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Old materials get new life

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A door from old Meriter Hospital has been recycled to make a coffee table at Madison Environmental Group in Madison.

CRAIG SCHREINER -- State Journal

Before the old Meriter Hospital on West Washington Avenue was torn down so the Alexander Co.'s Capitol West mixed-use project could begin, Christi Weber and Dave Waisman were called in to see what could be reused or recycled, and devise a plan to make that happen.

The pair, which works for the Madison Environmental Group, took 250 doors from the building for use as raw material for the group's new business, Fullcircle Furniture, launched in November at the company's headquarters on Capitol Square. Weber, 29, designed furniture that made use of the solid-core birch flat-panel doors.

Two of the doors were used to make a harvest table with benches. One of Weber's challenges was to camouflage the holes left by the doorknobs. For the harvest table design, new, sustainably grown birch was used to make an inlay that covers the hole, and for edging and legs. Other designs handled the doorknob-hole dilemma in other ways.

Local woodworkers were hired to build the furniture, which can be seen on the Madison Environmental Group's Web site, www.madisonenvironmental.com (Fullcircle Furniture will have its own Web site this summer). The furniture also can be viewed during an open house at Fullcircle's offices on the Square on Earth Day, April 22.

Fullcircle Furniture is funded by a Department of Natural Resources grant to encourage innovative efforts to reduce the amount of material that winds up in landfills. The Madison Children's Museum also pitched in, loaning the fledgling company storage space in a warehouse, where the doors will be stored until they're taken to woodworkers.

"We decided to use the flat commercial doors because no one else wants them, and they would have ended up in landfills," said Waisman, who has an MBA from the University of California at Berkeley. "People want the old paneled doors to put in their houses because they're beautiful."

The furniture is designed to be multifunctional. Weber, who has a master's degree in architecture with an emphasis on sustainable design from UW-Milwaukee, is now working on the design for a coffee table that can also be used as seating, storage, an end table or bedside table, or an ottoman. Her kitchen island can also be used with seating, as an art cart, a buffet, or a work station.

"Efficient design maximizes space and reduces clutter," she said. "People can live well in smaller houses, which use less energy. Good design can be freeing."

Weber said Fullcircle serves a so-far unique purpose.

"There are people are doing salvage, and people doing green design," she said. "But we are where salvage and green design come together."

Another emphasis of the company's furniture is on the use of nontoxic materials to protect health.

So far, Fullcircle Furniture has yet to do any advertising but nonetheless has sold 10 pieces.

Though developers pay Madison Environmental Group for its services when they are taking down a building, recycling and salvage can result in tremendous savings for them. For example, it would have cost the Alexander Co. about \$36 a ton to take concrete from the old hospital to a landfill. It cost the company \$1.50 a ton to take it to a recycler, where it can then be used in road beds or in new batches of concrete.

Also, selling scrap metal can be profitable, and copper wire is particularly valuable in the recycling market.

Here's how Weber and Waisman tackled the job for the Alexander Co.: Before deconstruction work began, they took a detailed inventory of the old building's contents. About 66 tons of material, such as furnishings and equipment, were either sold to the public or donated to non-profits.

Besides the doors for the furniture line, Weber and Waisman salvaged lime green medical cabinets for use in their offices, as well as a wall of combination lockers, which they painted the same green and used for storage. They also reupholstered shabby chairs and a sofa in organic wool.

After that was finished, 24,500 tons of materials (lightbulbs, computer equipment, masonry, concrete, cardboard, ceiling tiles, cans, bottles, paper, metal, wood, and drywall) were sent to recyclers.

In all, the recycling rate for the project was about 95 percent, according to Nick Alexander. Nearly 24,500 tons of material were recycled instead of going to a landfill.

There are still about 200 old doors in the warehouse, but Weber and Waisman are looking for more. They are working on salvage and recycling plans for a house on Lake Mendota, four multi-unit residences, and two warehouses on the Beltline.