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Salvage Shopping - Downtown business re-purposes architectural elements

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In a society that frequently throws away perfectly good items for more modern ones, **South Front Antiques** and Salvage has built a reputation for buying and selling pieces of old architectural elements. Eric Nielsen and his 84-year-old father, Svend, operate a 20,000-square-foot building with three floors full of salvaged windows, fireplace mantles, doors, columns, light fixtures, chandeliers, plumbing, bathtubs, stained glass, artwork and more - all for the purpose of reusing.

"My Dad does more of the selling end of the business and I do more of the buying," said Nielsen, a pilot who goes shopping for antique discoveries during his layovers in different cities. "If you've seen that show 'American Pickers,' I'm sort of a picker, but in the architectural field of antiques."

The store opened in Overton Square in the early 1970s. Business continues Downtown, and largely through word of mouth. When a building or home in Memphis is going to be demolished, parts that can be resold are taken to **South Front Antiques** to be repaired and restored.

"So literally, when you take a house down, it can be pieced out from the old plumbing, all the interior work," Nielsen said. "A majority of the whole house can be reused."

Part of Nielsen's job in salvage is discovering innovative ways an old item can be given new life.

An antique door can be painted, turned sideways and used as a headboard. Four pieces of tin ceiling can be made into a planter box. A column from a front porch becomes a stand alone piece of art. A baluster, a small vertical column that supports the handrail of a staircase, can be used as the base for a lamp.

Nielsen imagines a massive antique fire place mantle in the store - far too tall and wide for a residence - could be raised and transformed into a back bar, ideal for a restaurant seeking a unique interior design.

"If you open your mind a little bit and with a little creativity, there are decoration possibilities and furnishing possibilities all over the place. Too many people are too quick to literally bulldoze and start anew, without saving anything," Nielsen explains.

Once an item is transformed, then "it becomes one-of-a-kind. You're not going to find that anywhere else."

Reusing old architectural pieces is budget-friendly as well. Nielsen says he has decorated every apartment he has ever owned, and all his houses, for a fraction of what it would cost to decorate with brand new items.

Nielsen continues, "When you think about it, for the money - you might spend just a little more money on buying antique furniture - but it's gonna last you a whole lot longer and it's something you can give to

your children, " he said. "Versus some of the stuff that people buy today, (newer pieces are) gonna be out on the curb."

The antique look is gaining popularity amongst designers and big name retailers, as well as buyers.

"There are a lot of companies that are going to Indonesia and cutting down the rainforest to make furniture, reproduced to make it look like it was the old stuff, " says Nielsen. "Why not just buy the antiques?"

Nielsen believes there should be more people in the salvage business to help save items from demolished or abandoned buildings. Over the years he has salvaged 6,500 square feet of tin ceiling from one school in Hutchinson, Kansas, more than 800 light fixtures and globes from a vacant electrical company's warehouse in Memphis, and up to 1,500 doors at any given time.

"I could be standing in front of the bulldozer, in front of the house being pushed over ... when there was many, many things that could have been used. Habitat for Humanity, you name it, people could reuse it.

"If it gets destroyed and taken to the dump, it's lost forever."

Illustration: Photos

Nikki Boertman The Commercial Appeal files

Malcolm Barnett works in the **South Front Antiques** Market, sorting salvaged items.

The warehouse has more than 20,000 square feet filled with doorknobs, hardware, doors, mantels, decorative iron, stained glass, terra cotta pieces and many more architectural elements.

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