



Tribune photo by Walter Kelle

Linda and Mike Stiscak of Chicago, hunting for bargains at Salvage One Architectural Artifacts, check out some of the merchandise at the Chicago warehouse.

Rescue mission

For imaginative homeowners, salvage warehouses can be a real find

By Mary Beth Klatt

SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Looking for that unusual or offbeat item to complement your home's decor? Well, since you live in the Chicago area, you've come to the right place.

Numerous salvage warehouses, all within miles of each other, offer a huge supply of architectural remnants at a relatively low cost compared to buying new, says Stuart Grannen, owner of Architectural Artifacts Inc. in Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood.

Salvage warehouses sell just about everything, from door knobs and doors to sinks and stoves, from fireplace mantels to medical cabinets and turn-of-the-century examining tables.

Old medical equipment? "No one needs these things," Grannen says with a laugh. "But they're neat to have. You have to have a sense of the bizarre."

You also must be creative and see new uses for old building remnants. For example, says Ken Byrde of Ziggurat Architectural Ornaments in Chicago, you can turn a capital, which is the top part of a building column, into an end table, an old iron gate into a bed headboard or columns into room dividers or pedestals for busts or plants.

Still many customers seek basic furnishings like old doors, windows and fireplace mantels, and though these things can often be bought new, salvage warehouse owners say the quality of vintage salvage is often better, and sometimes cheaper.

But you need to educate yourself to get a good bargain. Buy books on the subject and attend lectures. Some salvage warehouses such as Ziggurat and Salvage One offer lectures. Last year Steve Thomas of television's "This Old House" discussed

rehabbing at Salvage One. Art historian Rolf Achilles and glass expert Neal Vogel spoke last spring at Ziggurat's annual stained glass symposium. For information about future lectures, call the warehouses.

You also can take an adult education course at Salvage One. Francis Parker School and the Latin School of Chicago offer separate classes at the warehouse. To register for Francis Parker School's class, call 773-549-5904; for Latin, call 312-573-4698.

Learn to bargain, too. "But you can't go in and say, 'I'll give you half,'" says Grannen. "You have to know what it's worth. It has to be based in reality."

All salvage warehouse owners have different ideas of what constitutes a good bargain. Salvage One partner Beau Kimball calls doors "a good bargain." They are available at the warehouse in 40 different panel configurations. Solid wood interior doors range from \$35 to \$75. Exterior entryway doors range from \$150 to \$1,200. "They're very inexpensive compared to what they would cost new," he says.

Grannen believes Frank Lloyd Wright windows are "the best bargains because they are undervalued" at prices ranging from \$2,000 to \$5,000. He believes prices will go higher since demand is high and supply is limited.

However, John Curran, stained glass restorer and owner of Affinity Art Glass in Oak Park, believes that Wright artifacts are overpriced. A market saturated with reproductions "takes the value of the good stuff down." Vintage Victorian windows may be better bargains, he says.

Ziggurat's Byrde has a Frank Lloyd Wright prism and Louis Sullivan windows in stock. Yet he favors stained glass windows made by Wright associate George Maher. "He hasn't gotten the press the others did," says Byrde, who cautions that "nothing's an investment except Louis Sullivan or Frank Lloyd Wright. You need to buy like you're buying artwork. Buy because you like it."

Achilles, who teaches at Columbia College and the Art Institute of Chicago, agrees.

"Salvage often doesn't retain its value," Achilles says. If you buy a plaster figurine from a movie theater, its value plummets when people lose interest in plaster figurines. However, a Frank Lloyd Wright artifact "will retain its value longer because it fits in the larger scheme of Prairie School," he says.

Antique tiles are also good bargains, says Grannen. Architectural Artifacts sells them for \$25 to \$35. "Sometimes you can get them for \$10," he says. Tiles can be used for a fireplace surround or kitchen backsplash.

Both Kimball and Grannen say light fixtures are excellent buys. Prices range from \$100 to \$5,000. "They cost a little bit of money," says Grannen. But Kimball says you can save more if you're willing to do your own rewiring or reassembling, says Kimball. "Rewiring is the simplest thing in the world," he says.

Garden accessories also can be good buys compared to what's available new, says Grannen. A vintage, wrought-iron bench will set you back \$700 to \$1,200, he says. "You can buy a reproduction for \$200, but why do it?" he says.

Grannen also thinks antique plumbing such as sinks and related accessories are good bargains. "It's about to go through the roof; it has in every other city except Chicago," he says.

What's the appeal of vintage plumbing? "It's like furniture, incredibly ornate," says Grannen. "It takes plumbing to another level or two."

Can these old sinks and showers be readily updated? Grannen says yes, but Kimball disagrees, cautioning that bathroom fixture replacement parts aren't always available. "You might buy a sink at a flea market. You may get it home and find out you can't get the parts anymore," he says. "You're better off getting things that work perfectly."

Likewise, Kimball warns that a fireplace mantel also can be a bad buy if it doesn't fit your fireplace box. He often has clients who buy mantels at a flea market and bring them home to find out they don't fit the space. Then, they can't return the items.

While it sounds obvious, Kimball advises consumers to measure rooms, windows and fireplace boxes before you buy. "People make fun of Martha Stewart because she carries her paint swatches and measurements in a notebook in her purse," he says. "But it's a good idea."

But when you see the fireplace mantel, door or window of your dreams, Kimball says, "be prepared to buy when you see it because you won't get a second chance."