



Washington Post photos by Sarah L. Voisin
Emily Schoenbaum, of Washington, D.C., picks out a board at Community Forklift in Hyattsville, Md. Old wood is particularly popular with customers.

Savings in store with reused materials

By Allan Lengel
The Washington Post

On a sizzling Saturday, inside a toasty warehouse, Eunice Youmans walks past the vintage fireplace mantels, unhinged doors and light fixtures at Community Forklift, a nonprofit store in Hyattsville, Md., that peddles reusable housing materials.

In one hand is her 10-month-old son, in the other a tape measure. Her two young daughters trail behind her like ducklings. She zeroes in on a used 48-by-17-inch kitchen cabinet.

It needs some work. It has been sitting for months. One door is chipped. The white paint is old. She plans to fix it up, re-nish it and put it in her dining room.

The price is \$50. She gets it for 30.

"It's much cheaper and good-quality stuff," the Cheverly, Md., resident says of the store's products, extolling the benefits



of buying used rather than going to the large home stores. "I come here all the time."

In a disposable society, where new is often equated with better, where big-box stores such as Home Depot have become the temple of home improvers, a growing number of homeowners are turning to reclaimed or reused products. In the past five years, the number of reused-material stores around the country has doubled, from 150 to 300, according to the Building Materials Reuse Association.

Driven by economics, environmental concerns, aesthetics or old-fashioned quality — or all the above — do-it-yourself homeowners, as well as contractors, handymen and landlords, are buying construction products at a fraction of the retail cost — such things as marble countertops, cast-iron radiators, sunken bathtubs, toilets, sinks and solid five-panel pine doors. Some come from homes built more than a century ago, some from new-home construction sites.

Sometimes there's even historic value: The Community Forklift recently landed marble from a federal building and a chandelier and several mahogany doors from a penthouse at the Watergate.

"Most people are proud of themselves for recycling cans and recycling newspaper and buying bags that are made out of recycled plastic, but people don't realize that they can recycle entire houses and that they can buy recycled products for their homes," said Ruthie Mundell, outreach director for Forklift, which opened in November 2005.

"When we first started, we had probably five customers a day. Now we probably have 150 sales a day," she said. "People are finding out about the concept. They realize how much it makes sense financially and environmentally."

In the Washington region, the Building Materials Reuse Association and Habitat for Humanity's Habitat ReStores Web site together list 60 for-profit and nonprofit operations that collect or sell reusable and reclaimed products, 40 of them in Virginia.

Nonprofit organizations such as Community Forklift, the Loading Dock and Second Chance in Baltimore, and Habitat ReStores in Virginia and Maryland get all or most of their products from donations, many of which come from homes that have been torn down or "deconstructed" instead of being demolished by bulldozers and



The supply of materials at Community Forklift and other resale stores is extensive and variable.

Online directory

Looking for a place that sells used or salvaged building materials? Start with these two resources:

- Building Materials Reuse Association: buildingreuse.org/directory
- Habitat ReStore: habitat.org/env/restores

wrecking balls.

There are also eight Habitat ReStores outlets in Illinois. They are in Bloomington, Champaign, Elgin, Gurnee, LaSalle, Peoria, Rockford and Springfield.

"I would say about 85 percent is donated," said Desiree Carter, general manager of the Loading Dock. In addition, "We get some materials from landfills" and buy some from places going out of business, such as plumbing supply shops.

Often, about 80 percent of a disassembled home can be salvaged or recycled, experts say. In that case, donating the materials is a boon for everyone, recycling advocates say. Homeowners get a tax write-off by donating the disassembled materials to the nonprofit stores and save on trash fees at the landfill. The environment benefits, as do the people who bought the products.

"Some homeowners can't stand good material — hardwood floors, kitchen cabinets, and on and on — just being dumped in a landfill," said Paul Hughes, president of DeConstruction Services of Fairfax, Va., which tears apart homes and donates the materials to nonprofit organizations. "Many builders are starting to feel the same way."

For many people, such as Gregory Cavanaugh, the savings are attractive, but more important is "the durability of the product."

Cavanaugh, a contractor, said he saved more than \$1,000 recently by buying six used doors — five from Community Forklift and one from Second Chance — for a restoration job at a Capitol Hill home built in the 1800s.

He said he paid \$58 for an entrance door instead of about \$300 new; \$260 for a walnut Victorian-style door that "you'd probably pay upwards of \$1,000" for; and \$25 each for the interior doors that would run "upwards of \$150" each at a lumber store.

On top of that, he said, he got a good deal on used yellow pine, a couple of hundred years old, that he used for door and window frames and windowsills. He said the quality was superior to that of lumber sold today.

"Basically, what you buy in the stores today is white pine, and it's junk," he said. "In two to three years, it can start to rot." Still, not all reusable material is cheap.

Mountain Lumber in Ruckersville, Va., which manufactures products from reclaimed wood, charges an average of about \$3,000 for flooring for a 300-square-foot kitchen and about \$8,000 for an 800-square-foot one. And that's just for the product — the company does not do installation.

Willie Drake, president and founder, said the wood averages 100 to 600 years old and comes from barns, ancient temples, buildings and schools around the world, including countries as far away as China. Recently, he said, the company bought 25-by-25-foot wooden Guinness beer vats from Ireland to convert to flooring.

Drake said most customers are from the United States, particularly the mid-Atlantic, but he "just shipped an order to Moscow and just sent an order to Italy."

"We have never cut down a tree to make our product," he added with pride. "It's all from 100 percent reclaimed wood."

Some places specialize in certain products.

The Brass Knob, a for-profit store in Washington, has an impressive collection of cast-iron radiators, some from the early 1900s, that cost about \$85 to \$500. It also has more than a thousand used doors. Owner Ron Allan said he attracts a lot of homeowners, architects and contractors who work on old homes.

"I've almost become a Victorian Home Depot," he said.