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REAL ESTATE

Good as new

Upcycling items doesn't need to be challenging — even for novices

By Lauren La Rose
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With an eye for affordable finds and a shared passion for restoration, Shannon and Dean Acheson's home showcases several pieces they've refurbished with a touch of creativity — and plenty of elbow grease.

Shannon says one of their most memorable do-it-yourself projects involved a dining room hutch received free from a friend of Dean's which her husband attached to a dresser they found on Kijiji.

They sanded and painted the pieces, then gave them a distressed look by sanding the edges and finishing with a glaze.

Half-cup drawer pulls were added and painted along with the knobs that were on the original hutch.

"That was the first piece I think that we really went, 'Wow, we can do this, and really change how something is, and really make something out of what someone else might think of as nothing or impossible,'" recalls Shannon, who partners with Dean on the design blog AKA Design.

The Achesons are among the participants in the Ultimate Upcycle Challenge taking place during the Toronto Fall Home Show, which runs from Sept. 20 to 23 at the Better Living Centre. Bids can be placed on the restored works at www.torontohabitat.ca until Sept. 25 with proceeds benefiting Habitat for Humanity Toronto.

For their contribution, the Achesons transformed an old wooden door into a richly red entryway table, which included incorporating stair spindles, two brackets, crystal doorknobs and furniture and antiquing waxes.

Fellow challenge participant Lisa Canning coated a pair of chrome chair frames with satin black spray paint for a modern edge. She further jazzed up the slim profile seats with a hand-painted chevron pattern in purple, teal and grey. In keeping with the upcycle theme, the Toronto-based interior stylist painted the print on a textured wallpaper remnant from a past client's project.

The mother of three and owner of Lisa Canning Interiors has also put upcycling into practice at home.

Canning's four-month-old son is using

Dean and Shannon Acheson a share their thrifty design finds, organizing ideas and affordable DIY projects on their blog AKA Design.

— Photos by Canadian Press/AKA Design

an Ikea crib first purchased for her three-year-old son which was spraypainted a soft grey. She says the change not only modernized the piece but also better weaves into the design colour scheme of the room the boys will share as the baby gets older.

Lisa Canning

For individuals seeking to refurbish a piece, Canning says the first thing to look at is structure and ensuring there's integrity in the frame.

"If you're talking about a hard furniture item, like a chair, for example, or a table, you want to make sure that it hasn't been too horribly exposed to the elements," says Canning, market editor for Dabble Magazine.

"I think with the naked eye many people could get a sense (of), 'Does it look like it's rotting at all? ... Does it feel sturdy?'" she adds. "Screws can be tightened. Screws can be adjusted ... but I think testing the overall sturdiness of it is a really big first step."

A mantle created and finished by Shannon and Dean Acheson.

Acheson says if individuals don't have the skills to fix a piece they should ensure they select one that's already solid — even if it's scratched. If still uncertain, Canning says it's worth consulting a furniture upholsterer or restorer to see if it's actually worth sprucing up.

Not every item may be befitting restoration, but that will all depend on the individual — especially when it comes to items of sentimental value.

"For some people, the cost of restoring it is totally appropriate and they're not going to feel that it isn't worth the money or the time. But you do have to take a look at what it is going to cost," says Canning. "I think sometimes people forget, 'Oh, it will take me four hours to upholster this,' or 'It will take me $400 to send to an upholsterer.' I think it is on a case-by-case basis."

Both DIYers agree individuals should turn a blind eye to design elements that

A red door entry table created by Shannon and Dean Acheson for the Fall Home Show Ultimate Upcycle Challenge is seen in this handout photo. The couple transformed an old door using two stair spindles, two brackets and a few old crystal door knobs from the Habitat Toronto ReStore.

— Photo by The Canadian Press

can be easily altered.

"Look past the colour ... and look past whatever hardware happens to be on it, whether it's something that has knobs or handles. Look past that to the overall shape of it," says Acheson, author of the e-book "Welcome Home."

"You can change the colour and you can change the hardware and make it look fabulous."

Canning says she draws a lot of inspiration from fabric and wallpaper.

"Textiles can play a really fun, engaging story in a space because with the variety of patterns and colours, you can really influence the mood."

In reupholstering a chair with a wood frame, for example, Canning suggests pulling one of the hues from the fabric pattern and using it as the paint colour for the chair frame for a cohesive look.

Acheson says she and Dean use their sander fairly frequently, but as fans of the modern country esthetic, she opts for a sandpaper and sanding block more often than not to create a distressed look.

If they're working on a piece that requires a considerable amount of sanding, Acheson says she starts with a really coarse grit and works her way down towards a finer grit. Finishing paste and waxes are also used to bring out layers, she notes.

Acheson says spraypainting candlesticks is a good starting project. Lamps are also fairly easy as well — providing that individuals select one in good shape where electrical components aren't a concern.

Canning says creating a pillow is another good entry-level project, which can also entail repurposing an old piece of clothing as a fabric source. She has aspirations to do something similar with some of her grandmother's scarves.

For those averse to sewing or whose stitching skills may not be up to par, Canning says hem tape can be a good alternative. The double-sided adhesive available at fabric and craft supply stores allows individuals to fuse two layers of material together using a hot iron.

"Even if it's just the introduction of a small pillow or the introduction of a trim on a drape ... it makes the space look very unique to the individual's home, to the individual's taste," she says. "That's a fun way to make a space feel really your own."

Shannon and Dean Acheson's Ajax, Ont., dining room is seen in this undated handout photo. The room includes the couple's hutch project: a hand-me-down hutch atop a dresser found on Kijiji that they refinished. The dining room table was made from old table legs and pallet/skid wood for the table top.