

U R B A N



IN A SPRAWLING EAST END WAREHOUSE, PITTSBURGH'S COLLECTIVE VISION OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD YARD SALE TAKES PLACE DAILY. CONTRACTORS, DO-IT-YOURSELFERS, BARGAIN HUNTERS AND THE JUST PLAIN CURIOUS ENGAGE IN THE HIGH (AND LOW) ART OF RECYCLING EVERYTHING FROM STAINED GLASS TO TOILET SEATS. A REPORT ON A BUSINESS DOING GOOD AND HOLDING ITS OWN.
BY JEFFERY FRASER PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID ASCHKENAS

R E N E W A L

itty Stemas drove 80 miles through off-and-on rain this mid-June morning to shop at Construction Junction in Pittsburgh's Point Breeze neighborhood. She has nothing in particular in mind to buy and no idea what she might find in the cavernous store that has all of the charm of a building-contractor garage sale, housed in a grimy warehouse. Before the day is out, she will discover once again that what one person deems worthy of discarding can seem a treasure in the eyes of another.

She spends nearly an hour perusing aisles of used building materials and assorted odds and ends that have been salvaged or donated by homeowners, landlords, builders and others. They receive tax deductions for their contributions, which are offered at prices 30 to 60 percent lower than what prospective buyers like Stemas would pay at a big-box home improvement retailer. The warehouse is packed with doors, mantels, retail display cases—one with "Parker Fountain Pens" etched in its glass top—sinks, bathtubs, cabinets of various shapes and sizes, tile, windows, shutters, toilets, bruised wood desks, tools, flooring, lighting fixtures, countertops, molding, mirrors, glass block, shelving, roofing shingles of asphalt and slate, marble and finished stone, a few appliances, pressboard, plywood, paneling and more. Some of these are vintage. Some are modern. Nearly everything is used—some, gently so, while others will require some handiwork or imagination to restore them to use.

Stemas's browsing pays off when she finds, for \$40, a four-legged gray steel cylinder with a faux marble composite tabletop and a single door that opens to a small shelved compartment. "Look at this cool thing. I don't know what it is," says the artist and proprietor of the Hartzell House bed-and-breakfast in Addison, Somerset County, who discovered Construction Junction four years ago. "Some of the things I get here I incorporate into the B&B, and some of the things I just play with. I'm going to put a vessel sink on this, whatever it is, and turn it into a vanity."

She is one of the thousands of Construction Junction customers who make more than 24,000 individual purchases a year. These do-it-yourselfers, artists and small building contractors enable the environmental nonprofit to annually divert 720 tons of used, but usable, building materials from landfills and cover its operating budget with revenue generated from those sales. Last year, the most successful in Construction Junction's decade-long history, the nonprofit brought in a little more than \$1 million in sales against expenses of \$955,000, which included payroll costs for its 19 full-time employees.

This year, the recession has done nothing to threaten that trend. It may, in fact, be helping.

Sales from January through June are up 16 percent over the same period last year, and the number of purchases has risen 50 percent, suggesting that Construction Junction is headed toward another record sales year. Just as important, the nonprofit has a relatively uncontested local niche, which appears to be helping it dodge one of the greatest recession-related fears that contributions-dependent organizations face.

“There was concern that people might decide to hold onto their stuff longer, and donations would fall off,” says Mike Gable, Construction Junction executive director. “But we haven’t seen a drop in material coming into the building. Our truck is scheduled-out pretty consistently two weeks in advance. And it’s going out five days a week.”

Without that ability to sustain itself financially—a rare achievement for an environmental nonprofit—Construction Junction would not likely have survived its first decade, let alone thrived, says Caren Glotfelty, director of The Heinz Endowments’ Environmental Program. In 2000, the Endowments awarded the nonprofit a \$100,000 grant to implement a business plan for making it a financially self-sustaining enterprise, which it has consistently been since 2004. Other support for the organization over the years has come from the Pittsburgh and Laurel foundations and the foundation-funded Social Innovation Accelerator project, a recently ended program that provided strategic counseling and assistance to startup ventures.

The nonprofit’s reuse mission “is important in our overall environmental portfolio because we are so focused on energy and materials conservation and green building,” says Glotfelty, herself a Construction Junction customer who bought bathroom tile, blackboard slate and other materials from the store as part of the “green” renovation of her home.

Construction Junction’s record of meeting its mission and paying its bills through social entrepreneurial strategies has given the nonprofit the confidence to move forward with its most ambitious

project to date. The organization is renovating its 75,000-square-foot store to LEED—Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design—gold standards and creating a resource center for homeowners interested in environmentally sustainable home improvements that would, among other things, demonstrate green technologies, such as permeable pavements, bioswales and rain gardens.

Last year, the Endowments’ Environmental Program awarded the nonprofit a three-year, \$300,000 grant to cover the costs of a planning and sustainability study for that project. “The idea is to ramp up the adoption of green building and site practices throughout the community by having a place where people can learn how to do these things,” says Glotfelty. “We’ve been very successful in Pittsburgh in getting large green building projects done through the work of the Green Building Alliance. But the individual homeowner still doesn’t have enough information, guidance and examples to know what to do.”

Construction Junction started as an idea conceived by staff at three environmental organizations—Conservation Consultants Inc., the Green Building Alliance and the Pennsylvania Resources Council—to address the lack of a place in western Pennsylvania to recycle construction and demolition waste, which accounts for an estimated 20 to 30 percent of the materials that are discarded in regional landfills. Not only would it fill an important need in the region, but anecdotal evidence suggested that there was a demand among homeowners and builders for such a resource.

