

Case Study of Reuse Centers:  
The Loading Dock of Baltimore

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The Loading Dock (TLD) claims the distinction of being the “first successful, self-sufficient, nonprofit distributor of reusable building materials.” Because its primary organizational mission is to store and distribute surplus building materials, TLD accepts almost any surplus, reusable building material including “paint, lumber, plumbing fixtures, doors, cabinets, windows, caulks, moldings.”<sup>1</sup> TLD began as a clearinghouse for used and donated building materials in 1984 with an initial seed grant of \$35,000. In 1990, after a period of about five years, the organization achieved its goal of becoming self-sustaining, which substantially reduced its dependence on external sources of funding. In addition the organization attained greater visibility for its achievements when it was awarded two prestigious national awards: the Presidential Award for Sustainable Development in 1996 and the United Nations Habitat II “Building Communities of Opportunity” National Excellence Award. I visited The Loading Dock in Baltimore in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the workings of the organization. I also interviewed Ms. Leslie Kirkland, the Executive Director of the TLD. She joined TLD as an office manager in 1989.

According to Kirkland, the TLD was started by three founders who later went on to become part of the board of directors. “The board of directors has always been a pretty good mix of for-profit business and non-profit representatives. The board has always had heavy finance people to give us advice that ties into wanting to be self-supporting.” The presence of both for-profit as well as non-profit members on the board has been a source of productive tension that has helped TLD grow as an organization. The organization employs 15 full-time people with each person performing more than one task. For example, the office support person and two cashiers double up with reception and customer support.

The immediate rationale for an organization like TLD was the prevalence of substandard housing within Maryland. The Governor’s Housing Initiative of 1986 suggested that one out of six housing units within the state was substandard. A majority of substandard housing units were occupied by households below the poverty line. An adequate quantity of building materials as required to upgrade the quality of substandard dwellings as well as to encourage the construction of more affordable housing units. It was this niche that TLD has tried to occupy. As of 2004, TLD claims that it has rescued over 33,000 tons of building materials from landfills and saved 24,000 gallons of paint and other toxic chemicals from reaching landfills. Furthermore, it has saved low-income housing projects over \$6.7 million through reused materials. Both these examples suggest that a potential win-win situation is possible through reuse efforts.

TLD has witnessed dramatic growth in the first twenty years of its existence. It has expanded its warehouse area regularly by renting larger premises in different localities. The expansion is clearly evidenced by the about 800% growth from 1984 to 2002. In 2005 TLD is moving to even larger premises in keeping with projections of future growth. As Kirkland explained, “We figured a 15% increase right away n expanding space, which would allow more people to get more materials, and each year after that at least a 5% increase.”

Apart from being a repository for reusable materials, since 1996 TLD has become involved with deconstruction and “gut rehabs.” Deconstruction is the process of salvaging building materials from a house before it is torn-down. As of 2005 TLD has conducted over twenty deconstructions. Since deconstruction is a labor intensive process, TLD evaluates the costs and benefits of deconstruction projects closely before making a decision. During the actual deconstruction, TLD carefully salvages building materials for its warehouse. TLD then gets contractors to conduct the deconstruction without actually getting involved in it. As Kirkland noted, “We decided after that experience, and a few others after that, that rather than handling it [deconstruction] in-house, it was better to work with a contractor who does it every day.” Such an approach allowed TLD to focus on what it does everyday while at the same time develops a relationship between contractors and TLD. About 30-40% of the material in the warehouse is a result of deconstruction efforts.

Since the middle 1990’s, TLD has also been involved with conducting workshops and providing tips for “do-it-yourself” projects for the home. These workshops are prominently advertised on TLD’s website.<sup>2,3</sup> Workshops are usually conducted on such topics as installing cabinets, tiles, and toilets. TLD has also been considering inviting lenders and contractors to come and speak about the process of purchasing a home. In addition to these activities, TLD does bulk purchases of some materials such as white paint, paint supplies, door hardware, and weatherization materials in the fall before winter. This allows TLD to make it easier and to pass on savings to their clients.

