

Opening new doors

Donna Hurtubise changed careers and now turns discarded doors and windows into useful items



Donna Hurtubise took up heritage carpentry in her mid-40s. Appreciating the craftsmanship in decades-old doors and windows, she lovingly restores them, then converts them into unique hall trees, hall mirrors, cabinets, tables and headboards.

Photograph by : Wayne Cuddington, The Ottawa Citizen

Michele Oberoi, Citizen Special

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It's a hot July evening in Ottawa, so even with the doors wide open, Donna Hurtubise's east-end woodworking shop is exhaustingly warm.

But as she enters the room, Hurtubise appears cool and energized. She drops her ladybug purse on a small table and surveys her domain with pride.

"It's a work in progress," says the heritage carpenter, standing amid the various saws, hand tools, wood pieces and partially completed projects that fill the shop, which she shares with another woodworker.

Heritage carpentry, a special form of carpentry that uses traditional construction and preservation methods, is a dream come true for Hurtubise, who returned to school to learn the trade in her mid-40s.

"I had a shift in my thinking and I just needed to do something different," she says of her midlife career change. Before hoisting a hammer, Hurtubise was a successful specialty leasing manager in the shopping centre industry.

Although the two-year program she took at the Algonquin College Heritage Institute in Perth gave her the know-how to renovate old homes, Hurtubise decided instead to turn her hand to creating useful items out of reclaimed doors and windows.

"I like to think I'm saving them from the landfill," she says of her raw materials, which she often purchases from the Ottawa Habitat for Humanity ReStore.

Hurtubise keeps an eye out for doors and windows in the 80- to 100-year-old range, as well as for old hardware. "It has to have something charming about it, or unusual," she says, gently touching a battered old door she found in the Glebe.

Hurtubise takes these roughed-up doors and windows and lovingly restores them, then converts them into unique hall trees, hall mirrors, cabinets, tables and headboards. "All of my stuff is hand-painted using water-based paints, stains and varnishes. It's all eco-friendly."

Retaining the original flavour and colour of the article is important to Hurtubise, who enjoys scraping off layers of paint added over the decades. "I love doing it. It's therapeutic," she says, opening her photo album to a picture of an elegant off-white headboard that was once a five-panel door painted an unattractive khaki green. To turn another old door into a masculine gentleman's hall tree, Hurtubise uncovered the original white paint, leaving the numerous chips and scratches untouched. She placed a

vintage mirror behind the door's glass panes, and painted the window frame dull black. The addition of a matching black bench built by Hurtubise on the bottom of the door, a black cap on the top, two black vintage-looking hooks and the preservation of the original doorknob ensure the hall tree will be a beautiful addition to its new home.

The off-white entrance mirror standing beside the hall tree is a more feminine piece that is equally attractive and serviceable. For this makeover, Hurtubise added a shelf and magazine rack she built onto the base of the door, under the mirrored top flat panel. The additions have been painted and finished in an antique style to match the rest of the door.

Asked why she prefers to use old doors and windows for her designs, Hurtubise expresses respect for the carpenters of the past. Heavy, solid wood and primitive tools mean yesterday's doors and windows were not easy to make. "It was a real talent. They're not easy to do. There's a lot of craftsmanship that goes into them."

As for the spark that compelled her to change career directions? "You just know it's time to do something different."

Michele Oberoi is an Ottawa writer.

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Hurtubise Houseworks

For more information, contact Donna Hurtubise at 613-321-9683,

or by e-mail at donna.hurtubise@sympatico.ca. Samples of her work are on display and for sale at Creative Floor-Worx, 857-A Bank St., and at The White Shop, 223 Dalhousie St.

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