

Santa Fe Real Estate Guide **home**

October 2010

Inside Adobe Walls • A new downtown condo
Architectural antiques

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home

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A light-filled living room in a new, fourth-floor condo in downtown Santa Fe. See *Inside Adobe Walls*, Page 32, for more about this property on the market.

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Talkin' about architectural antiques

By Paul Weideman

There's nothing like the earthy, rustic quality of architectural antiques to add substance to a New Mexico home, courtyard, or garden. And if you prefer being surrounded by gleaming, newly manufactured surfaces, a well-placed object bearing the marks of age and human hands may yield a contrasting soulfulness.

It's not hard to find architectural antiques in Santa Fe. Jackalope and Seret & Sons are obvious places to check out. It may be valuable to look into these fascinating items with a designer like Pam Duncan of Wiseman & Gale & Duncan Interiors.

Cost is an unavoidable consideration. "When I travel, I find things, but it can be very expensive to bring them back," Templeman said. "I was in France and I found a table, fantastically priced at just \$1,500 for a beautiful, elm, 500-year-old farm table, but it was going to cost me \$4,000 to bring it here."

For Pam Duncan, "Making furniture out of whatever we find is a joy because those are things you can't do with new, purchased furniture. I've made architectural antiques into headboards, I've used them on fireplace mantels and as fireplace surrounds. Sometimes we make pieces into lamps or table vases. We had some wonderful porch posts from Peñasco years ago that I'm sure someone used inside as decorative features."

In her showroom are small tables incorporating an old tray and an old basket. Looking at a 17th-century, Spanish chest, she said she's thinking of making an interesting, iron stand for it.

"That's what we're all about," Duncan said. "You can't do an interesting space without a few interesting pieces. Maybe the clients have a piece of their own they want to showcase that we can make into something. We do things that are tailored for each client, and that's what a designer does: you work with the person and the space."

A prime source for architectural antiques and custom doors, windows, and furnishings made from such pieces, is La Puerta Originals. The company, formerly in the Santa Fe Railyard, is now on N.M. 14, just south of Interstate 25.



Before and after — Materials in the antique, Pakistani doors at left were used by La Puerta Originals to create the vanity pictured above

Duncan stressed that both antiques and antique-based pieces — such as decoratively carved strips that can be added as accents to furniture — should harmonize, culturally, with the home or room.

"We generally have used architectural antiques and fragments from Guatemala and Mexico and France. Sometimes we use a piece from the Philippines, because the Spanish were there and that works well."

The smooth, earth-toned surfaces in a typical "Santa Fe Style" home curiously works with many décor varieties: Asian design is one that seems to work as well as New Mexico Spanish colonial. And architectural antiques go with almost anything, if done tastefully.

"There's no reason why a contemporary house can't have an interesting element that isn't a contemporary piece," Duncan said.

She takes trips for the purpose of finding things to import, "and when I look at something, if it's an interesting something, I can figure out a way to use it."

The first thing you notice are the oceans of old doors lined up in the extensive inventory yard.

"The myth is that we're just a salvage yard, just selling old doors," said Scott Coleman, who owns La Puerta with his wife, Melissa. "We do still sell old doors, but most of our work is tearing apart old doors and manufacturing new products for new construction entirely out of the antique materials. 'People walk along here and see doors. I just see wood to make doors out of.'"

The 23-year-old company's marketing materials say it has "the world's largest collection of antique doors including Spanish Colonial and classic antique mesquite Mexican doors, teak and pine doors from Southeast Asia... ornate carved columns and corbels, antique carved cabinets, dowry chests, reclaimed beams and ceiling timbers, antique tin ceilings and roofing material, and cast-iron railings."

The materials, dating from the 18th century through the early 20th century, have been collected in Northern New Mexico and from Mexico and a dozen other countries in Latin America, Europe, and Southeast Asia.

It's easy to wonder if La Puerta isn't robbing these countries of wonderful, antique doors and other materials, but Coleman insists that all the stuff in his inventory would otherwise have ended up in those nations' landfills or as firewood. "You're not going to come to La Puerta and find a perfect door," he said.

