marterLiving In Home

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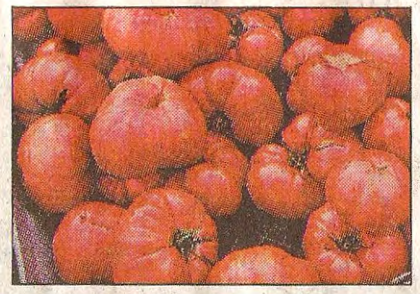

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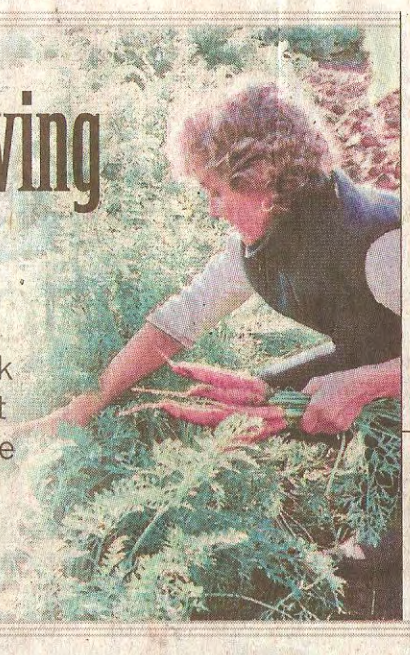


Price a makeover online

REAL ESTATE

ALLEN NORWOOD

You've used Zillow to check on the estimated value of your house. (Confess. You know you have. Maybe even your neighbor's house too.)

Now you can visit Zillow to check the estimated cost of that kitchen or bathroom makeover you've been dreaming about. (Or, say, your neighbor's new kitchen.)

Zillow, the most widely recognized of the online home value search tools, earlier this month introduced a new feature that estimates the cost of remodeling projects. Called Digs, it's offered as a free app for the iPad and online via the Web.

Digs uses a proprietary algorithm that factors in room size, materials and labor, including regional differences. Just visit Zillow.com, click on Digs and select a picture of a bathroom or kitchen that catches your eye. You'll have plenty of images to choose from.

I'm not sure how accurate the estimates are.

It can be tricky to generalize about remodeling costs. When I've helped judge Charlotte remodeling contests, for instance, I've heard architects, designers and contractors debate the costs of projects we were reviewing. Did that $40,000 kitchen actually cost $40,000? Was it more? Or even less?

If the top local pros struggle, surely an app will, too.

Often contractors don't discover expensive problems until they start pulling things apart. And remodeled spaces often are part of larger projects, for which room-by-room costs can be hard to nail down.

But Digs is fun, and you certainly will learn some important things about where your remodeling money goes.

The estimate for one sleek, contemporary bathroom was $19,000. On the materials list, cabinets and flooring accounted for $1,900 each – or 10 percent each – of the total. The most expensive item was the $2,400 shower, followed by the $2,300 bathtub.

Smaller things – paint, lighting, the mirror – added up quickly. There's an important lesson to learn from Digs.

Here's another: While tile

Success BY THE yard

The textiles at Modern Fabrics are popular with customers tackling home decor projects and with crafters who make quilts, totes, handbags and pillows.

ROBERT LAHSER - rlahser@charlotteobserver.com

Ewa and James Powell own Modern Fabrics on Camden Road in Charlotte. The store offers designer fabrics rescued from cutting-room floors of area furniture companies.

Shop that sells salvaged furniture fabric scores with the DIY crowd

HILARY TRENDA
htrenda@charlotteobserver.com

A Charlotte fabric store is making a name for itself turning furniture factory leftovers into eclectic do-it-yourself projects.

Modern Fabrics – started by James and Ewa Powell in January 2007 – has found its niche salvaging new fabric otherwise headed for the landfill and offering it to the public through their online store and South End shop.

James said the store does two things: It keeps thousands of pounds of fabric out of the waste stream and offers it at a discount to people who may not otherwise have access.

