



# HOUSING RECLAIMED

Jessica Kellner Sustainable Homes for **Next to Nothing**





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Advance Praise for *Housing Reclaimed*

Jessica Kellner's book comes to us in the nick of time. We need a new, more enlightened approach to housing and this book provides the roadmap. *Housing Reclaimed* could put a whole generation on the path to comfortable, secure sustainability. Jessica has written a beautiful and necessary book that everyone who lives under a roof should read.

— Bryan Welch, Publisher, *Mother Earth News*  
*Natural Home & Garden* and the *Utne Reader*  
Author, *Beautiful & Abundant: Creating the World We Want*

In an environment of underwater mortgages, home foreclosures, and lack of adequate housing for many Americans, Jessica Kellner's *Housing Reclaimed* makes a compelling case that we can more easily realize the dream of homeownership if we utilize our hands, our imaginations, and the high-quality low-cost materials available from building deconstruction. Filled with many creative and innovative examples of warm, livable and affordable homes built from found materials, this book should be in the hands of anyone who wants to build his or her own home without getting trapped by the large debt associated with conventionally marketed and financed houses.

— Bob Falk, President, Building Materials Reuse Association  
Author, *Unbuilding: Salvaging the Architectural Treasures  
of Unwanted Houses*

In a time when so much of the news around housing is negative, Jessica Kellner offers an optimistic but practical approach to building a home — mortgage free! Jessica proves that, with a little creativity and a willingness to step outside the constructs of modern housing, anyone can build a dream house.

— Robyn Griggs Lawrence, Author, *Simply Imperfect: A Guide to  
Revisiting the Wabi-Sabi Home*

This unique book outlines an inspiring perspective on how we can make housing more sustainable and more affordable. Kellner provides compelling examples of how we can build our own elegant, debt-free homes, and she outlines approaches to make housing sustainable by creating salvage businesses, showcasing companies that recycle entire homes and non-profits that produce sustainable low-income housing.

— Cheryl Long, Editor-in-Chief, *Mother Earth News*

Jessica Kellner has managed to give us a glimpse of who we are as a species — clever, creative and resourceful. Perhaps we can take a hint and return to primal sensibilities and first strategies, and

discover who we really are. She even tells us where to go to do that. Magnificent!

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— Dan Phillips, Founder and owner, The Phoenix Commotion

In *Housing Reclaimed*, Jessica Kellner ventures into terrain that remains offlimits to most: the subculture of homes made from trash, reclaimed, discarded and recycled material. In exploring case studies of people who have crafted their homes out of society's cast-offs, Kellner challenges all of us to think outside the box of residential convention and to embrace new options. Anyone interested in saving a buck, in saving the planet and in creating a magical, healthful and one-of-a-kind home should reach for this beautifully crafted, engaging and timely book.

— Wanda Urbanska, Author, *The Heart of Simple Living*

*7 Paths to a Better Life*, Co-author, *Less is More*

*Embracing Simplicity for a Healthy Planet*

*a Caring Economy and Lasting Happiness*

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**Jessica Kellner**



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## Introduction

Our homes are the most intimate of spaces; the backdrops of our lives. The need and desire to create shelter for family and self is as ancient as human civilization itself.

For most of human history, we have created our homes with our hands, out of the materials available to us where we live. We've altered our homes as our families have changed. We've designed them for ourselves and our lives. We've formed communities around them.

Since the Industrial Revolution, our homes have become increasingly alienated from us, and we have alienated ourselves from them. As our professions have become more specialized and our lives more compartmentalized, mass production, increased access to credit and layers of bureaucracy have carried us farther and farther from the path of self-sufficiency. Today, our food is shipped from thousands of miles away, and our homes, especially our low-income ones, are quickly constructed, uniform boxes designed for everyone, not anyone in particular, using often-toxic, low-quality materials.

At the same time, the invention and standardization of the 30-year mortgage and our ever-increasing reliance on the credit system has come to mean that most of us never own our homes outright. In many cases, all we pay is interest to the bank, confident that ever-rising home values will eventually lead to a financial gain in the risky housing market. Rather than investments in one's family and future, houses have become financial investments, valuable not as a place but as a commodity.

