



Jim Salata

Garden City Construction

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Jim Salata shares a common motivation with the paleontologists of an excavation site—he’s compelled by a constant itch to answer the question “What’s underneath?” But instead of unearthing dinosaur fossils, Salata unveils old architectural features. As he walks the streets of downtown and its surrounding neighborhoods, his brain is continually peeling away plaster and stripping back panels to imagine the hidden gems boarded up by brash contractors long ago.

“When you see the siding on some of these Victorians, it’s real tight where the window is,” Salata notes. “You know the original stuff’s underneath there.” He puts that perceptive gaze to good use as the president of Garden City Construction, a company with an emphasis on the preservation and restoration of historic buildings.

In his younger years, Salata spent time as a laborer—tearing off old roofing and carrying buckets of hot tar up ladders before working his way up to concrete cutting and demolition. His lightbulb moment came while demolishing plaster off a property on San Fernando Street. After stripping away unwanted layers, Salata discovered an old tin sign announcing the building’s past life as State and Savings Bank. Like a name tag, it felt a little like an introduction.

After more plaster removal, he exposed an old-fashioned light fixture. “It came down to a little point. I [tapped] it with a sledge hammer. And this old light bulb,” he pauses to snap his fingers for emphasis, “turns on!”

After that, Salata wondered what other age-old remnants were waiting to be brought back into the light. He shakes his head as he explains how many historic buildings fell casualty to modernization. “It was the inner-city revitalization of the ’50s to the ’70s, of just wiping things out and making it plain. They didn’t understand the value,” he says. “‘It’s old so we’ve got to get rid of it.’ ”

Historic property restoration is a niche market. It’s no easy task, and most contractors don’t have the stubborn patience required to do it well. “It’s hard,” Salata confirms. “It’s dirty at times. It’s very cerebral.” He also notes it requires creative problem solving and an out-of-the-box mindset. “This is not normal thinking. You have to be a little twisted like myself to figure this out,” he chuckles.

You might call Salata an architectural sleuth of sorts—it’s his profession to uncover the clues of a building’s past. By searching under floorboards for broken shards of tile and around crawl spaces for discarded slabs of terracotta and hunting down old photographs, maps, and city directories, he gradually pieces together the bigger picture. “I always say that every building has its own personality,” he elaborates, “and you’ve got to figure it out and bring it back.”

Garden City Construction—along with its subdivision Buccaneer Demolition—also emphasizes adaptive reuse of old structures. To illustrate, Salata says that two years after salvaging masonry from a century-old fireplace, he repurposed

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the old materials, replacing missing bricks in planters at the Del Monte district manager's office. The color and texture were a perfect match.

"I try to plug all these things into my head and where they're at, and memorize it all so that somehow, down the road, I can connect that dot." His brain is always processing where he's seen something before. "I might wake up and say 'I know where that piece of wood is,' " he laughs. "You keep working, working, and then everything clicks in."

As a second example, he points to Studio 724, his private event venue. "There was a whole bunch of rot in [the rafters]...but you can't see where we replaced it." It took him a number of tries to match that lumber perfectly—he almost gave up. But finally, he recalled wood beams from a demolition job at an old Santa Clara plant. "You have to want to get it right and not just throw in the towel. Once in a while, you have to really grit your teeth to make it work."

Salata's studio, stocked with his construction and demolition finds, is a prized creation for the contractor. His hands move as he speaks of the space and its reclaimed décor, of its salvaged doors and tables, of its antique safes, of its entire wall of '60s and '70s production art found abandoned in an Oakland warehouse. The movement illuminates his gold wedding band engraved with the pirate skull and crossbones, red rubies for eye sockets. It seems a fitting detail for this treasure hunter of architectural antiques. 