



RECLAIMED TIMBERS

By Merle Adams, BT Company

Reclaimed (aka recycled, salvaged, reused) timbers are dry and stable and they allow a timber frame to look as good in a hundred years as it did the day it was put up. Clients really appreciate the history of where their wood came from; this history becomes part of the legacy of their new building. Clients like the fact that their projects were substantially constructed without cutting down live trees. Timber framers appreciate the quality of the wood which was cut from old growth trees 50-100 years ago instead of the second growth trees where new timbers come from now. There are some tremendously long and large timbers available on the market; one would have a difficult time now finding trees to cut such large timbers.

There are some downsides to using reclaimed timbers. They are usually the most expensive option available. Reused timbers may have noticeable defects like bolt and nail holes, old mortises, notches, black staining, and checking. Using these timbers calls for one to look at these markings as “badges of courage” rather than gross imperfections. Timber framers complain how hard reclaimed timbers are on their cutting tools because of their dryness and the years of grit found in the wood.

The two largest sources of reclaimed timbers:

1. industrial timber-predominantly old growth Douglas fir and southern yellow pine timbers from obsolete industrial structures.
2. barn timber- usually mixed hardwoods from old timber frame barns.

INDUSTRIAL TIMBER PARTICULARS

- Found in old factories, warehouses, sawmills etc. built during the World Wars when steel was in short supply. This old growth timber was railed across the country to supply industry’s building needs.
- Industrial timber is generally easy to reuse since the timber was high quality and there are usually only simple connections on the end of each timber.
- Timbers can be graded using current grading standards and used structurally.
- Availability may be limited especially large and long pieces so design should be tailored to reasonable sizes.
- Waste is most important factor in determining price of material. Supplier needs to carry large inventory to minimize waste.

BARN TIMBER PARTICULARS

- Barn timbers are usually mixed species (whatever was available near the site); it may be advantageous to use the original handhewn or circular sawn weathered patina instead of resawing bright.
- Best for nonstructural uses since grading standards are murky, and these timbers have plenty of old mortises which make structural work difficult unless the original structure is reerected as it was.
- Prone to rot and insect damage depending on the barn’s condition.



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There is some question as to how long will reclaimed timbers be available. There is a definite time span for this resource. Since nobody really knows how many buildings are left that have timbers in them, and nobody really can predict when and if those buildings will come down, there is no real way to predict ongoing availability. Demand has skyrocketed in the 15 years, and supply has been fairly steady, causing prices to rise sharply. That trend seems likely to continue.