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Art of preservation in downtown Riverside

By Suzanne Muchnic
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Wurms Janitorial Service will not go quietly. The shabby old building on downtown Riverside's historic pedestrian mall will be knocked down by a bulldozer at 7:30 p.m. Saturday amid a cacophony of falling bricks, stucco, wood and metal.

That's what happens to eyesores when their upscale neighbors are slated for renovation. The Wurms building clings to one side of the former Rouse department store. The 1895 Rouse building also has fallen into ruin, but with good bones, a three-story atrium, wrought iron balconies and Moorish-style tile work, it's about to be reborn as the Culver Center of the Arts. Offering media laboratories, exhibition spaces and performance facilities, it will join UC Riverside's California Museum of Photography and Sweeney Art Gallery in a lineup of renovated structures on Main Street, recently christened the UCR / ARTSblock.

The demolition signals the university's growing presence in the downtown community, in partnership with city government. But the bulldozer's performance is also the grand finale of "Live Building," a 12-day recycling blitz conceived by Jason Middlebrook, a New York-based, nationally renowned artist.

He and three associates have chiseled "Live Building" in big block letters on the side of the Wurms building and have set up a makeshift workshop under tent-tops in the adjacent parking lot, where they are making furniture from wood gutted from the old structure. A few of their creations will become fixtures at the museum, others will be donated to local charitable organizations and the rest will be sold in an online auction with a portion of the proceeds going to the community.

So far, several unconventional benches and a table, each designed and built by an individual, have emerged. Some pieces are fashioned of butcher-block slabs of scrap wood. One table has trapezoidal legs and a top made of two wide planks of redwood.

Middlebrook's current project is a bench composed of planed lumber and chunks of a stubby tree that once stood beside the building. Wielding a brush, he paints bright circles of pigment in spots where branches have been sawed off the trunk.

"The color really makes it pop," says the 40-year-old artist. Middlebrook, a native of Jackson, Mich., who grew up in Los Gatos and earned his master of fine arts degree at the San Francisco Art Institute, is a Paul Bunyan-esque figure with an easy smile and a sense of purpose. His colleagues are better carpenters and craftsmen, he says. "I'm more about the ideas."

But his main idea is social responsibility, not furniture.

"It's thinking green but also thinking creatively," he says.

"When Ciara Ennis contacted me about this being torn down, she said they were looking for an artist to do something to this building," Middlebrook says, recalling a conversation with the curator at the UCR / California Museum of Photography. "I saw it as an opportunity to salvage something from the building, to make a comment about the life of these materials. We are not going to have these resources forever."

The Wurms building didn't have nearly as much useful material as he had hoped, but wood removed from the roof is enough to make the point.

"In this project at least there will be a memory, a sense that the building didn't just go into a landfill," he says. "Even if we only make 10 pieces of furniture, that's better than putting it all in the dump. It's about social awareness. Hence the title, 'Live Building.' It's alive. It's live because it's happening right now, and we are trying to get it to live beyond the time when they bulldoze it."

The project is part of a series of events designed to call attention to the university's art programs and its collaboration with the city, says Jonathan Green, director of the museum.

"As a prelude to the renovation of the Rouse building, we sought imaginative proposals that would use the Wurms building as the stage for galvanizing events," he says. "Jason's proposal was the most minimal, just two paragraphs in an e-mail, but it was clearly the most interesting. He brought together something large and impressive, an intervention into the architectural structure and, what I found most interesting, this notion of memory and the way it can remain within the community once the building is gone."

Ennis, who had worked with Middlebrook on an installation in 2002 at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, says he is perfect for the Riverside project. She and Green initially thought the chosen artist might produce something akin to the work of the late Gordon Matta Clark, who is known for slicing through entire buildings, but they are delighted with Middlebrook's innovative approach.

"Gordon Matta Clark was definitely an inspiration for me," Middlebrook says. "So was Robert Smithson. Matta Clark dealt with architecture in terms of an incision or disruption. Smithson dealt with entropy and the decay of architecture. I love those guys. I couldn't get to this place without them, but I like to deal with the positives, the salvage of it."

Still, the Riverside project takes Middlebrook's work to a new level.

"It's kind of scary," he says, "because I kind of like the idea of being the artist who saves your building. I've been a gallery artist and a site-specific artist for about 20 years. But this is a lot more interesting. This is about a social space."

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