



# *House Gutting Manual*

FEBRUARY 2006

# Common Ground House Gutting Manual

**House gutting is the primary step in rebuilding New Orleans.** It is what residents need physically to begin reestablishing a presence; they need it emotionally to begin purging their personal space of devastation beyond comprehension. It is not just demolition work.

**In entering a home, we are entering a very personal, private tragedy.** We are there healing a violence that happened in people's kitchens and bedrooms. Their homes are open wounds. The gravity and importance of house gutting cannot therefore be put into words. The actions and experiences speak for themselves.

**Common Ground walks a difficult line with this work.** On one hand, we are doing everything possible to help people get back into their homes quickly and safely. On the other hand, there is an enormous need and we do not have the resources that this task requires. We cannot do everything for everyone; we are here to give them a jumpstart.

**That being said, crews should do only assigned work.** For example, if a crew goes out to only remove furniture, they should not begin tearing down drywall; if gutting, do not begin mold remediation. This is a sensitive subject as owners may want us to come back the next day and sometimes we have to tell them we can't.

**Any questions about why we do certain work on certain houses and not on others should be directed to and discussed with a work crew coordinator.**

## *Safety*

### **EQUIPMENT:**

When gutting homes, crew members should be equipped with proper equipment. Please return all equipment issued to you. Wear work clothes and shoes or boots with thick soles to protect you from nails. A sweat scarf helps too.

- Tyvek Suit (worn over boots & duck taped at ankles and wrists)
- Over boots (shoes/boots soles need to be thick to protect from nails)
- Work Gloves
- Latex Gloves
- Respirator with filters (properly fitted)
- Goggles

### **COMMUNICATION:**

Good communication is vital to ensure safety.

- Crew Leaders need to keep a daily log of crew members.
- Everyone needs to watch out for one another physically, mentally, and emotionally. Be aware of who is working around you and how they are coping with the experience. Ask how crew members are doing and don't be timid about taking or suggesting to others to take breaks.

### **FIRST AID:**

- Each work crew needs to take a basic first aid kit that is found in the equipment shed.
- Bring an adequate supply of bottled water, hand sanitizer, snacks, and extra latex gloves.
- Always be aware of signs leading to heat exhaustion.

### **CAUTION:**

All buildings must be approached with caution.

- Be aware of downed power lines and assume they are live.
- You may encounter gas leaks or chemical concentrations, so pay attention to odors.
- We screen most buildings beforehand for structural integrity but do not work in the vicinity of any structure that is unsafe.
- Although their numbers are dwindling, there are many stray animals in the area.



- It is unlikely that we would come upon any human remains considering that we know the owners of the buildings have already entered and checked, but it is reasonable that we could (and indeed have) come across those of animals and pets.
- In short, just be generally alert and aware of your surroundings.

### ***When First Entering a Building...***

#### **STEP ONE:**

All utilities should be cut from a building before beginning the gutting process.

- Prior to gutting, EM spray the inside of the building.
- Locate the fuse box and flip all fuses to the off position even if there is no electricity in the neighborhood.
- If possible, shut off the gas at the meter along with closing the individual valves as you come across them (i.e. at the stove, dryer, and/or hot water heater). It is standard, although not always the case, that when a valve handle is parallel to the line, it is in the open position and when it is perpendicular to the line, it is in the off position. If you are uncertain, contact a work crew coordinator.
- The main water line should be shut off provided you have the tools. Otherwise, close individual valves as you come across them.

#### **STEP TWO:**

Once the utilities are in order, the entire crew should do a preliminary walk-through of the building.

- This is both to familiarize the crew with the layout of the building and identify any trouble spots or potential hazards.
- Open all windows and doors so that the air can circulate and lessen the mold concentration.

### ***General Gutting Tips***

There are several practical concerns to keep in mind when beginning gutting.

1. Always start near an accessible exit, keeping the path clear of mud and debris. Remove debris as it is torn down and mud should be scooped off the floor as the rooms are cleared.
2. If there is much dust in the air, lightly spray it down with water.
3. The houses should be worked through linearly rather than by task (i.e. the living room should first be completely cleared of furniture and mud rather than first clearing the entire house of furniture and then the entire house of mud).
4. Place debris and trash between the sidewalk and street as far away from the house as possible, preferably across the street as long as that does not infringe on the neighbor's space. It is a good idea to lightly spray debris with EM.
5. To facilitate easy pick up, separate the trash into three general categories: appliances, large loose debris and furniture, and bagged debris.
6. If a ramp must be placed on the steps, be sure to make it stable.
7. Avoid overcrowding in the building. If there are too many folks inside or if you need a break from indoor work, pick up debris in the yard and on the block. Psychologically, this is very dramatic and important for the residents.
8. For posterity's sake, we would like to document our work on the houses. If you have a camera, take before and after photos. Measure the depth of mud and take notes on the state of the building and neighborhood. Pass this information on to a work crew coordinator.

