



Ch. 13: Furniture

The ins & outs of acquiring secondhand furniture for your home.

BY PERMACRAFTERS



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Let's get into acquiring secondhand furniture for your home. Cristina and I have both had a lot of experience furnishing our homes with secondhand stuff. Cristina started doing this because she was on a budget – hauling items from the thrift store on her bike, and now she continues to do this for environmental reasons and because she's fallen in love with thrifting.

And in my case, the past 5 years, I've lived in 9 different places. That includes 5 places I called my own, and 4 AirBnB or shared home situations.



In that time, I managed to furnish my different homes and stock them with household items 100% secondhand every time – I couldn't imagine what it would have cost to have bought new furniture and kitchen gear each time and the waste associated to that. In this section, we'll be focusing on getting used furniture, specifically. The first time I moved into an unfurnished apartment, I was 27. Up until then, I had been lucky enough to live in already furnished places.



Where to find it

Ask friends and family

The first time I had to fully furnish my home, it was a small apartment I got when I moved to the States from Europe. I have to say I sort of cheated and had it easy. My grandma and mom lived 45 minutes away. My grandma was downsizing from a large house to a smaller house, and my mom was getting rid of a bunch of her extra furniture, including a king size bed. So I had absolutely nothing to do. I took the basic furniture they gave me that I needed for my small apartment as well as all the extra kitchen items my mom and grandma were giving up, and I literally had everything I needed to be comfortable within 24 hours of moving in. If you have it easy like that, jump on the opportunity because that's definitely the best case scenario!

I ended up using that furniture for a long time while I lived in the States for those 4 years. I would drag the furniture from home to home. When my partner and I moved in together – we scored a super cheap but quite large home compared to the miniature size apartments we had gotten used to. His furniture and mine filled most of the house, but we did end up thrifting for things like ottomans for the house.

Our biggest challenge was when we moved overseas to Switzerland and we decided not to have a car there. We couldn't bring any furniture with us from the States because not only would it be ridiculously expensive and not covered by his employer, but it would take months by boat. So, the only large items we ended up bringing overseas with us on the plane were the essentials, which were our daughter's high chair and her fold-up travel bed. Everything else, we got secondhand in Switzerland.

Basel is a 3 hours drive from where my dad lives in Geneva, so again, I used my family connections to get us furniture. We got lucky because there was a ton of furniture that my father wasn't making use of in his house, like mattresses, chairs, bedside tables, a TV stand, small dressers, crates, a small table, an old desk, carpets, and lamps. It really helped us get the basics and he was happy to pass them on to us. But what he had wasn't quite enough, we had some more essentials we needed. So we told our family & friends that we were on the lookout for furniture. My father let everyone know and within days he had hooked us up with neighbors of his down the street that were moving out and were looking for folks to take items off their hands. They passed on a ton of furniture to us for free, including a couch, a coffee table, and shelving units, and even threw in some kitchenware. My father put all this in his garage and it was waiting for us when we landed in Basel.

It made our move super easy, because we got a moving company for a ridiculously good price to pack everything up and move it for us. So if, like us, you're moving to a place where your friends and family will be nearby, and you won't have a car, ask them for help.

Secondhand Furniture Stores

If you are moving to a place where you know no one, or where your friends and family can't help out furniture-wise, check out secondhand furniture stores. The furniture in my experience is inspected and they offer such a big selection that it makes sense to go there to pick up a bunch at once.

Here in Basel, there's an organization called EcoChair that helps English speaking ex-pats – and really everyone –



to find used furniture to furnish their home. They offer free delivery in Basel and ship to all of Switzerland. The cost of going with an organization like this is steeper as they inspect the furniture and list every single item on their website and deliver locally for free. But if you want the convenience of picking out your items online and for them to be delivered for you, this is a great option.



In the States, a similar group called Kaiyo also does this and lists all their pieces online. They deliver on the East Coast around New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Kaiyo inspects all their pieces prior to pickup to make sure there's no infestation or hint of one. Then they professionally clean all their items after pick up. Their team is well trained in bed bug inspections from a bedbug specialist in the industry.

Apartment Therapy Marketplace also sells vintage furniture online, as does Chairish. Chairish also sells used furniture that's more modern.

Thrift stores with secondhand furniture

For more affordable options, there are thrift stores with large furniture sections. The furniture may not be closely inspected here, so it's worth asking to check. But there's an amazing store like this in Basel that makes buying secondhand furniture very easy because you can buy multiple items in one go.

Antique Stores

Antique stores sell used furniture as well, but it will definitely not be cheap like at a thrift store.

Yard Sales



Yard Sales Yard sales are a place I personally feel comfortable getting used furniture from, as long as I get a good feeling from the seller. We scored big at a garage sale here in Basel just a few blocks from our house. We got a super comfortable armchair and a marble table for under \$40 and the guy was super nice and helped us carry it to our place.

Flea Markets and the Street

I wouldn't recommend getting furniture from flea markets or that's laying on the street unless you're used to inspecting furniture for pests. I'll gladly pick up things like hangers or books from the street, but mattresses or couches I wouldn't dare get from the street. I did take a body-length mirror from the street once.



