

Case Studies of Reuse Centers:

Construction Junction

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Construction Junction opened in 1999 with support from the Pennsylvania Resources Council, the oldest grassroots environmental organization in the state. The reuse center represents Western Pennsylvania's first non-profit, retail business that promotes conservation by selling used and surplus building supplies. The organization is said to have started when a contractor who asked Lou Tamler of the Pennsylvania Resources Council where he could donate useable siding from a renovation job. The Pennsylvania Resources Council had nothing set up to organize such donations, but Tamler saw the opportunity to create such an organization. In 1997 Conservation Consultants and the Green Building Alliance joined with the Pennsylvania Research Council to put together a business plan. I spoke with Mike Gable, the manager and executive director of Construction Junction. Before joining Construction Junction when it was launched in 1999, Mr. Gable managed an organic farm for the Pittsburgh Food Bank.

Construction Junction was originally run out of an old warehouse in the Lawrenceville section of Pittsburgh. In 2002 the organization moved into a new, 50,000-square foot store in the Point Breeze area, near the East End Food Co-op. According to Gable, the new building had several desirable features, which might be of general interest to those in the reuse industry looking at sites: "First, we had sales information and a knowledge of our top five sales zip codes, so I wanted the new facility to be somewhere accessible, ideally right in the middle of the top five sales zip codes. The building had to have adequate parking, at least enough for fifty cars. It had to have decent general comfort level. Natural light would be ideal. The building needed to have at least 50,000 square feet with the possibility of acquiring more space if we needed it. It had to have more than one loading dock, and it had to have a separate space for processing materials, separate from the retail space."

Although Construction Junction obtained its nonprofit status in 1999, as an independent organization, it has remained partnered with Pennsylvania Resources Council. Since 1999, CJ has recorded over \$2,200,000 in sales of building material donated by more than 3000 individuals and companies. The majority of the 550,000 inventory items purchased at CJ would have otherwise wound up in landfills. CJ's sales growth has averaged a respectable 30% per year since opening. In 2004, the store recorded sales of \$631,000-its best sales year covering over 98.5% of operating expenses.

Both the quantity of its sales and the quality of its offerings reflects the organization's local popularity. The store accepts and sells kitchen cabinets, doors, lumber, windows, light fixtures, carpet, plumbing fixtures, architectural salvage (mantels, molding, etc.), tile, tools, mirrors, shelving, latex paint, clean brick or block, surplus shingles, insulation, plywood, and drywall. Prices are a fraction of their equivalent for new items. Donations are tax-deductible, and Construction Junction offers a free pick-up service for large donations. The facility also hosts 3 monthly collection events for special items, such as appliances, propane tanks, electronics, tires, phonebooks, and Christmas trees (to be chipped into mulch). Sponsors for these collections have included paper and appliance companies, a bank, and a recycling and repair shop. Such special collections are the combined project of the Pennsylvania Resources Council, Construction Junction, the City of Pittsburgh, Alleghany County

Health Department, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, and the Southwest Pennsylvania Ozone Action Partnership.²

Another program of the Construction Junction's is the artistic use of reused materials. The University of Pennsylvania at Pittsburgh's Public Service Learning Alliance recommends Construction Junction as a great place to buy materials needed to make trivets to give as Christmas presents. For Earth Day 2000, Construction Junction sponsored "The Art of Re-Use" event featuring art created from used building materials. In 2003, Construction Junction opened a 4,000 square foot loft in their store to act as a gallery and workshop area for SALVO (Salvage Artists Linking Venues & Opportunities), and hosted a two-day "Festival of the Salvage Arts."³

Construction Junction made its presence known through other Pittsburgh events as well. During the 2003 U.S. Green Building Council's Greenbuild International Conference and Expo held in Pittsburgh, Construction Junction and the Pennsylvania Resources Council collected display materials after vendors were taking down their stands. Green Inspectors roamed the conference looking for attendees in the process of turning materials in to be recycled. When found, recyclers received a sticker stating, "I got caught Green-Handed" and were entered into a prize drawing.⁴

Equity and Sustainability

Construction Junction has three organizational goals. The first is to keep materials out of landfills. Approximately 20-25% of the trash in landfills comes from construction, demolition, and other reusable materials. Low tipping fees in Pennsylvania relative to surrounding states exacerbates landfill dumping problems in the Pittsburgh area. Construction Junction received an Enviro Star award from the Allegheny County Health Department in 2002 as one of 18 local businesses and institutions with voluntary pollution prevention programs that exceed county environmental regulation standards. The second goal is to reduce or avoid the environmental cost of reproducing lumber, steel, etc. as raw materials instead of reusing already existing materials. Their third goal is to provide low-cost materials for people becoming homeowners. Although people from all income levels shop at Construction Junction, low-income families looking to buy or renovate their homes depend on Construction Junction to make low-cost, quality building materials, home furnishings and appliances available.⁵

The primary mission of Construction Junction is environmental, but the organization also works with programs that provide training for the unemployed or underemployed. As Gable explained, "We just started trying to develop a partnership with the Black Contractors' Association, which has a program that trains minority youth in construction skills. We've hired one person from that program, and we want to work more closely with their program. We've also hired from a program in Pittsburgh called Life's Work, and they train people with disabilities and hard-to-employ individuals who may have had criminal records or problems with drugs and alcohol. We've hired people from that program with mixed success. We've had some very good experiences and some people who still work for us, and we've had some troubles. Mixed results are to be expected when you're offering people decent wages and benefits, and you're dealing with a pool of potential employees that tend to have issues of holding down jobs."

