

Published February 11, 2008

Reused items make for eco-friendly renovation

JOHN DODGE, The Olympian

When Susan Alexander decided to remodel her home on Irving Street, she didn't head for a big-box store for new windows, doors and shelving.

She chose instead thrift stores, antique shops, liquidation sales and, most importantly, the South Puget Sound Habitat for Humanity Sound Builder's ReStore in downtown Olympia. At the Habitat for Humanity retail store that sells donated and surplus building materials, she found secondhand French doors, kitchen tile, molding, and planks to turn into book shelves and storage shelves above her washer and dryer.

Her approach to the remodeling project was driven by an environmental mantra that she embraces: "Reduce, reuse, recycle."

Even the house she purchased in 2000 reflects her commitment to tread lightly and minimize her consumption of raw materials and energy, and ultimately her contribution of greenhouse gas emissions that lead to global warming.

"I downsized by 50 percent when I bought this house," she said of her 825-square-foot bungalow nestled in a patch of cedar trees near the base of Tumwater Hill. "None of us need as big of a footprint as we think."

In fact, it was the home's forested setting that led to the remodel project. After a short time in the house, she knew she had to let in more light to combat the dark and shady environs. So she added a skylight and three French doors that took the place of solid walls and small windows. Suddenly, the visual and physical barriers that separated the inside from the outside were blurred the way she likes it. Alexander, director of fund and resource development at Community Youth Services, offered some tips for others interested in reuse of building materials when they build or remodel their homes.

- **Take time to visualize what you want the project to look like.**

"Draw pictures, do it on the computer, do what you can to reduce any surprises," she said. "Once you cut the hole in the wall, you're going to have to work with it."

- **Fit your project to the materials you want to use.** Remember that something like a secondhand French door or a finite supply

of white tile isn't custom built or ordered to meet your needs.

"You have stay flexible and retain a sense of humor about the project," she said.

- **Don't underestimate the importance of accurate measurements.** To emphasize the point, Alexander carries a small keychain tape measure with her when she's shopping or browsing.

- **If the project requires the services of a carpenter or other professional, choose carefully.** "Don't just pick a name out of the Yellow Pages," she said. "Ask around — it's important to have a carpenter that shares your philosophy."

- **Be practical about your renovation.** For instance, Alexander bought new skylights, in part for warranty purposes in case they were to start leaking. "But whenever I can, I try to reuse," she said.

There are economic benefits to using recycled building materials, she said. The three sets of French doors she purchased at ReStore ranged in price from \$75 to \$100. Purchased new, Alexander said she would have paid \$300 to \$1,000 per set. The project paid other dividends, too.

"I just had my house appraised a few weeks ago," she said. "It's valued at twice what it was before the remodeling project."