

BY JON VARA

1. A stylish job-site toilet awaits a customer on an upscale San Francisco sidewalk. Adjustable feet keep the structure level anywhere on the city's famous hills.

2. Carpenter Randy Watts cuts crown molding for the company's newest portable toilet enclosure. Partially completed wall panels are visible in the rear and at left.



Little House on the Sidewalk

Except for those whose need is urgent, the sight of a plastic portable toilet is unlikely to inspire joy. And the humble structures are decidedly unwelcome in the upscale San Francisco neighborhoods where remodeler Aaron Gordon practices his demanding craft. The nature of the local streetscape means that the Porta John usually ends up on the edge of the sidewalk out front, so Gordon makes a practice of enclosing the unsightly plastic box in a nicely detailed surround assembled from MDO panels, molding, and trim boards.

Over the last five years, Gordon's company has built up a library of the little structures in a variety of architectural styles. Each one is designed to be taken apart and reused and is expected to last for up to 10 years, with some minor repair work and a fresh coat of paint after each project.

For Gordon's carpenters, building the toilet surrounds is an opportunity to cut loose and let their creative juices flow. "I leave the design completely up to them," Gordon says. He also finds that it's a good way to provide some productive fill-in work during downtime between projects.

Each surround costs a minimum of several thousand dollars and takes two workers about half a day to transport and assemble, but Gordon considers those costs to be part of his marketing budget.

"The intricate trim makes them a great tool for showing our craftsmanship," he says. "Not long ago, I got a big job from a guy who told me 'If you can build a shitter that looks like that, I have to believe that you'll do a great job on my house.'"

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Photos: Aaron Gordon