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Deconstruction Junction

The ReStore is Razing the Bar in a Unique, Green Field

By *DAN CHASE*



John Grossman sees the ReStore as not only an economical alternative, but a 'green' one as well.

John Grossman is an example of someone being the perfect person for a job.

As general manager of the ReStore Home Improvement Center, he says he's got building materials salesmanship and salvage in his DNA. His great-grandfather started Grossman's Lumber, and his grandfather was an early proponent of building material salvage after World War II.

"Just after the war," Grossman told BusinessWest recently, "the business bought tanks to demo houses. They bought submarine nets, and sold them as road reinforcements. My grandfather was always looking at surplus, and my great-grandfather, before he began Grossman's, operated a junk wagon, and sold materials to factories that made shingles."

The ReStore has been operating on Albany Street in Springfield since 2001. Once the place where one could find architectural elements like granite window lintels taken from turn-of-the-century apartment blocks, or other fantastical and antique building remnants, the business has in recent years shifted focus to the more immediate needs of local homeowners.

Since he came onboard in 2004, Grossman has been steadily turning the ReStore's fortunes over to the people who donate and buy building materials at the business. In the process of 'deconstructing' a house, the staff members will pick the structure apart, piece by piece, salvaging every last bit of material with the intention of seeing it re-used in another building project. What that means is



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savings for the homeowner buying these discount-priced materials, but also savings in the form of tax breaks for the donators, and, of equal importance for the 'green' creed of the business, saving tons of material from a destiny in the dump.

Green by Association

The ReStore is a nonprofit business started by the Center for Ecological Technology. A Western Mass. nonprofit organization founded in 1976, the CET's mission is to "do research, develop, demonstrate, and promote those technologies that have the least-disruptive impact on the natural ecology of the Earth." There are many services offered by the CET, from home-energy audits to recycling programs for schools and towns to community events. The ReStore began its life as part of the CET's waste-management division.

Because the ReStore is a nonprofit, said Grossman, all donations made to the store are eligible to be tax write-offs, with some deconstructions yielding tens of thousands of dollars in tax-deductible materials.

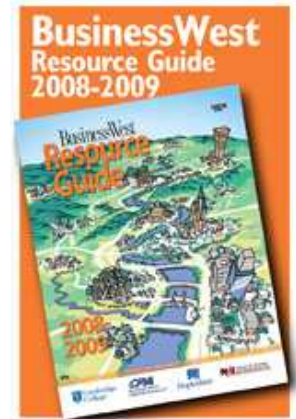
"Everything you see in the store ... someone has received a tax benefit for that," he explained. "That helps to drive people to donate the materials. Often this will be an individual's largest-ever tax credit. The tax break will offset the increased cost of deconstruction for the homeowner, making it a more competitive and viable option for them."

While tax breaks for donated materials don't necessarily suggest a green status, the role of those contributions and their subsequent sale does vault them into the green marketplace. "When people are using their remodeling dollars by buying here," Grossman explained, "they are supporting a green product because it's already been manufactured, transported, and used for maybe 100 years. In the purchase of these goods, the consumer is buying a sustainable product, because it hasn't had to be manufactured new.

"A primary component to our role in a green model," he continued, "is that we divert tons of material that would otherwise end up in a landfill. Many of the people that we work with — we have over 400 commercial donors — don't even necessarily associate us with doing a green activity. But when the donor is looking to address their 'waste' in a different fashion, and they discover us and find out that it's not more expensive to offer those materials, it works for them in the marketplace. It greens up their business."

When looking at a building scheduled for demolition, the staff at the ReStore can often find tons of reusable material that might otherwise slip past the eyes of the owner or contractor. "A lot of people won't see the recoverable material that we do," said Grossman.

In the deconstruction of a luxury home in Cohasset, Mass, the 6,000-square-foot structure yielded more than 35 tons of timber and other supplies, with an additional 16 tons



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recycled. More than \$30,000 was saved by the homeowner in tax credits. Many of the boards went into the construction of a new home in Springfield built by Habitat for Humanity, saving that eventual owner a great deal off the purchase price due to its lower construction costs. Not only did the deconstruction save money, but the donors know that their old home has gone to good use.