The need for home prices to climb continuously has edged out many low-income families, who simply can't afford even the lowest-cost homes on the market. The need for home prices to climb continuously was also the underpinning of the subprime mortgage crisis of 2006 to 2008 — and proof that participation in the conventional home market is riskier than most homeowners believed. The value of housing, having become a stock market commodity, was allowed and encouraged by the free market to increase in value far beyond its worth in wood, concrete and nails. Irresponsible lending, greed, ignorance and government deregulation worked together to ruin the financial lives of millions of Americans and to cause millions of others to lose their homes.

And as home quality has gone down and home prices have gone up, our throwaway culture and the throwaway housing market have increased our waste to astronomical levels. We demolish more than 250,000 homes a year, according to the National Renewable Energy Laboratory.<sup>1</sup> Almost all of the building supplies in those homes are bulldozed, crushing everything inside and sending it to the landfill. We send more than 135 million tons of construction site debris to landfills every year, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.<sup>2</sup> Of that, half is demolition waste, and 40 percent is from renovation and remodeling. Meanwhile, every urban area in the nation, as well as many suburban and rural areas, has shortages of affordable housing. In 2010, the National Low Income Housing Coalition released a study<sup>3</sup> that showed that, from 2007 to 2008, growing demand and shrinking supply of affordable and available rental units for extremely low-income households led to an increase in the absolute shortage from 2.7 million to 3.1 million homes.

It's time we begin thinking differently about housing, in terms of what our shelters are and should

be made of, and of how we create and inhabit them. Housing isn't meant to be a one-size-fits-all, bigger-is-better proposition. Today, all over America and the world, individuals and groups are creating homes that don't fit the mold. Homeowners in Alabama, Idaho and Colorado are creating small, artful homes using salvaged materials, never taking out construction loans. In Texas and North Carolina, people are working together to reclaim building supplies and whole houses before they go to the landfill, using them to create new homes and neighborhoods for hardworking families. In Reno, a pair of designers, sick of seeing their inner city crumble, is revitalizing old buildings and blighted neighborhoods.

The individuals and homes featured in this book show the ways that regular people have extricated their homes and their communities from the standard model. Rather than designing their homes for the real estate market, these brave individuals designed their homes for their own lifestyle. They reject the "bigger is better" mantra. They reject "resell value." Their methods of simplicity, reuse and community-building engage our deepest connections and relationships with our homes. In place of mortgages, they invested time and love. Instead of connecting over a shared desire for three bedrooms and two-and-a-half baths, they connected over their shared desire for community. Rather than hosting housewarming parties, they hosted mudding parties.

In this book, I hope to show that building homes out of reclaimed materials is an idea that applies to a whole lot of people. You can do this if you are the type of person who wants to get involved and build your own home. Building your own home isn't crazy. It's something nearly every person used to do not so long ago. It's not impossible today, and it doesn't have to be intimidating, even in the city. The skills required to build a home are, for the most part, simple and easy to learn. It makes good financial sense to create homes that cost less, too. It makes even more sense to use all the quality building materials we currently send to the landfill simply because we haven't figured out a better destination for them. Programs featured in this book model the ways we can access used building supplies and unconventional building methods to provide low-cost housing and improve communities.

We face challenges today that have never existed in the past. Our growing world population means the need to provide low-cost housing will expand each year. Our serious environmental crisis means we must be vigilant about creating homes that run efficiently. But we also have many advantages. Technological advances, design evolution and resourceful, out-of-the-box thinking in terms of materials and efficiency can help prepare us to meet challenges never before faced.

With challenges comes the opportunity for great growth. Our history is one of great, almost unthinkable advances in times of need. Great revolutions in thinking and practice enable us to create new realities when it seems we've hit a dead end. Our recent economic crisis can light the fire to change the commoditization and depersonalization of our homes. It's clear to see our system needs change. By changing the way we conceive of and demand our homes, we could start to change the system.

