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Features

Recycled building

Artist crafts salvaged wood into furniture

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By PAT O'BRIEN
The Press-Enterprise

Under a hot December sun, Jason Middlebrook mopped sweat from his brow with his T-shirt as he chalked out the letters L-i-v-e B-u-i-l-d-i-n-g on the side of a concrete-covered brick structure.

Cutting through the concrete was going to be harder than envisioned to get the desired effect of the words popping out at passersby.

A mix of performance art, visual art and ecology, "Live Building: The Recycling and Demolition of the Wurms Building," is under way on the Main Street pedestrian mall in downtown Riverside.



Stan Lim / The Press Enterprise
Artist Jason Middlebrook draws the letters that will be cut out of the side of the "Live Building" project in downtown Riverside.

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Middlebrook is a New York-based artist who was listed as one of "Ten Artists on the Brink of Stardom" by Business Week three years ago.



Middlebrook was named one of "Ten Artists on the Brink of Stardom."

His works often explore relationships between nature and humans. He created large works for the Whitney Museum in New York and for the Wellcome Trust in London. His "Strata Garden 2000" was a painted wall of Styrofoam and wood that resembled layers of earth that ran 53 feet along Park Avenue in New York. His London piece was 370 feet long and was inspired by the human genome.

He was chosen when UC Riverside was looking for an artist who could make a statement, an impression, reflective of the future of UCR/ARTSblock, the new name for an area on the Main Street pedestrian mall that houses the UCR/California Museum of Photography, Sweeney Art Gallery and the future Barbara and Art Culver Center for the Arts.

"The notion of the Culver Center was to bring interesting, provocative, challenging arts, performance, theater, music to Riverside," said Jonathan Green, director of UCR/CMP. "Rather than just bulldoze the building, we're using this an opportunity to show that artists can be involved in a range of projects, not just hangings on the wall."

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Middlebrook stains a piece of wood taken from the inside of the building.

Middlebrook is dismantling the small building that housed a janitorial supply company. It is wall to wall with the 1895 Rouse Building that will become the Culver Center. Once the Wurms building is gone, renovation of the Culver Center can begin.

Middlebrook is gutting the building of reusable material, which he is transforming into furniture. Every day through Saturday, Middlebrook and his team will be at work and passersby will see objects displayed as they are fashioned of Douglas fir and redwood planks removed from the building.

One of the objectives is to reduce the amount of trash going to the landfill and turn the material into useful objects.

"It's more environmentally friendly to make things out of it, rather than destroy it," Middlebrook said.

He is making benches that could be used in parks or sold for charitable causes.

"We're going to try to make some really beautiful benches that can be circulated in the community," he said.

At 7:30 p.m. Saturday, the furniture will be exhibited and, in a grand finale, a bulldozer will begin to crush what is left of the building. Middlebrook received a master's degree in fine arts from the San Francisco Art Institute and has exhibited throughout North America and Europe, including the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York and the Addison Gallery of American Art.

UCR/ARTSblock is a collaborative endeavor between UC Riverside and the city. The Live Building project and some previous UCR/ARTSblock activities, including a poetry rap event and a neon installation, are supported by a \$10,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts -- with a matching grant from the university -- geared at putting arts into community settings.