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# Chico architect turns old railroad hardware into home decor

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In a recycled world, everything old can be new again. Castoffs can take on entirely different shapes and styles, serve totally new purposes. But sometimes, the second time around can bring past charms into the home.

Railroad spikes as towel holders? Traffic lights as chip 'n' dip platters? All it takes is imagination and, yes, the right set of tools.

Browsing an antiques store, Chico architect Tim Leefeldt was intrigued by vintage glass insulators, the kind used on old telegraph and telephone poles.

"I loved the way they looked," he said. "I thought, 'There's got to be something I can make out of these.' "

Leefeldt, a tinkerer by nature, then got interested in odd iron clips, anchors and spikes used to hold railroad ties and rails in place. He started playing with these castoffs in his workshop, turning them into streamlined light fixtures, kitchenware, even modern sculpture.

The result: A whole line of Railroadware, more than two dozen household items, all using artifacts of a bygone era. "I call it Railroadware because all these items originally could have been seen at a railroad crossing," Leefeldt said.

His reclaimed, reimagined housewares are showing up in stores in the Sacramento area as well as at [www.railroadware.com](http://www.railroadware.com). His work is featured in the current Sustainable Art and Architecture design show at Butte College in Oroville.

Leefeldt turned an assortment of e-clips – they anchor rails at crossings and intersections – into kinetic sculpture. One of his lamps is also on display.

An offshoot of the college's recent sustainable living conference, the gallery show – with 167 submissions from almost 100 artists and architects – celebrates the possibilities of new life for unexpected items. Paul DiPausque created a samurai statue out of platters, china, forks, antique jewelry and other found items. Another artist turned heaps of scrap metal into a huge hanging heart.

"There's a very romantic nature to artists," said Hillary McNeill, who curated the show. "We

tend to fall in love with material and texture. We see the possibilities in a lot of things.

"We're always striving to make something beautiful out of what we find around us. We live in a society where we consume a lot of stuff, so there's a lot of this material to work with."

Some items, such as glass or ceramic insulators, are attractive on their own. Their form – undulating ridges with a beaded bottom edge – followed their function: keeping wire connections dry and separated from poles. The shape helped draw condensation down and out.

Millions of these glass domes once sat on poles nationwide. But technology turned them obsolete.

"There are dozens and dozens of designs," Leefeldt said of the insulators, which are collectible in their own right. "Some are more than a hundred years old."

Because insulators were so common, Leefeldt has found a large, affordable supply from wholesalers. He's turned them into pendant-style hanging lights, wall scones, salt shakers, candleholders, soap dispensers, plant pots and dishwasher aerators.

Insulators also form the core of larger lamps, incorporating another castoff: colorful lenses of traffic and railroad lights. "Cities now are replacing heavy glass lenses with lighter plastic or poly-carb lenses in their traffic lights," he said. "So, there are a lot of those available, too."

The lenses make natural lamp parts; they have a beautiful sheen and deep color. But Leefeldt has also used them like glass platters or bowls. "I come up with all sorts of things, like a chip 'n' dip set," he said. "It's whatever strikes my fancy."

Nancy Lindahl, owner of Zucchini & Vine in Chico, carries several Railroadware items. She also has acted as Leefeldt's "product therapist."

"He's really inventive," she said. "He has a mind that just won't stop."

As with insulators, there's no shortage of railroad spikes and clips. Every railroad tie used sets of the heavy anchors. "They were made to last," Leefeldt said. "And they have, sometimes for a century or more."

When railroad lines are repaired or updated, up comes the old, often rusty hardware. Leefeldt acid-washes this not-so-raw material to clean it up but lets it retain its character. The metal is then treated with an oil and wax coating to keep its vintage look.

Spikes become kitchen knobs, towel and toilet paper holders, bottle stoppers, door stops, pot racks and door hardware. He's paired them with rail clips and washers to make handles and door knockers.

"I'm not a train buff, but I know the hardware," Leefeldt said. "I also know that it can be wonderful material to work with."

#### WHERE TO LOOK FOR REPURPOSED HOME CREATIONS

Finding artistic new uses for discards is a popular trend. Here are examples of creative second lives that retain a hint of the items' original purposes.

- Wine bottles: In California, more than 2 billion sturdy green bottles are used by the wine

industry each year. Besides being recycled into new glass products, the empty bottles have been flattened into platters, cheese plates, bowls and other service items to accompany the vino. Winetini.com also markets repurposed wine and liquor bottles as night lights, salt and pepper shakers, tree ornaments, candleholders, even menorahs. Bay Area-based Vetrazzo turns shattered wine, beer and liquor bottles into countertops – with bits of the labels still visible.

- Wine barrels: Another wine-industry byproduct is a huge supply of oak barrels. Besides planters, the used barrels have found new life in furniture, from tables and benches to bar stools and rockers. Calistoga's Paul Block has earned renown for his barrel creations. (See [www.winebarrelfurniture.com](http://www.winebarrelfurniture.com).)
- NASCAR tires: A coveted conversation piece for high-octane man caves, tables using a race-worn tire as a base are popular with NASCAR fans (see [NascarTire.com](http://NascarTire.com)), but those big blackwalls have other uses, too. The Sprint Cup series consumes about 600 tires per race; that's more than 24,000 a season. Instead of dumping the 20-pound tires into landfills, companies such as Goodyear (NASCAR's tire provider) have started turning them into such products as patio pavers and shredded rubber mulch. Entrepreneurs also make beverage coolers out of NASCAR tires – perfect for tailgating. (See [www.speedwaymotors.com](http://www.speedwaymotors.com).)
- License plates: Our car culture churns out millions of discards every year. Crafty entrepreneurs have turned them into handbags, belt buckles, bookends, CD holders, teapots and much more. (See [www.etsy.com](http://www.etsy.com) and [www.inhabit.com](http://www.inhabit.com).)
- Car parts: For folks who want to take their favorite model – or at least parts of it – out of the garage and into the living room, discarded cars offer a wealth of material. Take that backseat and make it a couch. (See examples at [www.route66store.ch/autosofa](http://www.route66store.ch/autosofa).) Michigan's Carniture.com turns classic car parts such as hubcaps and steering wheels into end tables and other fun furnishings.

– Debbie Arrington SUSTAINABLE ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Where: Butte College Art Gallery, 3536 Butte Campus Drive, Oroville

When: 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday; 10 a.m.-7:30 p.m. Wednesdays; through Nov. 21

Admission: Free

Details: (530) 895-2877

For more on Tim Leefeldt's Railroadware: [www.railroadware.com](http://www.railroadware.com). Several products are also available at Zucchini & Vine, 204 Main St., Chico, and at [www.lightingdirect.com](http://www.lightingdirect.com).

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