Construction Junction has also helped the Union Project restore the former Union Baptist Church around Highland Park (one of the most racially diverse sections of Pittsburgh) and East Liberty areas through offering the organization space to hold stain glass window restoration classes in its warehouse. The windows had been damaged in an attack by vandals. The Union Project's vision is to make the former church into a gathering place for neighborhood residents, and a gateway to many communities, including a Mennonite community working close by.⁶

Policy Issues and Recommendations

The City of Pittsburgh and surrounding Allegheny County have not provided financial support for Construction Junction, but the local governments have helped the organization gain access to buildings that have been condemned and slated for demolition. As Gable explained, “We’re going to put together a proposal for salvaging materials out of buildings that the county acquires on brownfield sites. However, there are some issues involved with municipalities having clear titles to structures and not being able to let us in, so there are still issues that need to be hammered out. One of the issues in a place like Pittsburgh—which doesn’t exist in a place like Seattle, Portland, or California—is that most of those municipalities have targeted goals for diverting usable materials from the landfill. In other words, by a certain date we’re going to divert 50% of what used to go into our landfills. I’m trying to work with the city of Pittsburgh and the county right now to create an ordinance on demolition permitting, to build space and incentives into the demolition process for reuse. Lots of other places are already doing this, like Portland, Seattle, and different places in California. Some are really aggressive. In the city of San Jose, if you apply to demolish a building you have to put a \$2500 deposit down that’s only refundable to you when you hand the permitting office a description of how you disposed of everything on the site that shows you diverted, reused, or recycled at least 50% of the material from whatever you demolished.”

Another difference from the West Coast is that the full recycling infrastructure is not in place in Pittsburgh. As Gable explained, “In California there are places that take drywall and grind up the gypsum and use it as a soil amendment; there are places that take asphalt shingles; and there are people who are aggressively recycling and grinding up wood for composting and mulch. In our area we have people who deal with wood, but we don’t have anybody who works with drywall and asphalt shingles. As a result there is a large amount of material that just is not reusable or recyclable.”

At a federal level, Gable noted that Congress was examining the issue of nonprofit organizations and how they are defined. He thought that such a discussion was valuable, but it needs to take into account the broader issues of the value of nonprofits for society, including sustainability goals. As he elaborated, “The whole idea of what a non-profit is and what a non-profit can be is grossly out of date. All of the nonprofit related discussion in the federal government appears to be about funding issues, not about the real contributions that are made by nonprofits and how important they are to the economy and the whole sustainability agenda. Nonprofits are very important to social entrepreneurship and the triple bottom line, and I think until they are looked at in a little more thoughtful and enlightened way, it’s going pull attention from the good work that non profits are doing and focus it instead on whether this organization or that organization is worthy of being a nonprofit by virtue of its funding mechanisms.” He added that one improvement would be to establish a federal agency dedicated to serving and developing the nonprofit sector.

Another policy challenge is developing standards so that new building materials are designed with deconstruction in mind. Gable explained, “How do you construct new products to be raw material for the next stage of a new product? I used to live in California and worked for a water conservation utility. They used to take old toilets and smash them up and use them for roadbeds, or construct artificial reefs out of them. But we don’t have an ocean in Pittsburgh, and we’re not smashing them up to use them in roadbeds. So, all we’re doing is taking perfectly usable toilets and we’re throwing them away.”

He noted that commercial buildings are renovated about every seven years, and the renovations generate huge amounts of waste material. “The commercial building industry throws away tons and tons of usable material, and they’re not creating any kind of market for reuse at all. It’s a problem that needs to be addressed. The City of Portland issued a request for proposals for people to come up with innovative ways to use this commercial material. We know we can get the materials; we know we can pull them out, and we can market some of them. But the sheer quantity of material that is usable and is being thrown away is overwhelming. So there’s going to have to be equally aggressive market

development.” He added that standards for using used material in new construction would be helpful, because they could help establish design criteria that were oriented toward reuse and remanufacturing.

Update (August, 2005): “We have reached an agreement with the County and have been salvaging our first site in Duquesne for almost a month. The site is not technically a brownfield (it is a residential neighborhood), but it is part of a larger development which will include development of a brownfield site.”

Based on an interview by Rachel Dowty with Mike Gable, June 10, 2005.

Web site: <http://www.constructionjunction.org>

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