



MONEY

Using Salvage Stores to Improve Your Home on the Cheap

Thanks to TV shows like 'Fixer Upper,' everything old is new again

- By [Judy Colbert](#)
-
- May 16, 2019



Credit: Courtesy of Judy Colbert Black Dog Salvage, Roanoke, Virginia

Fans of such TV home renovation shows as *Windy City Rehab*, *Home Town*, *Fixer Upper* and *Salvage Dawgs* are familiar with the term “architectural salvage.” But if you’re not, it’s the booming business of reclaiming, recovering, and reusing rich architectural building materials. And if you’re considering improving your home, you may want to make a stop at a salvage shop to do it.

A salvage company goes into an old building, deconstructs it, saves the good pieces (and sometimes the not-quite-so-good), and repurposes them. Sometimes, the older objects — from fireplace mantels to chandeliers to mirrors— are turned into something decorative or functional or both.

Salvage Shopping: Bringing Back Childhood Memories

One benefit of shopping salvage: the pleasure of having part of your home remind you of your childhood home, perhaps helping your grandmother make cookies or sitting by a fireside on a brisk evening.

Another beloved aspect of using salvaged materials is that they may be used as originally intended (repurposing wooden floors or barn siding) or given an entirely new fun, sentimental or whimsical interpretation.

“There’s a history and a story behind the item, whether it’s antique flooring or architecture.”

Erin and Ben Napier, hosts of the *Home Town* TV show, converted old high school bleacher seats into a wood bench for Judi Holifield of Laurel, Miss. Holifield’s first job was teaching choral music at the school. “It was very surprising,” she says about seeing the bench, “and I’m Southern. I thought it was a very sweet sentiment. It suits the dining room and it is a conversation piece.”

[Old 56 Salvage](#) of Perryopolis, Pa., converted a chicken roost into an entryway of bins for gloves, mail and other objects. Chip and Joanna Gaines, of the *Fixer Upper* TV show and based in Waco, Texas, converted the vanes of an old windmill into an overhead fan.

Good for the Environment and Yours, Too

Stuart Grannen, of [Architectural Artifacts](#) of Chicago, says the salvage industry “may have started 2,000 years ago when the Greeks and Romans borrowed from each other. The English have been borrowing and stealing for many years. Every country in the world does it and every big city has their salvage guys.” His 80,000-square-foot store has what he calls “extraordinary [antique objects](#) that are intriguing, statement-making and exquisitely eccentric,” sourced from dozens of countries and cultures.

These days, Grannen says, in many architectural salvage places, “fireplace mantels and corbels are the most popular items being salvaged and repurposed.” He doesn’t stock those, but does have mid-century chandeliers (\$500 to \$20,000 each) from Germany and a 1920s pharmacy counter (\$28,000) from Buenos Aires.

[United House Wrecking](#), in Stamford, Conn. may have been the gateway salvage company. It started in demolition, saving things like stained glass windows and claw foot tubs when houses were torn down to make way for I-95 in 1954. While the company still pursues unusual items (they’ve sold the original Yankee Stadium seats and a New York City subway car), it now also carries reproductions.

“Today, there are maybe 400 to 500 such businesses across the country,” says Rich Ellis, publisher of [Architectural Salvage & Antique Lumber News](#).

The Authenticity Advantage

He cites a few reasons to shop at a salvage shop instead of buying new. “There’s a history and story behind the item, whether it’s antique flooring or architecture. Old items have an authenticity to them. They’re unique, not cookie cutter, because they were hand-made. And, the cost of a salvaged item is less than buying a newly crafted replica,” says Ellis.

Mike Whiteside of Black Dog Salvage in Roanoke, Va. says *salvaging* “allows us to be good stewards of the past, for our future. Saving and using architectural salvage honors the craftsman and energy that went in to creating these pieces of history and gives them a second chance.

Black Dog converted the portico from the 1870s Italianate St. Mary’s Catholic Church rectory in Chillicothe, Ohio into an outdoor kitchen bar. The top was made from salvaged fireslate slabs from Trenton Central High School in Trenton, New Jersey.

Pete Theodore, marketing manager for [Second Chance](#), in Baltimore, cites another advantage of salvage: “It’s an [environmentally sustainable](#) practice. It saves raw materials and provides waste stream diversion.”

Unlike landfills and incineration processes, the practice of reclaiming, recovering and reusing building materials is ecologically sustainable and environmentally sound, Theodore notes. Deconstruction reduces demolition debris overloading landfills and provides renewed materials that preserve the region’s rich architectural heritage,” he adds.

Within the first three months of 2019, Theodore says his company diverted more than 3 million pounds of materials from landfills. (Among the most interesting materials Second Chance has claimed: light fixtures and wooden benches from the old Philadelphia Convention Center.)

Doing Good for Workers

Some salvage shops, like Second Chance, do good in other ways. Second Chance’s workforce includes a number of ex-offenders. “We train them and give them work experience,” says Theodore. For instance, customer service manager Antonio Josen has been with Second Chance for a decade. Before that, he was incarcerated for a number of years and was shot five times. “We’re helping him start his own side business,” says Theodore.

Some people like to add salvage items to their homes as a way of honoring the local area’s history. Many salvage companies offer a selection of older, local pieces, such as landing staircase windows from Pittsburgh, carved angel doors from Philadelphia, brownstone and terra cotta from New York and mantels from Boston.

“You can find ornate building materials in New York City that you wouldn’t find outside of the metropolitan area,” says Ellis. “In St. Louis, there’s a lot of cast iron, because of improved building codes after the devastating fire in 1849.” And abandoned textile mills in the southeast have provided salvagers with wooden floors, antique brick and timber.

Reclaiming Barn Wood and Doorknobs

Some salvage operators specialize in certain materials or knickknacks.

Heather Stegner of the [American Wood Council](#) maintains a list of companies that provide reuse and recycling options for wood and wood-based products. “Homeowners looking to source reclaimed barn wood products for a feature wall” can check the organization’s database to find them.

Bill Fellenz, of Fellenz Antiques (really more of a salvage shop than an antiques store) in St. Louis, is all about doors and doorknobs. He’s sold more than 100,000 doors to dealers and has a large collection of 36” wide doors that are in great demand for homes and businesses needing wheelchair access. (Today’s doors are more likely 30” or 32” wide.)

On a recent visit to southwest Virginia, Robert Caldwell stopped by Black Dog Salvage. The Draper, Utah resident walked through the warehouse and started picking out pieces for his new home. Formerly from Salisbury, Md., he felt the old furniture from a West Virginia house, gave him “the opportunity to reuse something that already has a history and brings a rich opportunity for us to add to that history and make it part of our lives.”

Among the treasures he selected: two bookcases that had been on either side of a fireplace. “They’re in the dining room and hold all our East Coast memorabilia.”

Lauren A. Williams, a professional organizer, used to volunteer for Second Chance and says, “I regret not being able to afford a Victorian toilet bowl. Wudda made an awesome bird bath.” And she recalls seeing there a giant, tall, wrought iron bird cage from Berkeley, Calif. ‘I have no idea what I would have done with it, but OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO,’ Williams says.

It’s enough to give a person salvage envy.

By [Judy Colbert](#)

Judy Colbert is the author of [100 Things to Do in Baltimore Before You Die](#) and numerous other books. She is passionate about cruising.