

style

Searching for tarnished treasure

Salvaged architectural gems can bring an affordable touch of yesteryear to a home, but the hunt can take patience

By Douglas Brown
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them with hollow-core doors, plastic window frames, particle-board cabinetry and cheap painted metal made to ape wrought iron.

Instead, they used hardwoods, stone, glass and iron, and created things to last.

That has worked out well for people who own those old homes: The very bones of some of them are now valuable antiques.

The pre-faux, pre-World War II approach to erecting and outfitting houses is a welcome circumstance, as well, to Betsy Werhane and Roger Johnson, the owners of Architectural Salvage Inc. in Denver.



Betsy Werhane, co-owner of Architectural Salvage Inc., is reflected in the mirror near the front door of the store. (Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post)

Here, heavy, solid hardwood doors — some tattooed with decorative inlays and embellishments, and others just plain and sturdy — stand upright, in stacks, like dominoes.

Here, rewired light fixtures glow from their places on the walls, and turn-of-the-century chandeliers hang from the ceiling.

Here, newel posts from a handrail that once graced stairs at the Boettcher Mansion and 19th-century beams that supported many downtown Denver buildings sit in piles.

It's all for sale: slats of oak flooring crawled upon by babies who by now are great-grandparents, banisters worn glossy by 100 years of hands, stained glass that tinted sunlight during the Spanish-American War.

Builders did not always construct homes and fill

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While this is helpful for people hunting for replacement pieces for their old homes, or special touches for their newer houses or commercial spaces, it's also good for the city.

"We're the ultimate recycling," says Werhane, bespectacled and gray-haired, in a denim-shirt and apron, standing in the middle of the vast showroom.

"For a lot of this stuff, the only place it goes is in the landfill," she says. "We're preservationists at heart."

Without places like Architectural Salvage, "what would be lost would be architectural details that are not built anymore," says Mary Allman-Koernig, executive director of Colorado Preservation Inc., a nonprofit dedicated to preserving old Colorado.



A wall of antique back plates at Architectural Salvage Inc. (Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post)

"You are saving it from a landfill, which is the worst thing that could happen to it," she says.

Werhane and Johnson got into the business 21 years ago, although they began collecting remnants of old Denver years before.

Johnson, an architect, was working on a project that involved the demolition of a historic house, Werhane says. He was bothered by the toss-it-all approach, so he took the worthwhile stuff for himself.

After sitting on the material for years, and picking up more from other sites, he and

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Werhane opened Architectural Salvage in a 1,000-square-foot space on South Broadway. Eventually they moved to their current location on Colorado Boulevard, just north of Interstate 70.

Werhane, who refers to herself as "the salvage lady," used to work a corporate job, but says now she would find it hard to leave her warehouse full of old things.

"I love this stuff," she says. "It's still here. It's solid. It will still be here in 100 years."

The joke among friends, she says, is that they started the business to find materials for their 1895 Park Hill home, but have yet to find the time to work on the house.

"It's the worst house on the block," she says. She points to a corner of the vast, dark warehouse that is full of odds and ends. "All of my stuff is over there in the corner, one great kitchen sink, light fixtures, all of the molding I need to finish my house."

Their business model is basic: People call and e-mail Werhane all day, every day, offering a turn-of-the-century door they want to sell, or kitchen cabinetry that was installed in 1910, or they know of a Victorian house that is being demolished and wonder if anyone's interested in salvaging the good stuff.



The marble cornice over the bar at Sloan's Bar and Grille in Edgewater was rescued from the exterior of a bank building. (Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post)

This is how banisters and marble fireplace mantles and brass hinges make it to Architectural Salvage. About 99 percent of the inventory comes from the city of Denver.

They rarely take stuff from homes built after the 1930s.

Once Werhane and Johnson purchase or consign the material, they clean it up.

"It's all very labor-intensive," says Werhane. "We'll sit at home polishing hardware in front of the television. We put a lot of effort into our stuff. The minimum is we wash it off."

Browsers roam the Architectural Salvage warehouse, even on weekday mornings.

Werhane is friendly with the regulars, people who come back week after week, looking for the

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perfect glass doorknob, or a decorative hinge.

"I have watched kids grow up," she says. "I had people who were pregnant and now their kids are in college. They may have gone through four or five houses, and they still are coming."

They come, but they don't always leave with what they are looking for.

"We have every door that ever existed, except for the one you need — that's part of our motto," says Werhane.

The rest of it?

"We have what you need until you need it, and we sold it this morning."

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Where old is new again: Five places to shop for salvage

Architectural Salvage Inc.

Mantels. Lights. A decorative porch roof. All there.

5001 Colorado Blvd., Denver; 303-321-0200; salvagelady.com

Eron Johnson Antiques

More swank than the salvage yards, this indoor showroom specializes in 17th- to 19th-century

architectural pieces from around the world.

451 Broadway, Denver; 303-777-8700; eronjohnsonantiques.com .

Queen City Salvage

Need a wall-hung urinal or a million doorknobs? This funky outdoor yard, north of the Denver Coliseum, has got you covered.

4750 Brighton Blvd., Denver; 303-296-0925; architectural-artifacts.com

ReSource

Pick through the outdoor yards in Boulder and Fort Collins for architectural diamonds in the rough or some ready-made gems.

2665 63rd St., Boulder; 303-419-5418

1501 N. College Ave., Fort Collins; 970-498-9663. resourceyard.org .

Wise Buys Antiques

This is the place to go if you're looking for a fireplace mantel — raw or fully restored. Wise also sometimes has interesting antique cabinetry in the showroom.

190 E. Second Ave., Niwot; 303-652-2888

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