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Family finds no need for the wrecking ball

LAURA CASEY; Contra Costa (Calif.) Times

DANVILLE, Calif. – When Mike Barry had his 2,250-square-foot Danville, Calif., home torn down to the dirt, the waste fit into just one large metal trash bin.

And, he says, he walked away with a nearly \$100,000 tax write-off.

Instead of employing bulldozers to tear down his home in a few swoops, Barry had the imperfect 1950s house “deconstructed” and recycled. Nearly everything that made up the house – wood, windows, appliances, flooring, roofing and even the nails – went to nonprofit organizations that needed them. The only items left to throw away were the possibly asbestos-ridden drywall and the stucco exterior.

“We basically had it deconstructed piece by piece, nail by nail,” says Barry, a financial planner. “Mainly, the difference is we didn’t tear it down and throw it all into a landfill.”

In 2007, before making the decision to tear down the Danville house, Barry and his wife, Tricia, sold the Diablo, Calif., home they built together for a good price to an unsolicited buyer.

The couple has two preteen daughters – Allie and Lauren – and their secluded hilltop home wasn’t a good fit for the kids to play outside and socialize.

GETTING APPRAISED

After selling, the Barrys had to find another place to move. Mike Barry found the 1950s bungalow on a prime lot on the border of Diablo and Danville.

The problem was, the house was ugly. A stark garage door greeted the street and there was a 100-foot walk to the front door at the side of the house. The foundation was sloping, the pool was not code compliant and the rooms weren’t big enough for the Barrys’ tastes. Everything had to go.

The couple strives to be environmentally friendly – they plan to have solar power and tankless water heaters added to their new home – and imagining the remains of an entire home landing in the dump was a nightmare.

The double-pane windows were sturdy, Barry says, as were the newer appliances and some of the wood. Surely someone would want them.

He called Habitat for Humanity of the East Bay, the nonprofit organization that uses volunteer labor to build homes for needy families. Habitat got him in contact with certified appraiser Molly Samietz, who specializes in donation appraisals for homeowners doing green deconstruction.

“I go in first before anyone else, and I give the homeowner and the contractor an idea of how much the recycling value will be,” Samietz says. “There are very few cases I’ve seen where it doesn’t make sense, financially, to recycle.”

Samietz says a homeowner doesn’t need to tear down an entire abode to deconstruct and recycle. Clients interested in remodeling a room also can take advantage of deconstruction recycling. Samietz added that if the donation is worth less than \$5,000, an appraisal is not required.

After the appraisal, the Barrys turned to Pagnini’s, a company in Brentwood, Calif., licensed to do the deconstruction.

Usable wood from the house’s frame was stacked on pallets, while damaged wood was thrown into a wood chipper to be used as landscaping material or for particle board. Heating vents and doors were recycled. Even the nails were taken out and collected with a giant magnet.

SETTING A GOOD EXAMPLE

After the house was stripped, California Deconstruction and Building Materials ReUse Network picked up the materials and brought them to Habitat for Humanity and other organizations, including Corazon, which helps build homes for people in northern Baja California, Mexico.

“I’d say 80 to 85 percent of the Barry house was reused,” says Gerald Long of the Alameda-based California Deconstruction and Building Materials ReUse Network, a nonprofit organization. “Even the copper plumbing was recycled, the bricks were saved and all the interior fixtures were saved.”

Long added that many cities and counties are beginning to require recycling from people who want to tear down all or part of their home.

As far as the financial aspects go, the Barrys were looking at a \$14,000 bill for demolition plus additional thousands to haul all the materials to a landfill. Deconstruction cost about \$23,000.

Although he wants to be as environmentally friendly as possible, Barry calls himself a capitalist “between breakfast and dinner” and says that although the deconstruction cost more, he is happy to receive the generous tax write-off.

“I don’t see how anyone can not do it,” he says. “It also says something positive to our children.”

He warns that deconstruction takes about two weeks longer than demolition, so people interested in the process should plan ahead. Barry and his family are happy with the decision and look forward to the new house they designed being ready in about a year.