## ***Troubleshooting Tips for Gutting***

If possible before gutting, consult the owner regarding any quirks that the building may have.

### **APPLICANCES:**

- **NEVER OPEN A REFRIGERATOR!** Securely duct tape the refrigerator shut before removal. Be cautious as some older units may contain Freon which is classified as a hazardous material.
- Before removing a washer, turn off the water line and disconnect the hose.
- For gas stoves and dryers, make sure that the gas valve is shut off before disconnecting the unit from the line.
- Hot water heaters need to be removed, but if you are not comfortable doing this, someone with more experience should be sent down.

### **FLOORS:**

- As a rule, we do not tear up flooring unless necessary.
- Carpets and pads will always have to be removed.
- Linoleum is tricky: it should be torn up if it is already peeling or curling up, but should be left down if it still makes a solid seal with the sub flooring.
- We do not remove ceramic tile or hardwood floors unless instructed otherwise by both the owner and a work crew coordinator.
- Never remove sub flooring, no matter how buckled or termite damaged it is. If it is structurally weak, place plywood, a door, or some similar material over the weak area.
- Beware of asbestos tile (*see photo below*).



### **CEILINGS:**

- As a rule, we do not tear down ceilings. That being said... all Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward ceilings will have to be removed. Elsewhere, ceilings will have to be removed only if they have visible mold on them or you are instructed to remove them. Use your best judgment, and always consult with the owner and a work crew coordinator first. Proceed with caution.
- There should be no one else in the room while a ceiling is being torn down.
- Never remove a ceiling from above.

### **SINKS:**

- Freestanding pedestal sinks can stay in. Otherwise sinks should be removed, particularly if it sits on a wooden cabinet (if possible, salvage the sink top for reuse by the homeowner).
- To unhook a sink, close the hot and cold water valves and use a wrench to disconnect the piping and the supply line at the valve.

### **TOILETS AND BATHTUBS:**

- Except for in unusual circumstances, we do not remove either toilets or bathtubs. The only possible exception to this rule is if there is a continuous panel tub with sheetrock or plaster behind it. This can be assessed from the opposing wall.

### **CABINETS:**

- If the bottom of a cabinet is more than a foot above the mold line, it can stay in.
- When there is sheetrock behind the cabinets and you need to remove sheetrock to the ceiling line, the cabinets must come out. If they are in good shape, please salvage them.

### **ATTICS:**

- Oftentimes we will have to remove items from attics and if you are willing to do this, proceed with caution. Make sure that the ceiling joists are adequate to support your weight and be extremely careful when maneuvering on them. Be aware of who is below you at all times. Safety first!

## HOW HIGH TO REMOVE WALLS:

- Remove wherever mold is present and visible on the surface and remove to one foot above mold line when applicable.
- If cutting sheetrock to a certain height, use a chalk line/straight edge to mark a level line and cut with utility knife (this makes it easier to replace the sheetrock when the time comes. If you're feeling very meticulous, try to remove the sheetrock at 4 foot, 6 foot or 8 foot heights, as that sheetrock comes in 4 foot widths).



## DIFFERENT TYPES OF WALL CONSTRUCTION:

- On interior walls, we typically encounter two types of construction: sheetrock (drywall or gypsum board) and plaster and lath.
- When walls are removed, all that should remain is the studwork and any conduits.
- Plaster and lath construction should be removed from floor to ceiling.
- When taking down sheetrock it is better to pull, rather than sledge, to minimize the dust and rubble kicked up.
- On occasion, we also run into diamond metal lath and concrete wall construction, typically as backerboard for tiling. This

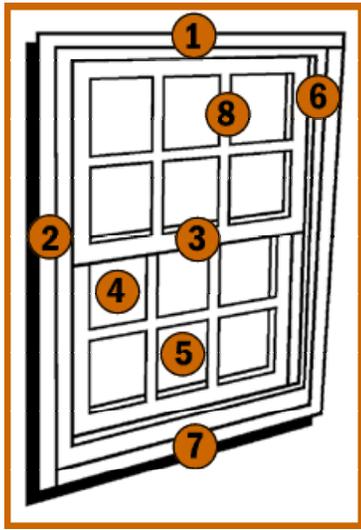
construction itself does not necessarily have to be removed. However, we need to have access to the wooden studs behind it in order to properly mold abate the building. It will therefore only have to be removed if it is placed on both sides of the studwork or on an exterior wall, creating an envelope around it. Any questions on whether or not it needs to be removed should be directed to a work crew coordinator. This type of construction is particularly difficult to remove because of the internal cohesion that the mesh lath provides. It should be removed in as large of chunks as possible, locating where it is attached to the studs and detaching it at those points.

