



## Trashmagination Podcast #88 – Upcycling Furniture

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown.

Today's episode is about upcycling furniture. How often do you see furniture on the side of the road that people are tossing away? Sometimes it is falling apart, but often these are solid pieces that just need to be retouched, repainted or reupholstered. There is a word called "junkernecking" which means slowing down in your car to check out roadside furniture to see if it is treasure or trash. Unfortunately a lot of well-made furniture ends up on the curb because fashions change or people don't have the skills to update a piece of furniture. Hopefully today's episode will get you inspired to learn more about upcycling furniture either for your own home or to help charitable organizations.

### Seniors / Retiree Clubs

The first stories I want to share are about people who take unwanted furniture and upcycle them as a way of building community. For example, there is a group of retired men in New Zealand called the "Grumpy Old Men Enterprises." They do a whole bunch of projects to raise funds which they then donate to community groups. They raised \$70,000 in two years. For example, they take apart old computers and appliances and sell components like gold or copper wire [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npn-MlmYYIw>]. These volunteers are not upcycling furniture but in many similar clubs for retired people around the world, people also refinish furniture.

At a senior's home in North Wales there is a furniture upcycling program for people with dementia [<https://www.northwaleschronicle.co.uk/news/16401614.from-bleak-to-chic-residents-at-llanfairpwll-home-upcycle-old-furniture-for-auction/>]. The activities coordinator noticed that residents liked painting on paper, so she wondered if they would also like to paint three-dimensional objects. She brought in furniture and they did such a great job that the furniture was sold at an auction for 160 pounds.

A great place to get furniture for upcycling is at the stores run by Habitat for Humanity which are called ReStores. A volunteer near me started a Facebook page called Finished for Good where they ask people to donate furniture that needs to be refinished, and they will refinish it for Habitat for Humanity's ReStore [<https://www.facebook.com/finished4good/>].

In St. Louis, Missouri, there is a community workshop called Perennial which teaches people lots of woodworking and other upcycling skills [<https://perennialstl.org/>, <https://www.instagram.com/perennialstl/>]. They led a project to make public seating from salvaged furniture. The program was called "Sidewalk Seats."

<https://www.instagram.com/p/Bm6Fb8FHqMF/> - chairs to be transformed

I would love to hear about more programs where people use discarded furniture as a way to build community, so if you know about more programs like this, please let me know at [trashmagination@gmail.com](mailto:trashmagination@gmail.com).

Next I'm going to talk about 3 types of furniture that get thrown away, but which have a lot of potential. These are pianos, arm chairs and cribs. If you are looking for ideas about mattresses and box springs, I talked about that in episode 10, and I'll link to that episode in the show notes [<https://trashmagination.com/mattress-and-box-spring-recycling/>].

## Pianos

So let's talk about with pianos. It would never have occurred to me that people would throw away a piano. It seems like such a valuable and sentimental item. I first heard about this trend of people throwing away pianos from Zeke Leonard, who I talked about in my episode about scrap wood [<https://trashmagination.com/21-scrap-wood-reuse/>]. Zeke makes lots of things from upcycled pianos, especially stringed instruments like harps, ukeleles and guitars [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A6iYskS1mtI>]. Zeke is a professor in the School of Design at Syracuse University [<http://scfoiw.blogspot.com/>].

I learned more about this issue in an article in the New York Times [<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/30/arts/music/for-more-pianos-last-note-is-thud-in-the-dump.html>]. The article said that many pianos are getting thrown away because pianos are expensive to repair and there are inexpensive new ones. They also noted that the life of a piano is actually about 80 years. The golden age of piano making was 1900 to 1930, so that's why there are so many pianos being tossed now.

When I searched for "upcycled piano" on Pinterest, I saw lots of creative ideas including:

- a desk where they covered the keys with a table top - <https://www.boredpanda.com/old-piano-turned-into-desk-jonathan-miranda-sickmeyer/>
- a coffee table with the keys encased in a clear box - <https://www.instructables.com/id/Piano-Coffee-Table/>
- a headboard for a bed - <http://morgancafe.homestead.com/headboard.html>
- a place to hang your house keys that featured piano keys - <https://www.etsy.com/listing/606060459/piano-key-holder-four-hook>

## Upholstered Armchairs and Couches

Upholstered chairs and couches are so difficult to upcycle. There are amazing examples where people sew doilies, neckties and even designer clothing on to upholstered furniture, but I have a feeling most of these projects would be difficult to replicate in a way that would look good unless you are a professional. My favorite idea for upcycling arm chairs comes from Knox County Humane Society No Kill Animal Shelter in Illinois [<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1549738028494200>]. They accept arm chairs to put in their kennels. The pets waiting for adoption look so much cozier snuggled up in an arm chair than on the floor or just a pad. I don't think many shelters take donated arm chairs but I wonder if it is an idea that could spread.

- Doilies on upholstered chairs & couches - <https://www.facebook.com/aliliokids/photos/pcb.1148467221941498/1148466865274867/>
- Chairs upholstered with designer clothing - <https://www.vogue.com/article/earth-day-recycled-clothing-chairs-maison-margiela-off-white-raf-simons>
- <https://www.facebook.com/160878464033717/posts/1148467221941498/> - patching armchairs & couched

## Cribs

Next I'll talk about cribs. My favorite ideas for cribs are:

- a drying rack for paintings or towels - <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=3321487464543993&set=a.123287711030667>
- a thread organizer if you add nails along the slats to put the thread - <http://www.madebymarzipan.com/?tutorial=old-crib-new-storage>
- a bike rack - <https://kellyleighcreates.com/diy-bike-rack-crib-rail/>

All of these ideas are in the show notes and also linked on the Trashmagination Pinterest board about furniture - <https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/furniture/>.

## Professional Upcyclers

If hearing about these projects inspires you, one way to learn upcycling skills is to find an upcycler making items in a style that you admire and follow them on social media. For example, near me is a business called Tanglewood Works in Hyattsville, Maryland [<https://tanglewoodworks.com/>]. Tanglewood Sue is a very entertaining upcycling guru and she has a bunch of online courses about furniture upcycling [<https://www.crazyasscraftcoach.com/all-tutorials>]. She teaches not only how to restore wooden furniture but also how to paint upholstery, pouring resin and decoupage.

Another upcycler who I admire is Sadie Seasongoods. She upcycles lots of items (not just furniture). She has lots of posts about what to do with cabinet doors [<https://www.sadieseasongoods.com/repurposed-cabinet-doors/>] and dresser drawers [<https://www.sadieseasongoods.com/repurposed-drawers/>].

## Thank you!

Thank you for listening! Did you hear that the Cambridge Dictionary named 'upcycling' as the Word of the Year for 2019? Upcycling can mean making new items out of old things of any material, but often I find that most posts with the word upcycling are related to wooden furniture and home décor. You can reach me at [trashmagination@gmail.com](mailto:trashmagination@gmail.com). Until next time – may you see secondhand furniture as a source of art in your life!