Rental

If you are needing furniture for short-term use only, you can even consider renting furniture. Cort offers furniture rental services in the States.



Potential Problems

What are some potential problems you might face when trying to furnish your home with secondhand furniture?

Unsafe Antiques

When you're buying antiques from flea markets or individuals, you might be getting a piece of furniture that contains lead. This is something you definitely want to be careful with. Serious antique stores will test the furniture for safety.

Pests, Allergens and Mold

Another thing you really have to be careful with is pests, allergens or mold. And before I get into all of this, remember that secondhand stores that specialize in furniture often have the furniture inspected closely beforehand so that you don't have to worry about any of this. Pests are more of an issue if you're buying from an individual, a random thrift store, and definitely if you're getting something off the street.

For mold it's quite easy. If you're buying a carpet for example, checking for mold is pretty straightforward. If there are circular brown or white or green or black stains on the carpet, then that's mold. If it smells pungent or musty, that's also mold. If it feels moist to the touch, it's definitely mold: don't buy it.



For bed bugs, it's a way bigger pain. Bed bugs leave you with red itchy bumps that can get very painful. They can get into carpets and mattresses and couches and upholstered furniture. So how do you avoid bed bugs? I personally avoid bed bugs on trust alone. I have to fully trust that the person who is getting rid of their item did so because they were moving or didn't need it anymore. For the 2 mattresses I've used secondhand, my dad found them for me on his CERN

work webpage for Items for sale. The items were only listed by other employees who were moving out of their homes and needed to get items off of their hands.

Whenever I have felt like the buyer is someone I could definitely trust, and they were getting rid of it only because they were moving, I was fine taking their mattress. And I haven't had any issues with the two secondhand mattresses I've used.

But you should absolutely be careful of bed bugs in other circumstances. Never get a mattress or carpet or upholstered furniture that's out on the street that's been exposed to the elements. If you don't know at all where it comes from and you find it in a thrift store, it may be infested with bed bugs. Bed bugs are notoriously hard to get rid of because they can survive 18 months without food. What you can do is check for signs of bedbug infestation, but it won't always be obvious. But you can look for blood stains. Look for bedbug fecal spots and skins that have been shed. There may even be signs of bedbugs on the nearby walls and clothes. Bed bugs are visible to the naked eye, but they do a great job hiding. A simple inspection like this might be futile if the owner vacuumed the mattress to get rid of the trail of bed bugs. So you may very well have bedbugs on your hands. Bringing bedbugs into your home takes a few minutes with an infested mattress, and it's a monumental task to get rid of them and you'll most likely need a pest-control expert. Even box springs and bed frames can contain bed bugs. All furniture can contain them, but their preference is the bed.

Dust mites are less of a problem, and you can't see them with the naked eye. If you aren't allergic to them, they won't be a problem at all because they just feed on dead human skin cells. But if you are allergic to them, it can lead to sneezing, coughing and itchy eyes for example. To get rid of dust mites on your mattress, you'll first want to wash your sheets and pillowcases at a high temperature. The pillows should be put in a bag and frozen in the fridge for 2 days. To get rid of the mites from your mattress, you can sprinkle baking soda on it. After a half hour, vacuum the mattress with a HEPA filter to trap all those small particles that would otherwise recirculate into the air. Of course if you have a severe allergy, you can call pest-control.

In fact, if you have allergies, forget shag rugs because they trap all sorts of messes and allergens. If you are allergic to pet dander, you'll want to ask previous owners of any mattress, carpet, or upholstered furniture if they had pets. You can vacuum the furniture or carpet or mattress with HEPA filtered vacuum, but depending on how severe your allergy is, that may not be sufficient.

If you're getting wood dressers, you'll definitely want to check for signs of infestation too. Wood furniture can be infested by termites, woodboring beetles like powderpost beetles – all beetles in this category are often referred to as woodworm, and even carpenter ants or bed bugs.

So how do you make sure you're not getting infested furniture? Well, if you're talking about bed bugs, as I mentioned earlier, it's not always obvious that they are there. It's less likely bed bugs will be living on wood furniture, but if it's coming from a house with a nasty bed bug infestation, it's perfectly possible. Be very careful with wood furniture – I would prefer to know the history of the furniture.



Some woodboring beetles like powderpost beetles enjoy eating furniture that hasn't been treated with wood preservatives. You'll find small round holes in the furniture and fine wood dust by the holes. These pieces of furniture can be treated with insecticide or with professional fumigation, but if you're using an aerosol insecticide, the larvae deep inside the wood will likely survive.

Termites can also infest furniture. You can tell because they leave pellets behind them. You would have to get rid of the termites with a surface treatment, a heat treatment, or fumigation.

Furniture infested by carpenter ants is easier to detect. You'll see ants on the furniture if you inspect it and small openings in the wood and sawdust. They'll usually attack this furniture if the wood is rotting or too moist.

