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New company reclaims old-growth wood from razed buildings

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There are dreams, harebrained schemes and promising business ideas. For a long time, Chris Kious wasn't sure which he had.

But he couldn't stop thinking about the waste of sending old-growth wood to landfills after Cleveland houses and buildings were razed. He knew that beneath the wear, stains and gouges, the wood was beautiful and could be used again.

Kious, housing services manager for the St. Clair-Superior Community Development Corp., was right. And after he wrote about reclaiming wood and other building materials for the group's March 2007 newsletter, he connected with P.J. Doran, 42, an Ohio City furniture maker. And a demolition contractor offered Kious a crack at salvaging materials from a building, the old Adelstein Pharmacy at East 79th Street and Cedar Avenue.

Wielding crowbars, Doran and Kious spent three weekends ripping out wood with friends.

"We took marble sheets, oak floor boards, poplar baseboards, wood doors," Kious said. "It was really exciting."

In the fall, two more partners joined: woodcrafter Aaron Gogolin, 30, of Cleveland's North Collinwood neighborhood - who'd begun his own cabinet and furniture design and fabrication business, Made in Cleveland, in 2005 - and independent furniture designer Ezra Taxel, 30, of Cleveland's Tremont neighborhood, whose company is Form2Design.

And A Piece of Cleveland - APOC for short - was born.

Taxel, armed with a master's degree in furniture design from the Savannah College of Art and Design, thought APOC would give him a chance to reconcile his passions for environmental responsibility and designing furniture. "I want to be earth friendly, but the field is about consumption," he said.

APOC's first products were maple cutting boards made from flooring from a house that had stood at 1425 West 65th St. for nearly a century. The quartet removed nails from the flooring, and Gogolin and Doran ran every piece of lumber through a planer.

“Every cutting board we produced, we sold,” Kious said. “It was a complete and utter joy.”

They recently delivered their first major project, a \$15,000 conference table for Thunder::tech, a Cleveland marketing agency. The legs and top are old-growth pine - 2-by-4 wall studs and 2-by-8 floor joists - taken from the West 25th Street house, and the steel I-beam supports came from an old industrial complex at East 36th Street and Superior Avenue, where their workshop is located.

Taxel designed the table with windows to expose the I-beam. “It’s too interesting to hide away,” he said.

“Thunder::tech not only has a table but history, too,” Gogolin said.

In fact, all APOC products come with “rebirth certificates” describing the lumber’s heritage. Thunder::tech’s Kristin Hall said the conference table document is proudly displayed.

APOC products are commissioned by private clients or sold retail at Planet Green, in the Old River Shopping Area on Detroit Road in Rocky River.

“We expect this stuff to be heirlooms,” Kious said. “You might live in Phoenix, but you got this piece of, say, Slavic Village, where your grandparents lived.”

Gogolin and Doran work full time in the APOC woodworking shop, making over the rescued wood and fabricating the products. They remove nails (and recycle them to a scrap metal yard), saw off the tongue-and-groove parts of floorboards, and plane out any imperfections.

“It’s different from working with off-the-shelf wood,” Doran said. “It has interesting grain. But I just really like the stuff that has history.”

Both Gogolin and Doran admit to braking for tree lawn trash.

“I don’t think either of us can pass up piles of junk,” Gogolin said. “APOC is a good excuse.” They’ve pulled maple flooring from a Cleveland Dumpster and white oak from behind Burton’s Welshfield Inn, built around 1820, when it was being remodeled. That oak went into a thick-topped table, custom built for a client.

“The people who threw that wood away thought of it as crap,” Kious said, “but we know there’s beauty to be uncovered.”

Gogolin recently snagged a 300-pound butcher block from the curb outside a Lakewood restaurant. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with it,” he said happily.

They all know there’s a lot more wood to be rescued, a market to be built.

“Ideally, we want to produce a countertop or table line, hire more woodworkers to become a production shop,” he mused. “APOC will be able to deliver locally sourced and produced products, using sustainably harvested building materials.”

Beau Daane, who is rehabbing a house in Tremont, recently contracted for a kitchen countertop. “I could just go to Home Depot,” he said, “but I want to do the right environmental thing. And the wood is absolutely beautiful.”

The men of APOC know company growth depends on industrial-strength equipment. "We desperately need the equipment to speed up production," Doran said. The company is pursuing a grant for an industrial planer.

But optimism wins the day. "This is too good an idea," Gogolin said, "not to be successful."

Learn more about A Piece of Cleveland at www.apieceofcleveland.com.

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