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XXXXXXXXXXXX and drooping prices haven't diminished homeowner optimism about their own nest egg's value. A survey by the Bost Consulting Group showed 55 percent of Americans believe they could sell their house for more money now than a year ago.



Home

communities • design

S.D. HOUSING FACT: XXXXXX

XXXXXXXXXXXX is great, but it will cost you: The price per square foot for homes in prime locations can reach \$2,700. Even in inland blocks, it can set you back a hefty \$500-\$600 per square foot according to realtor David R. Indermill, who has been selling beach real estate for the last nine years.



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THE SAN DIEGO
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FRONT PORCH

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ALMANAC

What's new in home and garden, crafts and classes. **H10**

Smokestacks & Geraniums

ROGER SHOWLEY



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IF THESE ROCKS COULD TALK

As the summer Olympic Games unfold in China, 100 tons of Chinese history are coming together at a home remodel in Point Loma.

Workers at the home once owned by former Mayor Maureen O'Connor have installed limestone blocks once used as paving stones in medieval Chinese villages overlooking the Yangtze River.

Countertops, cabinets and fireplaces are faced with stone, polished or rough cut. And other elements of the house, located on the water around the corner from the San Diego Yacht Club, incorporate imported Chinese stone, both old and new, for baseboards, outdoor trim pieces, the wine cellar and a fire pit.

Project architect John Dodge said the house's owners, who wanted a wide range of textures in the house, were fascinated by the history of the stones they will live with when they move in this fall.

"They were just really touched by the history of it and the fact that they are making good out of something that just would otherwise be thrown away," Dodge said.

The two-story, 6,850-square-foot house was gutted before being lifted into the air to make room for a new 2,300-square-foot basement. Many materials from around the world went into the seven-figure remodel.

But it's the Chinese stone that is most fascinating, both

Stone from ancient Chinese villages recycled in Point Loma

in where it came from and how it got here.

This is the ultimate in recycling. Stones that were quarried, cut and installed in some village 1,000 years ago have been salvaged rather than discarded and then shipped to California to take on a new life.

The finished material, which takes about 15 weeks to cut and ship from China, costs between \$11 and \$80 per square foot, compared with \$10-\$15 for material bought at home improvement stores, Dodge said.

But this is also the ultimate in high-touch home improvement, whether it's the jagged edges of stones hewn by hand by factory workers using low-tech hammers and chisels or the highly polished surfaces that expose million-year-old fossils embedded in the rock. The colors dazzle and mesmerize — dark grays, tawny browns, yellow, ochre, red and black.

Think about the "sermons in stone," as Shakespeare put it, that these rocks, weighing in at 174 pounds or more per cubic foot, could tell: waves of invaders, famines and floods, adornment of temples, painters capturing the once-breathtaking scenery along this stretch of a storied waterway.

All these imaginative musings are possible because Richard Rhodes, a once-aspiring actor, apprenticed to a stonemason in Siena, Italy, and changed careers.

"I found out it was a lot more satisfying to be working on stone than to think about theater," said Rhodes, 47. "Stone is so interesting."

He eventually formed Rhodes Architectural Stone Co. in Seattle and began scouting for interesting stone sources around the world. He now draws on the output of 12 factories in China, India, Indonesia and North Africa.

In 1997, Rhodes happened to take a side trip up the Yangtze, site of the \$30 billion Three Gorges Dam project, and saw villages, some dating back 3,500 years, abandoned by residents forced to relocate in advance of the dam's rising waters. He saw battlements, castles, fortifications and everyday homes and pathways whose stonework was destined to be submerged and lost forever.

SEE Stone, HXX

► STONE

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Some villages date back 3,500 years

"I was captivated by the beauty of these ancient villages," he said, adding, "I started on a quest to see how I could purchase these structures that would be lost."

After two years, he struck a bargain with the Chinese army and local officials to pay a nominal fee to acquire stone from 17 villages, whose populations once ranged from 200 to 3,000 persons. (About 1,600 villages and towns have been vacated as part of the dam project.) Rhodes said he would have bought more had he had the capital to do so.

"It has a special patina, ancient wear-and-tear patterns, where people walked for centuries," he said. "Sometimes there are groove marks where carts have gone along narrow passages of roads."

