Woodworker Michael Moran is among the craftsmen who have begun to rely on storm-downed or other salvaged wood to make furniture.

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Rebuilding America

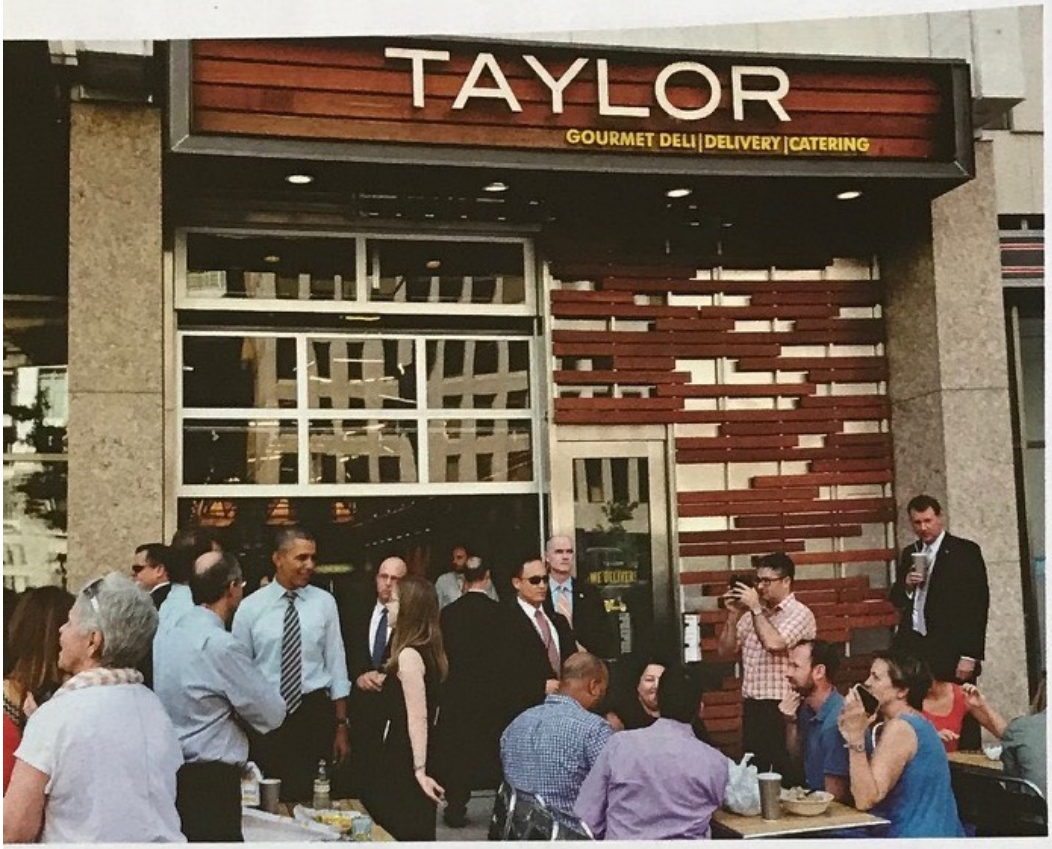
Discarded wood and repurposed material find a home in new construction

BY DAN FRIEDELL

President Obama and Vice President Biden took a short walk from the White House last fall to buy lunch at Taylor Gourmet Deli, a sandwich shop that sells Philly-style hoagies. While their subs got plenty of attention from the press corps (Obama ordered turkey, Biden cold cuts), the store's trademark décor of rough, reclaimed wood and salvaged materials surely made an impact on attentive observers.

Casey Patten, one of Taylor Gourmet's founders, tells a story about not quite, but almost, dumpster diving with business partner David Mazza for some of the material for his first store in Washington, D.C., six years ago.

"David and I started driving around a U-Haul truck, picking up discarded wood pallets," says Patten, who owns nine stores in D.C., Virginia and Maryland. "We were looking for cool, reclaimed stuff that wasn't really out on the market." »



Taylor Gourmet Deli, with nine outlets in the Washington, D.C., area, attracts attention for the way reclaimed materials are incorporated into its décor, as well as for its famous customers.

Now those pallets — broken down and reconfigured — frame one shop's kitchen. Fifty-five-gallon oil drums hang from another's ceiling as light fixtures. White 5-gallon drywall mud buckets do the same at the store the president visited. Bits of one store's DNA might live on at another outlet. For example, the wood that came from deconstructing the floor of one future sandwich shop lives on as a table at another.

"Our landlord said, 'That's insanely cool,' but wondered if anything was going to fall onto the customers," Patten remembers. "We said, 'We hope not!'"

So far, the stores have been both busy and free of collapsing design elements.

