

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

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Business

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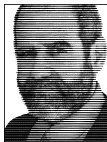
# Don't landfill that old house! Recycle it!



TOM GRALISH / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

**W**hen Philadelphia rowhouses die, they go to 4300 Rising Sun Ave.

That's where 65 workers at junkpicker-turned-recycler **Richard S. Burns & Co. Inc.** break city construction waste into shredded wood, metal, brick, and plaster, and resell it all to metalworks and building suppliers across the region.



Joseph N. DiStefano

"The name of the game is to beat the dump," founder Burns told me, as workers running excavators and custom sorting lines tore rebar from concrete and wall beams from flooring at the 10-acre Burns complex of machine shops, truck dumps, high sheds, and crowded bins.

They don't just do rowhouses. "When they built **Comcast Center**, they hauled that material here around the clock," from the onetime **Central Penn National Bank** building that the city's highest tower replaced, says **Allen Burns**, who grew up in the business his dad founded in 1979.

Burns charges \$80 a ton for fill; besides reselling the metal, it grinds the wood into mulch and the brick into fill for resale, said Maura Kennedy, spokeswoman for the city.

A wrecked rowhouse weighs about 80 tons, according to Burns. Three a day, on average, arrive at the Burns plant, in trucks and Dumpsters, from contractors paid by the city to wreck abandoned homes.

The rest of the 700 tons Burns collects each day at the site, once home to a **Cardone Industries Inc.** auto-parts plant and neighboring factories, is construction waste from new and renovated buildings, city street, sewer and

water projects.

Last winter, the demolished **Youth Study Center** was trucked up to Burns for breakup as work started on the planned **Barnes Foundation** art museum.

Wood from the old **Academy of Music** roof passed through Burns to a Manayunk furniture-maker. The stores that used to line South Broad Street where the **Kimmel Center** now stands, the "sinking homes" of Logan, the guts of the old **PSFS** tower before it became the **Loews Hotel**, the minor neighborhood landmarks the **Keating** construction companies bulldozed to expand the **Convention Center** — all flowed through the Burns breakup sheds and back into the local industrial economy, in pieces.

Piles of crushed wood and concrete, yellow and red brass, stainless-steel sinks, plasterboard, roofing felt, concrete, paper,

Twenty tons of cardboard, twenty-five tons of iron, every day.

"They are a steady supplier of ours," said **Joseph Balzano**, president of **Camden Iron & Metal Inc.**, which runs the vast metal-shredding yard at the foot of the Platt Bridge. "Good people."

Burns didn't set out to build a green business. Allen Burns said the family was forced into recycling when **Waste Management Inc.** bought a string of South Jersey landfills and jacked up disposal prices in the early 1980s.

"They took away our big accounts. So we took the stuff they didn't want and said, 'Jeez, a lot of good stuff is getting thrown out,'" he told me.

Burns specialized in repacking waste so it took up less space, and locating smelters and other buyers for sorted materials,

bypassing middlemen. Back then, "We called it trash-picking. It wasn't glorified as 'green.' We called it the 'B.H.' method — by hand," Allen said.

"Dad always told us, 'The less you send to the landfill, the more money you can make,'" said Allen's sister, **Andrea Burns**, sitting at the company meeting-room table, salvaged from the old **Fidelity Bank**.

In 1985, with a Fidelity loan (Burns now banks with **National Penn**), the firm bought an old alfalfa grinder and refitted it as its first automatic shredder.

Lately the embrace by the building industry and government programs of LEED standards — Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design — has boosted builders' demand for recycling disposal and recycled materials. "We've been doing it all along, only now we document it, and it's LEED," Andrea Burns said.

Business was better — up to 1,200 tons a day — during the construction boom of the mid-2000s.

Still, Burns is planning to expand. That means extensive meetings with neighbors, city, and state officials. Allen says Councilman **Maria Quiñones-Sánchez** has been supportive. Hazardous and radioactive materials are forbidden under the site's permits.

As long as old Philadelphia keeps molting, said Allen Burns, "this is one sustainable business."

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TOM GRALISH / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER  
Allen Burns (left) and Andrea Burns (right) children of the founder at Richard S. Burns and Co. Inc. Apr. 14, 2010, where 700 tons per day are handled from Philadelphia contractors including city agencies charged with scrapping abandoned homes, and Center City builders, etc.

TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer  
**The sign at the gate** of Richard S. Burns & Co. Inc., of Phila., makes it clear that this enterprise looks upon trash as a revenue-producing item.