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## Architectural gems saved from the razer's edge

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The wrecking ball, anathema to any edifice, is ambrosia to North Center's Stuart Grannen. Before the ball smashes into brick and stone, Grannen often beats it to the punch, swooping down on hapless buildings to salvage anything he believes might have some life left in it.

The owner of Architectural Artifacts, 3759 N. Ravenswood Ave., Grannen, 34, buys bits and pieces of buildings before they turn into so much rubble. He then turns around and sells them out of his 25,000-square-foot showroom to private collectors, architects, businesses and other dealers.

"We go after everything: antique components that have artistic and historic value, as well as pieces that are just kind of fun and wacky," says Grannen. "Everything from fireplace tiles, which I might sell for as little as a few dollars, on up to rare objects that can run as high as \$25,000. It depends on what I have in stock. It changes all the time."

What he had in stock on a recent visit to his showroom was everything and, if not the kitchen sink, then the bathroom tub — an ancient, free-standing wood-encased bathtub selling for \$650.

And cast-bronze grilles. Art deco light fixtures. Antique fireplace mantles. Wrought-iron gates. Terra-cotta statues. Classically carved reliefs. And newels. And garden benches. And on and on and on.

"I end up buying everything," says Grannen. "Functional and decorative. The good with the bad."

After receiving permission from wrecking companies to peruse a condemned building, Grannen searches for anything he thinks might be marketable.



Photos by Weldemar Reichert

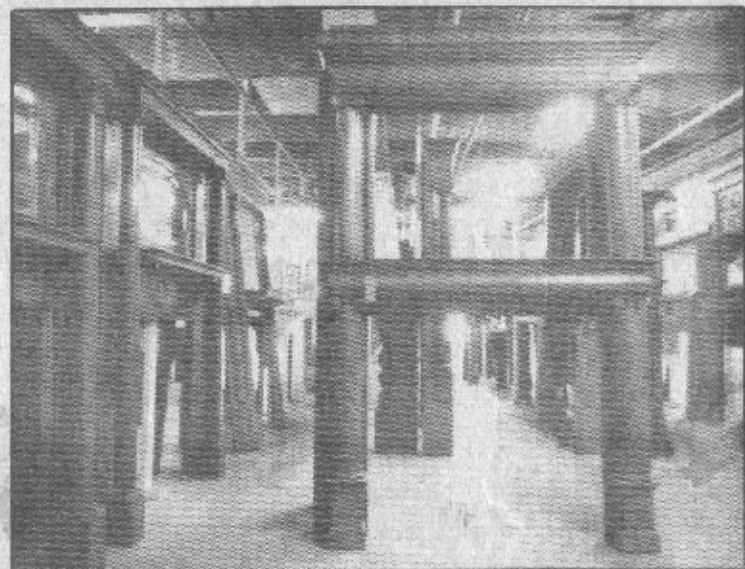
Stuart Grannen displays the neon sign from the now extinct La Belle Corsette, Devon and Talman avenues.

When he finds something, the wrecking company typically tells him that he can have it, along with other items (it's usually a package deal), for "x" dollars. Grannen counters with a lesser figure, and sometime later the deal is made.

"Knowing how much to buy and sell this stuff for isn't easy,"

says Grannen. "It really just comes with experience and knowing what the market will be willing to pay."

He says that wreckers are knowledgeable enough on their own to know that some items should be salvaged. "Some of the things are so extraordinary — beautiful carvings or moldings —



Stately antique fireplace mantels (above) and a fierce-looking griffin (below) await new homes after being spared the wrecking ball.



that they know they can sell them to a dealer, and for a good price," he says.

But the wreckers don't know everything. "Most of the stuff, if I didn't buy it, would be demol-

ished along with the rest of the building," says Grannen. "There's just a lot that they don't know about as far as what is valuable and what isn't."

Grannen and his own crew of employees go in and remove the pieces — some weighing thousands of pounds — and return them to their showroom. "It's fun but dangerous work," he says. "Going into half-demolished buildings — the other week I was on the 20th floor of one — can be a little unnerving."

Grannen also gets some of his merchandise through other dealers, but whatever means he employs, his efforts often result in the acquisition of pieces rarely seen, and more rarely offered for sale.

"This is a fun business," says Grannen. "Going into a lot of the old buildings, you never know what you might find. It's a bit of a treasure hunt. And for the person who purchases something here for their home, they'll likely be the only one for miles around who will have anything like it."