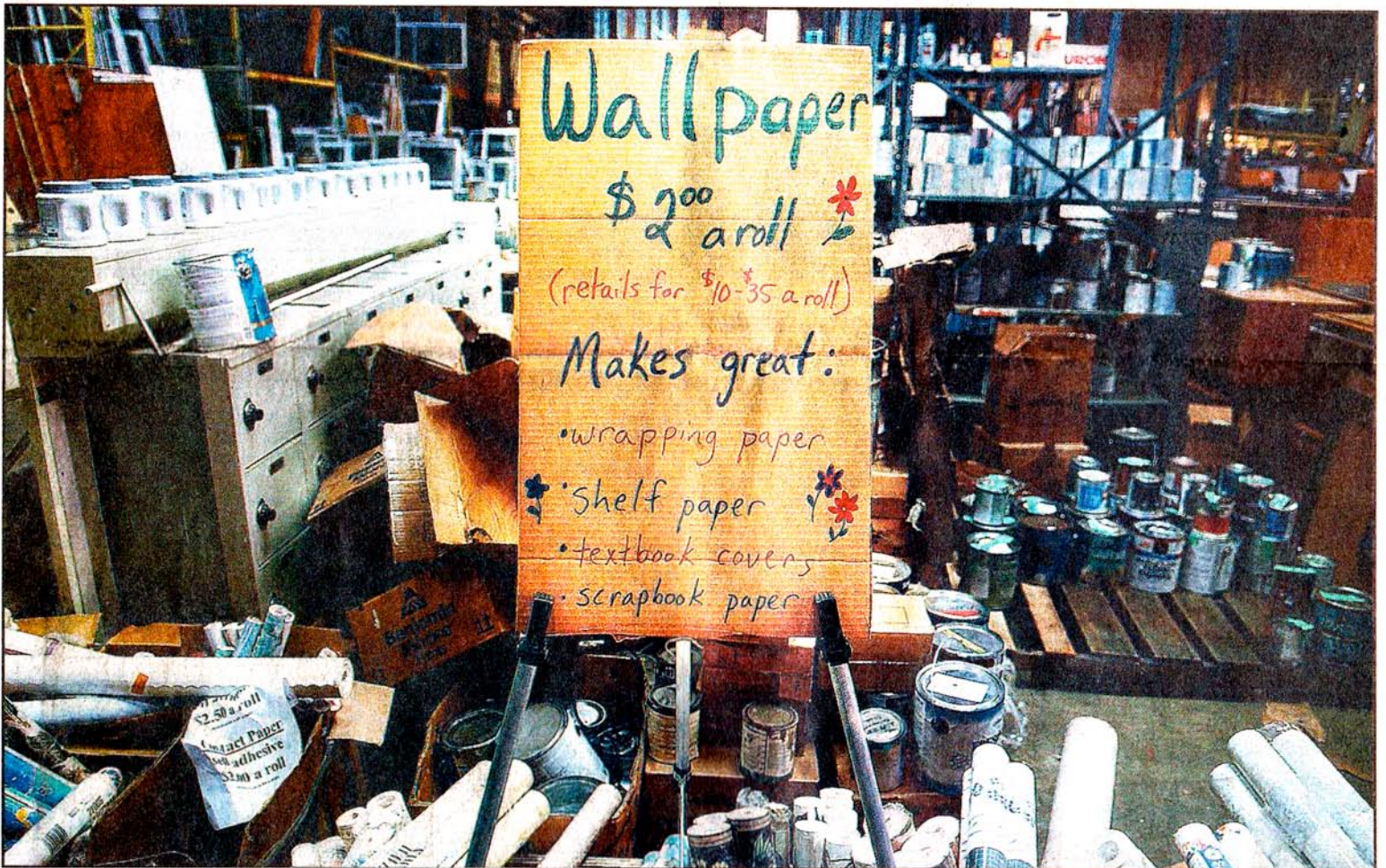
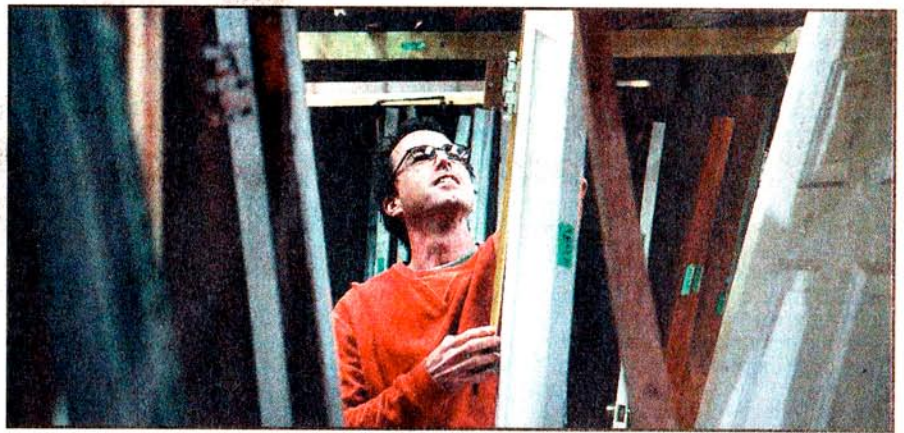


BUYING on the CHEAP



Photographs by Astrid Riecken/The Washington Times

Inexpensive tricks can turn boring space into lively place

By Christian Toto
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

No matter how far home prices fall in the District, it still will cost a pretty penny to buy a house.

