

We've simply redefined an old idea — converting unwanted items into something even better

The Art of Upcycling

BY NADINE TAYLOR

... it's a sly nod to the conviction that an item's next incarnation can, with a bit of attention and a touch of the inspired, exceed and outshine its former glory.

New buzzwords can thrive quickly in society today. You might suddenly find yourself “trolling” for “ubertweets” on “truthiness” and wondering, how exactly did all this happen? Yet in the midst of our evolving lexicon, it's extra encouraging when a catchword ups the ante and improves on an already accepted belief. Such is the case with the design trend of “upcycling” and how it can easily be integrated as a sustainable attitude toward home décor.

While this term makes the rounds on the coolest of lips and the hippest of websites—a quick search on the modish marketplace etsy.com reveals roughly 238,000 references to the word—its eco-responsibility is matched by a renewed sense of creative impact among devotees. Simply stated, upcycling is the art of reusing unwanted items by converting them into something better...more beautiful...more desirable.

Whether this is achieved in the form of funky table lamps made from galvanized steel piping and grommets, or by rescuing a defunct, outdated headboard and repurposing it into an eye-catching hall bench, it's a sly nod to the conviction that an item's next incarnation can, with a bit of attention and a touch of the inspired, exceed and outshine its former glory.

Since the notion of recycling has doggedly infiltrated our collective thinking over the last decades, following the philosophy that used items can still be useful or provide valuable materials through salvage, it's been a noble idea frequently spoiled in fashionable decorating by well meaning, practical intentions gone awry. Unfortunately, it can call to mind tales of the “reckless recycler,” one who excessively re-uses old, dilapidated milk crates as end tables, or pickle jar lids as drink coasters—certainly not the definition of refined living.

And though no one at this stage can really dispute the importance of recycling, without it we'd sadly succumb to even more rubbish in this world, and there isn't a pair of wading boots tall enough to accommodate our often rampant, needless consumerism. Truthfully, much of what is discarded is too good to be wholly thrown out, and not everything that has seen better days should be disassembled and broken down to be reprocessed. There are other options, and upcycling resourcefully and brilliantly fits the bill.

You may recognize this inspiration from another heyday. Embracing the rallying cry to use what already exists, the term “shabby chic” really rose in recognition during the 1980s. Perhaps first coined by UK design ma-



MARGARET CURRIE'S Port Dalhousie home has been an ongoing joyful project. In her dining area (above) she brought her fireplace from her previous home and refinished to match the wall colour; the table she purchased at a garage sale for \$20 and changed the brown solid oak to a pale yellow. Currie found the 1920 Gustavian toile chairs online as is. She also resurfaced a Mahogany china cabinet she bought on Kijiji for \$90; the glass clocks were picked up for \$5, the Italian statue, \$20 and the pillar \$5 all from garage sales. This past summer she refinished the floors with pickle pine paint. PHOTOGRAPH BY CHERYL THIESSEN

ven Rachel Ashwell to describe a straightforward sense of style, she went on to become the purveyor and veritable face of the movement, with a string of Shabby Chic Couture stores and a line of approved, newer items befitting the brand. However disingenuous that may appear to the actual meaning of the phrase, Ashwell's original ideals suddenly made it OK to leave items as you found them, usually distressed by much time and love, to be given a fresh life as interesting décor.

This design cue signaled a casual elegance and comfortable ease in living with your reclaimed surroundings. As Ashwell herself sees it, "a faded, peeling old dresser, a cracked white chandelier, or a chipped metal trash can painted with roses," all of these items can either be "rejects from the junkyard. . . or a bounty of riches." With this belief as a basis, the current mantra is to transform the abandoned into something exceptional by taking it that one step further.

Margaret Currie, a Port Dalhousie resident and former bed and breakfast proprietor, has spent the last 40 years incorporating both savvy style and a conscientious lifestyle choice. She was wisely upcycling before such a concept even existed.

When purchasing her first home in the 1970s, she was faced with a tight budget and limited resources to furnish it the way she wanted. Undaunted, the necessity prompted a keen ability to look beyond what an item is now and envision what it can be. She filled her space with pieces that could be revamped, restored, and re-imagined, and found the design eclecticism exciting and liberating. In fact, she hasn't purchased any furniture—excluding sofas—from any conventional retail store since.

"It could be Contemporary, Victorian, French Provincial, or a thing that you really love, just look that it is a well made piece of good wood and nice lines, anything with a bit of interest," she offers as advice to others. Also, don't overlook the sentimental significance of a legacy piece. "The item I have enjoyed the most is a corner hanging cupboard that once had about six layers of paint. When I restored it, the piece became my most treasured, even to the point of losing five thousand dollars in 1972 on the price of our house, as the purchaser thought it should stay in the corner. I have just given this cupboard to my daughter, who absolutely loves it and gives it pride of place in her house."

Now, as the upside of this design evolution circles around, there is additional cachet in the adaptive reuse of found objects. It's a new way of existing, an original approach of thinking beyond the expected, and on occasion, an opportunity to make something truly yours. NMI

Clever Upcycling Ideas



❁ Consider turning an old set of encyclopedias or textbooks into a stylish table. "Book tables" can be singular by stacking a few together and gluing them for stability, or making a table with books for legs, then topping it with a piece of glass, tile, or wood. loveyourway.net



❁ Think about how to reuse mismatched cutlery, often amassed in rummage sale boxes. Twisted into interesting shapes and collected together, they can be refashioned into an eclectic hanging mobile, windchimes or funky wall art. etsy.com

❁ Cast aside plastic bags can be kept out of landfills by weaving them into fun, eclectic rugs and runners. weupcycle.com

