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# Don't Cry for Us Argentina

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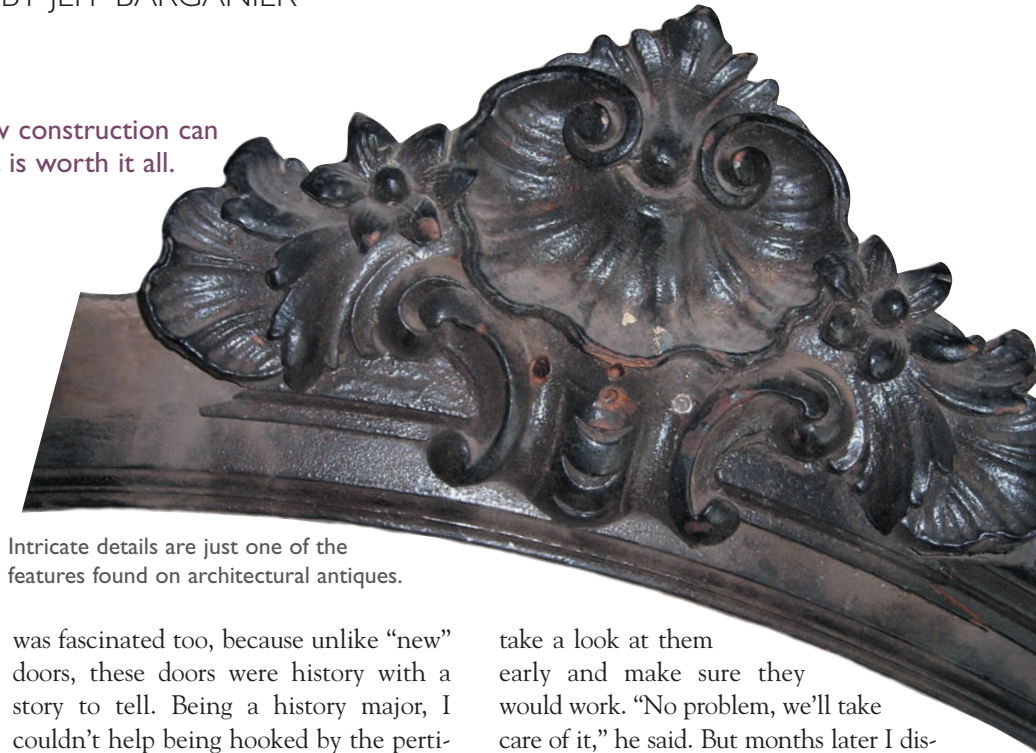
Using antique Argentinean doors in new construction can have its ins and outs, but the end result is worth it all.

After a feature story last year in *Architectural Salvage News* about Cindy E. Barganier Interiors' use of architectural antiques in new construction, the firm was deluged with contacts from vendors interested in supplying our needs. It just happened that Cindy herself was in the market for some fabulous entry doors for her new shop when an e-mail arrived with a picture.

As her husband and business manager, I can tell you with authority that Cindy does it right or she doesn't do it, and like our daughter, she's very adept at getting whatever she wants from me—especially since I work for her. Of course, she vehemently disputes that. "We work together," she reminded me. I got drafted into her interiors and architectural antiques business a few years ago when I abruptly sold my company after some-twenty-odd years, went home and kicked my feet up. But the blood in my feet hadn't quite reached my knees before she put me back to work.

First, I constructed a headboard of old garden gates. Several projects later—after she realized what a gold mine I was—she showed me a picture of some large, black, antique doors featuring bars in the windows, reminding me of clients I defended years ago as a young attorney. "I've found the perfect doors for my new shop," she said. "See! They're salvaged from Buenos Aires, Argentina! Let's get them!"

"Oh, honey, they're gorgeous," I replied with a gulp. "They look very umm...heavy." And then I asked, "How much?" I remember her first words: "They're only..." But I missed the rest. I



Intricate details are just one of the features found on architectural antiques.

was fascinated too, because unlike "new" doors, these doors were history with a story to tell. Being a history major, I couldn't help being hooked by the pertinent questions: Who made them? What kind of wood are they made of? What fabulous home in Buenos Aires did they once adorn? How old are they? What was *their* story?

Weeks later, I met the delivery truck in the Home Depot parking lot. They had been transported on their side in a makeshift frame and must have weighed at least 600 pounds. It took three strong men, ropes and other devices to extract them from the tightly packed trailer and place them on the bed of a special truck with sides that folded down. I drove them to the turn-of-the-century designed "traditional neighborhood development" known as The Waters where we live and work in Pike Road. My friend, Carlos, used a massive forklift to ease them into a barn where they rested while construction on the town center and Cindy's shop progressed.

We asked the construction foreman to

take a look at them early and make sure they would work. "No problem, we'll take care of it," he said. But months later I discovered there were, in fact, serious and soon-to-be expensive problems. My very first lesson: Never assume that modern-day builders will automatically know how to make architectural antiques work with new construction. Soon, I was being told that in order to meet "code" the doors must open out. And Cindy's doors were designed to open in. Unfortunately, they would have to be taken apart and reassembled to make that happen. And when I asked the foreman who could do the work he just kind of shrugged and rubbed his neck. In other words, I was on my own.