Donations of surplus or reusable building materials are accepted from both individual and business donors. TLD lists nearly fifty business donors from the Maryland and greater Baltimore-Washington metro area who are currently supporting it. Large donations made by businesses are picked up by TLD. For smaller donations or those made by individuals, three alternative means exist for providing donations: taking the materials directly to the TLD warehouse in Baltimore, bringing the materials to specially marked containers in four participating landfills in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Howard County and Montgomery County; and making donations to TLD by arranging with the organization for materials to be picked up by truck. The TLD truck travels to specific prior-arranged sites on special Community Days. Of the participating landfills, the ones at Montgomery and Howard counties are the most active. This is mostly due to the fact that these counties are relatively affluent and can afford the luxury of encouraging reuse.

As of 2005, TLD has partnered with several organizations and established a dedicated client base mainly within the mid-Atlantic region. According to its website, “TLD has an active partnership with more than 400 manufacturers, distributors, and contractors in the Mid-Atlantic Region.”<sup>4</sup> TLD is quite clear that the partnership with these organizations is a symbiotic venture with benefits accruing not just to TLD but to

partner organizations. Tangible benefits to donor organizations include savings in handling, tipping and storage fees. Organizations also benefit by increasing storage capacity by eliminating reusable waste. Finally donor organizations gain substantial tax write-offs through their involvement. TLD mentions that their activities have saved their donors about half a million dollars and provided over \$1 million in tax deductions.

TLD possesses a membership system for people who get materials from TLD. The membership system was set up so that the member pool and the targeted group of low and moderate communities match closely. Initially membership was regulated by requiring potential clients to be sponsored by a local non-profit. In the interests of streamlining the process, members are now matched up against zip codes that correspond to low and moderate income localities. TLD requires individuals and organizations who wish to purchase building materials to register as members. An annual fee of \$10 is charged by TLD as membership. A membership makes members eligible for benefits such as: discounts on materials, free paint give-aways, and sign-up for free workshops.

In addition to its internal programs, TLD was instrumental in creating a national information network to accommodate the growing interest in reuse facilities. Accordingly, in 2002, ReDO (Reuse Development Organization) was established and is physically located within TLD. ReDO seeks to “advocate, educate and organize new and established reuse centers across the United States and Canada.” Functionally, ReDO helps reuse centers throughout USA by providing a space for sharing of ideas and by finding a home for large loads of surplus material that a warehouse wants to get rid of in a hurry. In one instance, fifteen tractor trailers full of materials were sent to different centers because the TLD could not handle the quantity.

### Equity and Sustainability

Equity and environmental sustainability lie at the heart of the reuse program for building materials and are integrated within TLD’s organizational mission. TLD’s mission is twofold: to increase the availability of affordable building materials and also to reduce the environmental burden that arises from the landfilling of unclaimed building materials. The first aim of the organization’s mission is to collect and store building materials that can then be reused in construction efforts of community development organizations or individuals. The second aim is to remove reusable building materials from the waste stream and thus save precious environmental resources that would have been utilized in order to create the same commodity from virgin materials. TLD argues that both aims are being positively addressed through their efforts.

TLD sees some tangible benefits that arise from promoting a venture like reusing building materials. It suggests that a primary community-oriented benefit is to transfer needed materials to disadvantaged populations at a fraction (about 25-30%) of the retail price. TLD sees building material reuse as a means for rejuvenating low income neighborhoods and bringing substandard housing up to par either through the efforts of organizations or individuals. Donations of building materials have been directed to “over 8,500 low-income housing organizations, soup kitchens, community centers, neighborhood improvement groups, nonprofits, theatres, senior citizen groups, day care centers and low to middle income individuals and families.” They support the efforts of over 2000 low-to-moderate income families, who collect their building materials from TLD. In the process they make improvements in their physical environment when they

otherwise would have not been able to. TLD estimates that their building materials reuse program has saved low-income housing projects over \$6.7 million and they have assisted in the rehabilitation of nearly 10,000 homes each year.<sup>5,6</sup> TLD finds that in addition to supporting the lower economic strata of society, its efforts have served racially disadvantaged populations. It finds that about 60-70% of its clientele are African Americans while the remaining proportions are composed of Caucasian, Hispanic and Asian. In order to maintain the focus of the organization, TLD has consistently tried to locate their premises within low- and moderate-income neighborhoods in order to make it easier for their target population to access their service.

