



Guide

Artistic Salvaging

Wood, other materials from building to be bulldozed are used to craft furniture, artwork

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The demise of the Wurms building in downtown Riverside won't involve a massive implosion and a cloud of dust. But there will be a bulldozer toppling walls Saturday and everyone is invited.

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Special to The Press-Enterprise

"I don't have the answers in terms of urban planning, but I think officials should think about sustainability," says New York artist Jason Middlebrook, who is gutting the Wurms building in downtown Riverside as part of the "Live Building" project.

The grand finale of "Live Building: The Recycling and Demolition of the Wurms Building" will take place at 7:30 p.m. But it is more than destruction. It is creation that is being celebrated.

"It will be a party," said UCR/California Museum of Photography director Jonathan Green.

Since Dec. 4, Jason Middlebrook, a New York-based artist, and his crew have been dismantling the building, which once housed a janitorial service.

The crew labored under mid-day sun and chilly nights with lamps illuminating the project as they salvaged wood planks of Douglas fir and redwood to build benches and other objects.

Hector Ducci, 31, was delighted with his find of some redwood planks.

"This tree probably sprouted in the 1300s. It's ancient, ancient wood," he said. He decided to transform it into the top of a coffee table, using fir for the support.

The handcrafted furniture will be displayed gallery fashion in a parking lot near Ninth Street. UC Riverside and city officials, as well as Middlebrook will talk Saturday about the project.

The brick building has to come down so that renovation can begin on its neighbor -- the Rouse Building, which formerly housed a department store. Built in 1895, the Rouse edifice is notable for its Spanish and Moorish influences. It will become the Barbara and Art Culver Center of the Arts, which will have performance space and galleries for public events, classes and research.

The new arts center will join the photography museum and the Sweeney Art Gallery in what is now called UCR/ARTSblock on the Main Street pedestrian mall.

Middlebrook, 40, was chosen for the project because his proposal was the kind of cutting-edge, provocative art project UCR officials wanted for ARTS/block, the sort of programming envisioned for the area, according to Green.

"In my mind, there was no doubt who should get this," said Ciara Ennis, the curator of exhibitions for the photography museum. When she was the associate curator of the Santa Monica Museum of Art, she had been impressed by a project he did concerning the relationship between art and museums.

Middlebrook is internationally known and has done large-scale installations in New York and London.

In the "Live Building" project, he wants to make as many objects as possible from salvageable materials and keep them from going to the landfill.

"I'm into pushing the envelope of the system," Middlebrook said. "I don't have the answers in terms of urban planning, but I think officials should think about sustainability."

He also is interested in the relationship between nature and human development.

"When a weed grows up through a sidewalk, I'm interested in that particular relationship -- where nature meets humanity or nature breaks through," he said.

