

Case Studies of Reuse Organizations:

The Reuse People

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The Reuse People (TRP) started in San Diego in 1993 as a way to help flood victims in Mexico to rebuild their housing. Organized by Judy Bishop, TRP's cofounder, the campaign solicited donations of building materials from local organizations. Response was generous: the organization received over 400 tons, or 27 tractor trailers, of materials. Ted Reiff, a former investment banker, met Bishop shortly after the donation campaign was completed. He found the work fulfilling and decided to engage in it on a full-time basis in the San Diego area. In 1999, the Alameda County Source Reduction and Recycling Board offered the organization a grant to relocate near its resource recovery facility in San Leandro, so TRP moved its headquarters to the East Bay. Two years later, Warner Brothers was using portions of the former Alameda Naval Air Station as a set for the movie "The Matrix Reloaded," and it asked TRP to help with set deconstruction. As a result, the organization moved to the former naval base, where it was able to recycle about 95% of the material, or about 10,000 tons. In TRP's new Bay Area headquarters on the former naval base, the organization established a reuse store, where people can buy used home materials at very low prices.¹

At the beginning, TRP's source of materials came largely from donations. Home supply companies such as Home Depot donated significant amounts of materials, but unfortunately customers who bought the materials from TRP sometimes took them back to the home supply store to get a refund. As a result, TRP gradually shifted out of donated extra stock from home supply stores, and over time the source for new materials shifted to building deconstruction. Most of the deconstruction work performed by TRP was for residential property owners. In many cases property owners who were taking down older homes were willing to pay TRP for its "velvet crowbar" of ecological deconstruction. Although the cost for ecological building deconstruction is generally fifty to 100 percent of more conventional methods of demolition and landfilling, property owners can earn a substantial tax deduction by donating the materials to the nonprofit organization. As a result, the ecological deconstruction process not only satisfies a growing environmental consciousness among property owners, but in some cases it can be even more advantageous financially than conventional demolition.²

TRP receives grants and in-kind donations, but its main source of revenue is fees from building deconstruction and sales of materials. As a result, it has developed a model of a nonprofit reuse organization that is financially viable and self-sufficient. Building materials are warehoused at the reuse store in the former Alameda Naval Air Station, and frequently local contractors will buy large allotments of a single type of material. Some of the wood is also used by a furniture remanufacturing company. By 2005 TRP's network was statewide, with branches in the Bay Area, Los Angeles, and

San Diego. It was developing plans for a branch in Seattle, and Reiff was even developing a plan to make the organization national by 2010.³

Equity and Sustainability

The primary goal of TRP is to educate the public to make remodeling and deconstruction more ecological. Tremendous amounts of construction debris go into landfills, and much of the material can be reused or remanufactured. In addition to its primary environmental goal, the organization also hires low-income workers and provides them with training in tool use, safety, and construction methods. After receiving training and gaining experience, the workers sometimes move on to better jobs with contractors. TRP has also developed innovative ways of combining the high-technology associated with conventional demolition with the “low-tech” approach of the velvet crowbar. For example, instead of using a crane to wield a wrecking ball against a building, TRP uses the crane to remove the roof or a module of the roof, then lower it to the ground, where workers can take it apart without the risk of falling. Because of the emphasis on safety and the use of human-scale deconstruction techniques, injuries to workers have been very low, including several years with no injuries at all. Another dimension of TRP’s concern with equity and low-income issues is that the organization donates building materials to nonprofit organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, Volunteers of America, and Goodwill. Finally, low-income residents in the East Bay also benefit from the low prices at the reuse store, and surplus lumber is sold to a company that builds housing for low-income people in Mexico.⁴

Policy Issues and Recommendations

One of the largest problems that TRP has faced is liability insurance for its demolition work. Insurance policies are structured so that even if 90% of the business is in resale retail, and only 10% is in demolition, the insurance rate is based on the entire revenue of the organization. One solution is to divide the organization into two units, one of which does demolition. However, Reiff is gradually shifting the TRP away from demolition work to a distribution role between building owners and deconstruction firms. In this new role, which is termed the “Reuse Solution”TM, TRP will oversee the work of the contractor to make sure that it follows ecological deconstruction techniques. The materials will then be donated to TRP.⁵

A second problem has been building codes. In the US local building codes are based largely on regional code guides (one for the Eastern states and the other for Western states), and the Western codes restrict the use of reused lumber to non-supporting walls and beams in buildings. In order to use lumber in supporting wall or beam positions, the reused lumber needs to be certified. However, in order to make certification cost effective, an organization would need to have a warehouse full of lumber to pay for a certification person to come in for a whole day. Yet, accumulating and storing that level of material in the Bay Area, where property values are so high, is not cost effective. Instead, the organization focuses on a more rapid turn-over of lumber, much of which is shipped off to other countries. A change in the building codes or certification process would allow more lumber to be reused domestically.

A third problem has been a proposed policy change that would make it illegal to ship any building materials that carry lead paint. The proposal is based on the

assumption that the dust from the materials constitutes a hazard. However, Reiff has called in experts to test the air in building deconstruction sites where there is significant lead paint, and no detectable lead can be found in the air. TRP is among the organizations that challenges the proposed legislation. The conflict is complicated because it pits two environmental “goods” against each other: lead-free air and reuse of building materials. Reiff’s position is that the scientific evidence to support the claim that there is a lead hazard from airborne particles in deconstruction sites is not there. Partly, the issue may depend on the techniques of deconstruction (the slow, human-based process of building deconstruction compared with the crane and bulldozer process of demolition).

Web site:

<http://www.thereusepeople.org>

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Site visit by David Hess to The Reuse People, Ted Reiff, March 10, 2005.

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