In Duncan's store, you may notice the beautiful *vargueño* or traveling desk from Bolivia. It's an example of a straightforward antique piece, ready to go. Then there are items like the glass coffee table built around a lovely, antique piece of French iron grillwork, and the glass lamp made of what was once a chandelier pendant.

A third category is populated by "nuevo antiques." Santa Kilim, for example, sells true antiques from Morocco, Afghanistan, and India, as well as new pieces made by artisans in Santa Fe and Morocco, based on old designs.

Barbara Templeman, Barbara Templeman Interior Design and insideOUTsantafe, said, "In my work, unless the client specifically wants an antique, I love good reproductions. I'm more concerned with the design aesthetic than how old it is."

Looking at some fantastically carved, but dilapidated, doors from Egypt, Coleman said, "To me, the patina on an old door is sacred; it's like a Jackson Pollack painting."

Inside the building, one room offers scores of samples of surface finishes. Next door is the company library, with photographs of completed pieces filling hundreds of volumes; they're organized by type, such as round tables and entertainment centers.

In a large wood shop, artisans fabricate custom doors, cabinets, fireplace mantels, beds, wine-storage racks, vanities, and flooring, most constructed using invisible but rugged mortise-and-tenon joinery. Many finished pieces boast intriguing combinations, like the refrigerator-door panels from reclaimed barn wood sharing space with cabinets fronted with antique tin paneling.

La Puerta employs 30, down from 50 a few years ago. That 30 doesn't include the acquisition half of the business, which is done by contract.

"Business has been OK," Coleman said. "It's a tough climate, but our business is all over the country now. Less than 10 percent of our product last year stayed in New Mexico."

A few pieces getting ready to go in September were a 12-foot, Japanese-style entryway arch bound for Lake Placid; a shuttered window going to Lubbock, Texas; and a \$3,800 feature door for a new restaurant in Florida.

"We don't make things for sale. We work by custom orders, and it's based on people's budgets," he said. "So rather than just telling someone this door is \$5,000, we ask them what they want to achieve and how much they can spend, and we'll design a solution that meets their



A find at Wiseman & Gale & Duncan Interiors: religious figures from Guatemala dating to the late 19th century. Below, interior designer Barbara Templeman created this coffee table using an old chicken cage from Mexico.



budget and comes as close as possible to their aesthetics."

The design side of the business is first and foremost. "The design appointment includes a tour of the inventory yard and provides a brief cultural history of the material as well as provenance," according to the La Puerta catalog, one of the coolest, little company catalogs you'll find anywhere.

One interesting design on view during a recent visit to the La Puerta shop was a tall and wide cabinet with a round insert — a sculptural circle in a square — for in-room firewood storage.

On another piece, a finished door showed hinge/strap indentations from its original use. "For some people, that will be their favorite detail," Coleman said. "Someone else might love the door except for that."

Designing and furnishing a house is, of course, all about individual taste.

"I only have 17 years of experience in Santa Fe," Barbara Templeman said, "but I think people still want a mix. They come from other places and want to incorporate their things, so architectural antiques are used as an accent. For me as a designer they have more impact if they're visually isolated. If they're used in a clean, contemporary environment, an antique as a coffee table becomes a centerpiece."

In the best circumstance, if the budget allows, a new-house project will begin with meetings between the client, the architect, the builder, and the interior designer. Templeman agreed, but added, "for some reason, architects here don't think of involving the interior designer until later in the process. It would be nice if there was more collaboration."

Templeman uses architectural antiques in many different ways.

"If I am planning with the architect at the time a home is conceived, we can use them for accent doors and windows and in garden walls. Also filigree ironwork can be used similarly in an opening in a wall or in windows or a door. Stone is also fun to work with. Old column capitals and fountains from Spain and Mexico, France, and Italy look really nice in a garden environment."

She has created coffee tables from antique, weathered doors and frames fabricated from wood or iron. Another table was based on an old, Mexican chicken cage.

Where did she find that antique item? "At an estate sale in Santa Fe," Templeman said. "Another good source for these items is Antique Warehouse in the Railyard, and I have used La Puerta. And I watch for things driving around New Mexico."