The Powells work with a dozen furniture factories around the state that use designer textiles that James said are typically only available to professional designers "at exorbitant prices."

The Powells said they've been surprised by the number of people looking to tackle their own projects. "We thought we'd have a lot of professionals shop here, but they're only 8 to 9 percent of our revenue. So 90 percent is soccer mom-DIY projects, and it should be," James said.

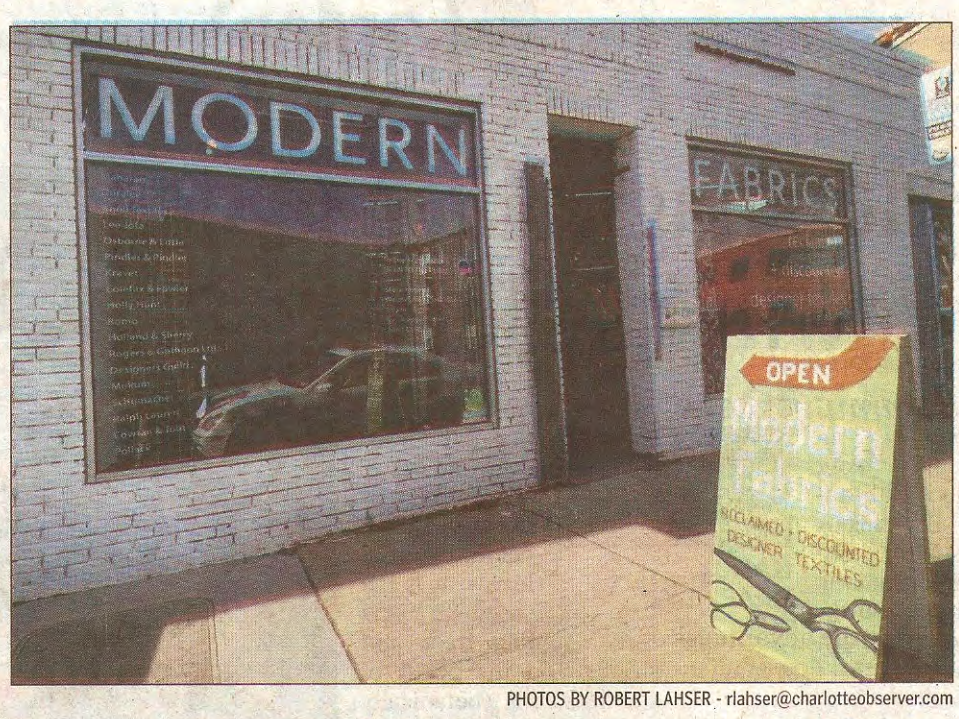
"If I can do it, they can do it. They save so much money doing it that way. Instead of paying an arm and a leg, you can spend an afternoon. People are doing it by necessity, or because they want to, to have that satisfaction." Their customers also in-

SEE FABRICS, 4H

Details

1504 Camden Road, Suite 300
Charlotte, NC 28203
704-740-9675
Hours: 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday or by appointment
Online: www.modern-fabrics.com/fabric-roll

The Modern Fabrics blog, The Fabric Roll, is at www.modern-fabrics.com/fabric-roll
Email: service@modern-fabrics.com



PHOTOS BY ROBERT LAHSER - rlahser@charlotteobserver.com

The owners have been in their South End location for about a year and half. The store is open 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday or by appointment.

FABRICS

[*from 1H*]

clude quilters and crafters who use the textiles to make totes, handbags, pillows and more.

"We always ask for pictures of their finished products for our blog, because people need to see what people can do with this stuff."

James worked five years at different North Carolina furniture factories and saw firsthand the amount of virgin material being tossed out. His existing relationships with the companies helped the Powells get their website started.

"We used to have to knock on their door, and now they call us. To them, it's industrial waste," James said of the fabric they save. "Not a lot of people (offer this service or product) and they know we pay a premium for their waste."

