

Deconstruction firm is the first of its kind in South Sound area

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Every year, thousands of tons of construction-related material are deposited into landfills by Washington businesses and homeowners. The most recent figures from the state Department of Ecology show that in 2003, 476,000 tons of material went to demolition landfills alone. One Olympia outfit is doing its part to prevent those materials from being disposed of, one project at a time.

Olympia Salvage is a nonprofit company that deconstructs buildings – mostly houses – and resells or recycles as many parts of the building as possible. The firm leases warehouse space from the Port of Olympia, where it operates a distribution center to sell materials that were salvaged from projects.

Examples of such materials are framing materials; wood floors; dimensional lumber, such as two-by-fours and two-by-eights; wood beams, double-paned windows; metal roofing materials; and fixtures, such as sinks, tubs, lights, cabinets, mirrors, doors and so forth.

Few people are familiar with the concept of deconstruction, but most people know what demolition is.

“It’s the same service, though the methods are entirely different,” says Ted Drummond, building material sales manager and co-director for the organization. “We’re sort of a new industry. People are familiar with bulldozers but not necessarily with pry bars.”

General contractor Doug Tallman recently had his first experience with deconstruction and Olympia Salvage on a home remodel project. Tallman owns Tallman Custom Homes, which specializes in high-end custom homes and the occasional high-end remodel.

“They salvaged almost the entire building, which was incredible,” Tallman says.

The homeowners had decided to go with deconstruction and found Olympia Salvage. While the cost of deconstruction can be higher than demolition, homeowners get a tax break for donating the materials to Olympia Salvage, which then sells what it can from its retail space at the Port.

“For them to be able to sell everything is a great deal,” Tallman says.

Tallman says he was impressed by the painstaking nature of the work Olympia Salvage performed.

“They are very responsive, which is even harder to find right now with construction booming,” Tallman says of the Olympia Salvage crew. “They were right on the spot all the time, taking care of things. They did a great job of salvaging things. That's the main thing, being able to re-use thousands and thousands of dollars worth of stuff rather than hauling it off to the dump.”

In this case, Tallman estimates that 75 percent of the structure was salvaged and about \$5,000 worth of lumber was re-used in the remodel.

Olympia Salvage deconstructs about one house per month. The organization has two full-time employees, co-directors Drummond and Quinn Vittum.

The deconstruction crew varies between four and six people, depending on the project, and the retail operation runs with four volunteers.

Drummond anticipates acquiring more staff as demand for the service grows.

Drummond says the organization's retail space, which he calls a distribution center, is popular with owners of older homes because they can often find pieces for their homes that go with the era, such as fir flooring, which was the standard flooring material in homes built in the 1950s and earlier, or claw-foot tubs and pedestal sinks. The quality of such fixtures is higher than of fixtures that are sold today.

The retail space is currently open on a limited basis, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturdays, and by appointment.

They plan to extend their hours during the summer once they hire a retail manager to run the operation. In the meantime, the Olympia Salvage Web site has a list of what is in stock at any given time and people can sign up for e-mail updates when new materials are brought in.

They also arrange bulk sales to contractors, who, for example, will buy all of the dimensional lumber from a particular project. The goal is to coordinate the sale ahead of time, so Olympia Salvage can take the materials directly from the job site to the contractor, thereby saving gas that would be spent on transporting the material to and from the distribution warehouse while saving space there. Because the group's structure is nonprofit, their goal is for materials to be reused whenever possible, whether it is as part of another building or for another use, such as refashioning wood into furniture. Materials are priced far below market value, Drummond says, because they want the materials to be

re-used and because they are nonprofit and as such only need to cover their personnel, equipment and overhead costs.

“We're not interested in seeing product sit around with high price tags. We'd give it away if we could afford to,” Drummond says. “Our goals are to keep materials out of the landfill and make it affordable for people to buy.”

Drummond makes an important distinction about the concept of recycling, using the example of a metal roof. If Olympia Salvage were to dismantle a metal roof and send it to a recycler, the material would be kept out of the landfill but it would also take more energy to convert the material into another form. Re-using the material in its original form takes the “embedded energy,” or the energy it took to manufacture it in the first place, and extends the life of that embedded energy.

Because of its environmental focus, Olympia Salvage can help businesses and government agencies, an emerging sector of their business, achieve Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, a rating system developed by the U.S. Green Building Council.

The LEED program gives credits for steps such as using deconstruction service rather than demolition or re-using salvaged materials in a new project.

Olympia Salvage has been in business in its current form since mid-2004. The organization grew out of a previous incarnation doing deconstruction for Sound Builders Resource, an organization run by Habitat for Humanity.

The deconstruction business outgrew its capacity, so Olympia Salvage incorporated with help from individuals and businesses in the community.

“The more support we get the more change we are able to affect by keeping materials out of the landfill” Drummond says. “We will be a resource in the community for years to come.”