After a couple of weeks of asking around I finally located a crew of five tall, lean, long-bearded characters. JR, Butch (also known as ZZ Top) and Joel stood out. They looked sort of like the bad guys in a Clint Eastwood western but sported cool tools rather than six-shooters. I soon learned to appreciate them for what they were—master-craftsmen who had learned



their trade in the trenches. They quickly convinced me they could do the job and soon had the massive 9-foot, 7-inch tall, 4-foot-plus wide doors detached from their jam and the jam dismantled.

While my guys generated great clouds of dust, the other crews on site were choking and gasping for air. But my bearded craftsmen seemed unfazed; indeed, they were joyful as they bragged incessantly about what awesome doors these were and what a privilege it was to work on them. “What’s this going to set me back?” I asked. They just stared at the doors and pulled on their beards. (Except Joel, who laughed maniacally.) “Come look at this!” Butch said, changing the subject. He scratched on the jam with a pocket knife. “This is solid mahogany. These doors need to be stripped and refinished. They’ll be incredible! I can’t believe somebody painted over this beautiful wood. And look here.” He pointed at a date written in black paint on the unpainted side of the jam: 1809. “What’ll it cost to strip them and refinish them?” I inquired. But, as before, they just pulled on their beards.

With JR and the boys dominating the entire space, the other subs couldn’t get their work done. I nervously decided to let JR take the doors out to his place in the country where they could work undistracted, take their time and properly refinish them. They gathered up the two tall, narrow mahogany doors with their serpentine tops, their massive ball-bearing hinges, the hand-carved shell that sat atop their center and the walnut carved panels that adorned their bottom. They gathered the heavy Spanish iron grills and the glass doors that were shaped to fit over the grills and the hand-carved outside centerpiece fluted column with ionic capital. They loaded all into their old dilapidated blue truck along with their tools and tentatively lurched away into the sunset. I scratched my own three-day-old beard and thought I heard Joel’s maniacal laugh as they drove away. Then I imagined little green dollars streaming from the shop and racing after them down the dirty construction-exit road.

A week or so later I was itching to have a look, so I called JR one evening and asked if I could pay a visit. His place was 30 miles out in an adjacent county. The doors were kept in an old metal building about a hundred yards behind his mobile home. A row of old dead trucks and cars lined the muddy road back to the shed, making my high-mileage Volvo nervous as she fought for traction. It was late evening, but I was pleasantly surprised to find JR hard at work, as well as Rita, whom I was meeting for the first time.

Unlike “*new*” doors, these doors were *history* with a story to tell.

They were very gracious and so excited about the doors that I could not help but feel proud. Rita almost cried when she spoke of what an honor it was to be a part of the project. I watched as she engaged in the tedious cleaning of the intricately carved fixtures.

They’d discovered that one of the doors had been badly damaged and then hastily repaired.

Apparently, many years before in Buenos Aires someone had knocked out the lower one third of the left door with a concrete block. Fragments of the block were found beneath a compound that had been plastered over the gaping hole left in the wood. Equally thrilling, pieces of a Buenos Aires newspaper had been stuffed into the cavity. Rita had painstakingly removed the newspaper and neatly deposited little scraps in a plastic bag for me. One piece read Domingo...de Diciembre 1, 1968.

Perhaps this shattered door belonged to a prominent, maybe political, Argentine family whose home in December 1968 was the target of revolutionaries? Or maybe a bomb had exploded in the street sending shards of concrete smashing through the door that just happened to be in the way. If only these doors could talk!

With much of the stripping completed, Butch showed me glimpses of what the finished reddish mahogany would look like. I was elated. Cindy would be also, I knew, as would many future visitors to the town square at The Waters, amazed at the sight of these gorgeous creations.

With Christmas 2006 days away, Cindy and I were excited to meet Rita and the guys at the shop the morning they brought the doors back. That’s when I discovered that, because the right door was mitred for an inside swing, if the left side was bolted, the right would not open at all. So we had to reverse the hardware and the security sensor. I visualized yet more little green dollars poking their heads from the shop and dashing away through the trees.

This first experience incorporating antique doors into new construction taught me much. First, matching trim for antique doors is very expensive and can cost as much as \$400 per foot. Two, hardware manufactured by a firm in Argentina almost two centuries ago can’t be matched. Third, don’t leave parts lying around—We lost some original hardware. Fourth, you must guard your finished product diligently to keep someone from deciding they would look really swell blue and painting them for you. And finally, no one gives estimates on these projects because they don’t know what the work entails until they get into it.

I’m embarrassed to say what I spent. So I won’t. But I shall be well prepared if I ever do this again. And if *you* ever embark on such a project, feel free to call. I’m now somewhat of an expert. As for these lucky doors, they’ve found a new home and no studio in the country has doors like Cindy’s. They’re unique right down to the wonderful brass grab-bars and little mail slot with the Spanish inscription CARTAS. And if, in their glorious rebirth, they *could* talk, I’m certain they would say: “Don’t cry for us Argentina! We’re doing just fine.”

Jeff Borganier is an attorney, entrepreneur and freelance writer. ML