So for most pests, it's easy to tell if they're attacking the wood, but for bed bugs, it's not obvious, so I would be very cautious to not bring bed bug infested wood in my home. You may end up using up more environmental resources and money just because fixing the problem is such a pain.

Mismatched Style



Another potential problem or disadvantage is mismatched style. I'm very laid back about the style of my home. As long as the furniture is functional and looks relatively good and is more or less matched with the other furniture and decorations in the house, I'm happy with it. However, if you have a very specific style in mind for your home, you may not find exactly what you're looking for. You can probably get close to what you

want – if it's wooden furniture or glass or wicker furniture you're looking for. But the furniture might not all match perfectly. You might have to be patient before finding an item you're really in love with. Or you might want to do more digging to find a set of matching furniture for sale.

Time & Convenience

The tricky thing with furnishing your home from scratch all secondhand, is that unless you are ridiculously lucky, it's unlikely you'll be able to stop in one place and get literally everything you need in one go. It won't necessarily be as easy as walking into Ikea and choosing every single item right then and there that you want. Unless, you are moving to a town that happens to have a really neat organization like Kaiyo that offers you a big selection online of

furniture to choose from and delivers to your door. Or unless you have family nearby that's downsizing and ready to give you all the items you need at once.



What I recommend if you are starting from scratch is to focus on getting the essential furniture in the first few weeks like a bed to sleep on and a table to eat on. This will make you home at least functional. You can work from there to get the rest in the following weeks. If you can afford it, you can even hang out in an AirBnB for the first few weeks while you track down the items you want to collect. If you don't have a car or friends nearby with a car, you'll need to get organized. If all the items you want are in different places at different times, you're not going to want to rent a truck or car each time. So you'll have to get organized if all the items you want are in different places. You'll want to have the vendors save the items for you - you can pre-pay - and then once you have everything you want, you can rent a truck and swing by all the places to pack your truck and then move it all into your home. If, like us you live in the city, the rest of your home essentials you can carry from the stores on foot or by public transportation.



Buy New

If you prefer to buy new furniture, check out companies or small business owners making furniture out of reclaimed or recycled materials. Our good friend Mike custom-makes tables, bed frames, cat trees, bars, and more. He is self-taught and learned all his skills through books and through trial and error.

You can also go for high-end companies like Emeco that sells a single chair for over \$300. And if your wealthy aunt and uncle only respond to luxury items, this is a great way for them to support used materials being turned into new ones. Here are a few companies you might want to check out: Emeco, in the States, sells all sorts of expensive chairs made from recycled aluminum, recycled PET, reclaimed wood polypropylene, previously used wood, eco-concrete or cork. Axyl makes chairs from recycled materials as well. Pentatonic is a UK company that makes furniture from trash. Tristan Titeux does this as well. In Mexico, there's Luken which sells high-end chairs and tables made from recycled plastic bottles and wood-fiber. Wherever you are located, look up to see if your local furniture store sells such pieces.

Even large companies are starting to make their furniture from used materials. Ikea is not a company I personally want to support in general, but I'm pleased to see that in 2017, they began selling a kitchen made from recycled plastic bottles. And now they are selling used furniture in the UK as part of a trial, and started a textile recycling program in the UK. These are great necessary steps forward.



How to fix

If you want to restore old wooden furniture, you could take your item to a furniture repair store or an antique restoration specialist. If you want to do some basic restoration yourself, you could strip your wooden furniture, sand it, and then put on varnish or paint it. You can strip off the finish with sand paper. Or for a less energy-intensive process, you can use a stripper that's non-toxic – I found a biodegradable stripper by Super Remover for example. Have a look around. Then you'll want to use low-VOC paint and varnish on top.

Otherwise, if your sofa has an imperfection, you can always cover it with a pretty sofa blanket. Same this with wooden furniture – if it has water marks or burn marks or imperfections, you can place an object like a lamp on top of it. Cristina's old fridge had nasty scratches on it, so she covered it with magnets, for example. You can definitely get creative to cover up these scratches and dents.





How to get rid of it

If you're looking to have your furniture sold, you can post it on Facebook Marketplace or Craigslist for example and the buyer is responsible for getting organized to pick it up typically. I sold my king size bed on Craigslist, for instance, and didn't have to worry about carrying that monster out of the house. Otherwise, there may be a furniture consignment store by you like Kaiyo, so that's worth checking.

If you wish to donate your furniture, and it's more than just a simple table, some organizations will come to your house to pick up the furniture. You just have to schedule a pick up time with them. Salvation Army does this, as will Goodwill, Habitat for Humanity, AMVETS, or the Arc. In Durham, there's an amazing company called Trosa that will pick up furniture and sell it in their thrift store. They are a nonprofit that offers a multi-year residential program to those recovering from substance abuse.

If your furniture is contaminated by bed bugs or something of the sort and you're looking to get rid of it, you'll want to make sure someone else doesn't take that item. First, contact your mayor or town representative to ask if special pick-ups need to be made for infested furniture – or for furniture in general. If that's not the case and the furniture will need to be in the street, you'll need to write in large letters on the item that it's INFESTED with bed bugs or termites and then make that item undesirable by cutting it for example.