



In the streets of post-Katrina New Orleans, trash heaps have become commonplace. Gutted houses frame mountains of soggy sheetrock, worn-out flooring and tired windows. This refuse provides a visual testament to just how much our residents have lost.

Although homeowners willingly toss these materials, the bulk of this waste is reusable. Grand architectural fixtures of the last century--- decadent moldings and solid true wood, windows, doors, cabinetry, and tongue and groove flooring--- have value born out of the fact that they simply aren't replaceable. These items can be directly reused in another location or even upcycled to a different, better use.

Once these architectural gems have been salvaged, the rest of the waste pile qualifies for a more standard recycling route. Scrap wood, metals and glass could be separated and re-constructed. Organic matter would make rich compost. Toxic materials, such as asbestos, paints or poisons, should be relegated to safe containers.

Yet despite the more than 22 million tons of construction and demolition debris generated by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, New Orleans' Sanitation Department still hasn't implemented a comprehensive curbside recycling program. Salvaged building materials find new life only through a handful of enterprising organizations that rely entirely upon independent coordination with contractors and homeowners. For every house that benefits from the selective "deconstruction" offered by these salvage operations, hundreds of other houses hit the landfill.

These houses add up. Since 2005, an estimated 13,000 houses have been gutted or demolished in New Orleans, sending more than 18 million cubic yards of garbage to Louisiana's landfills. These landfills, in turn, are bursting at the seams. New Orleans has literally reopened geriatric pits to accommodate this influx of trash, to the detriment of the surrounding ecosystem and the neighbors who border it.

While massive dumping occurs in New Orleans, thousands of uprooted residents are desperate to rebuild their homes. The loss of salvaged building materials correlates to a longer wait for eager rebuilders who otherwise lack access to budget construction materials. This is a critical moment in the rebuilding history of New Orleans: a time that calls for both innovation and progressive practices.

New Orleans needs a comprehensive building material recycling program. We can begin by diverting waste from overwhelmed landfills and providing the rebuilding effort with a plentiful source of high quality building materials. This process saves energy and natural resources, reduces Katrina's carbon footprint, improves the quality of the city's building stock, retains the historic identity of this city, and contributes to a smarter local economy.

To test this theory, a team of students from Tulane's School of Architecture investigated the real-world logistics of incorporating salvaged materials for architectural reuse. They targeted one typical trash pile along a street in a flooded mid-city neighborhood. Initially, they picked apart the heap of debris to determine the amount and type of refuse generated by a typical gutted house. Then they looked at what they could construct with the materials from one single trash heap--- and the process of rebuilding by diverting this waste from the landfill.

The contents of this pile included one set of drawers, two crutches, two sets of suspenders, one ball of twine, one bag of rusted nails and screws, one ball of fishing line, 500 linear feet of tongue and groove pine flooring, one box of glassware, two mirrors, several lamps, one fluorescent light, one singing big mouth bass trophy, eight strands of Mardi Gras beads, thirty-six hangers, one pair of lace curtains, one ceramic paperweight, three chairs, one bicycle, one bag, 150 feet of miscellaneous wood scraps, two solid wood doors, and two brooms.

After cataloguing each of these resources, the students developed a design for a table that would illustrate the new potential embedded within old woodwork. This design was built entirely out of the materials found in the trash pile.

The goal of this project was to highlight the amount of trash generated by post-Katrina house-gutting, and the lack of a comprehensive building recycling program in New Orleans. Further, this team sought to demonstrate that it is possible to upcycle the material waste from dismantled houses into a useful, beautiful object.