

From the homeowner's point of view, he looks like every other garbage-picker rummaging through curbside trash in downtown Toronto. But this scrounger, dressed in tattered, paint-splattered clothing and riding an old bicycle, isn't after discarded wine bottles; for more than 10 years, he's been saving windows, doors, moulding and other building materials from landfills and turning them into custom furniture.

"Most of this stuff is at least 80 years old," says Michael Simardone, standing in his one-man shop crammed floor to ceiling with more than 250 windows, 150 doors and hundreds of feet of crown and baseboard mouldings, hundreds of board feet of lumber and "other tasty tidbits" Simardone finds on his meandering bike rides through back alleys and side streets. "If I pass a dumpster, I look inside," he says, running his hand through his huge mop of hair; even it looks salvaged, an abandoned bird's nest plucked from a treetop. "You wouldn't believe what people throw away."

Simardone has yet to encounter an angry homeowner or a competing trash-picker. "I'm not sneaky about it," he says. "If I can get it on my bike, I just ride off. But sometimes I knock on the door and ask if I can come back later and get more. And that's when the person tells me there's more junk in the basement." Building with salvaged materials isn't novel—canoes turned into bookshelves; Adirondack chairs made from hockey sticks—but Simardone's furniture stands out, thanks to unorthodox design. "This cabinet door used to be a transom window in an old turret," he says, pointing to a tall cupboard he recently finished. The curved window, which is at least 90 years old, is striking, especially against the white, hand-painted frame and the matching doors with recessed panels along the bottom of the cabinet, which Simardone made from an old door he ripped in half.

As with almost all of Simardone's projects, the hand-painted cabinet is made entirely from salvaged materials and hand painted. "When I started out, clients weren't as enthusiastic about found materials," he says. "They'd nod their head as I described the project's details, and then sort of look puzzled and say, 'But you found it in the garbage, right?'" Of course, this has all changed as more people have become environmentally aware. "But there's still a feeling that the project isn't solidly built because the materials are used and old," he says, handling a 7'-tall, 2½"-thick quartersawn oak door. "Solid wood is just as hefty, whether it's 100 years old or brand new."

But it's not just the environmental side of salvaged materials that appeals to Simardone. "I've always been interested in history," he says, showing me a picture of a bed he made from an old fireplace mantel. "Think of the stockings that would have hung from here at Christmastime," he says. "When I'm building, I always think of where the pieces came from."

Simardone honed his woodworking skills over 10 years with a renovation company. "We'd be ripping apart the interiors and all this perfectly fine

moulding, doors and trim would go to the dump,” he says. “It felt like such a waste.” So, Simardone approached a custom furnituremaker in Toronto and told him his plan to build things entirely from salvaged materials. “He let me sell my stuff on the floor and pretty soon I was on my own,” says Simardone, who now builds custom furniture full-time.

“Working with salvaged materials changes the design process,” he says, fondling an old window with hidden mortises in the frame. “Instead of drawing up a plan and then cutting everything to fit, you do the opposite with salvaged: you look around your shop and see what you have, and how it might fit into the design—how to best use the materials.”

So, what is Simardone’s prized possession? He points to a regular-looking piece of wood at the back of a huge pile of boards. “That piece is more than 100 years old,” he says. “Every day, I look at it and think, ‘What a beautiful board’.” So, will Simardone ever give it up to a project? “It depends how big my pile gets. But I doubt it.”

#### Working With Salvaged Material

Here are custom furnituremaker Michael Simardone’s tips for working with salvaged material:

- Old glass is especially brittle, so use care when cutting, storing or affixing it to a project
- Be mindful of weight when making doors. Old windows or ripped doors are usually heavier than the common workshop materials you’d be using on a piece of furniture, so stronger hinges and counterweights might be necessary
- If you see something thrown out on the curb, don’t wait to pick it up later because it will be gone
- Don’t disturb old finishes by removing coats of paint and other potentially toxic finishes. Instead, strip the loose stuff and then coat the project in new layers of paint that will seal off the old finishes