

Furnishing Concern

Upon walking into Jerry's Antiques, I was taken by the smell of timeworn wood. Piled on top of green linoleum flooring are more pieces of antiques than I thought possible. The sun melts in through skylights, then through stained glass window panes that hang from the rafters, highlighting the dust floating through the air. Furniture from the 1800's, 1700's, 1600's, 1500's, and it never seems it stop. The air is thick and stale, but every piece is breathtaking. And within a few more steps, I forget it's the 21st century.

Jere's Antiques on Bay Street here in Savannah is run by Jere Myers. His massive historic warehouse holds thousands of pieces of furniture hailing from all over the globe, passed down and preserved generation after generation, and each piece is truly a spectacle to behold.

When I buy furniture, I think of three things: Do I like it? Will it fit in my home? Can I afford it? As a college student I know the importance of convenience and cheapness. It can feel like that's all that matters. However, there actually are other aspects to consider. What is that coffee table you have made out of? Where is it coming from? How long will it last? According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, in 2009 over 9.8 million tons of furniture were been thrown away. It shocked me, and brought to mind something I hadn't given much thought to before, that our choices regarding furniture actually have consequences. Not only do our choices affect the success of individual furniture stores--buy local!--but they greatly affect our environment in terms of air and waste pollution, and climate change. This got me thinking that it

may be time to reconsider what criteria are important to consider when buying furniture--where we get that furniture from. It may be time to consider the consequences and our alternative options.

Towards the back of Jere's Antiques lies a staircase to a loft that contains massive tables and shelves. In the next room another staircase leads you up to yet another lofted space. There are three separate second floors, each packed to the skylights. One floor even holds nothing but chairs. Chairs stacked on chairs, stacked on tables. Chairs hanging from the steel rafters. If you need a chair for something, it's most in this room. If you need a chair for anything it's most

definitely in this room. A warehouse packed to the brim might seem familiar, but one that's packed with quality furniture is rare. Here you are surrounded by a collective history that feels like magic. Jere pulls out a couple seats for us at a long



dining table on the second floor. The sunlight still pours through skylights here, illuminating the golden brown wood and ornate carvings that run along the arms and backs of the chairs.

Just about every day of the week Jere has people coming in here asking some variant of the question, 'Do you think this will hold up?'

“And I look at them and I go: ‘It’s 80, 90, 100, 110, however old it is, years old. What are you going to do to it that hasn’t been done?’ He looks at me matter-of-factly. “Now, go buy it from Pier One, and be prepared to go buy another next year.”

Jere has been in the antique business for 43 years, and he sees the misconceptions surrounding the word ‘antique.’ “The general word antique turns a lot of people off, scares a lot of people, out of sheer ignorance. If you don’t understand what you’re looking at, you have no idea of value and worth,” he tells me. Maybe it’s because of this that people actively do not buy furniture from antique stores. Their mentality turns into, *You’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all*. But if we are willing to put a little more time and effort into finding our furniture, we may just stumble upon a place like Jere’s, a place where we are introduced to a whole different experience than when we walk into somewhere like Pier One.

“I’m privileged,” he tells me. “And I feel honored to offer something to those people that want something that is worth having.”

Besides that fact that buying antique furniture is almost guaranteed to outlast cheap, mass produced pieces, the process of how each piece is made is also something to consider. An antique piece made of solid wood and nails has a much different impact on the environment than a piece made from glue and particleboard.

Just a few months ago Jere was asked by his customs house broker, the gentleman responsible for going through all the furniture being imported, if some of his particular pieces were solid wood. Of course they were, but never in his 43 years in the business had Jere been asked this question. Why now?

We've been aware of the mildly dangerous chemicals lurking in our furniture for quite some time now, but just last year the EPA set new regulations for imported wood products, particularly things that are not solid wood, such as particle board, plywood, medium-density fiberboard and plastic. Specifically, what they're on the lookout for is formaldehyde in these products. You've probably heard of it before; formaldehyde is an organic compound that becomes a gas at room temperature, and it's in our furniture. We are breathing it in every day. According to the U.S. government's Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), it is defined as a respiratory irritant that can cause chest pain, shortness of breath and nose and throat irritation. It has been linked to an increased risk of asthma and allergies in kids. Even worse, at higher levels it can also cause cancer. Formaldehyde is in most furniture today, and overtime it's levels in your furniture will die down through ventilation. But there is a way around this, to avoid bringing chemicals into your home altogether: buying used or antique furniture.

Most of the time, we aren't purchasing from antique stores because of the price. We can't always afford to fill our homes with antiques and it's understandable. But as we make our choices about buying our furniture, we need to be more aware of our process, and that we have an intense need for instant satisfaction. We want our home furnished as soon as we can. We think getting everything from Ikea in one weekend is the best option, and we think it's the cheapest. But is it really cheaper when we are replacing it all within the next five years? We need to rethink how we go about this. "You would save your money and might buy a chest of drawers. Done. That's all the damn furniture you're gonna buy that year," Jere says. "Next year, you save

some money and go out and buy a table that year, and slowly over a period of time your house got furnished.”