The Lincolnton couple, both 37, celebrated the fourth anniversary of having a brick-and-mortar store in January. They've been in their current location about a year and half, after they outgrew their first retail space of about 1,700 square feet on East Park Avenue within a year of opening. They just had too much inventory.

"James has a gift for collecting fabric," Ewa said with a laugh. "We only had room for one employee; two people couldn't pass in the aisle. I'd watch people come in the door and stop short ... it was too overwhelming."

"We heard through the grapevine American Apparel (was moving to SouthPark) and we jumped on it. Nothing else felt as safe, as friendly and as community-oriented as South End," she said.

Now, with nearly triple the space, Modern Fabrics is organized by yardage and color, from 1- to 3-yard pieces of upholstery to rolls of 16-plus yards.

And it's not just beige couch upholstery: there are rolls of leathers, vinyl, neutral linens, richly toned velvets and prints ranging from houndstooth and paisley to plaids and mod florals.

James said the average price per yard is around $22, though high-end decorative fabrics such as velvets and mohairs can be over $30. "We try to fit everybody's budget with various fabrics and quality."

The store has bins priced $5.99 per pound of fabric and leather remnants to $3.50 per square foot for some cuts of leather.

Janet Allen of south Charlotte has been a designer for 35 years. She heard about Modern Fabrics through other local designers and now comes into the store frequently.

"I find lots of great things, I love their availability and mixture of designers," she said.

"There's a lot of one-of-a-kind (fabrics), and the designer brands they carry are all high-quality and high end."

In addition to shopping for her customers' furniture, Allen found some printed Ralph Lauren fabric that her daughter's friend made into a dress for Allen. "I get so many compliments."

Ewa said she's proud to be able to offer the variety that was otherwise bound for the trash heap. "I love that people are amazed by the quality and designs. It's exciting. People leave saying, 'You have the most beautiful fabrics.' They come to be inspired and we're like the curators of this fabric museum."

James said they pick up fabric anywhere from every two weeks to once every six months. At some companies, they're able to handpick the fabrics they want; at others, they have to take it all.

Going to warehouse or store

The fabric is then either sent to the warehouse in Lincolnton and put into their online store, or brought into Charlotte.

James noted the Charlotte market has an advantage over mail-order customers, because they can see in person what's in the store.

"We purchase 5,000 to 10,000 yards of fabric per month," he said, noting they don't sell that amount in a month. But they have a good idea what will sell best depending on the market location.

"Charlotte is more traditional. The fabrics people prefer are neutrals, linens and basics," he said. "Most of what sells to urban areas and the West Coast (is) modern, contemporary, funkier stuff, brighter colors."

Ewa said their national client base reaffirms they're offering something different from fabric store chains. "We get calls from all over the country," Ewa said.

What's next for Modern Fabrics? James said they'll likely hire more staff to help process the fabrics and get them onto the sales floor more quickly.

They've toyed with the idea of opening another location, but James said they strive to balance business with their personal life and children, Kora, 9, and Henry, 7. "We've found a nice middle ground. We love what we do and pinch ourselves every day. We're blessed, we found a great market and we're very fortunate."

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Modern Fabrics is organized by yardage and color, from 1- to 3-yard pieces of upholstery to rolls of 16-plus yards.

Do it yourself

Modern Fabrics co-owner James Powell provided this rough guideline for how much fabric is necessary for various DIY projects.

- 3/4 yard of fabric: two dining chairs.
- 1.5 yards of fabric: four dining chairs or two pillows (depending on size of pillow form.)
- 1 3/4 yards: six dining chairs.
- 3 yards: up to eight dining chairs or an ottoman.
- 4-6 yards: headboard, smaller armchair.
- 9 yards: wingback chair, small loveseat.

TAKE A CLASS

Need some help with the technical aspects? Central Piedmont Community College offers "Introduction to Sewing" courses starting at $155. Details: www.cpcc.edu.

Designer Dana Phillips pulls out upholstery fabric from among rolls of leather, vinyl, linen, velvet and prints. Average price per yard is around $22.