Everything old can be new again

Upcycling reflects modern design, cost effectiveness and sustainability

A reclaimed traffic light lens and vintage glass insulator combine to create a stylish light fixture. Photo courtesy railroadware.com.

Upcycling is the process of turning unwanted materials or useless products into a quality new product with the added benefit of keeping what was once trash out of a landfill. It's an evolution of recycling, which generally breaks down unwanted materials and turns them into similar new materials. On the other hand, upcycling also lends itself to creating something more valuable than the original material or, at least, more unique.

The trend has grown significantly over the years, reflecting a growing interest in environmentally friendly products at a reasonable cost. And websites, like etsy.com, have sprung up to showcase and sell these handmade items. Just three years ago, Etsy sellers tagged fewer than 8,000 items with the word "upcycled," according to Wikipedia. As of May 2013, that number stood at more than 265,000.

A unique bracelet fashioned from vintage typewriter keys – etsy.com

Companies are exploring ways to make upcycling profitable, too. U.S.-based TerraCycle, one of the more prominent companies in the space, focuses

on finding ways to create something new from discarded packaging or other materials that can't be recycled. The company has turned worm waste into fertilizer and "trash" into bags, notebooks, clocks, clothing and countless other items. Some companies are creating garden and design materials to incorporate in upscale homes. For example, IceStone makes a durable, sustainable slab that mimics quarried stone but is made from recycled glass, cement and pigments.

Personal upcycling isn't limited to craft projects. Consider the creativity and design that goes into making unique furniture, jewelry and clothing that is more ultramodern than campy or shabby chic. For example, upcyclers have created chandeliers from old bicycle chains, modern chairs from the ends of old claw-footed bathtubs, and elegant dresses from discarded peanut candy wrappers.

The beauty is just about anyone can create something new with a little ingenuity and a sewing machine or some power tools and paint. The results could range from useful to funky, from self-expression to an imaginative side business. Ultimately, it's about creativity and reinvention, as well as saving money and the environment.

For many people, it's also a real way to create a quality piece at an affordable price. New graduates, for example, may turn to upcycling to furnish their first apartments, decorating in a style that reflects who they are. More established families may consider the old-is-new trend to save money for other things, like investing or saving for a down payment.

Inspiration for upcycling projects abounds on the Internet. Sites like pinterest.com, upcyclethat.com and inhabitat.com feature do-it-yourself projects, and many retail sites sell upcycled items.

Ménage à Trois sofa, courtesy of Transfodesign.info

Converting a non-recyclable refrigerator into a funky sofa is part of the imaginative process for the designers at Transfodesign. The couch is coated with paint free of VOCs (volatile organic compounds) and features cushions made from recycled advertising banners.