

Disasters

By Dan Phillips

I have dedicated the better part of my recent life to building houses from recycled, salvaged and free material—and there is a mountain of it to choose from. I simply can't use it all. But the odd-looking houses scattered around town are testimony that, indeed, a house can be constructed from trash. I'm constantly experimenting with new strategies, and some of them are successful—like the wine-cork floor (I'm still interested in more wine corks, incidentally). But I've had some whopping failures.

Huge, public, embarrassing, humiliating failures. Onlookers try to be polite, but I know that deep inside they are howling with laughter, pointing, and privately remarking, “Can you believe anyone would try that? A child would know better. I'm glad I'm not a moron.”

And so I would like to describe some of my more illustrious failures. Some were outright disasters; others were simply wiggles to the right, when I had intended them to go left.

The best was when my good friend and engineer, Jason Bobruk, said, “Dan! Dan! You know how a honeycomb is quite rigid, but each cell of the honeycomb is fragile? Well, that's the principle of many airplane wings—lightweight, but extremely strong. All the individual cells are not strong by themselves, but when they tessellate together, you essentially have a truss. Maybe you could try that with aluminum cans.” He had hit a nerve.

So I set about collecting perfectly round aluminum cans, and carefully gluing them together, thinking that I would fashion some sort of bottom and top—known as chords—to keep them squeezed together. Never mind the glue I was using. If the prototype showed any promise, I would sniff out the perfect adhesive. I was most certainly going to save the world by identifying a higher use for aluminum cans other than as metal to be remelted.

When my prototype was ready, I positioned my aluminum-can truss between two raised blocks, and stepped on it. My weight on the contraption caused the whole thing to collapse in an explosion of aluminum cans, with Dan staggering through the parking lot. While no one was around, I am honor-bound to fess up to the monumental failure of my experiment. So I did not save the world after all.

But then I tried to save the world again by using tires for shingles. I cut the sidewalls out of old tires—fairly simple—and then cut the tread, yielding a long strip of a cupped-shape piece of rubber. My idea was that these could be overlapped for a roof—alternating cup-side up, cup-side down—much like a clay tile roof. My adrenaline was racing. Finally I had found a use for old tires, and the arrangement shed water beautifully. And the half-life of a tire is approximately 8 million years. What a concept. But it was our fire marshal, Tom Grisham, who kindly said, “Dan, I'll research it if you

want, but I've got to tell you that very few fire departments are prepared with enough foam to put out a tire fire. I can't be very encouraging." It still would be a great use for tires if we lived in a world without fire.

The learning curve on papier mache floors was testy enough, but eventually produced some pretty nifty floors. The trick, however, is to use SINGLE PLY paper, soaked with aliphatic resin. Multi-ply paper—like cardboard—doesn't work. The testament here was the papier mache floor I tried with Budweiser cartons. Oh, it was a spectacular floor, but eventually failed because the glue didn't penetrate all plies of the cardboard, and the top layers simply wore off. But using single ply paper produces spectacular—nearly free—floor coverings, and the world of design is literally at your feet. But think single ply.

Unintended consequences come in many guises, as when I attempted to fashion a bathtub faucet from a piece of bois d'arc. It was a curved limb, but I was aware that bois d'arc stands up to all manner of cooties and water—a perfect material for a faucet. So I set about drilling a hole lengthwise through the limb, and I would simply glue standard plumbing parts to fit with the rest of the plumbing system. It worked. But it had the unmistakable look of a phallus. When people would see it, they'd be silent. But upon my saying out loud that it looked a bit phallic, they would immediately agree. I left it. After all, it was a bathroom.

And I tried to use hickory nuts in the fretwork on a Victorian house. It worked very well on parts of the house, but the nuts that were accessible to squirrels mysteriously disappeared. I eventually had to cast those nuts from polyester resin and paint them to look like hickory nuts to discourage squirrels.

But I'm still trying. If failure destroys you, you simply can't do this. I think of failures as opportunities to try a new direction. Who knows how many objects hit Sir Isaac Newton on the head before the famous apple? It might have been a series of walnuts, or stones thrown by bullies picking on nerds, or sticks, and then, finally, an apple. And Benjamin Franklin almost failed when he ran a close brush with being electrocuted by flying a kite in a lightning storm. Christopher Columbus wanted to discover India, but didn't. He discovered something yet a bit more interesting. If giants have failed, then it clears the way for us small guys to fail. Thanks, giants. I feel better.

But America is the place to try out anything you choose. And, indeed, anyone in America can do this. We don't have to cave in to only what's made available by the marketeers. We can strike out on our own, perhaps failing occasionally, but living the adventure. The giants did, and that's what I want to do, too.

