



Skip the souvenir shop and scour an estate sale

Sanctioned snooping in a stranger's home combines the joy of thrifting with a dash of immersive theater

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Go to enough estate sales in [Brooklyn](#), and you'll start noticing the same books, the same crystal cake stands, the same Christmas linens. You'll recognize the picture frames with real glass, complete sets of china, little porcelain knickknacks and aging magazines with paper that flakes when you touch it. Nose around, and you'll see the original moldings, the chipping paint, the magnificent windows that overlook tree-lined streets. The similarities among houses form a bingo card of lives well-lived and people well-loved.

Or so I choose to assume.

In New York, estate sales are a rare opportunity to snoop around a stranger's home. Undeniably voyeuristic and unquestionably opportunistic, the patrons of estate sales scavenge through the remains of the dead and the downsizing, haggling to get the best deals on whatever's left over after family and friends have pocketed their fill of mementos and unexpected treasures.

Once they give us their blessing, us vultures and resellers drop in, shimmying curtains off their rods and lugging armoires down flights of stairs either to flip in a thrift shop or in an effort to infuse the newly constructed cinder blocks we live in with the character of a bygone era.

It's not a thrift store; it's immersive theater with a gift shop.

Since moving into a new apartment in September, I have taken to visiting estate sales throughout New York City to piece together a space that feels like home. After living in two dorms and renting out five bedrooms within the last 12 years alone, I was determined to decorate with intention, rather than settle for a wobbly hodgepodge of furnishings that followed me throughout my 20s.

Scouring through Craigslist, Facebook Marketplace, [Estatesales.net](#), Garage Sale Finder, and Nextdoor for upcoming sales, I dutifully add them to my calendar, occasionally researching the address with [New York Public Library's guide to discovering a home's history](#).

I haven't bought many things, but what little I've purchased — candle sticks, picture frames, a tin sign that I thought was vintage for days only to find a Bed Bath & Beyond sticker adhered to the back — dazzles in its mundanity. But I'm not looking for heirlooms. I'm looking for worn-in comfort.

I recently visited a 5,700-square-foot brownstone in Brooklyn Heights. Priced at \$7,750,000 and originally built around 1845, the house hadn't been on the market in 60 years, but after the recent death of the family's patriarch, it was in need of a new owner. In one of the six bedrooms, surrounded by piles of dusty books and black and white family photos, I came across a box of handwritten letters and personal documents.

Among the packet of contracts and architectural plans for a 1965 renovation was a shopping list scrawled out on the back of an envelope in well-practiced cursive: "Baby food, lettuce, eggs, mayo, carrots, tomatoes." In another box, there was a handwritten letter that started "Hello. Hello. Hello. How are you doing? Write to me and tell — you must be doing fine if you don't write, I figure."

That letter could have been taken straight out of my text messages.

I tore through the pages, flipping over postcards, glancing at itemized invoices for construction projects, gleefully — and guiltily — poking my way through decades of a single family's triflings. There were no big reveals or character arcs of intrigue. Truly ephemeral, entirely disposable, wonderfully intimate. More squares filled on the family bingo card.

As Alix Bleek, the owner of [Alix's Tag Sales](#), explains, most of the people who hire an estate sale company have been in their homes for around 20 to 30 years, long enough to accrue too much for the family to handle on their own. And while tag sales are no longer the place to find luxury goods — those items are generally handled by auction houses so they are sold at or above value — you'll find common household items ("every sale has an iron,"), antique bric-a-brac and outdated furniture at a fraction of their value.

"I tell them not to throw anything away," says Bleek. "People even buy railroad schedules from a long time ago because it's nostalgic."

On my way out of the Brooklyn Heights home, I remarked to the estate sale proprietor about the letters I had found. "Doesn't the family want them?" I asked. The woman said nothing, but emitted a weighty sigh, turning her face to the side with a huff. I thanked her and left.

Maybe it's morbid to play supermarket sweepstakes in the homes of the deceased. But a deal's a deal, making estate sales one of the only souvenir shops in the city worth a visit.