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From Grain Elevators to Spectacular Homes: Recycling Old Growth Timber

By Virginia Wilkinson

Lincoln Dobson is as passionate about building timber homes as he is about the recycling he does to access the timbers.

“The homes, with their open timber beams and rafters, are beautiful—and they resonate with power because of the way they’re constructed,” he said.

Timber framing is an age-old art that incorporates the use of large timbers in the framing of buildings and homes. The structures use mortise and tenon connections, and hardwood pegs instead of nails. Years ago large homes, barns and churches were all built this way using large, old growth timber.

Over time, and with the disappearance of old growth forests, that type of construction virtually disappeared as well. Recently there has been renewed excitement about this form of building.

Dobson became interested in timber construction in the mid-1990s when he worked on timber home construction in BC. But his first foray into the sector was as a timber supplier.

In the late 1990s, as the demolition of grain elevators began to peak in Saskatchewan, Dobson opened Last Mountain Timber Wrighting & Recycling at Regina Beach. He began salvaging the timber from these prairie landmarks and re-selling it to other timber frame companies across North America. Over the past 12 years, he has recycled timber from more than 140 grain elevators and a dozen warehouses.

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Lincoln Dobson of Last Mountain Timber

Photo: Kevin Hogarth

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He believes the recycled wood is a much better construction product.

“When I was in BC we were working with green wood. When we would go back and see the project a couple of years later, it was all gapped and twisted. At one point we used some recycled stuff. It was drier and didn't shrink—it's a much better product.”

Before long, Dobson also began building his own timber homes.

To date he has built more than 60 homes, living rooms and entryways and supplied timber for hundreds of projects. He's created specialty products such as stairs, doors, plank flooring, baseboards, casings and some furniture. He said the demand for timber products is growing worldwide.

While he is proud of the products he creates, he is especially proud that they incorporate the legacy of Saskatchewan's early settlers.

“Saskatchewan's early settlers had these huge pieces of wood brought here by train. They built the elevators with a lot of hard work and determination,” he said.

“We're helping to recapture some of the passion and energy they put into these buildings, and incorporating it into other structures that will continue into the future.” —

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McCrea said the containers work extremely well in this sector.

“They were created to be transported, so they are easily moved around the country or from mine site to mine site, and they are made of steel so they are incredibly durable and can be moved without affecting their structural integrity,” he said.

While its initial focus has been on creating structures for the resource sector, 3twenty will also be moving into the residential market. McCrea expects 3twenty will begin manufacturing residential containers within the next 18 months.

“There is absolutely unlimited opportunity. The containers are really affordable so they'll provide some exciting new residential options. I'm getting phone calls all the time from people looking for residential products.”

He said there has also been significant interest from people looking for containers that could be used as cabins.

Most of the containers provide an area of 320 square feet—which led to the creation of the company name. McCrea said some callers have wondered whether the living space would be tight.

“The time is now to be an entrepreneur, especially in Saskatchewan. There are so many possibilities here.”

“People are always amazed at the space inside these containers. When you walk into one of them it's always so much bigger than people expect. We ask people to come into the space, have a look around, and then we invite them to draw their dreams. It's exciting to see what unique concepts the company and our customers can create within the four steel walls.”

3twenty expects to move a significant number of its structures into the market this year. The company is forecasting sales of 30-40 units in 2010. McCrea said while this year has been exciting, he expects next year to even better.

“The time is now to be an entrepreneur, especially in Saskatchewan. There are so many possibilities here, and a very supportive mentorship network. It's exciting to be able to create and add value to this growing province,” he said.

“It's a great opportunity.” —