



# Gargoyle Hunters

By Roger Grody

**In creating new luxury residential environments, architects and interior designers often reach back in time, and some of the most coveted design elements have been passed over by progress.**

**W**hen designers seek to add drama to a space — whether a historic setting or ultramodern environment — they frequently look for something that has been abandoned, even discarded. The use of architectural salvage, ranging from cracked limestone gargoyles to grand marble fireplaces, not only creates unique focal points, but teases some compelling stories.

Interior designer Joanne Palmisano, author of the books *Salvage Secrets* and *Styling with Salvage*, specializes in using reclaimed and repurposed vintage items in her commissions. “Even as a child, I was fascinated by historic objects and old vintage homes, and as a designer I’ve tried to incorporate pieces that are unique and have character,” explains the Vermont-based designer.



Part of Palmisano's passion for salvage is driven by an environmental consciousness informed by her profession. In an era when more than one-third of all landfill waste is generated by construction projects, she suggests, "We all need to think more about the footprint we leave behind, understanding where materials come from and how we use them in our homes." She cites Fireclay Tile, a California company that transforms trash like old porcelain toilets into luxury handcrafted tiles, as an outstanding example of producing style through recycling.

With its endless variety of meticulously sourced antiques — filling a 30,000-square-foot showroom on nearly three acres in Atlanta's affluent Buckhead district — Architectural Accents is one of the nation's premier salvage retailers. Founded in 1981 by Charles Nevinson, a Brit who maintains relationships with demolition contractors throughout Europe and the States, the company has earned an international clientele for professionally restored antiques plucked from abandoned châteaux, villas, churches, government offices, or boutiques.

"Age, provenance and a quality of execution hard to find today are some of the reasons people find these items attractive," suggests Nevinson, who states that in many cases these pieces cannot be replicated today. For instance, the quarry from which a particular marble was extracted may now be entirely depleted, or the craftsmanship is simply unavailable. "Some want to clutch at yesteryear or put some soul in a soulless structure, while others want to emulate a shepherd's house in Tuscany or the French countryside," reports Nevinson.

Antiques should not be reserved for vintage architecture, insists the salvage expert. "The contrast between old and new works extraordinarily well if done correctly," says Nevinson, who recognizes the value in using antique accents even in modern, minimalist settings. He cites the powerful first impression created by adding an ancient entry door to an ultramodern facade, or hanging a centuries-old artifact on a blank wall. "If you show it with a plain backdrop, that item will get all the attention, just like pieces of the Acropolis displayed on a wall at a museum," explains Nevinson, who notes many of his clients (a mix of architects, interior designers and trend-conscious homeowners) are attracted to that kind of juxtaposition.

Designer Palmisano, who recognizes the value of a reliable salvage dealer, agrees with Nevinson and is fond of using functional pieces as



A 2,000-year-old petrified wood mantel and vintage stone steps enhance a fireplace in a home Joanne Palmisano showcased in *Salvage Secrets*.

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Joanne Palmisano

**In her book, *Salvage Secrets*, Palmisano suggests reclaimed materials introduce character into modern spaces.**



As the designer for an old barn-turned vacation home, Palmisano insisted the historic beams play a key role in the overall design.

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decor. “For example, in a bright white, clean-lined house I brought in a gray table constructed out of wood from a barn built in 1810,” she recounts. “From afar it looked modern, but up close you could see the gorgeous grain and character of the old wood,” she explains.

Palmisano will use reclaimed brick to floor a mudroom or hang an old apple ladder in an otherwise contemporary bathroom to create contrasts that resonate with clients. Citing another example, she reports, “For a luxury bathroom, I bought an old dresser, dropped in a beautiful sink and transformed it into a vanity, juxtaposing the fun, vintage piece with modern elements.” She further reports, “An old country store counter can be turned into a kitchen island, and an architectural salvage dealer can help you refinish it or adjust the height.”

Reporting that trends in antiques are fluid, Nevinson reports, “Suddenly, sliding barn doors are very fashionable and any door without relief molding can be transformed into a pocket or barn door.” The workshop at Architectural Accents can convert virtually any door to the current trend, explains the owner, who notes that prices in his extensive inventory of doors range from \$275 to approximately \$30,000.

