

## Brick By Brick: Demolition With Dignity In New Orleans

By Elizabeth Wynne Johnson

In post-Katrina New Orleans, a project with northwest roots is making its mark on the rebuilding effort. It aims to preserve more of the original by rethinking how damaged buildings get taken apart. In the process, familiar conservation concepts like "re-use" and "recycle" serve a purpose well beyond environmentalism. Correspondent Elizabeth Wynne Johnson went to check it out.

-----

Patricia Cheneau returned home to the 9th Ward shortly after Katrina. She got help from volunteers to rebuild. They gutted the place. When she saw the results, she was heartbroken all over again.

Patricia Cheneau: "Every window, every doorway, everything had cypress around it. All that was gone. I can't replace that. So what I'm replacing it with now is... cute but cheap. (Laughs) Cute but cheap."

Now she has a job that does for others what she didn't know to do for herself. Clipboard in hand, Cheneau is overseeing a more mindful removal. This home in the 7th Ward is being dismantled by hand in order to salvage as much material as possible for re-use. As data collection clerk, Cheneau logs hours and documents the spoils.

Patricia Cheneau: "To see somebody take the time to go through these houses, and take the time to take things apart board by board and say, 'Hey, this can be used somewhere else,' is much more beneficial to me than seeing people just snatch stuff down and throwing it away without any thought of what it was worth."

This is the fourth house in a pilot project for New Orleans: a test of deconstruction as an alternative to demolition. Portland, Oregon-based Mercy Corps is paying for the deconstruction of ten homes here. The project trains local demolition contractors how to forgo wrecking balls and bulldozers.

Program officer and builder Rick Denhart acknowledges it takes more people, time, and training.

Rick Denhart: "A bulldozer can come through in half a day and wipe a site clean -- and have no salvage material for reuse. It would all go to the landfill and all be a waste."

These projects, on the other hand, salvage anywhere from 30 to 60% of the material in each house. Much of it old-growth timber. We're not just talking about carved mantles and crown molding. Deconstruction digs deeper: To harvest as much as possible from what amounts to an urban forest.

Rick Denhart: "6x6s, 2x6s, 2x4s, we got door jambs, trim..."

From this house, Denhart estimates the salvaged materials' total market value at \$5,000 to \$15,000. The cost of deconstruction is \$10,000.

Rick Denhart: "The value of the material exceeds the cost of the deconstruction in something like this. So when you're looking at a bottom line for what and how deconstruction compares to demolition, deconstruction will always come out ahead."

Deconstruction has been tested elsewhere, but this is a first in post-Katrina New Orleans. It will always be something of a niche approach. FEMA actually requires homeowners to go with traditional demolition if they want federal relief funds.

In the end, there's more to all of this than just the bottom line. Homeowner and deconstruction employee, Patricia Cheneau.

Patricia Cheneau: "We had a neighbor at a site in Arabee. She said, 'This is removing the house with dignity: Board by board, brick by brick.'"

In the process, salvaging some of a community's soul. And allowing it to live on, even if only in the form of a modest wood-framed screen door.

Rick Denhart: "This one little door, if it's taken off and put on somebody else's house down the street, will be able to be remembered. And that collective memory of the neighborhood is a very positive thing. And part of what we hope to see can be done through deconstruction."

Which is one way to keep more of the old New Orleans in the new New Orleans.

© Copyright 2007, [Boise State Radio](#)

[http://publicbroadcasting.net/opb/news.newsmain?action=article&ARTICLE\\_ID=1118908&sectionID=1](http://publicbroadcasting.net/opb/news.newsmain?action=article&ARTICLE_ID=1118908&sectionID=1)