

HOMIE

reclaimed

Written by JOE NICKELL

Photographed by TOM BAUER



Karen Slobod was drawn to Montana by “The Pink Panther.” But when she set about remodeling her new home last summer, the motivating hue was green.

“Even before I found this house, I already knew that my goal was to use as many recycled materials in a remodel as possible,” said Slobod,

a California native and freelance graphic designer who has called Missoula home for seven years. “It was about saving money, but it was also about being ecologically mindful – as well as being creative.”

As she spoke, Slobod stood in the vaulting, airy main room of her finished project, a 2,100-square-foot chalet-style house that overlooks the Rattlesnake Valley north of Missoula. Beneath her stocking feet lay parallel planks of pinkish, wide-grained fir. Along the massive, south-facing glass wall that looks out over the valley, a neat row of white, shutter-style doors provides privacy and insulation. In the middle of the room sits a long, rough-hewn dining room table.

Each element has a backstory. The flooring was milled especially for the project by Heritage Timber of Potomac, using beams salvaged from the old mill in Bonner. The shutters came from the Home Resource, the Missoula reclaimed building materials store. The table was constructed out of wood found in the house when Slobod purchased it. She even outfitted the table with matching chairs, purchased from the University of Montana’s Facilities Services surplus sale.

A guided tour through Slobod’s house feels almost like a highlight reel for local green building businesses and second-hand stores. A large wooden island, built from the same wood as the floors, separates the great room from the kitchen sink – itself another score from Home Resource. A large slab of granite frames the stove.

“It made me feel really good to find that at Home Resource,” said Slobod of the granite, “because I didn’t want to be a part of mining anything in the process of this remodel.”

Nearby, a custom-built window seat and storage unit, again made from the same reclaimed wood, frames a breakfast nook.

The theme runs throughout the house: new windows in most of the five bedrooms, tile in the bathrooms, a beautiful glass French door that leads to a patio, a hammock made of old garden hoses, door knobs, wallpaper, insulation, faucets, carpet padding – the list of reclaimed and reused materials in Slobod’s house goes on.

The result is a home that blends quirky touches with sleek, modern design principles, all folded under the high, steep-pitched roof of a classic A-frame chalet. In that sense, it’s an apt reflection of Slobod’s own aesthetic, which she said was a big part of what brought her to Montana in the first place.



A custom seat with shelves made from reclaimed wood frames the windows of Karen Slobod’s Missoula home. Slobod has remodeled the 1960s-era house using as many reclaimed and recycled materials as possible.



“Finding the right materials required creativity as much as it required good checklists and persistence.”

A table made from reclaimed wood is one of several furniture pieces in Slobod's home using recycled materials.

The bathroom in Slobod's basement, which she previously considered “a scary dungeon,” was renovated with recycled tile and other materials.



“**P**retty much the reason I moved to Montana was that I was heavily influenced by the aesthetic of (‘The Return of the Pink Panther’), the one where they’re in the Alps and there’s Henry Mancini music playing in the background,” said Slobod. “So when I saw this house, what interested me was that I could turn this into a whimsical Swiss ski lodge.”

But when she saw the house, she also knew it would take a lot of work. Built in 1968, the house hadn’t been updated significantly, until Slobod came along.

After living in an apartment for her first years in Missoula, Slobod was looking for a house that could benefit from some sweat equity. When she started actively looking for a home to buy in the autumn of 2009, the house on Carriage Way was one of the first that she toured.

“I was looking for a house with some character that I could fix up because of my design background and fix-it background,” said Slobod. “I was looking with the idea that I would use recycled materials and patronize the green businesses in town. So when I saw this place, it seemed like it had a lot of potential, but it also had a lot of challenges that needed attention.”

The required work ranged from replacing the ancient and worn carpets, to knocking out walls, to transforming the basement from “a scary dungeon” to a livable space with two bedrooms and a full bathroom.

But after looking at several other properties over the course of months, Slobod ultimately decided to make an offer on the house. She closed on the purchase in late June, and quickly set out to find all the materials and contractors necessary to transform the space.

“I borrowed my friend’s truck for a month, and started going to Home Resource every day looking for things I knew I needed,” said Slobod, who served as her own general contractor for the renovation.

Finding the right materials required creativity as much as it required good checklists and persistence.

“You’re not sure what you’re going to get at Home Resource, so you have to be looking for certain things and keeping your eyes open and having an open mind,” said Slobod. “Things are sometimes not totally clean and you have to clean them. They’re generally well-organized; but everything’s original and unique, it’s not like there’s a slew of the same-size windows of the same brand sitting next to each other.”

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Karen Slobod sits in the living room with wood flooring that was salvaged from the Stimson Lumber Co. mill in Bonner. She's holding a piece of the old St. Joseph School gym floor that will be used for a kitchen island

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Working with builder Bob Garrity, structural engineer Jennifer Anthony, and deconstruction specialists Martin Farney and Tony Montgomery, Slobod opened up the main floor of the house, fitted out the basement, and updated all of the rooms to a style that's at once rustic and modern.

"This is a mid-century modern house, but a lot of it didn't reflect that style," said Slobod, pointing in particular to the main-floor bathroom, which she described as originally following an aesthetic that was "on the Vegas-y side."

Slobod now finds herself the proud owner of a five-bedroom, three-bath house that befits not only her ecological intent, but also her aim to create an open, inviting space for social gatherings.

And despite the fact that it was all achieved through custom work, Slobod said the price of the remodel was quite reasonable, in no small part due to the low cost of using reclaimed materials.

As an example of how she shaved costs off the remodel, she points to the wood-framed French doors that now bathe the north-east bedroom in natural light.

"Those cost \$175 from Home Resource," she said. "If I'd bought them new, they would have cost over \$1,000; and yet they look brand new."

"The thing people should consider when using recycled materials is, you're getting into custom work – and custom costs money," she added. "So I saved money using recycled materials,

but the labor was more expensive than it might have been otherwise. So the thing to do is to get a bid before you start, to make sure that you're not getting into something where the work to install it doesn't outweigh the benefits."

Fortunately, Slobod said that it wasn't hard to find contractors who bought into her vision for the house.

"In the last few years I've traveled a lot," she said. "I was surprised to find that Missoula had more folks enthusiastically involved in the widest range of sustainable practices of any of the places I've been. Maybe it comes naturally to people here because the pioneer skills for self-sufficiency are still in use. ... There's a lot of positive, energetic activity in this community."

By using reclaimed materials and hiring contractors who shared her vision and ethics, Slobod said she ultimately managed to shave thousands of dollars off what she would have paid for the remodel, had it all been done with new materials.

"If you're trying to save money and also trying to be ecological, you couldn't do better," she said. "And I feel like I ended up with exactly what I wanted." ■■■

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12 - "All You Need is Love." Imagine performs Beatle music at the Bigfork Center for the Performing Arts on Electric Avenue, 8pm
26 - 2nd Annual Bigfork Brewfest, Electric Avenue, call for details
- March** 5 - PUTT-PUTT Bigfork, 2:00pm, Garden Bar
18 - Annual Bigfork Rotary Chili Feed - 5pm
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7 - Spring Art Walk

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