The last thing homeowners want to do is spend the rest of their savings on furniture and decorations.

It doesn't have to go down that way, say design experts and handy people alike. Homeowners can do some

savvy shopping or simply make over their existing furniture to give new life to old interiors.

Vicki Macenka, principal designer with Interior Transformations in Richmond, says a simple shuffle can bring visual snap to a home.

"Dig through your library of books . . . and put them on your shelves. You can make a lamp higher by using books," says Mrs. Macenka, who has a winged-pig sculpture in her own home propped up on a series of books.

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David Peterson of Capitol-Hill looks for a bargain-priced bathtub (above) and a door (top) at Community Forklift (middle photo), a warehouse in Edmonston that offers a variety of cheap items, including furniture, appliances, rugs and old wallpaper, which can be used as gift wrap or shelf paper, among other uses.



Astrid Flecken/The Washington Times

Abdul Diaite of Bladensburg wraps a lamp he found at Community Forklift in Edmonston, which offers used furniture, appliances, lamps, rugs and other items for shoppers who don't want to spend a fortune decorating or remodeling their homes.

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"He wouldn't be as cute if he wasn't propped up on something," she says.

A simple potted plant resting on an end table can have a transformative effect.

"Greenery always makes an impact on a room," she says.

Mrs. Macenka adds that homeowners can scan design catalogs for creative book uses as well as find inspiration for any number of modest changes.

"You can spray-paint a lamp, maybe with a decorative faux finish by using a sponge," she says.

Also, when arranging an assortment of decorative items, she advises to "group accessories in odd numbers for more visual impact."

Libby Langdon, commentator on HGTV's "Small Space, Big Style," says working within a tight budget often means tweaking smaller items to inject new life into bigger pieces.

"You can work with the sofa you have by changing the less expensive elements," Ms. Langdon says. "Adding two new end tables or lamps can really change the look and feel of the couch."

While most shoppers know to visit stores such as Ikea and Pier 1 Imports for affordable furniture and bric-a-brac, she says other shops, including T.J. Maxx and Marshalls, also offer discounted home decorations and are expanding their existing lines.

Sometimes a simple coat of paint can turn drab decor into something dramatic.

"If you have old lamps, old furniture or oak stuff you had since your first apartment, paint it black for a modern look," she says. "You don't even have to sand it first."

If a homeowner dreams of days spent at the beach, try a can of white spray paint in place of black for everything from end tables to mirror frames.

"There's so much that can be done," Ms. Langdon says.

One practice she would discourage is buying in bulk.

"Sometimes people want to try to get a look, and so people buy stuff in sets," she says. "It can make your space look a little cheap. You're better off buying one cool chair. Don't be afraid to mix and match styles. Everything now is so eclectic. Combine a yard-sale piece with a new chair."

Another area on which homeowners would be wise not to skimp is the rugs beneath their feet.

Too many people buy small rugs, which only serve to shrink the appearance of large rooms, she says.

"Go to a remnant place and buy their leftovers. Have them bind it," she advises.

Not everyone is sold on the merits of used furniture, particularly a plush couch or bed.

Debbie Wiener, principal designer with Silver Spring-based Designing Solutions, says saving money should be balanced with the kind of furniture one brings into a home.

"I'm not a big believer of buying big pieces of furniture from estate sales, especially upholstered pieces," Ms. Wiener says. "I don't know where it's been or who's been sitting on it."

Anyone with allergy concerns should hesitate before making such a purchase, she says.

When browsing estate or yard sales for wood furniture, she recommends considering inner beauty.

"I'm not so concerned about wear and tear. Wood is a natural product. I'm looking for quality of construction," she says. She recommends ex-

amining how easily a drawer pulls in and out from a chest or seeing if a table's leaves fit properly.

"That will tell you if the piece will hold up," she says. Besides, a scarred wooden piece will have far more character than a store-bought model.

"I feel like it adds a sense of history, like it wasn't just purchased today, and it has a good story to tell," she says.

One area where homeowners can find like-new furniture for a reasonable price is from show-house setups.

Ms. Wiener sets up show houses for design clients, and she knows firsthand the bargains that can come once the show closes.

"I finished a show house in July, and I almost cried at the price I sold the things for," she says.

Some area homeowners do their home shopping at Community Forklift, a conservation-conscious shop in Edmonston where people can browse for surplus or salvaged building materials.

Store employee Ruthie Mundell says her customers have sharp imaginations. One turned an old window sash into a picture frame, while another transformed a mantelpiece into a television stand.

District resident Edgar Browder dropped by Community Forklift last week, in part to avoid spending big money at home-improvement chains.

"I'm trying to fix up an old house, and there's no sense in putting a lot of expensive things in there," Mr. Browder says while inspecting a lighting fixture with a friend.

Capitol Hill resident David Peterson is renovating a carriage house in his neighborhood and likely will shop outlets such as Community Forklift for all the sinks, toilets and tubs he will need.

"You find some bizarre things you don't normally see here," he says. "It pushes your imagination."