

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.

By KATE MURPHY

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."