When This Old House worked on a project in Weston, Mass, those homeowners actively sought out the re-use of the home that they wished to replace. When the featured owners couldn't move the house to another location in its entirety, the ReStore was contacted to fulfill the homeowners' goals of repurposing the structure. When the deconstructors hung up their hammers on that job after two and a half weeks, more than 90% of the structure was either reused or recycled.

High, Low, and in Between

During Grossman's tenure as general manager, the ReStore has looked closely at its successes, and where to focus for the future development of the business.

"We've really honed our product, and we are making sure that what we accept is going to find a new home," he said. "There's been a lot of experimentation, and while we do get enormous donations, it might clog up a portion of the store. If I can't turn those materials into new roles, then I'm not doing my mission. Understanding our client base has been a great part of our growth."

And growth there is. In the four years Grossman has been at the helm, volume has increased more 30%, an enviable model in any retail environment, let alone a construction sector with almost unilateral sluggishness. "We know that, within the building-materials market, while it's been hit hard, there's still a large-enough market out there for us to continue to grow and to sustain that growth," Grossman said, continuing, "look at the number of big-box retailers, and how much sales volume they've had, historically."

Occasionally the exotic will still find its way to the ReStore. Grossman mentioned a pending church deconstruction that would yield more than 30 pallets of Travertine marble, but cited the lack of a market demand for such product. "It's beautiful, but the challenge for me is, how am I going to house that? I've got far more people who are interested in vinyl replacement windows and doors. When we take in a product, it's because we know it's something that people will want to buy."

A walk around the property on Albany Street shows every item imaginable to make a complete home, from dimensional lumber to insulation to the kitchen sink — only here, there's a good chance there will be a full kitchen to back it up.

One can find high-end products rubbing shoulders with the ordinary. At the end of a line of windows and doors stands a pair of tiger maple columns, taken from a multi-million-dollar condominium at Boston's Four Seasons. "That was a

spectacular job," said Grossman, "and a testament to a great green relationship we have with a company called the IRN, Institution Recycling Network. They normally do work with hospitals or colleges. A college, for instance, might be changing over to all new dorm furniture. Well, they could put all of that into a landfill, or they could put it into an overseas freight container and send it to Doctors Without Borders, and the costs are about equivalent."

Salvage Operation

The ReStore might be an early example of the architectural and building salvage business, but over the past few years, the number of such operations has boomed. "Since we started, there have been several stores opened within driving range of us," said Grossman. "Everybody has a slightly different way of functioning, but since a primary motivation of ours is environmental, we can use that to determine what will end up in our store."

"When we started this store," he continued, "our commitment to environmental concerns dictated that we were interested in attracting the highest number of shoppers, to keep that number of people from buying new. Other stores like ours might have income guidelines to target lower-income families, with one price for one economic bracket and a higher one for a more affluent customer."

In the future, Grossman would like to see the ReStore focusing more on deconstruction projects in this region; most of those to date have been in the eastern half of the state, where those types of jobs are more popular. "In Eastern Mass., more often than not the land value exceeds the property's building value. But by having the chance to do more of that work here, there's even less impact in the travel involved to bring the materials to Springfield. I'd like my guys to be closer to home, also. We know the work is there, locally."

The ability to expand the store's deconstruction efforts and bring those goods to market, however, is ultimately bound by the store's footprint on Albany Street. Grossman would like to have the ability to expand, because this would only further the mission: more deconstruction potential, more inventory for his customers, and, of course, that much less material to truck off to the dump. "I do see continued market growth in our ability to divert waste, and I'd love the opportunity to make that happen here in Springfield."

Across the nation, new home construction has reached record lows. The National Assoc. of Home Builders recently posted statistics showing that starts of single-family homes fell for the eighth straight month in December 2008, to an all-time low of fewer than 400,000 units. In a tough economy, remodeling over rebuilding is the cost-effective trend.

With the possibilities for remodeling getting the green light, so to speak, the ReStore gives the old adage for recycling, "once is not enough," a whole new meaning.