

## One Man's Trash ...



Michael Stravato for The New York Times

**CYCLES** Dan Phillips builds houses out of salvaged items, like frame samples, which he used on a ceiling.

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HUNTSVILLE, Tex.

AMONG the traditional brick and clapboard structures that line the streets of this sleepy East Texas town, 70 miles north of Houston, a few houses stand out: their roofs are made of license plates, and their windows of crystal platters.

They are the creations of Dan Phillips, 64, who has had an astonishingly varied life, working as an intelligence officer in the Army, a college dance instructor, an antiques dealer and a syndicated cryptogram puzzle maker. About 12 years ago, Mr. Phillips began his latest career: building low-income housing out of trash.

In 1997 Mr. Phillips mortgaged his house to start his construction company, Phoenix Commotion. "Look at kids playing with blocks," he said. "I think it's in everyone's DNA to want to be a builder." Moreover, he said, he was disturbed by the irony of landfills choked with building materials and yet a lack of affordable housing.

To him, almost anything discarded and durable is potential building material. Standing in one of his houses and pointing to a colorful, zigzag-patterned ceiling he made out of thousands of picture frame corners, Mr. Phillips said, “A frame shop was getting rid of old samples, and I was there waiting.”

So far, he has built 14 homes in Huntsville, which is his hometown, on lots either purchased or received as a donation. A self-taught carpenter, electrician and plumber, Mr. Phillips said 80 percent of the materials are salvaged from other construction projects, hauled out of trash heaps or just picked up from the side of the road. “You can’t defy the laws of physics or building codes,” he said, “but beyond that, the possibilities are endless.”

While the homes are intended for low-income individuals, some of the original buyers could not hold on to them. To Mr. Phillips’s disappointment, half of the homes he has built have been lost to foreclosure — the payments ranged from \$99 to \$300 a month.

Some of those people simply disappeared, leaving the properties distressingly dirty and in disrepair. “You can put someone in a new home but you can’t give them a new mindset,” Mr. Phillips said.

Although the homes have resold quickly to more-affluent buyers, Mr. Phillips remains fervently committed to his vision of building for low-income people. “I think mobile homes are a blight on the planet,” he said. “Attractive, affordable housing is possible and I’m out to prove it.”

Freed by necessity from what he calls the “tyranny of the two-by-four and four-by-eight,” common sizes for studs and sheets of plywood, respectively, Mr. Phillips makes use of end cuts discarded by other builders — he nails them together into sturdy and visually interesting grids. He also makes use of mismatched bricks, shards of ceramic tiles, shattered mirrors, bottle butts, wine corks, old DVDs and even bones from nearby cattle yards.

“It doesn’t matter if you don’t have a complete set of anything because repetition creates pattern, repetition creates pattern, repetition creates pattern,” said Mr. Phillips, who is slight and sinewy with a long gray ponytail and bushy mustache. He grips the armrests of his chair when he talks as if his latent energy might otherwise catapult him out of his seat.

Phoenix Commotion homes meet local building codes and Mr. Phillips frequently consults with professional engineers, electricians and plumbers to make sure his designs, layouts and workmanship are sound. Marsha Phillips, his wife of 40 years and a former high school art teacher, vets his plans for aesthetics.

“He doesn’t have to redo things often,” said Robert McCaffety, a local master electrician who occasionally inspects Mr. Phillips’s wiring. “He does everything in a very neat and well thought-out manner.” Describing Huntsville as a “fairly conservative town,” Mr. McCaffety said, “There are people who think his houses are pretty whacked out but, by and large, people support what he does and think it’s beneficial to the community.”

Indeed, city officials worked closely with Mr. Phillips in 2004 to set up a recycled building materials warehouse where builders, demolition crews and building product manufacturers can drop off items rather than throwing them in a landfill. There’s no dumping fee and donations are tax deductible because the materials are used exclusively by charitable groups or for low-income housing.

“I’ve been recycling all my life, and it never occurred to me to recycle a door,” said Esther Herklotz, Huntsville’s superintendent of solid waste. “Dan has changed the way we do things around here.”

Officials in Houston also consulted with Mr. Phillips before opening a similar warehouse this summer, and other cities, including Bryan, Tex.; Denham Springs, La.; and Indianapolis have contacted him to inquire how to do the same.

Phoenix Commotion employs five minimum-wage construction workers but Mr. Phillips also requires the labor of the home’s eventual resident — he tends to favor a poor, single mother because his own father walked out on him and his mother when he was 17, which left them in a tough financial situation. “My only requirement is that they have good credit or no credit but not bad credit,” he said.

One of his houses belongs to Gloria Rivera, a cashier at a doughnut shop, who built the home with Mr. Phillips and her teenage son in 2004. Before then, she lived in a rented mobile home. Constructed almost entirely out of salvaged and donated materials, the 600-square-foot wooden house is painted royal blue with various squares of red, maroon and fuchsia tile glued to the mismatched gingerbread trim.

Inside, there is imported Tuscan marble on the floor, though the tiles are not of uniform size, and bright yellow stucco walls that Ms. Rivera said she textured using her thumb. “It’s not perfect but it’s mine,” Ms. Rivera said, touching the stucco, which looks like very thick and very messy butter cream frosting. “I call it my doll house.”

Phoenix Commotion homes lost to foreclosure have resold to middle-class buyers who appreciate not only their individuality but also their energy efficiency, which is also part of Mr. Phillips’s construction philosophy.

Susan Lowery and Alfredo Cerda, who both work for the United States [Department of Homeland Security](#), bought a Phoenix Commotion house after the intended low-income owner couldn’t manage the mortgage. It has mosaics on the walls and counters made of shards of broken tile and cushy flooring made out of wine corks. “My wife likes the house because it doesn’t look like everyone else’s, but, being a guy, what I like is that it has a galvanized metal roof that I’ll never have to replace,” Mr. Cerda said.

Mr. Phillips said it bothered him when his low-income housing became “gentrified.” But if it leads to an acceptance of recycled building materials and a shift away from cookie-cutter standardized construction, he said, “I’m O.K. with it.”

Although it has a social agenda, Phoenix Commotion is not a nonprofit. “I want to show that you can make money doing this,” Mr. Phillips said.

He said he earned enough to live on but he was not getting rich. While he declined to be more specific, he allowed that the business has become more profitable as he has gained construction experience. It now takes six months to build a home rather than the 18 months it took when he started.

But Mr. Phillips said his biggest reward was giving less-fortunate people the opportunity to own a home and watching them develop a sense of satisfaction and self-determination in the course of building it.

An example is Kristie Stevens, a single mother of two school-age sons who earned a college degree last spring while working part time as a restaurant and catering manager. She has spent the months since graduation hammering away on what will be her home.

“If something goes wrong with this house, I won’t have to call someone to fix it because I know where all the wires and pipes are — I can do it myself,” she said. “And if the walls are wonky, it will be my fault but also my pride.”