

The Look of Age, Without the Wait

By DEBORAH BALDWIN

WHEN Jessica Dubner went shopping for flooring for a 1910 house on Long Island, she passed up linoleum, rubber, cork, vinyl and Pergo, opting for secondhand chestnut pried from a collapsing Normandy farmhouse. "I like knowing that the material has history," she said.

The world may be moving toward polycarbonates and plastics, but a lot of premium old boards and beams are finding their way into homes, offices and country clubs. Once associated with Yankee thrift and environmental awareness, salvaged wood is now a big-city status symbol, used in Robert Redford's former Fifth Avenue kitchen and in furniture made for clients

Salvaged wood and rusty old iron speed charm along.

like Andrew Lloyd Webber.

Stained by the elements and hand-rubbed to a warm patina that is hard to replicate out of a can, then transported at great expense from as far away as rural England and France, it conveys instant character to a house, toning down the shine of new money or souping up the ancestry of an older place. And then there's the je ne sais quoi that comes from having, as Ms.

Dubner put it, "a unique product that nobody else has."

Dilapidated tobacco warehouses, wharves and textile factories: all are grist for the reclaimed-wood mill. Some customers ask for attic flooring, which has turned a nice color over time but otherwise looks new. Others want the pickled effect of wood taken from wharves or logs dredged from the bottom of rivers and lakes.

Ms. Dubner bought her century-old chestnut at Cornerstone, a red-brick warehouse in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn, run by a Georgia entrepreneur named Wyatt B. Childs and his New York partner, Amanda Mitchell. To get a first crack at his inventory, hard-core customers fly private planes to his outdoor depot, a five-acre

SELLING POINT

Wyatt B. Childs with a 19th-century clock face from France, part of a multimillion-dollar stockpile of salvage he has amassed for his stores in Brooklyn and Atlanta.



Albert Trotman for The New York Times

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spread at his family farm in Barnesville, Ga. This year Mr. Childs, known as Bo, expects to sell up to \$5 million worth of salvaged goods.

Cornerstone specializes in materials with a colorful past. Spotted in recent months were mantels reminiscent of Stonehenge (\$5,800); walnut doors with original hardware (\$1,500 to \$2,500); a rusty chateau spire in want of a chateau (\$5,500); a stone trough from a French barnyard (\$1,800); and stubby granite anchors (\$75) that used to tie down French cows (suggested use, doorstops).

Each item seems to come with a story. "They went through the provenance just the way an art dealer would," Ms. Dubner said of her authentic French fireplace and 11,000 square feet of flooring (\$12,000). "It was really cool."

Mr. Childs stocks antique American heart pine, a perennial favorite among interior designers, and oak beams reclaimed from Southern wharves and warehouses. But he is best known for his French wood and

whatnots, picked up by the containerful during monthly runs. Normandy and Burgundy are two favorite destinations.

"What I'm after is age and the history," he said. "What I sell is romance."

"I found a fireplace with the date 1623 owned by an old farmer in Burgundy," he said, setting the scene in his seventh-generation Georgia lift. In order to get it, Mr. Childs had to buy and pack up the entire house.

Not that that's a problem, really. Customers at Cornerstone and at Wyatt Childs, a new store in Atlanta, snap up anything with a pedigree or at least a good tale. The thinking is, anyone can have a spiral staircase; you will have a wobbly walnut and iron spiral staircase (\$9,800) from an 1840 house in Macon, Ga.

Mr. Childs, 50, got into the business about 20 years ago when he was fixing up an old house for resale and went scavenging for period planks. One good woodpile led to another.

Gary Chensoff, a hotel and resort developer, is arranging to buy some of Mr. Childs's 200-year-old pine to dress up a clubhouse in Naples, Fla. "To me a lot of places with hard granite and hard brass and gold-plated fixtures are not very welcoming," he said. "Bo has materials that make you feel you're being welcomed into a place with character and charm."

Old wood also comes in widths and lengths unavailable at the local lumber yard. Mr. Chensoff said he is negotiating to buy beams up to 28 feet long.

Architects and designers love the dense grain of wood that was har-



BEFORE AND AFTER
Beams at the Wyatt Childs depot, left; a base of old French oak by Clodagh, below.



Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

vested before the advent of commercial plantations, when trees struggled for sun and water in deep forests. When this free-range timber ages, it doesn't warp or shrink like newer woods. "It's better behaved and stronger and harder," said Jerome Maddock, sales manager at Mountain Lumber in Ruckersville, Va., which went into business with barn timbers in 1974 and now stocks richly colored oak reclaimed from a British cider mill.