Jere’s stuff is priced accordingly. A hand carved dresser from the 1600’s is priced at \$1,000, as what it’s worth. It certainly won’t be able to compete with the price of the dresser you saw at Target, but it will almost certainly outlive it. And the lifespan of our furniture needs to be a priority. If it’s not, we are not only adding to the clutter of our own lives but to the astronomical amount of waste we create every day.

Buying furniture for long-term use is clearly not a priority for businesses. Just a few years ago, Jere had a gentleman, also in the furniture business, come in his store. Working in the hotel business, his company created what was known as 36-month furniture. Most hotels refurnish their rooms every three years. The pieces are built to last for three years, and then they’re thrown away, because by that time, they are falling apart.

As a college student, by the end of each semester I see mountains upon mountains of furniture and other items that are thrown away simply because the students are moving. The furniture waste we create each year doesn’t go unnoticed. There are many companies that will come and remove old furniture and other things we call junk from our homes. One company is working hard to ensure these mountains of things do not end up in the landfills. Junkluggers was founded in 2004 and prides themselves on being an eco-friendly junk removal company. I spoke with Keith Tenuto, the franchise owner of the Junkluggers in the North Atlanta market to get some insight into what a company like this sees and how they deal with it all.

“In our line of work we find a lot of houses that have that cheap furniture and it’s hard to find a donation center that will take something that is broken,” Keith says. “It does contribute to furniture that gets thrown away and sometimes there’s not much you can do with it.”

From estate sales to hoarder jobs, Keith and Junkluggers has seen it all. With their main goal being to keep this stuff out of the landfills, the company always goes that extra mile to carefully sort through it all and seek out local charities to donate it to. “Our big corporate goal is to keep all items out of landfills by 2025. And we live by it,” Keith says.

Keeping your furniture waste out of the landfills shouldn’t only be Junkluggers’ concern, but ours just as well, because we are responsible for what we waste.

“It’s something that will take a learning curve and an educational standpoint that some people don’t have,” Keith says. “I don’t know if people will put in the work and take the extra time to do that to know where that furniture is coming from.”

In an effort to combat furniture waste, carefully looking for specific pieces and buying antiques are great options to consider. But as I said before, I know it’s not realistic to think everyone can afford to fill their home with antiques. I certainly can’t. However, another great option is refurbished furniture. Whether you’re heading out to a lumber yard and putting in the work yourself, or seeking out the hundreds of companies that will do it for you, refurbishing old furniture can be an incredibly rewarding project.

On busy Victory Street in Savannah, a large green and white Victorian house sits on the corner. The massive sign on the side reads ‘Vintage Woodworks’ in bold red letters. Scraps of wood and large tables and windows sprawl out over the parking lot in the blistering sun. A man

named Philip hobbles over to me hunched far over his cane. His peppered gray hair hangs over his forehead, and a bright orange t-shirt engulfs his small frame. We sit down in the shade in office chairs in front of a small plastic table displaying a full ashtray and a small pink foam



crucifix. Philip has worked here for the past ten years refurbishing old pieces and encouraging people to buy used or rehabilitated furniture themselves.

Refurbished furniture is great not only because you are

reusing the pieces, but it makes for a fantastic opportunity to create a unique piece for your home. And when the time comes to switching out your furniture, selling a unique refurbished piece will most definitely be worth more than a particle board desk from Walmart.

The pieces around the lot sit propped against the building, some dirty with old, cracked paint jobs. But those problems are easy to fix. Most importantly, each piece is solid. Solid wood that will be here for the long haul. “We try to only buy solid wood, Philip tells me. “You can

have a good solid piece of wood furniture that will last a lifetime.”



The options are endless when it comes to refurbished furniture. Almost anything you want can come to fruition, it's option that allows for endless creativity in our furniture. “There are people who come in to buy other pieces of things to incorporate into projects, to make windows into tables, and doors into headboards. And it's a great way to recycle,” Philip says.

By educating the people who come to his shop, he's encouraging a cycle of reusing and upcycling furniture for the community around him. “We try to encourage people to buy the good pieces, wood pieces,” he says. “So they do have pieces that they will cherish through their lifetime and pass it on to their children. They become family heirlooms.”

After talking to Jere, Keith and Philip, when I buy furniture I try to think differently. To slow down and think about the larger impacts each purchase is making, and try to make the best

decision. There are so many little steps we can take to ensure the furniture we are buying is best for us, will last us a long time and has a minimal impact on our environment. If we take the time and make the effort to be concerned with our furniture, we can make progress and inch towards a better conversation about it.