

Reuse Centers: Ways to Optimize Partnerships

By Sara Badiali

Like churches or pubs, reuse centers can be a pivotal gathering place. If done well, the physical detritus of the community flows through a reuse center. Neighbors stop and talk with each other over finds and projects, suggestions are made and advice is given. I've seen reuse centers inspire creativity that transcend individual projects and develop into community initiatives. Material with history motivates people to collaborate and build both projects and relationships.

Reuse Contests

Reuse Contests are growing in popularity. Over the years some contests have developed from community gatherings into grand events. Annual galas have grown out of simple DIY challenges. Nothing gets the competitive juices flowing like media coverage and a party.

The Post-Gazette and Construction Junction joined forces and created the Reuse Inspiration Contest. People sent in photos of their home renovation projects and three won tickets to the Big Pour, a beer festival sponsored by a brewery in Pittsburg. Construction Junction and the Post-Gazette in partnership with the brewery, attracted publicity but also provided the community with inspiration in creative reuse.

Other events like these include catwalks complete with fashions made from recycled materials. CART'M, a reuse and recycling center on the Oregon coast, holds the TRASHION show every year to a sold out crowd of hundreds. These contests have expanded into categories from structures that are integrated into buildings, to fine art displayed in local galleries. A community in Arizona established a yearly event called The Big Heap, complete with reuse categories and a market. The festival is so big now that it is a music venue for national bands and is covered by HGTV. Reuse contests are an effective platform for jumping off into greater reuse possibilities.

Curriculum Design

Schools and reuse centers are natural partners. Before leaving the reuse center where I worked was collaborating with interior design professor Amanda Davis of Portland Community College. We were developing a curriculum for students on how to design with reclaimed materials. We were focusing on the importance of scouting materials before designing, and frequenting reuse centers to establish types of inventories. In other words, to design well with reclaimed materials go early and often, to get to know your reuse center well. Then match your client's needs based on your material expertise.

For example, tile was always abundant where I worked, so a student could discuss saving money with a frugal client or selling a mosaic style to a creative client. Her design class would be required to spend half the day volunteering at the reuse center to handle the materials and see how they are categorized. The rest of the day would be spent in a design charrette working with the materials they handled earlier in the day. This keeps the students on site at the center learning about materials. It also benefits the center not only with volunteers for half a day, but with a generation of designers confident in reuse.

Educational immersion is an excellent learning technique, which produces exceptional results in students. It manifests in professionals reengaging with the businesses to which they have developed a deep emotional connection. The students from Amanda Davis's design class went on to win the design competition at the 2013 Portland Home and Garden using reclaimed materials.

House as Showcase

For many people seeing the potential in a material is challenging. Piles of hardware or stacks of used lighting components can look like junk. Retail outlets rarely show inventory without a display area. But reuse centers can be at the mercy of volumes of materials and few workers to organize them. The result is unappealing piles of product on shelves or the floor.

One reuse center tackled the issue of material languish by using inventory to decorate an entire house. Some reuse centers have display areas or even design rooms within their stores. But a lack of space can inhibit this option. By using a donated vacant house as a showroom, the reuse center sold items literally off the walls. Lighting fixtures, outlet covers, doors, sinks, paneling, windows, and many other random household items are displayed for sale in the home. Walking through the house, customers are able to see the items in context. Sales are made.

The display house's interior is ever evolving, which would make an interesting photography project. More importantly the material is moving, being sold to create space for more reusable components. Possibly the most important element is that people are inspired to use reclaimed materials. That the transformation of junk to viable product is as simple as displaying it in the right context. The other benefits of using an entire house is the attraction of interior design to reuse. The opportunity to stage materials is a great way for staff to show off their artistic skills. There is untapped potential in the artists and craftspeople that work in the reuse industry, especially in the reuse centers (after all, they work with the material every day).