We are not slaves to the machine of mass-market housing. The skills that enabled our great-grandparents to build their own homes are still buried within us. The desire to create safe, beautiful homes for ourselves and others is strong. And it is our human nature to work together and help one another better our lives. We have plenty of materials and many examples. In this book, I hope to inspire you with views of amazing homes, lists of resources, stories of intense human spirit and practical examples that prove we can take back our right to housing. We can make our homes places we value because of the lives lived within them, not places we value because of the mortgage that hangs over our heads. We can connect with our homes more deeply because we know how they were

built and where every building material came from. We can provide more for ourselves and our families because we own our homes, mortgage-free. We can use all the quality building materials available to us to build homes for our neighbors and our communities. And we can also use all those valuable supplies to reinvigorate urban centers and provide the very low-cost housing we need in increasing numbers. We can reclaim our right to housing.

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**HANDBUILT HOMES**

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CHAPTER 1  
**ALL IN THE FAMILY**

**An Alabama family comes together  
to hand-build a home and connect with  
each other and their region's history  
in the process.**

**I**N WEDOWEE, ALABAMA, Guy and Kay Baker live in a cozy cottage they built with their three sons using almost entirely salvaged materials collected from all over their county. Under the guidance of Guy, a lifelong professional builder, the family spent about five years on the project, lovingly and painstakingly building the intimate space using centuries-old materials. The family so loves their handbuilt home, initially planned as a vacation cottage, that they ended up moving in full-time, and every day Kay and Guy enjoy the personal connection they have with every detail of the 1,100-square-foot space.

In 2001, Guy was overwhelmed at work, and Kay was working on her bachelor's degree in psychology. The couple's three young sons were getting increasingly busy with school and personal lives. When Guy's mother unexpectedly fell ill and passed away, Guy became acutely aware of the sensation that life was passing him by. He felt driven to make good on a longtime dream of building a getaway in the woods for himself and his family.

Kay and Guy had owned the land on which they planned to build — formerly owned by Guy's grandfather — for years, but they'd never gotten around to starting the project. Eager to reconnect with his past and the things he values most in life, Guy was inspired to get moving on the project after his mother's death: "It was something I had always wanted to do, but I'd always put it off. Things just got in the way — work, school, the boys. We were just making excuses for never doing it. But my mother had gotten sick in 2001 and passed away, and I think that was the reason I went ahead and quit making excuses and just found the time to do it."

For Guy, his family was building more than a home; they were building a place for calm and family togetherness, a place to escape the hectic world. "The biggest reason for doing it was that my workload had gotten astronomical. I had no down time, and with the boys at the age they were, we just needed some peace and serenity," he says.





**The Bakers' 1,100- square-foot cabin is made with 85 percent reclaimed materials the family collected from all over Randolph County, Alabama.**

## ■ Building Reclaimed

Guy had long had a fascination with the array of antique building materials he saw while working on tear-down buildings in the area. He was impressed with the materials' good quality and durability, even after they had withstood the elements for hundreds of years. He saw the antiques he'd collected as heirlooms of a bygone era that valued craftsmanship over speed. "I was always and still am fascinated with older structures and older materials. It amazed me that I could work on houses that were 150 years old, and the damages to these homes were minute because of the materials and the quality of the studs and the lumber," he says. "A year later, you work on a home that's only 20 years old, and you saw all this termite and water damage."

For years, Guy had been collecting items — bits of the region's architectural history — gathered from projects in the area. Though he hadn't been sure at the time what he would do with them, he knew those great old things were too wonderful to throw away. When it came time to start construction on his family cabin, Guy realized he had probably collected nearly enough reclaimed materials to build the whole cabin. He knew the unique materials would give his home a one-of-a-kind feel. "You couldn't purchase the boards in this home nowadays," Guy says. "Even if you tried to duplicate it, you couldn't. They're all one-of-a-kind. Most of the boards were hand-hewn with a chop axe, and they were in excellent condition. That was fascinating to me: to be able to take something that had been out in the elements for hundreds of years and it was still good quality."



**Guy and Kay estimate they spent \$20 on the kitchen; hinges and doorknobs were the only things they paid for. Kay laid the wood-block countertops herself.**

” Having spent 20 years building in Randolph County, Guy had more than his collection of antiques to call upon when he started building his own home. He also had a vast knowledge of all the area’s best sources of reclaimed and antique building materials. “All these materials were readily available. They were everywhere,” he says. People in the area who were tearing down old structures often didn’t have another destination for them, so Guy took them off their hands. “Being in the construction industry, I saw it everywhere — say we were tearing down an old barn with great old wood. If you ask them if you can have it, nine out of ten people say, ‘Sure!’”

