



From Ming to the Patio

By Guy Trebay

If you are one of those people who can see poetry in stone, then the story of Richard Rhodes may need no explanation. Since 1984 he has traveled the world in search of stones for use in the construction of houses. The stones that Mr. Rhodes, a principal of Rhodes Architectural Stone, a Seattle salvage firm, sought out were often to be found in quarries. Six years ago, though, Mr. Rhodes was in China hunting down a specific type of granite to use in building a house for Larry Ellison, the chief executive of Oracle.

The term house may be a bit misleading; Mr. Ellison wanted to recreate a 15th-century Japanese temple complex in the hills south of San Francisco. And the stone Mr. Rhodes was looking for was a granite of a color that complemented the tawny Bay Area light. While in China, Mr. Rhodes happened on a material that, as it turned out, he considered more precious. This occurred during a side trip to the famous gorge of the Yangtze River, an evanescent landscape celebrated in art and poetry and soon to be inundated by the waters of a \$25 billion hydroelectric project called the Three Gorges Dam. The dam would drown monuments and temples and villages where Chinese culture had evolved uninterrupted for millennia.

BUILDING BLOCKS Richard Rhodes buys ancient Chinese stones, including dismantled walls from the Yangtze River valley, salvaged before they were inundated by the Three Gorges Dam. "Everyone knew about the ecological impact and about all the historic stuff like temples being inundated," Mr. Rhodes said. What Mr. Rhodes had not fully realized before his visit was that there was another kind of wealth in the valley, in the form of old stones from the nearly 1,600 condemned villages.

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“Most people go to see the gorge,” Mr. Rhodes said last week by telephone from his headquarters in Seattle. “But the truth is, I’m really interested in epic construction.”

The construction Mr. Rhodes referred to was the dam first extolled by Mao Zedong, plotted for decades by Chinese leaders, bitterly debated on cultural and ecological grounds and, by the time he saw it, being brought to completion by an army of 10,000 laborers wielding shovels and picks. A great deal has been written about the effort to hem the wild and erratic waters of the Yangtze and to feed its force into turbines that would spin out hydroelectric power and drive China even faster toward its future. A lot has been written, too, about the 700,000 people displaced by the project, and about the heritage lost as the waters of the dam, which was filled to its interim level of 443 feet above the sea on June 15, closed over the valley.

All along the river Mr. Rhodes found condemned dwellings, disused staircases, outbuildings, paving stones, battlements that dated to the centuries when the Yangtze was the source of China’s trade and life.

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“We negotiated for two years,” said Mr. Rhodes, who began the recovery project with a \$100,000 grubstake and a speculative plan to harvest old rocks and then warehouse them in China, to

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be sawed and milled in the United States as orders arrived. There were materials from 11 villages in all, little of it considered by preservationists to be of cultural consequence. The only stones under official protection are those, like carvings, that are considered to have artistic value. Besides, he said, local bureaucrats were too pressed by the problems of resettlement to concern themselves with material they considered scrap.

“These were not temples,” Mr. Rhodes said. “Sometimes people were paid for material they didn’t know had any value.” The stones themselves were in the form of paving, house veneers, sills and lintels; beautiful, bisque-colored, streaked with iron and magnesium and occasionally traced with the fossil remains of sea creatures.

As Mr. Rhodes pointed out, geological origins are only part of the history of an old stone. He is, he said, in “the story business as much as the stone business.” The stones he sells in bulk are not in any sense the Elgin marbles; all the same, they carry the freight of romantic association as any souvenir.

The functional poetry of stone may be composed of its physical properties, but there is also something narrative about certain hunks of mineral, if one chooses to see it. If for most people a diamond is a chip of hardened carbon with a really good back-story, for others a slab of dolomitic limestone is no less seductive.

“This felt like a rare opportunity to use material that had been walked on and worn and lived in for thousands of years,” said Steven Steinman, a former Nasdaq trader who is deeply invested in Yangtze River stone.

Having taken early retirement from a brokerage firm, the Knight Trading Group, that was for a time one of the largest traders of technology stocks on Wall Street, Mr. Steinman decided to build a family compound on 47 acres that he and his wife, Diana, had acquired in Greenwich, Conn. The entire facade of a baronial 37,000-square-foot manor house, designed in a style reminiscent of the British imperial architect Sir Edwin Lutyens, is to be built of Yangtze River stone.

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So, for that matter, are the terraces, the garden hard-scape, the chimneys, the outbuildings, the motor court and the roadway leading through an allée of mature Norway maples. By Mr. Rhodes's estimate, each container shipped from China holds 20 tons of stone. The Steinman house, Mr. Rhodes said, "is a 200-container job."

The financial scale of the job is, if anything, more daunting: the cost of rock veneer recovered from the Yangtze River valley is \$35 a square foot on average. A square foot of antique pavement costs \$44. "The rule of thumb is that recovered stone is three times the price" of standard quarry products, said Mr. Rhodes, who formed his company in 1984 to specialize in supplying construction materials for what he terms "multiyear residential projects." For Mr. Steinman, the cost of the stone accounts for 15 percent of the overall budget for his multimillion-dollar house.

The clients behind Mr. Rhodes's projects have tended to be people whose fancies are as outsized as those of any 19th-century plutocrat: Mr. Ellison with his Japanese temple; a man described by Mr. Rhodes as a coffee executive who constructed a vast mansion styled as an Irish "cottage"; a vintner whose estate in Napa, Calif., is paved with bisque-colored Chinese stone. Exotic as the materials these people bought from Mr. Rhodes may be, there is ultimately something deeply American in adding a veneer to new money with ancient stones. The Yangtze River rock, Mr. Steinman said, "is an expensive material, and there was some anxiety about buying a material from a vendor that is far away." But Mr. Steinman's initial concerns were offset, he said, by the "sheer beauty" of the Chinese stone, which is similar in composition to the fabled stone from Bath, England, and equally by its provenance. "The narrative was very appealing," he said.

"We're building a home for our family to live in and for our children hopefully to have one day," Mr. Steinman added, "and there was something irresistible in using these rocks that have been walked on and worn and lived in for thousands of years."

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