Obtaining an entire house for the purposes of displaying reclaimed materials is not a viable solution for every reuse center. However, the materials are coming from somewhere and in some cases it's a house that is being demolished. There is widespread urban blight in this country. Many municipalities are struggling with abandoned houses and unfortunately entire neighborhoods are being demolished. Actively using abandoned buildings is an effective way of keeping vandals and crime in check. There is potential for partnerships in this area if you can just see it.

Business Evaluations

Partnering with educational institutions can go beyond the medium of reuse. Colleges and Universities frequently have business schools within them. The genius of students are that they are constantly problem solving (that is education after-all). Teachers and professors are often on the look-out for projects that enrich their curriculum with real businesses that are facing actual issues. Reuse centers, nonprofit or private, offer a unique case study opportunity. The fluctuating markets of reclaimed material, selling unusual and often unique products, and the volume of goods that are incomplete in some way, are amazing problems to solve. An executive director's nightmare can be a business class's educational goldmine. The return for opening up your business to a student evaluation, is a plethora of sharpened minds let loose to collect information, review data, debate, postulate, and innovate. It is their job to provide information and ideas that typically a business would never have time or money to do.

These types of projects are most effective if the reuse center is open and helpful in providing data. For example, in Ohio the Tristate Habitat for Humanity opened its doors to business students from Miami University. The Strategy Works teams shared statistical data about ReStore buyers, donors, and potential corporate partners. Each team provided research suggestions on how to more effectively market the ReStore.

All partnerships with schools and students benefit from the perspective that they aren't cheap labor, but professionals in pre-recruitment stage. If utilizing undergraduate students does not appeal, then consider contacting graduate programs. However, living in Portland, Oregon and constantly working with students, my experience is that creative gold comes from minds unfettered by established practices or "the norm". If open to it, learn from what companies like Widen & Kennedy and Nike already know, that when supported there is no limit to what young creatives can do for a business. Reuse centers can use educational partnerships in other ways like marketing, organizational development,

strategic planning, and board recruitment for starters. The benefits of collaborating with local educational institutions are limitless, and the stewardship of young minds is good business.

Artist Residencies

Art starts with raw materials and reuse centers are brimming with materials waiting to be reused. Thus, reuse centers are filled with unrealized art. What better way to showcase this potential than with an artist in residency? By sponsoring an artist to commit acts of creativity, reuse centers can show off inventory and potential use in unique ways. Recology is an artist in residency program at the Recology Solid Waste and Transfer Station in San Francisco, California. This program has sponsored over 100 artists since 1990. Artists have unlimited access to inventory and even studio space provided by the transfer station. Artists are required to speak to elementary school students and tour groups about using reclaimed materials and there is a two-day gala event for the unveiling of the finished artwork.

There are unlimited ways to partner with artists. The key is to find a good balance between experience, education, and the deliverable product. Some residency programs require the artist to donate the end piece to a gallery for permanent display. Other organizations hold an auction for the final product and use the proceeds for funding purposes. The unveiling, gala, or celebration for art is an important event. Reuse centers are utilitarian by nature, so to express the value of a beautiful creation make sure the party is off site and fancy.

Fine art is one type of reuse possibility, but reuse centers that carry wood will benefit from craftspeople who make custom furniture. For many people the desirability of having a custom piece of furniture by an artist, is a chance to own an heirloom. Reclaimed wood from a local landmark or historical building that is crafted into furniture, is a functional piece of history. When beautifully done these pieces really are unique, valuable for both their craft and their connection to place and time.

Partnering with artists and craftspeople in residency programs can facilitate unlimited opportunities. The benefits of partnership include supporting local craftsmen and burgeoning artists, but also funding opportunities. Art organizations have loyal patrons because many people feel strongly about supporting the arts. Reuse centers are in the excellent position of supplying materials for art, but also education in both craft and reuse. An organization that combines collaboration with artists, providing education, environmental benefits, and supporting the local economy in jobs and goods, is a great investment for funders. In many cases a reuse center can adopt an arts program with little administrative or policy changes, and the value is limitless.