The families typically received the equivalent of \$200 in relocation costs, if anything, from local officials, Rhodes said. "They really weren't compensated for where they lived."

But he tried to make up for that by hiring villagers to dismantle their homes, roads and other structures and load the stone pieces onto barges for shipment down river to a factory Rhodes set up.

"The real expense was not the cost of the villages but years of negotiations and 40 trips and demolition," Rhodes said, estimating his expenses at about \$2 million for about a decade's worth of material.

Salvaging lasted from 1999 to 2006 and consisted mainly of antique limestone and granite. Other quarries are being mined for additional material for his business.

"To them it was a huge boon, and in the end it's a win for the world," he said. "I think this stone is a part of the world's



Richard Rhodes, who learned stone masonry in Italy, imports Chinese village stones for construction projects.
Rhodes Architectural Stone

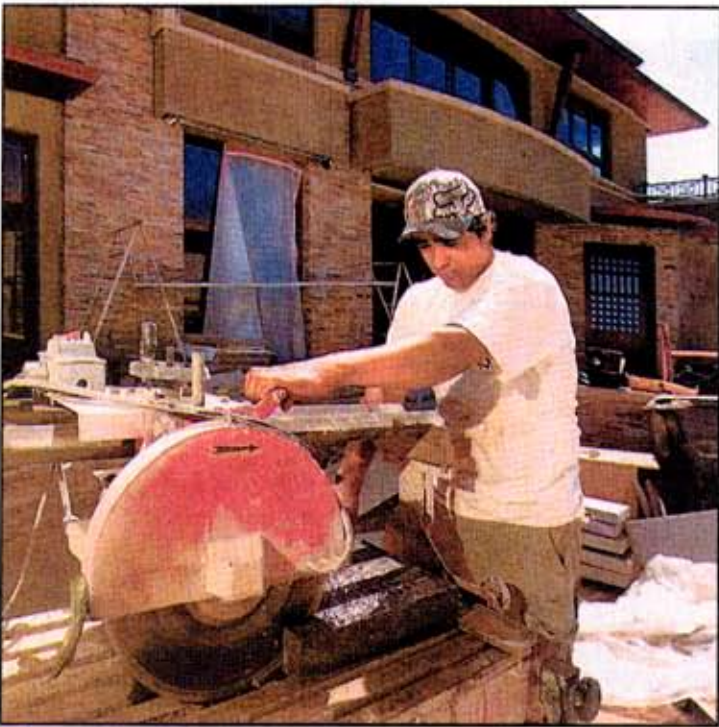
patrimony. To have it recycled and go into new projects in the U.S. is a win, and it's creating work."

Rhodes said he was mindful throughout the process that as many as 5 million Chinese are being uprooted over several decades to make way for "progress" in the form of hydroelectric power that is expected to generate less than 3 percent of China's needs. Critics have also decried the loss of some 1,300 archaeological sites, environmental damage to native habitat and long-term impacts on downstream cities, like Shanghai, deprived of siltation trapped behind the dam.

"What was most meaningful in the end," Rhodes said, "was being able to save material but also creating four to six months of real employment for these communities," he said.

"Suddenly we came in and paid them real wages for a prolonged period. They were able to build new homes with the money. In a funny way, we went there for stone but ended up getting involved in the whole economic possibility of it. It really did turn out to be a win-win for everyone."

But he acknowledged that



In the front yard of a Point Loma residence, Javer Vazquez Jr. trimmed one of the ancient stones imported from China.
Howard Lipin / Union-Tribune

most Chinese thought his recycling scheme was crazy.

"The Chinese absolutely cannot comprehend why anyone would want this old, tired stone," he said.

Bob Johnson, superintendent for Sharatt Construction Co., said after receiving about 100 pallets of Chinese stone and putting the pieces together like a jigsaw puzzle he was surprised there were so few mistakes from designer to factory

to shipper to building site. "It was simply amazing."

Smokestacks and Geraniums is a monthly look at growth and development issues as they relate to historic trends in San Diego. The name is derived from a 1917 San Diego mayoral campaign pitting quick-fix forces against advocates of long-term planning.

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After stones were salvaged from villages along the Yangtze River, workers transported them on river barges to factories for cutting and finishing. *Rhodes Architectural Stone*