Guy’s collection of building supplies and his knowledge of how many additional resources were available in the area helped convince Guy and Kay to build the home in the first place. The free materials made building their home a low-cost endeavor. “After being in this business for years, I knew I could build what I wanted at a very minimal cost, and we did,” Guy says. He and Kay were determined to avoid taking on debt to build their dream home. Over time, finding free supplies became a game to Guy. “It came to the point that you didn’t want to spend anything,” he says. “Anytime you needed something, you knew it was out there, and you could find it. It almost became a challenge to not spend any money and be able to do this.”



**An old Indian grindstone the family found on the property serves as decor in the outdoor kitchen supply building.**

Guy searched far and wide to find the best materials to use in his home, then used creativity, artistic vision, and hard work to incorporate them into his home.

He used entirely antique window panes from an 1800s church his company worked to deconstruct. People said the church was the oldest in the county, and Guy spent hundreds of hours reframing the antique panes with reclaimed wood. He estimates creating new window frames from reclaimed wood and fitting the panes took him about 60 hours per window — and there are 12 windows in the house. He created a gigantic bathtub by lining a cattle trough with fiberglass. Guy estimates he spent \$20 on the kitchen — doorknobs and hinges were the only thing he paid for. The outdoor stone fireplace is made of stones collected on the property. Old road signs and American Indian grindstones found on the property act as decor.

Though safety required that some building materials such as plumbing and wiring be new, overall the project cost virtually nothing. “Other than the wiring and the plumbing and things like that, we didn’t spend any money,” Guy says. He was able to hunt down just about everything they needed from the many old buildings in their rural area. And though saving money was part of the motivation, the family was also keen on using reclaimed materials because they liked incorporating their region’s history into their dream home. “In this part of the country, farming was the main industry, so barns are everywhere. They’re dilapidated, but there’s a lot of good lumber in those things,” Guy says. “It was partially monetary and part just being fascinated with the idea that you could take something someone built 100 years ago, take it apart and create your own dream.”



**Building the home together brought the Baker family closer and instilled a huge sense of confidence and can-do spirit in the Baker sons. Left to right: Jeffery, Adam, Kay, Guy and Kyle.**

## ■ The Ultimate Family Project

As Guy collected materials (he says he used something from every town in Randolph County), the Baker family started spending their evenings and weekends building. From roofing and tiling to laying flooring, the family members took on every task. The boys, Jeffery, Kyle and Adam, who were 15, 14 and 12 when the project started, were assigned specific jobs, such as constructing the outdoor fireplace from rocks found all over the property.

Youngest son Adam says he touched every one of the thousands of rocks used in the outdoor fireplace foundation and dry creek beds three times — once when he found a stone, once when he moved it to the house and once when he laid it in its final destination. Kay tiled the kitchen floor and countertops with “tiles” made of barn wood Guy cut into small slices. She then coated each one with polyurethane for a shiny effect. “The wood was from barns and floors,” Kay says. “Guy took it and sliced it like a loaf of bread. They were different sizes. Then he told me how to pattern them and lay them out as tiles. We did that on the countertop and the floor. It’s a little crooked, but it’s still beautiful,” she says.

Guy and Kay viewed building their home as an important way to teach their sons the value of hard work and to show them what a huge feat they could accomplish working together as a family. Working hands-on together provided the family a way to connect outside the normal day-to-day grind, and it taught Kay and Guy’s sons the importance of dedication.