Architectural Accents carries an incredibly diverse inventory, but many salvage dealers have very specialized practices. Some focus only on 18th-century fireplaces, others exclusively sell doors. Liz’s

Antique Hardware in Los Angeles is a veritable wonderland for vintage doorknobs, hinges and hooks from throughout Europe and America.

European marble and limestone mantels at Architectural Accents — various styles from the 16th through the 19th century are in demand — range in price from \$9,000 to \$80,000, while the company’s own high-quality reproductions are relative bargains. Currently, one of the showroom’s most intriguing pieces of decorative art is a nearly nine-foot-tall stone Eiffel Tower (\$18,750) from the 1920s, a piece with a personal connection to Nevinson. “It used to be on top of an Art Deco second-hand sportscar dealership in the UK, and as a boy I always admired it,” he explains.

“We don’t take any shortcuts, even if it

eats into our profit margins,” reports Nevinson, who takes considerable pride in the care and restoration of antiques at his Atlanta workshop. In addition to an astounding supply of fireplace mantels, antique mirrors and crystal chandeliers, Architectural Accents offers a wide variety of 19th-century English stained-glass windows and a circa 1889 French bidet (\$5,750) with a gorgeous floral motif and nickel hardware.

In Houston, Chateau Domingue is a highly respected resource for homeowners in the city’s tony River Oaks neighborhood, as well as among professional designers throughout America and internationally. The establishment is one of the premier purveyors of vintage French oak flooring, but its new 15,000-square-foot showroom is also filled with an enormous variety of reclaimed



PHOTO BY TERRY VINES

Ruth Gay

PHOTOS OF PIECES COURTESY ARCHITECTURAL ACCENTS

**Architectural Artifacts offers an ornate 18th-century Italian safe and a 1920s decorative element from France, both wrought iron.**

artifacts from across Europe. Proprietor Ruth Gay advises, “We don’t really consider ourselves an architectural salvage company, but more of a curator of very special architectural pieces.”

Gay regularly crisscrosses the Continent and has a staff member based in France to keep abreast of relevant demolition activity. The owner buys whatever she feels an emotional connection to and the diverse array of items stocked at Chateau Domingue encompasses limestone and marble fireplaces, antique stable lanterns, hand-forged iron gates from Andalusia, and elaborate

fountains or sundials from Provençal gardens. She has dismantled and shipped entire 18th-century chapels — reassembling the structures in Houston and placing them with new owners — and Chateau Domingue currently stocks more than 700 reclaimed doors from the 17th through 19th centuries.

Mirroring the experience of Charles Nevinson in Atlanta, Gay reports, “People enjoy the juxtaposition of a touch of history in very new, contemporary settings,” and adds, “They give a project soul.” In fact, she states that more than

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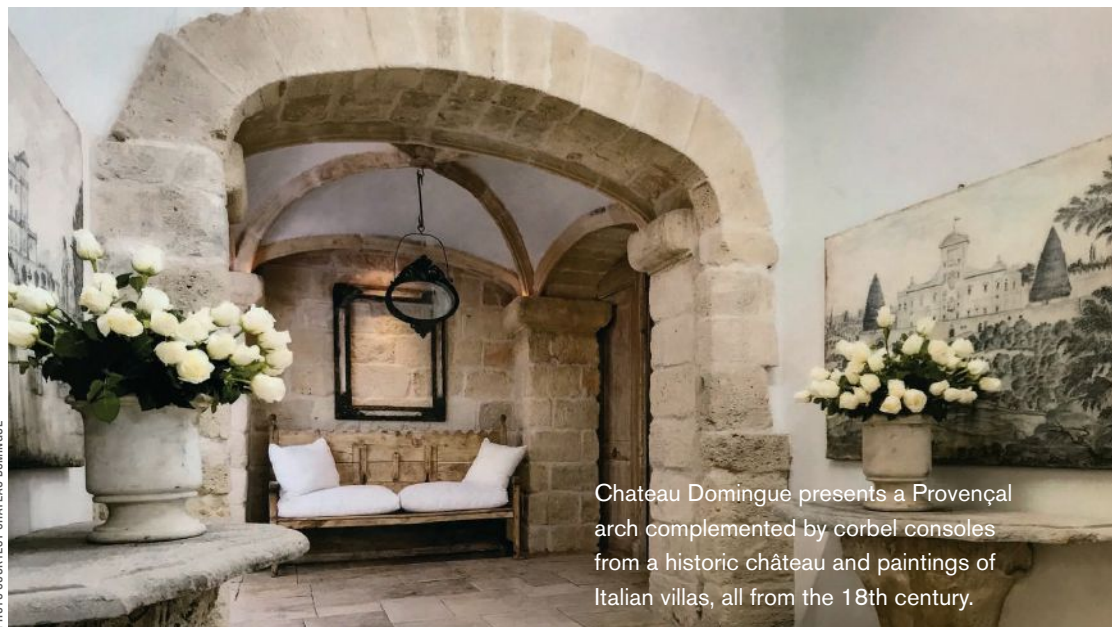


