



IN WITH THE OLD

DESIGNERS AND HOMEOWNERS ARE
FINDING WAYS TO INCORPORATE
USED MATERIALS OF ALL SORTS
INTO THEIR HOMES.

By Terri Finch Hamilton
Photography by Michael Buck



Left: Designer Jeffery Roberts finds use for all kinds of discarded materials, like soda cans and wine corks, in people's homes.

Below: Roberts' dog, Maggie, a rescue who also is "reclaimed," accompanies him on all his scouting missions.

If you're going for a walk with designer Jeffery Roberts, don't be in a hurry.

For one thing, his loyal dog Maggie is along, and you know how dogs love to sniff everything.

And for another, Roberts pauses to pick up discarded bottle caps and crushed aluminum beer and pop cans. He might scoop up other trash, too, if the spirit moves him.

For Roberts, this discarded stuff is decorating gold.

"This is a big part of how I design and create," said Roberts, owner of Jeffery Roberts Design and Jeffery Roberts Homes. He works from studios in Chicago and East Grand Rapids, and has been using reclaimed items in décor for decades.

Lately, it seems everybody is doing it.

If you tune in to watch Chip and Joanna Gaines of HGTV's super-hit show, "Fixer Upper," you'll see their carpenter, Clint Harp, happily pawing through dumpsters for old planks to repurpose into dining room tables.

Check out Pinterest, and you'll see headboards, furniture and cabinets crafted from reclaimed wood, soap dispensers from wine bottles and chairs made from old tires.

Reclaimed is cooler than ever.

Whether you want to reduce the amount of waste that's piling up in landfills or you're just interested in having a unique trinket or piece of furniture that tells a story, there's a reason for just about everyone to start using repurposed goods in their home.

And you can find material to reclaim all over the place. Look for cabinets at Habitat for Humanity's ReStores or old chandeliers at Salvation Army and Goodwill thrift stores. You can even find multi-pane windows at salvage companies like Pitsch or vintage lumber and barn wood at Odom Reuse.

Or, you can use things you already have in your home.

But how do you use it? Let's ask Roberts.

"I told one client to save the ends of all the wooden wine crates he has his wine shipped in," Roberts said. "Then I covered a wall of his bar with them. So, he and his wine are part of the story."

He asks clients if they have pieces of fabric, maybe an old quilt that was handed down, or meaningful items of clothing.



"My No. 1 thought is, 'What beauty can I see in something people think is used up, discarded, past its time? How can this become significant again?'"

— Jeffery Roberts

"Most people have things like this, but they don't know what to do with them, so they sit in a drawer," Roberts said.

Haul it out.

"Let's upholster an ottoman with it or a chair," he said. "We can use it on the headboard in the guest room or put part of it in a frame or cover a ceiling.

"People are so happy," he said. "They say, 'Oh my gosh, I can finally use this.'"

A few years ago, Roberts was among area designers who decorated a 1920s-era East Grand Rapids compound for the Grand Rapids Symphony Showhouse fundraiser. Eager visitors paid 20 bucks and streamed through to collect unique décor ideas. Roberts didn't disappoint.

He covered a side table in crushed pop cans and faced a mirror frame in old bottle caps. He even sewed a stunning bedspread out of men's shirts he nabbed at thrift stores and created a kitchen backsplash from vintage boards rescued from a Zeeland barn.

People oohed and aahed — then (probably) went home and started saving their bottle caps.

"I try to push the envelope," Roberts said.

He was inspired back in the 1980s as a fashion design student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He had an assignment: collect thrift store clothing, take it apart and turn it into something couture.

Roberts was hooked. When he moved from fashion design to interior design, his passion for reclaimed materials transferred perfectly.

"When I reclaim something, I think, 'Good, it didn't have to go to a landfill,'" he said. "But my No. 1 thought is, 'What beauty can I see in something people think is used up, discarded, past its time? How can this become significant again?'"

"I love taking something that lost its luster and giving it new significance."

At one high-end home, he covered the cabinet doors of an entertainment bar with smashed bottle caps and wine corks, creating a sophisticated mosaic, then added a multi-layer glaze.

The millionaire owners don't turn their noses up at this trash-turned-décor?

"They love it," Roberts said. "It's completely unexpected. It's whimsical. People love having something that nobody else has."

Inspired?

Start small, Roberts suggested.

"First, decide what you're drawn to," he said.

"Old car parts? Farm implements? Bottle caps? Old glass? Start collecting it."

Then, ponder how you can use it. Start with a small table top or a bathroom mirror. Don't expect perfection the first time, he said, but your eye will get better with each project.

"When you get more confident, tackle something bigger, like a countertop or a wall," he suggested. "Soon, you'll start seeing things in a whole different way."

His two favorite tools: self-tapping screws and Goop glue.

Self-tapping screws have pointy ends that drill right through metal, he said. Find Goop glue at any home improvement store.

"I buy it by the case," Roberts said. "It sticks to anything, and it dries permanently."



Jeffery Roberts helped a client use reclaimed materials to transform this fireplace. The surround and hearth of the fireplace are covered with vintage reclaimed terra cotta from Europe, while the mantel was made of reclaimed barn siding.

"When you get more confident, tackle something bigger, like a countertop or a wall. Soon, you'll start seeing things in a whole different way."

— Jeffery Roberts

Ready to dive in? Stop over to see Bruce Odom. He'll set you up.

