

Second coming

Selling surplus and used construction materials, not-for-profit Build It Green! is a salvage house with soul

By **Kate Williams** Photographs by **Patrik Rytikangas**

Each day, New York City generates 32,000 tons of construction-demolition waste, the result of everything from Park Slope kitchen renovations to the razing of midtown high-rises. Of this staggering amount, 13,000 tons are salvageable—including such items as wood floors, doors, windows and sinks. Aiming to repurpose these materials is Habitat ReStore—Build It Green!, a joint venture of Habitat for Humanity New York City and the Community Environmental Center, which works to incorporate sustainable elements into low-income housing developments.

Located in a 17,500-square-foot warehouse in Astoria, Queens, Build It Green! (BIG) is a not-for-profit retail outlet that sells surplus and used building materials, most of which have been donated by contractors or salvaged directly from demolition sites. While architectural-surplus stores with secondhand prices and an environmental bent have long been a staple in other cities, they've been hard to come by in New York, where high rents discourage businesses from leasing the necessary amount of space and a lack of recycling regulations for the construction industry often means that usable goods get tossed out with the trash.

"We try to skim off everything we possibly can that could be reused," says Robert Politzer, president of Greenstreet Construction & Consulting, a design and building company in Manhattan. "Before BIG, a lot of the material that we salvaged ended up in the landfill anyway because there was no place else to take it."

BIG got off the ground when the Durst Organization, the Manhattan developer that built 4 Times Square—a premier green building—hired the CEC to do salvage on one of its demolition sites and provided the

group with the money and materials to move forward with a store. Since its opening in March, BIG has salvaged more than 80 tons of reusable materials, says Justin Green, the organization's program director.

"People who come here may be interested in green building," he says, referring to the movement to increase energy efficiency, create nontoxic environments, and use sustainable or renewable materials. "But most of our customers come because we have cheaper stuff." Much of the warehouse's used stock comes from housing on the Upper West Side, Brooklyn Heights and Park Slope, and includes items such as lighting fixtures (from \$5), rolls of wallpaper (\$5), wall-mounted bathroom sinks (\$30), antique double-paneled doors (\$80 each), Benjamin Moore and Glidden paint (\$5 a gallon), eight-foot-long pieces of trim (\$1), and surplus Andersen patio doors (\$325) and windows (from \$129).

"BIG is one of those places that are good for everybody," says Pamela Lippe, an environmental consultant for the Durst Organization. "Obviously, we're trying to keep things out of the landfill, but New York is such an expensive place to live that there will always be a demand for less-expensive building materials."

Nicolas Locke, an independent contractor based in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, scored a stash of recycled mahogany and recently finished a storefront he crafted almost entirely out of materials from BIG. "You know, it takes vision and a little more work to see all the possibility in these materials," he says. "But you'll often end up with something that's cheaper and far superior to anything you'd get at Home Depot."

3-17 26th Ave at 4th St, Astoria, Queens (718-777-0132, www.bignyc.org)

