

He owns and runs the only sustainable urban sawmill in Philly



Steve Ebner, woodworker and owner of Manayunk Timber, located at 5100 Umbria St. in Philadelphia. (ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER) DN

STEVE EBNER, 61, of Roxborough, owns Manayunk Timber, the city's only sustainable urban sawmill. The carpenter and woodworker's 2-acre lumberyard on Umbria Street is stacked with yellow and white pine and Douglas fir beams from Philly's abandoned factories and breweries. The beams are sawed down to size for flooring, paneling and cabinets.

Q: How did you start Manayunk Timber?

A: I was a carpenter, also doing woodworking and interested in old, high-quality wood. My brother and I bought the sawmill in 1994 for \$15,000 and we were able to process larger beams. I saw a fair amount of green trees but I still saw old wood and also do woodworking.

Q: Origin of the wood?

A: Mostly from buildings being demolished as well as green trees. Most city trees are thrown away because they have hardware in them and there's too many of them.

Q: The biz model?

A: If you're a contractor or woodworker, you call us and say you need 300 square feet of pine. We go out to our yard, get the right beam, pull the nails out and put it on the sawmill. We sell wood by the board foot for \$6.50, and that's white pine, yellow pine or Douglas fir from 1860 to 1900.

Q: That's the wholesale end of the business?

A: Yeah. I'd say this part of the business represents about 70 to 80 percent of annual revenue. I create furniture but selling it is harder than selling lumber by the board foot.

Q: Your customers?

A: Mostly professionals who want to buy wood rough. Howard & Dean [in Maryland] buys a lot. Kane Woodworking Co., in Camden, and DWR Custom Woodworking, in Doylestown, are others. Since we also make a finished product, such as kitchen cabinets, a lot of homeowners come here and pick out the wood. Our beams are so large that if you need 300 square feet to do a kitchen, we can get it from one beam, cut it for your kitchen, it's the same tree, same color wood.

Q: Tell me about some of your custom orders.

A: Tables, bookshelves and countertops. Making furniture is much more aesthetic, and I'd rather do that. A trestle table is about \$4,500 and it's handmade, and I sign all my stuff.

Q: What differentiates you from competitors?

A: We have lots of old wood and take it all the way to a product that has three coats of varnish on it. I have wood from Schmidt's Brewery in 1984, a lot of redwood and cypress. When I make your tabletop out of redwood from Schmidt's, I'll leave the beeswax on the top that originally came with it and it will have a patina like you can't believe.

Q: How big a biz is this?

A: About \$100,000 annual revenue, two part-time employees.

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