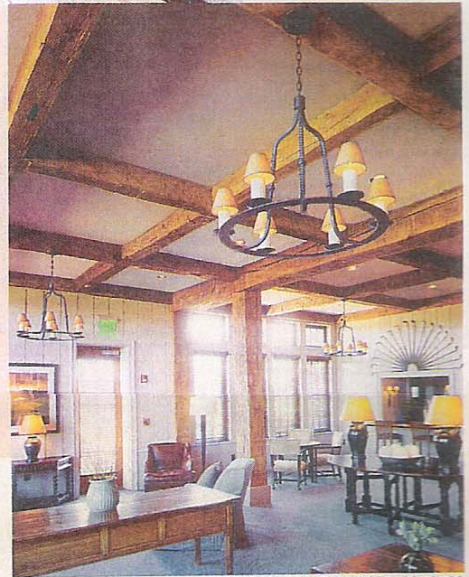
Clodagh, an interior designer whose SoHo studio used some of Mr. Childs's French oak to make furniture, says she is drawn by the "patina and energy" of vintage wood. "It's the eroded surface," she said, "that kindness that reflects the light differently."

Peter Bentel of Bentel & Bentel, which designed the New York restaurants Gramercy Tavern and Craft, came home from Cornerstone



NATURAL RESOURCES

Wyatt B. Childs, above, supplied the oak and heart pine beams for the Cassique clubhouse in South Carolina, right.



Terry Knaizer; Albert Trotman for The New York Times, left and top left

with twin slabs sliced from the center of an old oak log. It was "the sheer materiality" of the wood, he said, that compelled him to join the slabs for a 16-foot-long table for the family retreat he is building in the Adirondacks.

He said what he really likes is "the French stuff," adding: "A 200-year-old tree, felled 150 years ago, was born 100 years before our country. That's a bragging point no matter what country you're from."

Because reclaimed wood is more expensive than new, some designers use it selectively, so it can set a tone, like coupling a vintage Chanel bag with a department-store suit. For the private Cassique clubhouse on Kiawah Island in South Carolina, the architect, Norman D. Askins, and one of the designers, Jackie Lanham, used Mr. Childs's oak and heart pine beams and French chestnut paneling in the vestibule and living rooms, with newer woods in areas with a less public role.

"What makes them so special is being done before saw mills came in about 1850," Mr. Askins said. "They have an aged surface." Though the beams are heavy and hard to install — and need fumigating against bugs — "they have a lot of soul," he said.

Indeed, Mr. Childs's weathered planks and beams are able to reflect whatever message is in the air. At Cassique they contribute to the Old-England-meets-Lowcountry look.

Ms. Lanham, who is based in Atlanta, said her clients increasingly want old-wood accents in their homes. "People are tired of mimimansions that are blah," she said. "They want character, charm and stability."

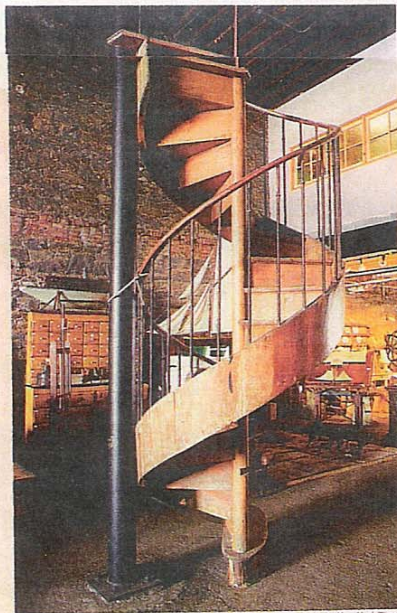
While no one tracks total sales of salvaged wood in the United States, the National Wood Flooring Association in St. Louis now has 60 members in the old-flooring business, up from "two or three" 20 years ago, said Bonnie Holmes, the group's consumer technical adviser.

Back then, salvaged-wood dealers were disparaged as barn rustlers. These days the business is well seasoned. Dealers now compare the hardness of their woods using a test

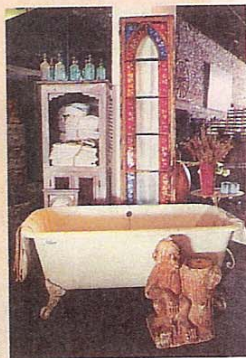
called the Janka. It measures the pressure needed to embed a tiny steel ball in the wood. The Janka test found that antique pine, for example, is twice as impervious to dents as new.

Of course, it costs more. At Cornerstone, flooring — French chestnut, oak and walnut and American heart pine — runs from \$6 to \$14 a square foot. Conventional "select oak" strip flooring is about \$3 a square foot, said Roger Berk, president of the Hayward-Berk Floor Company in New York.

Mr. Chensoff said he will gladly pay a premium for Mr. Childs's pine beams, which are 12 by 16 inches around and cost about \$75 a running foot. Laminated and veneered beams would have cost 20 to 30 percent less, he said, and while many club members will never know the difference, "to know I have the real-deal beams, that makes me feel good."



Photographs by Barbara Alper for The New York Times



WORLDLY At Cornerstone in Brooklyn, a 19th-century walnut and iron staircase from Georgia, left; above, a cheese cabinet from France and a tub from England.