Though the teens may have grumbled at times as they made their way through the project, today all three Baker sons realize the invaluable lessons they learned from building the home, and they know their home is worth all the hard work. Jeffery and Kyle also gained a foundation for their careers through the project — both are professional builders working for Guy today. Middle son Kyle says that, though the project was challenging, he gained enthusiasm as the home came together: “At first, I hated it. That’s the last thing you want to do with all your free time when you’re 16 and 17 years old. But later on, all the pieces of the puzzle came together. When it got closer to the finished product, you saw how neat it was and you wanted to do more to it.” He remembers how the project empowered him and it’s still a source of pride: “I remember rocking the inside of the fireplace. I pretty much did that by myself. I’d never done anything by myself. I’d probably never been trusted to, but I did that. I’m proud of it.” Kyle says the project helped him determine that he wanted to be a professional builder, but also that he could do anything he set his mind to: “It showed me that I was able and capable of doing some of this stuff, and now I’m getting paid for it. It opens your mind to all the things you can actually do if you just get down and try it.”

Adam says working with his parents helped him develop a stronger, more mature relationship with them:

“There is a certain amount of time you have to spend with a person before you truly know them. Until you’ve seen your parents react to frustration in a very human way, you can’t say for sure what type of person they are.” Watching as their parents demonstrated grace under pressure showed the Baker sons the best way to react to difficult challenges, Adam says: “I had the opportunity to see how both of my parents deal with stress, and it built respect between us. They did not have to tell me to be moral or honest; they showed me by example. They did not throw a fit every time a rock refused to stay cemented to the wall. We saw what was happening and learned from it.”



**Collecting stones from all over the property and laying the outdoor fireplace with them were some of the Baker sons’ tasks.**

Along with the value of accomplishing goals, Adam admits the project also taught him the value of failure, and of perseverance: “If I succeed without making any mistakes, I fail to learn something new. What is an accomplishment if we’ve learned nothing from it?” And, though he learned a lot about his parents and brothers, working through the challenging project also helped Adam learn about himself: “Everyone has character flaws. My family loves me enough to point mine out. They’ve helped me become a better person by showing me things about myself I couldn’t see on my own.” Adam says he grew up while building the project from ages 12 to 17 and that it helped him navigate the sometimes difficult road to adulthood: “Every one of us changed while building that place, but we grew together.”



not apart. It was therapy to get our minds back on track after the pitfalls of everyday life. Building the house helped me cope with the death of my grandmother and two close friends. I became a man. I grew closer to my father. I got to know my brothers. I learned to appreciate my mother. She is my link to the past and what keeps me moving forward.” Adam also built the foundation of what he hopes is his future career — he’s applied to architecture school at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte.

Kay agrees that everyone in her family grew through their work on the project. Building the home helped her sons become the responsible, capable adults they are today, she feels: “This project just instilled something inside of them. All three of the boys have such a huge sense of independence, and it seems to have come from this project — working like they did, realizing they could make anything happen. It made us really close.” Guy sees the home as a testament to his family’s dedication: “I love that when my sons come in this house, it’s a reminder of what hard work and dedication can do. At the time, they weren’t crazy about doing it like I was. But now the boys can remember doing each task, and it becomes really personal. It’s more than a house, when you know that you or your children had your hands in the whole project.”

Kay loves how every part of the home has its own family memories — not just the memories of the times they’ve spent in it over the years, but of actually laying the bricks together. The entire family recalls fondly constructing the large fireplace that extends up through the family room and heats the entire home, a task that was hilariously wrought with difficulty. Kay remembers: “Oh, the fireplace, just laugh when I look at it and think about it. We built that on one of those days when it was freezing cold, and probably 10 degrees colder inside than outside. All the boys were here, and Guy was trying to get all the bricks up there. Our middle son was on the ladder, and he was mad because it was really difficult, and he was holding the mortar. Every time he’d try to put it up on the bricks, he’d sling some of it on my head. Of course, I’d get mad, but we all ended up laughing. It’s a fun memory.”

The project made the family so close that sometimes they didn’t have to talk at all, Adam says: “I remember days where no one said a word because we had had an argument, and the thing that broke the silence was what we had built that day. We were so close and knew each other so well that we could build anything together and speaking was an option. You don’t learn that much about someone just by having dinner together one night a week.”