The concept of taking landfill-bound material and looking at it creatively goes beyond sandwich shops. Furniture makers like Michael Moran of Charleston, S.C., and Cory Tieva of Mankato, Minn., have crafted fulfilling careers by creating stunning pieces out of both urban wood (trees felled by storms or cleared by power companies) and reclaimed wood from barns and other structures. The combination of an economic downturn and a growing sense of the need to re-use has furniture makers, designers and consumers stepping in to disrupt the modern lifecycle of building material. According to The ReUse People of America, a California-based company with a nationwide network of deconstruction firms and retail outlets specializing in reclaimed materials, there's been a 25 percent bump in the volume of materials flowing through debris-diversion businesses since 2008.

"When we first started doing it, people thought we were kind of crazy. They hadn't heard of any other furniture maker that did (what we do)," says Moran of Moran Woodworked Furniture. "(But) this is what people used to do 100 years ago."

IN COOK COUNTY, Ill., the large jurisdiction that contains Chicago and many of its suburbs, debris diversion is not just a good idea, it's the law. Since 2012, 70 percent of debris created by most demolition projects must be recycled, with 5 percent earmarked for re-use.

This type of thinking has been a boon for The Rebuilding Exchange in Chicago and similar organizations around the country that sell brick, flooring, paneling and fixtures saved from demolition projects.

No such clearinghouse exists in Mankato, but Tieva's Reclaimed Woodworks has been using barn wood and naturally downed trees for five years. While looking for lumber and refinishing grain-filled panels can be arduous, it's a historical throwback to the days when hardly anything went to waste.

"Some of the setbacks in our economy have made people value what they have more," says Tieva, whose favorite piece is a »

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dining table made out of barn siding designed to look like a weathered door. "It's made a lot of people realize that they should be thankful for what's around them instead of wanting something new."

Moran says there's a thrill that comes from having his hands on the entire process: finding a piece of storm-downed wood, cutting it, milling it, drying it and turning it into a custom furniture piece.

Moran recently started working with a large chestnut oak that came from his wife's parents' home in Washington, D.C.

"We put an immense amount of time and energy into our materials," Moran says. "We've always felt like the reward is when we build a piece of furniture, we can tell you whose hands it passed through, the story and pedigree of the material." Even local tree services know how to cut limbs so Moran can use them in his work.

Moran and Tieva, as a result, have numerous satisfied customers who sleep in sturdy wooden beds or admire coffee tables made from the trimmed branches of live oaks.

"We have a log home furnished with antiques," says Steve Watkins of Belle Plain, Minn., who was looking for a 14-person dining table for a great room and a queen bed for a large bedroom. "So we wanted heavy, sturdy reclaimed wood with a natural look." The lack of a shipping bill offset the slightly higher price of Tieva's pieces when compared to furniture from catalogs, Watkins says.

Woodworker Michael Moran used the wood of a dying chestnut oak removed from his mother-in-law's Washington, D.C., yard to craft a stunning side table.

SOME SMALL FIRMS are refinishing deconstructed wood, but even the big guys are getting in the game of selling wood that might otherwise rot or turn into fuel for forest fires. The Home Depot stores around Colorado Springs launched sales of "beetle kill" or blue-stain pine in 41 stores during 2013. Bacteria carried by mountain pine beetles, while eventually killing the tree, creates a blue streak in the wood which, when stained, can make for compelling flooring or wainscoting.

Ron Jarvis, The Home Depot's vice president for environmental innovation, says the lumber is sold at the same price (about $2.30 for an 8-foot-long 1-by-3 board used in paneling) as the wood it replaced, which originated in British Columbia or Scandinavia. Added bonus: The pine that attracts customers from as far away as Albuquerque is no longer drying out, waiting to be consumed by a fire.

"The customers tell us they're glad (we) could work to get this product in the supply chain," says Jarvis.

Reclaimed and recycled materials are a big element of corporate design, too. Lindsay Buccola, an interior designer for Washington, D.C.-based Interior Architects, which proudly showcases Twitter as a client, says projects can

Big companies have developed an interest in using and selling reclaimed wood. The Home Depot sells blue-streaked pine from trees killed by mountain pine beetles.

gain points toward LEED certification by using recycled or reclaimed local materials. "Reclaimed wood is a wonderful accent … It visually represents the idea of re-use, as well as giving that sustainable storyline to any project," says Buccola.

The material's storyline is often the top reason designers, builders and customers come away happy with a project. Knowing your kitchen countertop was once a basketball court can be thrilling. Reclaimed Cleveland, an Ohio furniture company, even stamps its products with the address from which the materials were harvested.

So if you're sitting at a table that has a back story, could it make the food taste better? Or it's a good sandwich to start with, like the chicken parmigiana from Taylor Gourmet, probably not. "But it enhances the experience you have," Patten says. "It helps set the tone and the vibe and reminds you you're not in a normal and average place." ●