Odom has been operating Odom Reuse in Traverse City for 19 years and opened a store at 1029 Four Mile Road NW in Grand Rapids two years ago. At his shops, you'll find cabinets and windows, vintage light fixtures, paneled doors, claw foot tubs and all sorts of used lumber and barn wood.

Odom loves seeing his customers' creative uses for the materials he salvages.

"The most satisfying part is this is the last opportunity for some really precious resources, like beautiful lumber, to be kept out of the landfill," Odom said. "We put it in a place where people can get some real satisfaction from it."

One guy crafted a dining room table from a section of a bowling alley — complete with the painted arrows that help you line up the ball.

The Old Goat restaurant in Alger Heights bought old hardwood flooring of all shades, hues and colors from him, and covered the bar front and 20 table tops with it.

One of his top sellers?

"Barn wood, barn wood, barn wood," Odom said. "It's so popular in all the magazines and on Pinterest. We're riding that wave."

Even a small piece of the silvery, deeply textured wood can make a big impact, he said.

"We connect to its sense of durability," he said. "It's a piece of history — it's been around for more than 100 years."

One customer, who lives in a new home, bought barn wood to build a custom sliding door on a track for a long wall in his basement.

"The juxtaposition of the old wood in a new house was really interesting," Odom said.



"We have a strong attraction to things from the past. I think it gives us a sense that, in the future, we'll be remembered. It makes our scope of consciousness bigger."
— Bruce Odom

Top: The Old Goat restaurant in Alger Heights bought old hardwood flooring of all shades, hues and colors from Bruce Odom to use on the bar front and several table tops. Bottom: Cathy and Bruce Odom, of Odom Reuse, bring in old cabinets and windows, vintage light fixtures, paneled doors, claw foot tubs and all sorts of used lumber and barn wood for people to repurpose.



He loves it when a customer wanders in who has never wielded a hammer, but wants to make a barn wood coat hanger.

"They're so enthused when they tell me what they want to do," Odom said. "I sell them a piece of 2-foot wood and say, 'Yes, you can do this. Go for it!'"

A small barn wood board to attach some hooks to will cost \$5 to \$10, he said.

"You'll probably spend more for the hooks," he said.

Stroll the aisles of his store, and you'll find beautiful blue and gold stained glass windows for \$225 each. Paneled doors run about half of what they would cost new and cabinets about one-third of what they would cost new, he said.

Chances are Odom can tell you exactly where your find came from: an old barn, maybe, or a century-old furniture factory.

"You'll have a story to go with your project," Odom said. "Everybody loves to have a story.

"We have a strong attraction to things from the past," he continued. "I think it gives us a sense that, in the future, we'll be remembered. It makes our scope of consciousness bigger."

Over at the Pitsch Salvage Store, manager Chad Pitsch isn't quite as philosophical. He just knows old multi-pane windows are flying out of his store faster than ever.

"It's getting huge to repurpose this stuff," he said. "People use windows for picture frames, they put hooks in them for coat racks, they put chalkboard behind them.

"When I get old corbels in, those sell fast, too," he added. "And people love turning old factory carts into coffee tables."

Chad's uncle, Steven Pitsch, is president of the salvage company, and tells how his dad started it back in 1958 in their 10-acre backyard in Byron Center. He and his siblings helped when his dad tore down a building, unscrewing switch plate covers and rescuing doorknobs.

By the mid-'70s, the Pitsch company moved to Richmond Street NW in Grand Rapids, attracting customers from all over the place: owners of vintage homes in East Grand Rapids and Heritage Hill, cottage and cabin owners, art school students working on projects, renters who didn't want to invest in new items.

"And people who just want to save money," Steven Pitsch said. At most, he said their items sell for half of what they would cost new.

The store offers just about everything you could think of: doors, windows, sinks, cabinetry, light fixtures, toilets, furnaces, water heaters, wood trim.

"You just can't find some of this stuff anymore," Steven Pitsch said of the items they rescue from tearing down old buildings. "If you do find it, it won't be as well made."

Roberts, too, finds nostalgia in giving historic furnishings and structures a second chance at life. He's currently incorporating his design tricks into a 160-year-old house he bought in Grand Rapids, covering the ceiling of his billiards room with reclaimed metal and wood; he often dresses up ceilings.

"I love the simple surprise it creates," he said.

Roberts' latest passion is collecting old wool blankets. They may end up upholstering furniture.

Sometimes, he collects things not knowing how he'll use them. He's just drawn to their color or patina.

Then, when the perfect idea strikes, "That's just the best feeling," he said.

His dog, Maggie, accompanies him on all his scouting missions. She gets a bit annoyed when the car starts filling up with his finds. But she understands. The affable lab and husky mix used to live at a shelter — a dog nobody wanted.

"She's reclaimed, too," Roberts said fondly. "She goes with me wherever I go."



"You just can't find some of this stuff anymore. If you do find it, it won't be as well made."
— Steven Pitsch

Pitsch Salvage Store rescues and resells a variety of used items, such as corbels, wood trim, doors, windows, sinks, cabinetry, light fixtures and other goods from old buildings.

Opposite page: Chad Pitsch (left) and Steven Pitsch, of Pitsch Salvage Store, even take in small fixtures, like doorknobs and hinges.

Contents

MARCH 2017 / VOL. 54 / NO. 03

FEATURES

32 / In with the old

Designers and homeowners are finding ways to incorporate used materials of all sorts into their homes. **BY TERRI FINCH HAMILTON**

38 / Back to your roots

Grand Rapids is a great place to trace your family's history. **BY JULIE BONNER WILLIAMS**

32