



Everything New Orleans

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## **EASY DOES IT**

**Hands-on demolition process used in St. Roch neighborhood in efforts to save architecturally significant building materials**

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Staff writer

Normally, demolishing a house takes about two days, with the help of a giant steel claw. On Friday, a sweaty crew of men pulled apart a house by hand -- hoping to salvage its lumber and architectural treasures -- and they'd already been at work two weeks on the abandoned two-story in the 1700 block of St. Roch Avenue. They had stacked slate roof tiles at the rear property line, and piled cleaned-up lumber nearby, along with old windows and terra cotta ridge tiles.

Scanning aging, stout boards that had been rafters, Allison Stouse said they still have a future: "They can be remilled for trim, floor boards, all sorts of things."

Stouse, 40, is director of operations for the Faubourg St. Roch Project, a post-Katrina nonprofit launched to rejuvenate nine mostly residential blocks running from the St. Roch Market on St. Claude Avenue to Independence Square, a neighborhood park. And the "deconstruction" of the house at 1704-06 St. Roch is a test case of sorts, promoting a rarely used, hands-on demolition technique that saves valuable building materials, along with landfill space, and requires four times the work force of a knock-down demolition.

Jay Johnson, part owner of a demolition company hired by the St. Roch Project, said such work requires close attention. When a mistake happens as walls and floors are pulled apart, materials can be damaged, or someone can get hurt, he said. And demo companies tend to believe they will make less on such jobs, he said.

"In deconstruction, you've got to know what you're doing," Johnson said.

But advocates of building deconstruction say it has huge potential, especially in an architecture-rich city where many homes are doomed.

"It's a lot of material, sitting on the ground" and going to waste, said Rick Denhart, director of Gulf Coast recovery for Oregon-based Mercy Corps, a relief organization.

Mercy Corps, in a more formal experiment, is using deconstruction in the removal of 15 homes across New Orleans, gathering data about the availability and cost of labor and the resale value of salvaged materials. By year's end, they hope to write an analysis that shows the economic viability of taking apart buildings slowly. The nonprofit Green Project often removes doors and windows of old homes facing demolition, in what is called a "skim" for valuable items, giving owners receipts for tax write-offs. The Green Project does a full-house deconstruction, charging for labor and offering receipts for materials taken for resale, but, so far, few people have requested the service, program manager Ross Harmon said. Though prices charged for the service are competitive with those charged for private demolitions, most people don't realize it, he said.

"Most people don't even know it's an option," Harmon said.

Use of deconstruction is part of an environmentally friendly strategy of the St. Roch Project, a group directed by New Orleans native Drew Lang, an architect based in New York City. Lang, 38, recently bought the two-story St. Roch home along with a commercial building next door, which

had little salvage value and has been razed.

Lang said he may transfer the buildings to the nonprofit, at cost. He said he bought the abandoned buildings for \$60,000.

The group will use salvaged materials as it redevelops properties along St. Roch or give them to Rebuilding Together, a nonprofit already renovating homes in the area.

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