Elemental Architecture
By Clare Dowdy, Julie Earle-Levine, Gwenda Brophy, Michael Fitzpatrick
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Reclaimed Wood

Architectural designer Todd Shultz searched for more than a year to find the perfect wood for his client's basement wine room. The heart pine he found in a cotton mill in Eatonville, Georgia had a golden colour, tight growth rings and blue veins – signs of its authenticity and age.

But when the client saw the beams, he was horrified. "He was like: 'What are these dark black marks? Can you get rid of that?'," Shultz recalls.

It was only after the man heard about the wood's history – the marks were caused by a rare mould that had formed in the tree more than 200 years before – that he became enamoured with it.

The story is a familiar one to Richard McFarland, who co-founded California-based TerraMai, a reclaimed woods company, in the 1990s. Homeowners appreciate the aesthetics and eco-friendly credentials of his products, he says, but mainly "it is the story behind it that they fall in love with".

Finding the wood, processing it, then building from it can take years. Once a source is located, the beams are photographed and their history researched. Every piece is sorted, cleaned, graded and then de-metalled and possibly re-milled. "The first reaction of someone is: 'There is a lot of damage to this stuff'. But once it is re-milled and the spike holes are plugged, the overall effect is stunning," McFarland says.

He says about half of TerraMai's projects are residential, including houses in Florida, New York's Hudson Valley, Nevada's Lake Tahoe and Aspen, Colorado. The wood is not cheap; flooring made from 100-year-old exotics sourced from as far afield as India, South America and south-east Asia cost about $15-$25 per sq ft, about 30 per cent more than floors made from new or "virgin" wood.

But McFarland insists that "people will pay for quality". "Because it is reclaimed, old-growth tropical hardwood – among the hardest wood on the planet – will last much longer," he says. "With proper care, these floors can last generations", compared with about 20 years for just-cut alternatives.

Plus, the reduced environmental impact cannot be ignored. "With every foot of reclaimed wood, you are offsetting destruction of a forest." Yes, there is a carbon footprint in securing the beams, he acknowledges, but specialists say it is insignificant compared with cutting down new trees.

Shultz grew up on a farm, where he was taught to recycle everything. "You didn't tear down a barn because it was 100 years old, you painted it and fixed it," he says. "Nothing makes me sicker than seeing a dumpster full of wood. I'm the one pulling up my truck and grabbing the stuff."

Any surplus wood goes back to his studio to be repurposed for other projects, he adds. "It is not really for cost. It's for karma."

Jim Ruig is another reclaimed wood specialist whose business, Australian Salvage, harvests wood from old wharves, French oak wine barrels, old buildings and industrial factories. His first purchase was 10,000 tonnes of wharf timbers, which took 400 semi-trailers to deliver to industrial land he had bought on Brisbane's outskirts.

But since then demand has been strong. He recently sold A$3.5m (£1.6m) of reclaimed wood to actor Hugh Jackman for his health resort on Queensland's Gold Coast and outfitted singer Jack Johnson's seaside home in Byron Bay. He also works with developers eager to add complexity to their building interiors, as well as exporting to the US. Clients choose from a "menu" of recycled timbers, including native blackbutt, spotted gum and ironbark, then decide the finish – raw, lime washed, oil, smoked or antique.

Given the popularity of reclaimed wood – more than 40m board feet is sold a year in the US, five times the amount sold a decade ago – some are concerned about supply. But McFarland is not one of them. "Yes, it is a limited resource but the timber will be recycled again," he says. "There will be new stories to tell – so many lives from one tree."

Julie Earle-Levine