Interiors: why upcycling is having its moment

Britain produces 280m tonnes of waste each year, but savvy homeowners are increasingly refurbishing old furniture

By Lucy Denyer
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Not long after Laura McDonald and her boyfriend Daniel moved into their own flat in June this year, Daniel came home one night with a broken dressing table that he’d found in a back alley. Rather than chucking it straight in the bin, however, McDonald, 26, mended it, sanded it and painted it, and the piece ended up in pride of place in their bedroom.

The dressing table was followed by a chest of drawers, then a pair of bedside tables, then a dresser in the living room, which acquired a chevron design to its front. After spotting an expensive mirror adorned with toy cars on a website, MacDonald decided to make her own for a fraction of the price. She spray painted lampshades and revamped picture frames. Her home is now a riot of lovingly
refurbished pieces, each one unique. So successful has her hobby become that she is considering starting to sell her upcycled pieces. “I love doing it,” she explains. “And, at the end of the day, you get something that’s totally personalised and unique – nobody else is going to have the same chest of drawers as you.”

Call it a backlash against the consumerism of the boom years, call it a return to the make-do-and-mend culture of the war era (looming large on everybody’s minds right now), or blame it on Kirstie Allsopp, but upcycling – the art of reusing discarded objects in a new and innovative way – is having a moment right now. Television is awash with programmes showing us all how to turn a bannister into a coat rail or a sewing machine into a storage unit. It’s now much more fashionable to fill your home with items that come with the patina of age and style than the latest lot of mass-made flat-pack furniture from China.

The number of products on Etsy, the online marketplace for handmade goods, tagged with the word “upcycled” increased from about 7,900 in January 2010 to nearly 30,000 a year later, and the figure now stands at 211,014. Last month meanwhile, a new website, remadeinbritain.com launched as the first dedicated shop window for businesses repurposing some of the 280m tonnes of waste the British produce each year. More than 300 retailers have registered already, selling everything from furniture to lighting, via clothing, jewellery and accessories. There are also sections for suppliers and salvage, courses and events. Its founder, Donna Fenn, says she has been overwhelmed by the response, but not entirely surprised. “We all know the figures on how much stuff is thrown away, and we all want our homes to be individual,” she says “We’re bored with all the stuff we can find on the high street, and it’s refreshing to see things that are new in terms of design.”

Of course upcycling is hardly a new invention. Reusing found objects has long been a big part of folk art, and came of age in mainstream culture during the 20th century through artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Joseph Cornell. Historically, in the home, things were not thrown away but reused or turned into something else, be it old sheets into rag rugs or holey buckets used as planters. A quick flick through the internet throws up hordes of sites offering inspiration on what to do with your old stuff.

Needless to say, the trend has been big in America for a while, where there are hugely popular websites such as Hipcycle.org, an online retailer selling everything from tumblers made of old vodka bottles to salt and pepper shakers that were once glass insulators.
There is some disagreement to what upcycling actually is – and what it isn't. But broadly speaking, where recycling is the process of converting materials into a different product, upcycling converts waste materials or useless products into new things that are of better quality. As Aaron Andrews, creative director at The Gifted Few, a company that sells vintage industrial lighting and contemporary homeware puts it, “taking an object or item that has been lost, forgotten or become useless and fiving it a new lease of life – so a factory wall lamp becomes a stylist desk lamp or an old tired pallet becomes a coffee table.”

At its most basic level, upcycling can be repainting an old piece of furniture. This has itself become a “thing”. Annie Sloan is the doyenne of painted furniture. She developed her own chalk paint in 1990 has written 20 books on the subject and now has over 900 stockists worldwide. She says that she has seen the trend rocket. “Financially it’s sensible and it’s also very practical because old furniture is generally nicer, well made and incredibly endurable.”

But the upcycling look doesn’t have to be folksy or cute – as Sloan points out, incorporating older pieces into an interior is a very old-school, grand British tradition – as a nation, we like that old, slightly faded glamour look, complete with beautifully frayed silk curtains and peeling paint. Sure enough, even at the top end of the market, designers are incorporating beautifully made upcycled pieces into their work.

The interior designer Sarah Stewart-Smith, for example, creates beautiful benches from ancient wood and Perspex with copper inserts and gorgeously soli kitchen tables from reclaimed church pews and hand-cast aluminium bases that wouldn’t look out of place in the most chichi of interiors magazines. Others are trying to subvert the whole idea that a newly revamped interior has to mean ripping everything out and starting again: Victoria Meale set up her interior design company in 2009 with the specific aim of trying to drive change within the industry by conserving existing resources and reducing waste in projects.

Inspired? If you want to do it yourself, all you need is a little imagination, a bit of time and an experimental attitude. “The important thing with upcycling is not to be afraid of doing it again,” says Clio Wood, aka Clio The Muse, who runs her own upcycling business making pieces, running classes and carrying out interior design projects. After all, she adds, “you’re upcycling it in the first place.” In this game, reworking something is always the way up.