

Storage unit puts clutter back on shelf

Portable steel shelving proving popular in condos

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BY DEE GIBNEY

When Pieter de Koning got married in 1998, he moved into his bride's 650-square-foot, one-bedroom apartment in Toronto. With him came a truckload of engineering textbooks, toolboxes, photo equipment and piles of hockey gear.

To his new wife, Rachna, clutter was anathema. Pieter, on the other hand, loves to be surrounded by scrapyards flotsam and jetsam, the raw material for the metal sculptures he assembles in his spare time.

Thoughtfully storing his grinders, saws, woodworking and welding machines at his father's Brantford workshop was not enough. Rachna wanted built-in shelves in the apartment's long entrance hall to hide the mounds of guy stuff.

"To get at something at the back of the closet, we had to unload the whole closet," says de Koning, who is a product designer for Xerox. "It was putting a strain on the relationship."

Because they weren't planning to stay in the apartment for long, de Koning didn't want to put time and effort into building something they couldn't take with them when they moved.

So he designed a portable system. Before long, anyone who visited the apartment wanted it, too. Soon, he was making them for friends.

"I wasn't thinking esthetics when I made it," he admits. "I'm a practical person. I wanted something strong."

The initial system consisted of welded brackets or collars that slid over metal pipe poles anchored to the ceiling. The brackets supported the shelves.

But he found that design to be too labour intensive because each one was welded by hand. And adding or taking away one shelf meant dismantling the whole system.

So de Koning went back to the drawing board and developed a two-piece cast iron assembly- a split clamshell bracket that can be mass produced, as well as unbolted to allow a single shelf to be added or removed.

"My wife likes to redecorate and to move things around a lot, so she was the source of many good solutions," de Koning laughs.

"I like tinkering in the garage and, at first, when people requested them, I thought this would be a good way to make some extra money to buy more shop equipment and a motorcycle- recreation type stuff," he adds.

But then a friend in sales came along and saw its potential. He approached Brian Garrison, general manager at UpCountry, who needed little persuasion.

"I immediately saw the versatility, especially for the condo and loft market," Garrison says. "And we love the fact that it's local."

Now a condo builder is considering offering the system as part of his upgrade package.

The system, named Stronghold, does not need to be fastened to a wall but relies instead on a secure base and ceiling combination that allows the posts to be tightened to a torque that resists slippage. Components can be ordered individually as needed and range from \$1.50 for the ceiling anchor and screw assembly to \$39 for a double shelf bracket.

The poles consist of black metal pipe, which can be ordered cut to size from most industrial steel suppliers for about \$9 a metre. They come in 6.4-metre lengths so even the loftiest of lofts can take them. Large wall hangings or artwork can be hung in between the poles at higher levels.

The hardware is available in 50 colours of powder coat paint, or they can be clear-coated.

An average-size unit with two poles and several shelves would cost about \$500 to \$700 to build yourself, depending on the type of shelf.

Shelves can be made of MDF, plywood, glass or even specialty wood such as those at UpCountry, where the 3-metre floor model sells for \$3,720, reduced from \$6,200 for hand-planed solid black ash shelves.

The Stronghold shelving series is available at UpCountry and Style Garage. Components can also be ordered directly from the company at 416-271-7640 or [strongholdfurniture @ sympatico.ca](mailto:strongholdfurniture@sympatico.ca). The Web site is www.strongholdfurniture.com.