



Urban Timber: Giving Old Wood New Life

If you've ever visited an animal shelter, you are familiar with the idea of "pet rescue."

But have you ever considered applying the concept to trees and "tree rescue"?

This week Elizabeth will lead the way to Urban Timber, a local company that calls itself a "re-treever." As they state on their website:

We breathe new life into fallen trees and other materials which would otherwise be discarded. Our business is driven through healthy collaborations between our material, our clients, and our vision. In our process we strive to steward our wood to elicit the most out of each piece, and transform it into utilitarian artwork fulfilling the collaborative visions we create with our customer (<https://sdurbantimber.com/>)

As you'll learn on your tour of Urban Timber's Chula Vista wood shop, owners Daniel Herbst and Jessica Van Arsdale have created a unique business that aims to "rescue" trees by reclaiming San Diego's old (dying or dead) timber and transforming it into beautiful, utilitarian furniture or art...and sometimes both.



Monks Sawing Wood Image: Wikimedia Commons

The Art (and Craft) of Re-claiming Wood

Urban Timber is not alone in realizing the potential of repurposed wood. The U.S. boasts a thriving reclaimed wood industry.

Perhaps that should not be surprising, given the widespread use of wood as a building material (as well as fuel). Reclaimed wood is a popular material in today's remodeling and home improvement industries. It not

only gives new life to old wood, but it provides virgin forests a chance to mature, since reclaimed lumber is usable, sturdy, and safe (Understanding Reclaimed Wood).

Glossary of Terms

Sawyer:	Someone who saws wood as an occupation
Felling:	Cutting down a tree
Limbing:	Removing the branches
Debarking:	Taking off the bark
Cants:	Smaller logs broken from larger logs

- Flitch:** An unfinished plank
Edging: Trimming the irregular edges off a flitch
Drying: Evaporates the moisture from wood, either in a kiln or by air
Planing: Creating a smooth surface on the wood (<https://kids.kiddle.co/Sawmill>)

Urban Timber's Mission

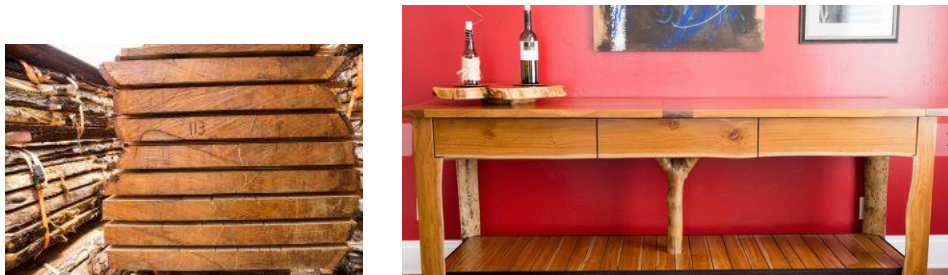
San Diego native Daniel Herbst started Urban Timber more than 10 years ago, as he noticed a Caltrans crew cutting up eucalyptus trees on the side of the freeway. He realized the abundance of old trees around San Diego. He developed an interest in milling trees himself, and processing and repairing the wood to be beautiful and useful. He found his calling (Schimitscheck 2018).

To understand Urban Timber's approach, it's helpful to know that commercially grown timber is grown for perfection. Urban wood, by contrast, has many scars. You might say urban wood has already had a life well-lived, as you can see from the cracks, holes from bugs, and scars from trimming.

Urban Timber's full-service wood shop in Chula Vista offers milling, kiln drying, and sterilizing (they also rent their facilities to the public). They believe that lumber needs to be milled promptly, but it also requires plenty of time to dry thoroughly. At Urban Timber, reclaimed wood is air dried for a year, and then additionally dried in a kiln for several weeks. This kills any bugs (Schimitscheck 2018).

The Urban Timber crew cut, clean, and make the wood whole by filling cracks with colored resin. This brings out the color in the wood, which also might be sanded and stained. Although Urban Timber works with a wide variety of wood (including olive trees and acacia), much of their wood is from the sugar gum eucalyptus.

Urban Timber works with residential customers as well as businesses. Restaurants like Karl Strauss, Juniper and Ivy, and Raglan Public House have customized Urban Timber furniture, bars, and counters. Urban Timber also offers its services to Friends of Balboa Park, where it helps take down dying or dead trees.



Urban Timber Transformation: Before and After



A Brief Tribute to the Eucalyptus Tree

Of all the woods they work with, Dan and Jenn love the eucalyptus tree. This got me thinking about the eucalyptus groves I see throughout San Diego, and wondering why they have a bad rap.

KQED writer Daniel Potter explained the eucalyptus conundrum in “Eucalyptus: How California’s Most Hated Tree Took Root” (2018). He explained that they are from Australia, and there are more than 700 different species. Here in California they are considered to be an invasive species.

Eucalyptus seeds arrived with the Gold Rush in the 1850s. Of the varieties that were imported here, the blue gum and red gum were most successful in reproducing on their own.

Potter cites California historian Jared Farmer, who explains the Gold Rush was the “era of wood power.” Wood was necessary for almost every aspect of California’s growth: buildings, energy, and transportation. Trees also served as wind breaks, and of course they beautified the landscape.

San Francisco nurseries made a good profit selling eucalyptus. They were hearty and survived well in the dry soil. They grew quickly, sometimes even 4-6 feet in a year.

Part of the reason they took off in California is their lack of “enemies,” according to Potter: “Because they were grown from seed, they hadn’t brought along any of the pests or pathogens or koalas they contend with back in Australia.”

But it didn’t take long to end the eucalyptus honeymoon. By the late 1800’s, Californians discovered that blue gum eucalyptus had notable drawbacks. It was a water hog, for one (draining wells). It made poor railroad ties, which cracked and split.

Yet Californians continued to plant eucalyptus, partly because they worried about possible timber famine on the east coast of the U.S. This resulted in thousands of eucalyptus groves (40,000 according to Potter). They shed bark and are a fire hazard.

But Dan and Jenn love them. As you’ll probably notice on your tour of Urban Timber.



Final Thoughts

It's inspiring to encounter a business that lives by its creed, creates beautiful objects, and serves and teaches the community about conservation.

Urban Timber sets the bar... or perhaps in this case I'll call it a high branch...

Works Cited

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