. Because used building materials aren't out of a catalog, they require some creativity to incorporate in your project, and they may add—gasp!—something unique to our homes. From my perspective, that is a good thing. 🐘

For more on used building materials visit [peakstoprairies.org](http://peakstoprairies.org) or the [Used Building Materials Association: ubma.org](http://Used Building Materials Association: ubma.org). To contact **Seth Portner**: [sportner@conservationcenter.org](mailto:sportner@conservationcenter.org)

