

# The Velvet Crowbar

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### How to Identify a Competent Deconstruction Contractor

By Ted Reiff

I receive several calls a week from building owners who want information on a variety of topics related to deconstruction and its benefits. Mostly, they ask which contractors are qualified to do deconstruction.

While I know of contractors in the cities where TRP has regional associates, I'm at a loss to help owners in other areas. To help, I've decided to provide a list of criteria for selecting deconstruction contractors, in the hope that having a basic profile will allow building owners to vet their own.

I think it best to start with the goal, or objective. In deconstruction, the goal is to end up with a group of salvaged materials that can be made immediately available for reuse. Whether the owner is motivated by a desire to reuse some of the materials in the new project, or by the tax benefits of donating to a qualified nonprofit organization, or simply by knowing it's the right thing to do, all salvaged materials need to be in reusable condition, otherwise the process and expense of deconstruction is for naught.

Having worked with numerous general contractors, builders and remodelers over the past 28 years, I've learned that, if a contractor is competent with all manner of tools and equipment, I don't need to tell them how to deconstruct anything. However, what must be made perfectly clear is how the materials must look and perform *after* they are salvaged. Each contractor has their own way of doing things. My job, or the owner's job, is to insist on how and in what condition the materials must be when made available to the next user.

How can you ensure that a contractor is both willing and able to achieve this goal? By applying the following criteria to your search.

- Is the contractor properly licensed and competent in accordance with city/state requirements?
- How many deconstruction projects has the contractor completed in the past year?
- Insist that the contractor show you certificates of insurance for general liability, vehicles, and workers compensation, with at least \$1 million coverage on each.
- Insist on receiving at least three references from recent deconstruction customers.
- Find out where and how the materials will be distributed.

An aside: If drivers' licensing were based on true competency, there would far fewer automobile collisions and deaths.

Often, a demolition contractor will assure you of their ability to do deconstruction. Be very skeptical of this claim. In my experience, while most demolition contractors know how to demolish a building, they know very little about deconstruction techniques. Contrary to popular belief, deconstruction is *not* simply a subset of demolition—or of recycling. It requires completely different skills and knowledge in every respect except one: At the end of the process, the building, or parts of the building, will be gone from the site.

In recycling, the form (and often the function) of an object is going to change. It will be broken apart or ground up—in some way reprocessed. In reuse, the object does not change. So, to ensure that all materials are handled for reuse, not recycling, tell the selected contractor what condition you expect the materials to be in when the job is completed.

Here are three examples:

Kitchen cabinets: Ensure all doors and drawers are intact and in place, all exposed nail and screw points are removed, and each cabinet is shrink-wrapped prior to transport.

Light fixtures: Must be wrapped for protection and placed in individual cardboard boxes.

Doors: Each must be treated as a pre-hung door with the strike-plate side of the jamb screwed into the edge of the door between the door knob and the bottom of the door.

These are merely examples, possibly enough for a kitchen remodel. Extensive projects require a far more extensive list, which I am happy to provide. Just send me an email request. [TedReiff@TheReUsePeople.org](mailto:TedReiff@TheReUsePeople.org) Questions are welcome too.

Here's to good vetting!