The environmental benefit can be traced to the ability to avoid resource consumption that arises from brand new products as well as to the reduction in landfill volumes occupied. The economic benefits are due to the savings that accrue from using reused commodities that are cheaper than virgin commodities. Furthermore, reuse centers contain the potential for introducing jobs into the community that can be targeted towards handicapped or at-risk youths.<sup>7</sup>

Tension between equity and sustainability is visible on a number of counts. The most obvious has been the possibility of reused appliances and materials promoting more damaging environmental lifestyles. For example, many of the toilets that are reused are often older flush toilets that use larger quantities of water. Thus while these toilets are often available cheap they sustain the depletion of natural resources. TLD has worked around this problem by placing notices that advertise placing bricks within the cistern of the toilet so that the volume of water per flush is reduced. In other appliances like shower heads, washing machines and ovens, TLD has decided not to accept appliances that are older than five years. In construction materials, it has decided to promote energy efficiency by accepting only thermal pane windows. The only single pane windows that are accepted are historic windows that are used for preservation of historic properties. Another facet where a tension between equity versus sustainability issues is evident is in the reuse of historical and architectural materials. Kirkland explicates that there was a time when more and more historical materials that were being stocked were being grabbed by upper middle class. She notes that the organization went through some internal discussion as to whether they should “take on and mark up these materials.” And it was eventually decided that TLD “would keep historical materials in stock but we would keep prices lower in the interests of people in low and medium income segments who are desirous of renovating their homes.”

### Policy Issues and Recommendations

Policy issues of relevance to TLD’s functioning concern the level of support that is provided by city and county governments. Kirkland is of the opinion that in general the city government has been supportive of their effort, while certain county governments—Montgomery and Howard Counties in particular—have been very supportive in sustaining the organization. An indicator of this support is the landfill collection containers. The landfill program in the city was effective initially, but then a change in staffing and indifference on the part of the new landfill staff, and a change in the city’s solid waste priorities, resulted in the program falling between the cracks. However, the landfills in Howard and Montgomery Counties have been active sites for material collection. Kirkland stressed that improving the collection of reusable materials was not a

high priority for TLD. She summed up the organization's attitude to the issue as follows: "It would be ideal to have the city's department of solid waste or recycling department really pushing reuse, but if we were the only game in town we would not be able to handle it [the volume]. So in a way it is kind of like let sleeping dogs lie until we come up with other solutions for collection of unwanted yet useable products."

Policy recommendations that TLD would like to see considered by governmental authorities are either incentives that the government can provide for reuse or the removal of barriers that hinder reuse. On the tax incentive side, Kirkland noted, "The benefit is the same for most donors whether the product is donated or disposed of. because you get the same write-off for donating as for throwing it out." A higher tax incentive might encourage individuals and smaller companies to donate newer materials to the reuse stream rather than disposing them. Another incentive for reuse could come through tax credits for historic renovations. A significant disincentive for TLD is the insurance liability that it has to shoulder from the classification of reuse centers as 'risky' businesses. Because of the classification, the TLD must contend with much higher worker compensation and auto-liability. Warehouse workers in reuse centers like TLD require almost twenty times the insurance cost of administrative/clerical staff. Since in TLD almost half of the personnel budget is for warehouse workers, this is a significant burden for the organization.

Web site: [www.loadingdock.org](http://www.loadingdock.org)

Based on interview of Ms. Leslie Kirkland with Govind Gopakumar conducted on June 17, 2005.

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<sup>1</sup> The Loading Dock. 2005. "The Loading Dock: A Surplus Building Materials Reuse Warehouse." Retrieved May 27, 2005 (<http://www.loadingdock.org/httpdocs/tld/facts.html>).

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<sup>4</sup> The Loading Dock. 2005. "The Loading Dock: A Surplus Building Materials Reuse Warehouse." Retrieved May 27, 2005 (<http://www.loadingdock.org/httpdocs/tld/facts.html>).

<sup>5</sup> The Loading Dock. 2005. "Donate Materials." Retrieved May 27, 2005 (<http://www.loadingdock.org/httpdocs/donations/donate.html>); The Loading Dock. 2005. "Becoming a Loading Dock Member." Retrieved May 30, 2005

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<sup>6</sup>The Loading Dock. 2005. "The Loading Dock: A Surplus Building Materials Reuse Warehouse." Retrieved May 27, 2005

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<sup>7</sup> ReDO. 2005. "Benefits of Reuse." Retrieved May 27, 2005

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