PHOTO COURTESY CHATEAU DOMINGUE

Chateau Domingue presents a Provençal arch complemented by corbel consoles from a historic château and paintings of Italian villas, all from the 18th century.

half of Chateau Domingue’s products currently end up in modern architectural environments.

Stuart Grannen founded Chicago’s Architectural Artifacts in 1987 with approximately 3,000 square feet of space and eventually expanded to an 80,000-square-foot showroom on the city’s north side. He is now in the process of downsizing to a 50,000-square-foot facility

that will be combined with a boutique hotel and restaurant. “I’d rather spend my time going and acquiring than selling,” states Grannen, who reports that only about one percent of his entire inventory is listed on the Architectural Artifacts website.

In addition to very significant locally discovered pieces — consider balusters from the Louis Sullivan-designed Carson Pirie Scott & Co. department store or a terra cotta fragment from the facade of the Chicago Stock Exchange — this massive showroom offers architectural salvage from around the globe. “I’d rather travel to Milan than Detroit, although there’s wonderful stuff in both places,” jokes Grannen, who as the son of antique collectors began acquiring stained-glass pieces when he was a kid. “These days we specialize mostly in Europe, where we find the pieces are generally higher quality, more interesting and a little more decorative,” says Grannen, who studied archeology in college.

Among the unique, high-end pieces at Architectural Artifacts are Argentinean Art Nouveau double-doors (\$28,000), a massive copper kettle from the Hershey chocolate factory (\$16,500), and a pair of life-size American limestone horses (circa 1920) priced at \$165,000. Grannen is constantly searching for pieces with interesting provenances, like pine cabinets from a Roman spa in Italy, stills from a Campari liqueur distillery, or antique mirrors from a Bavarian hunting lodge. The professional collector has long dealt in gargoyles, and sold a collection of 140 to a St. Louis museum. “Some people believe

they ward off evil spirits, but basically, they’re just decorative,” says Grannen of the unique, fantastical architectural elements that are often 400 to 600 years old.

The architectural salvage business has changed, according to Grannen, who reports, “Designers used to decorate an entire house in antiques, now they tend to focus on a singular statement piece, often in a modern setting.” With massive communal dining tables and crystal chandeliers as large as automobiles — some were recently acquired from a Munich opera house — Architectural Artifacts is well suited to accommodating those needs. Many of Grannen’s clients are restaurants, bars and hotels, where some of the most flamboyant pieces complement the scene.

Regardless of price point, designer/author Palmisano insists it is the history of salvaged or reclaimed objects that provides the greatest satisfaction. As she writes in *Styling with Salvage*, “Sometimes it’s the hunt, or the find, or maybe the thrill of getting a good deal that compels me, but in every case it’s the stories behind these objects that keep me looking for the next cool thing.”

There is a place for every piece, and Palmisano has a unique suggestion for one of those elusive gargoyles that might be salvaged from a crumbling medieval church. “I like to add a little humor to my designs, and can see a gargoyle occupying a niche in a modern bathroom,” she says. Sharing that spirit of discovery and imagination, Chateau Domingue’s Gay insists, “If you acquire something really wonderful, someone will find a spot for it.” **KW**



PHOTO COURTESY ARCHITECTURAL ACCENTS

Architectural Accents’ founder sits by a Louis XVI mantel, hand-carved in the South of France, circa 1750.

Charles Nevinson