



## Old Wood R.I.P.

THOSE WERE heady days back in the late '80s and early '90s. Suddenly it was possible for timber frames to be cut from dry, stable timbers rescued from old industrial structures. Now we could go visit our timber frames after a year had passed and not be embarrassed at how amateurish the joints looked! Plus this wood was cheap and could sometimes be acquired for just hauling it away. Talk about having your cake and eating it too! The quality of the wood was wonderful, even though one had apologize for the bolt and nail holes, and, oh yes, the checking. With tongue in cheek, some purveyors of this wood even offered free checking with each order. All in all, we thought we'd died and gone to heaven. Supply seemed endless and demand was anemic.

The growth of timber framing in the West was just starting to take off when, rightly or wrongly, the lowly spotted owl became the hammer to stop old-growth log-

ging on public lands. It was no longer cool to use old-growth timbers in your timber frames. Now the worst insult one could hurl in those hip western playgrounds of Hasbeen, Tohelluride, Scum Valley, Jackasson, and Pig Sty was calling someone a tree killer. We thought we were environmentalists, and environmental guilt became an extremely effective marketing tool for companies that sold reclaimed materials. Now cool people were into organic stuff, sustainable living, telecommuting for work and information, alternative energy, energy efficiency, and not-so-big timber frames with used timbers.

Fast forward in time to 2005. Interest in this unique resource has grown so much that demand has outstripped the supply of old wood; price has subsequently risen to the point where only the truly wealthy can afford it. There have been some great buildings built with it, buildings that will stand the test of time. But I often

wonder if a lot of this old wood resource has been wasted on poorly conceived and executed buildings.

For the most part, timber framers have underutilized these materials because of cost and because of difficulties in adjusting to the realities of used wood. It was deemed hard on tools. It was difficult to work with available sizes. The wood needed different joints because of thinner x-sections. Clients didn't really like free checking after all. Reserving wood required early commitments. If the wood had continued to be cheap, I'm convinced there would have been few difficulties in adapting to it. So the people who should have been using these materials were often shut out of the market for the simple reason that timber framing is labor intensive and needs inexpensive materials to remain even remotely economically viable. The timber framers who use these old materials have had to move away from traditional timber framing in order to use fewer timbers and eliminate the structural redundancy found in most insulated timber frames in North America.

The real demand for used wood seems to have come from architects designing high end residences in exclusive places for exclusive clients. Sometimes I wonder if there is a competition going on between some architects to see

who can design the biggest home for the fewest number of people with the biggest and longest timbers possible that do the least work (or none at all). They often herald their use of recycled timbers as some sort of justification for the construction of these behemoths. The real tragedy for much of this old wood is that quite often the wood is not doing any structural work and is only there to make the building look like something it's not. Disneyland! The only upside to this whole situation is that these buildings will probably become obsolete someday soon, too big and expensive to keep—much like the industrial buildings the wood is coming from—and maybe the timbers can be reused again.

Make no mistake: old timbers will never be a long term solution for timber framers looking for quality dry timber. One could only hope that this 20-year phenomenon gave our old-growth forests a breather from the relentless pressure of cutting and that we came up with a forest management policy to insure the continued existence and availability of old-growth wood. Yeah, right!

Maybe we should take some lessons from sportsmen who have helped guarantee the continued existence of favorite fish and game populations that they regularly harvest on a sustainable basis. —*Merle Adams*