- Before removing walls, remove baseboard. If it is salvageable, place it aside in a secure place.
- Work from bottom to top so that accumulated rubble does not impede progress.
- Take care to place rubble in center of room so as to allow easy removal by another crew member.
- It is advisable to break up the crews such that some people are removing baseboard first, several people are removing walls in rooms already cleared of baseboard, and behind them are people clearing the rubble.

## DOOR AND WINDOW CASING:

- The problem with door and window frames is not the wood itself, but, much like cabinets, that there is sheetrock behind them.
- Use your best judgment: sometimes sheetrock can be pulled from behind the frames without having to pull out the frames, sometimes the frames are so worn and rotted they should be thrown out, and sometimes the frames have to be removed but are themselves salvageable, in which case they should be bundled and labeled by location (i.e. bundled and packed with painters' tape, and then labeled with a sharpie on both the bundle and door/window header with some identifying mark – "A" or "1", etc.). If you do this, make sure to place the frames (AKA casing or molding) in a secure location where they will not be thrown out and the owner is aware of them.

- Do not remove jambs, sills, sashing, or anything that constitutes the structural definition of the window. Just remove the ornamental attachments.



- 1. Head** The main horizontal member forming the top of the window or doorframe.
- 2. Jamb** The main vertical members forming the sides of a window or doorframe.
- 3. Frame** The enclosure in which window sash or door panels are mounted.
- 4. Glazing** Glass in a window or door; the act or process of fitting with glass.
- 5. Pane:** A framed sheet of glass within a window.
- 6. Sash** A single assembly of stiles and rails made into a frame for holding glass.
- 7. Sill:** The main horizontal member forming the bottom of the frame of a window or door.
- 8. Muntin Bar:** Any small bar that divides a windows glass. Also called a grille or windowpane divider.

- When a door has to be removed, first remove the hinge pins, place the door off to the side but in the same room, and replace the pins in the hinge so that they do not become misplaced.

### **ELECTRICITY, CONDUITS, AND HVAC:**

- Do not remove electricity, conduits and HVAC.
- If it is necessary to remove ceiling fans or other electrical fixtures, use extreme caution.
- Keep floor vents covered during work.

### ***Mold Abatement***

Because of licensing and liability issues, we do not do mold abatement in the proper sense. Our primary mission is gutting; only buildings we as Common Ground will be using and certain other homes will go through the mold abatement process. If you have questions about this decision making process, speak with a work crew coordinator.

### **EM:**

As of the writing, we have begun shifting towards the use of Effective Microorganisms (EM) for mold abatement.

- In lay terms, this is a solution of mold-eating bacterium that is harmless to humans.
- EM is easier than bleaching, more effective, and less environmentally detrimental.
- It is mixed in a 10-1 water to EM solution and sprayed throughout the house and onto all surfaces, taking care to avoid over saturation.
- It can be used before the gutting process to reduce the ambient mold count, providing a safer environment for us to work in.
- Because EM is a bacterial solution, there are several storage and use concerns that are not applicable to bleach.
- Once the solution is mixed, its effectiveness is greatly reduced after one day, so it must be freshly mixed every day.
- Temperature extremes need to be avoided and it cannot be exposed to daylight for any appreciable period of time.
- Take care to avoid over-soaking the studs, joists, or other woodwork. When clean, the drier the better.
- In mold abatement, the purpose is not to just kill the mold, but also to physically remove it. To this end, make sure to thoroughly vacuum with a shop-vac equipped with a HEPA filter.
- Also take care to rinse and wipe down within a foot or so of where the walls meet the floor.

### **BLEACHING:**

We will no longer be bleaching as a rule but if done, the bleaching process is fairly straightforward.

- Every surface up to a foot or so above the mold line should be sprayed and scrubbed twice with a 10 to 1 mixture of water to bleach. The key here is in the mechanical scrubbing.
- During and after bleaching, there should be a dehumidifier along with fans placed in the building. This will most likely entail procuring a generator.
- It is very important that all houses being bleached have either been tarped or that the roof is in good condition; otherwise, the bleaching process will be ineffective.