

“The Sense of Community at the Junkyard is Incredible”

Ever wonder what happens to your junk? Well, there are these Northern California reuse activists who made it their mission to transform our junk into a new kind of treasure. They perform this alchemical feat by harnessing the embodied energy from our discarded wealth, re-making use of the 'useless', and transforming our "junk" into tools to build and strengthen community. Very cool!

RECYCLETOWN AND BEYOND WASTE, SANTA ROSA, CA

A recycling center can be much more than a place for residents to dump old phone books. It can be a resource for activists, a shopping center for bargain-hunters, and even an attractive site for community arts events.

When residents in Sonoma County, California, want simply to do their duty, they'll pitch their recyclables into a bin for weekly curbside collection. But when they want to indulge in "junkyard philosophy," chat with others, or donate clothing, appliances, paint and the like for others to use, they'll head for Recycletown, the county's reuse/recycle center. Recycletown is operated by Garbage Reincarnation, a nonprofit organization, and managed by Judy Smith, a reuse activist who has spent years dealing with and thinking about America's junk.

The early stages of recycling efforts in this country promoted "cash for trash" and equated recycling with a greener, cleaner planet. But reuse, for several reasons, is superior to recycling, and Recycletown is designed to promote the virtues of reuse and to encourage people to recycle as a last resort. Among other things, reuse heightens interconnectivity and community, Smith asserts. As opposed to recycling, for which items are anonymously collected, reuse can't be done on a significant scale without some social interaction. Pavitra Crimmel, reuse activist, consultant, and Recycletown Founder, remarked that many of the reusable items that make their way to Recycletown's three sites are not immediately identifiable, unfamiliar to the public at large, or downright strange. "So you have to tell people what it is," she said, "and pretty soon everybody is talking." On an average day Recycletown attracts over 150 people. Crimmel remarked, "There is this sense of community at the junkyard that is incredible."

Recycletown is presently being relocated. The original Recycletown had a sense of place; the new location will maintain much of the original feel and design. A totem and four main buildings designed with a Wild West theme formed the core of the original location. Volunteers constructed the buildings in 1994 almost entirely out of reused building materials. The Corral housed all sorts of donated building materials; the Kitchen held electronics, clothing, and household items; the General Store dealt in furniture; and the Library, of course, in books. Reusable donations are accepted at no charge ("reusable" being a judgment call reserved

for staff), and purchasing is informal. There are no cash registers at Recycletowns, and customers usually collect all their desirables into one pile and barter for the lot. When functioning at full force, Recycletown sells more than 30 tons of reusable goods each month, which accounts for about 73 percent of its sales. Recycletown's three sites spare landfill at least 378 tons of trash per month.

Besides creating an interesting place and establishing operating procedures which encourage human interaction, Recycletown brings locals together for an annual "Scrapture" contest. Anyone may enter the junk-art contest for a chance to win cash prizes. The contest rules basically require only that all entries are built well enough to withstand some wind and are taken home at the end of the day. Garbage Reincarnation serves junk food at the event, and the Recycletown Players, a theater group, provide music and entertainment. Garbage Reincarnation also conducts educational tours, community outreach and research, and invites local artists to teach workshops.

Why Did I Buy It?

Reuse contributes to community building, and it is superior to recycling for other reasons. First, reuse preserves not simply raw material, but the embodied energy of the material; recycling uses energy. Further, recycling markets fluctuate, taking support for its programs up or down with the market. "Secondary materials are always used last," Crimmel said, which is why recycled products suffer when there is a poor world economy. "Manufacturers don't have this understanding that you eat your leftovers before you make a new meal." Also, recycled goods are rarely processed in local communities, and many end up overseas only to be bought back by U.S. consumers in the form of value-added products. In contrast, reuse benefits local economies because tinkering and repair shops tend to be local businesses. As products are increasingly designed to be irreparable, these small businesses will eventually disappear.

Finally, whereas recycling can lull us into a false sense of stewardship, reuse can get us to think about our culture of consumerism to a far deeper degree. "People feel good about recycling," Crimmel said, and added that, unfortunately, that good feeling may lead us to purchase things that should have never been manufactured in the first place. Since repairing items and disassembling them for their parts is more difficult than recycling, people often chose the simpler option. "People don't want to recognize what their lifestyle is causing to happen," she said, and recycling, taken at face value, can be a means by which to avoid that knowledge.

As a corrective, Crimmel recommends walking through our homes and asking ourselves several questions about each of our belongings: Why did I buy it? What

is it made of? Do I enjoy owning it? Could I fix it if it broke? How would it change my life if I didn't have it? What will happen to it if I don't want it anymore?

Crimmel said that large reuse projects, such as deconstructing entire buildings to reuse the lumber as opposed to sending it away to be chipped, make the value of reuse more easily understandable to lay people. Therefore, after several years in joint ventures with governments and nonprofits, Crimmel and two colleagues from Recycletown have opened their own dismantling business.

"My aim is to try to prove that you can do this kind of thing and still make money," she said. Their business, Beyond Waste, works with demolition contractors to salvage parts of buildings before they are bulldozed to shreds. "The big trick is to charge less than the bulldozer."

Some of what they glean they sell "as is" in their warehouse located near Recycletown, but the bulk of their business has been hardwood flooring and wainscoting made from Douglas Fir and other woods recovered from demolition projects. The marketing advantage is that this vintage lumber has imperfections—swirls and knots—that add character not found in commercial retail flooring. Beyond Waste has sold products as far away as Colorado and throughout Northern California. Another marketing trend they have uncovered is that customers are giving preference to contractors that incorporate recycle and reuse into their demolition process. In 2001 Beyond Waste trained low-income individuals to work in recovery of materials from California's historic Treasure Island.

Source: [The Democracy Collective at the University of Maryland](#)