

December 27, 2003
Section: BUSINESS
Page: D1

Champion recycler: She's truly resourceful

Becky Pallack

Woman turns vacant warehouse into store selling reused goods

////

Natasha Winnik can recycle and reuse almost anything. That's how she turned a vacant freight warehouse into a new store for natural and recycled building materials. Originate, 526 N. Ninth Ave., is the latest transformation of an old warehouse in the Downtown arts district.

As one of the founding members of Freecycle, a local network of people who reuse each other's giveaways, Winnik has made a career of recycling and reusing.

Trained as an architect and specializing in straw-bale homes, Winnik realized about five years ago that it was getting harder and harder to find recycled building materials for her projects.

"Even if you want to do something environmentally friendly, it's so tedious," she said.

She's eliminating the hassle by becoming the first local distributor of products such as hardwoods from sustainably harvested forests; countertops made of soybeans, sunflower seed and recycled newspaper; and insulation and acoustic paneling made from recycled blue jeans.

Originate is in an old freight warehouse built in the 1950s. Winnik has spent half a year transforming the place into a resource for environmentally conscious home builders.

"It's being reused in a way that it was never meant to be used," she said.

The building is painted with milk-based paint. The 2,400-square-foot warehouse cost less than \$20 to paint.

The floors are stained and polished with tea, or tiled using recycled ceramic pieces.

Even rainwater is reused for gardening after it is collected in an enormous bin - a freebie from a Freecycle member.

Finding a space for the store was not easy. The first storefront Winnik looked at Downtown would have cost \$22,000 a year. She figured she would have to make \$100 a day just to pay the bills.

She bought her warehouse in June from the Arizona Department of Transportation at auction for \$145,000. Luckily, she was the only bidder and could afford only the asking price.

The store has room for a research library on building techniques, a classroom for teaching ecological building techniques, an office, a showroom, a rooftop garden and an outdoor classroom for demonstrations.

"There's a lot of people who would like to do the right thing environmentally that have nowhere to go to get the right information," said Michael Keith, a home builder and owner of Contemporary West Development who has worked on projects with Winnik for about three years. "There's a growing number of builders and buyers that are very receptive to using natural materials."

Keith said people who are sensitive to chemicals will be thrilled to find a source for interior products with few pollutants.

Local customers and home builders currently shop mostly online or call wholesalers to

get natural materials.

"With education, I think people would prefer to choose as many of those items as possible, whether for the health aspect of it or for the character of recycled materials," said Tom Wuelpern, owner of Rammed Earth Development.

He said customers view natural products as a custom upgrade and are prepared to pay a higher price for a healthier product. Demand for environmentally friendly building is higher in Tucson than in many same-sized cities, Wuelpern said.

Some natural building materials cost more than commonly available materials.

For example, hardwood flooring from Originate costs about \$1 more per square foot than it would at a home-improvement warehouse.

Blue-jean insulation costs 15 cents more per square foot than generic fiberglass insulation, Winnik said.

The choice is similar to that of buying organic food vs. food grown using chemical processes, Keith said.

"You have to ask yourself, do you want the environment that you spend the most time in outside of work - your home - to be a healthful place or a polluted place?" he said.

Besides product displays, most of the materials Winnik sells have been used in the Originate building.

"It's a statement of what I represent and what I'm trying to do," Winnik said.

Starting a nature-friendly business was a challenge, Winnik said.

For example, she said, she had to find a company that sold checks printed on recycled paper before selecting a design for her free checks, she said.

And the Originate business cards are recycled and use soy-based ink.

While it may be a long shot to get all builders to use natural materials, Keith said, there's a small movement starting.

Locally, it starts with Winnik.

"It's people like her, who push for consciousness, who push the envelope," Keith said.

////

Originate showroom

What: Originate, a natural and recycled building materials showroom

Products: Paint, flooring, plasters and glass included

Where: 526 N. Ninth Ave., 792-4207

Hours: 1:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Saturday

On the Web: www.originateNBM.com or www.freecycle.org

Contact reporter Becky Pallack at 573-4237 or bpallack@azstarnet.com.