## ■ Home Sweet Home

When their sons were young children, the Bakers lived in a number of homes. Guy was continuously buying and renovating homes, and the family would often relocate into his least finished project while he fixed it up. Living in a number of places, Kay says her sons never developed a strong sense of connection to a place until this home: “Of the 15 homes my sons have lived in in this world, this is probably the only place my sons really think of as home.” The home is more than a house to the Baker family. It’s an heirloom and a repository of family memories. “The idea’s been batted around about selling it,” Kay admits. “We’ll say, ‘If someone pulled up in this driveway and offered however much money, would we sell it?’ The boys look at us and just say, ‘No.’ This is the one place that means a lot to all of us. It’s something they can hold onto and have.”

Oldest son Jeffery confirms that, though they’ve lived in many houses, the little cabin will always be home to them: “I don’t think it would matter where any of us lived, that would always be home. We would always want to go back there for Christmases and all that.” All three sons realize their connection is so strong because they put so much work into it. Adam concurs: “My family’s house

feels so much like home to me because I had a hand in it. The average homeowner is two degrees away from their home. They work a job to earn money that pays for labor and material cost. Often they will help with the design of the house, but they will never know the feeling I got from clearing nails from old boards knowing they would be given life again. I worked on my family's home with my own hands. Money isn't what's needed when you do something like this — the main thing you spend is time with people you love.”



Though they've lived in many houses, the Baker family says this house is the only one that truly feels like home because they put so much love and effort into it.

### ■ Guy's Four Requirements for a Handbuilt Home

Guy says having patience is the top requirement of taking on a project like this: “I learned at a young age that patience is the key to anything. Patience and knowledge: If you have those two things you can pretty much do anything. The biggest key is realizing you're not going to do it overnight.”



Before starting the project, Guy accepted that it was going to take a long time, but that he would get through it by focusing on what he and his family had accomplished rather than what was still left to do. He says concentrating on achieving one small goal at a time helped keep the project manageable. Going slow also gave the family the opportunity to see their progress as they went along, and to really contemplate how they wanted to build every detail. Guy instilled the importance of patience in his sons, teaching them to enjoy the process as much as the finished product. Adam says: “I wanted to complete a task by doing everything at once. My father taught me to do things one at a time so I could visually see my accomplishments. Otherwise I would get frustrated and want to give up. Now, I have learned to enjoy using my hands and building something. It gives me time to think.”



**Guy built the bedframe out of reclaimed timbers, modelling it after an expensive one Kay saw in a magazine.**

Knowledge is the second requirement on Guy’s list, but he feels that anyone willing to investigate and learn could figure out nearly every skill needed to build a home. Even as a builder with 20 years of experience, he says sometimes he had to learn a new skill along the way: “We all get to the point where there’s something we don’t quite understand, and when we get to that point, what do we do? We ask questions or we get online until we find the answer, then we move forward. It would be the same thing for someone who didn’t have the knowledge or background. It would take them longer, but if that’s what they want to do, they can do it.”



**Guy made the bathtub by lining a cattle trough with fiberglass; the whole project cost \$90.**

Though Guy feels anyone could learn the skills to take on a project like this, that doesn't mean it didn't take a whole lot of his third requirement: hard work. In the depths of the project, Kay recalls wondering if the project would ever end: "I was overwhelmed like it would never be over. It was such a long process. It took Guy every minute he had. He would work all day and come to the cabin for two or three hours in the afternoon." She laughs, "From a wife's point of view, I didn't think it would ever end."

The family's biggest investment into the project was the time they put into it. "It's time-consuming. Anytime you go with recycled materials, and you're doing it on weekends and after hours, it becomes very time-consuming," Guy admits. Though using reclaimed building materials helped reduce the financial expense of the project, it increased the time investment of nearly every task. "It's not the simple task of calling the materials store and having stuff delivered," Guy says. "You're actually bringing the materials from somewhere else. With wood planks, you're denailing them and using them again. That becomes a task." But Guy feels it was important to him not to cut corners on the place he planned to live in for the rest of his life. He knew if he did, he'd always look at the rushed job and wonder "why didn't I just spend the extra 50 hours to make that right?" The family says all the added effort required to prepare the reclaimed materials was worth it for the one-of-a-kind home it created. "Whether you have experience or no experience, if you do something like this, it's one of a kind," Guy says. "Even I could not duplicate this cabin we live in because the materials were all unique. It's a one-of-a-kind thing."

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