



Into the Woods

THROUGHOUT PHILADELPHIA, CRUMBLING FACTORIES recall a faded past. But in the wooden beams that once held them up—century-old timber taken from vanished virgin forests—Steve Ebner sees beauty, opportunity and a chance at renewal. “You can’t get better than this,” he says, gesturing toward the massive stacks of reclaimed wood that make up the stock of his business, Manayunk Timber, Inc. For 25 years, Ebner has been refashioning those beams into boards for use in new construction—a career that has quietly extended the memory of our city’s departed industry. ¶ “I just love cuttin’ them, man,” says Ebner of the 19th-century girders. Ebullient in a Stetson, checked shirt, blue jeans and boots, the 57-year-old Northeast Philly native exudes a deep devotion to his work. “I can go back in time, just for a second,” he says of sawing through each beam.

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—STEVE EBNER

Manayunk Timber reclaims the city’s industrial past, one beam at a time

by JACOB LAMBERT

And on his lot, tucked away in a gravelly corner of Manayunk, there is plenty of history: Current inventory includes logs from a paper mill along Frankford Creek, as well as supports from an evaporator plant at 17th and Clearfield and a canvas factory at 4th and Brown. Prior to the buildings’ demolition, Ebner bids on their steel-strong wood—a process he describes as “competitive.” If he wins, the beams are trucked here, where they’re methodically stacked with a forklift. Then it’s usually only a matter of “days or weeks” until orders come from builders and contractors, hoping to use his freshly hewn antique planks in everything from cabinets to counters to flooring.

Ebner got his start in 1981 as a carpenter, and his mentor, Ben Brown, passed along an enthusiasm for wood that the years have done little to diminish. “A light bulb [went] off,” he says of the moment when occupation merged with passion. “I got addicted to wood, and that was it.” Ebner supplements his habit by turning windblown trees into boards and mulch—every scrap reused—and crafting furniture from cypress, cedar and redwood, gleaned from the long-gone Schmidt’s brewery.

But whatever the product, the materials and the process are what drive him. “Wood is more beautiful when you think about it,” he says. “It’s the greatest renewable resource.” Holding out three fingers, he ticks off a quick list of precious items: “Wood, diamonds, gold—I don’t know... it could go one, two, three.” ■

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