“We were getting phone calls from people who had usable construction materials,” says David Mazza, regional director of the Pennsylvania Resources Council, a 70-year-old grassroots environmental nonprofit that specializes in waste reduction and recycling. “Early on, it was things like brick or vinyl siding, overruns or leftovers from a project, and people would say, ‘I don’t want to send this to a landfill, so where do I recycle it?’ We didn’t have any viable options.”



NAME> AMANDA THORP **RESIDENCE**> PITTSBURGH **FIND**> MISCELLANEOUS DESKS AND CHAIRS **USE**> THE CARNEGIE MELLON UNIVERSITY STUDENT PLANS TO INCLUDE THE ITEMS AMONG THE FURNISHINGS IN HER NEW APARTMENT.



NAME> CHARLOTTE RICHARDSON-KA AND ERROL REYNOLDS
RESIDENCE> WILKINSBURG AND NEW YORK CITY **FIND**> CHURCH PEW
USE> THE PEW WILL ADD SEATING AND CHARACTER TO A HOUSE THAT THE TWO ARTISTS ARE CONVERTING INTO AN ART AND MUSIC STUDIO IN NORTH VERSAILLES, PA.



NAME> JEN VERI **RESIDENCE**> TURTLE CREEK **FIND**> LOW-COST PAINT WITH RECYCLED LATEX **USE**> VERI'S HOME OFFICE WILL GET A FRESH LOOK WITH A COAT OR TWO OF THE RECYCLED SAGE GREEN PAINT.

NAME> LEE NAGLE **RESIDENCE**> MOON TWP. **FIND**> WOODEN DOOR
USE> THE DISCARDED DOOR WILL SEE NEW LIFE AS A CHILDREN'S STAGE ON THE SET OF A TELEVISION COMMERCIAL ABOUT FIRST NIAGARA BANK.



NAME> MARY MUNCIL **RESIDENCE**> PITTSBURGH **FIND**> WOODEN SHUTTERS **USE**> THE SHUTTERS WILL DIVIDE THE POINT PARK UNIVERSITY STUDENT'S BEDROOM FROM HER ROOMMATE'S.





NAME> ADRIAN ENSCOE **RESIDENCE**> PITTSBURGH **FIND**> GLASS WINDOW **USE**> ENSCOE ENVISIONS CONVERTING THE WINDOW INTO A GLASS TABLE TOP.



NAME> TERRY FISCHER **RESIDENCE**> BALDWIN BOROUGH **FIND**> WROUGHT IRON RAILING **USE**> GOOD SAMARITAN FISCHER IS PROVIDING THE RAILING FOR THE FRONT HOUSE STEPS OF HIS NEIGHBOR, WHO UNDERWENT KNEE SURGERY.

NAME> WILL AND BRITTA WALKER **RESIDENCE**> WILKINSBURG **FIND**> TWO CUSHIONED CHAIRS: ONE RED, ONE BLUE **USE**> THE BRIGHTLY COLORED CHAIRS WILL PROVIDE EXTRA SEATING IN A FORMER TWO-CAR GARAGE THAT THE WALKERS CONVERTED INTO AN OUTDOOR EATING AREA FOR ENTERTAINING GUESTS.

NAME> OSCAR HENDERSON **RESIDENCE**> WILKINSBURG **FIND**> MINT-CONDITION TOOLBOX **USE**> HENDERSON PLANS TO USE THE TOOLBOX TO —WHAT ELSE?— HOLD HIS TOOLS.





Construction Junction opened in a Lawrenceville warehouse in November 1999, based on models of nonprofit reuse centers in the northwest and northeast. Evidence of its long-term viability was apparent after the nonprofit's first full year of operation, when revenue from the sale of donated material and rental of unused space in its store covered half of its expenses. Two years later, the nonprofit moved to its larger Point Breeze location to accommodate its growing business and popularity—trends reflected on balance sheets that show sales revenue rising from \$184,000 in 2000 to \$1.03 million in 2008.

In addition to sales, about 1 to 2 percent of the nonprofit's revenues are earned from renting space in its Point Breeze store to nonprofit and for-profit businesses and organizations. Among them are a bicycle recycler, a commercial electronics recycler and The Pillow Project dance company, which uses an upper loft on the site for performances, exhibits and other arts events, including some that promote art created from recycled materials.

Construction Junction also broadened its community reach over the years by developing a relationship with local artists and craftsmen. The nonprofit and local artists, for example, founded SALVO—Salvage Artists Linking Venues and Opportunities—which offered public classes and workshops on creating art from discarded materials. For three years, the collaboration hosted a salvage arts festival supported by corporate sponsors and foundations, including two grants from the Endowments' Arts & Culture Program.

The reuse business is not without challenges. For all of Construction Junction's experience, pricing remains more of an art than a science.

As a general rule, brand-name materials are priced at half of what they go for at a big-box retail outlet. But complicating the pricing process are one-of-a-kind items and the fact that even the more common donations, such as the 4,000 doors it moves each year, usually vary in age, condition, size and the material they are made of.

And, from time to time, the nonprofit underestimates the value of certain donations, which can result in a huge bargain for the keen-eyed customer. That was the case a few years ago when a savvy collector purchased a set of five chairs for \$3 each. Construction Junction staff learned later that with some cleaning and TLC, the set of Ilmari Tapiovaara chairs were worth about \$9,500. "You want to kick yourself when that happens," says Gable. "But the benefit is, if someone gets a great deal, maybe they tell their friends. It's part of the ambience of the place, part of the experience." Also, even with a handle on a unique item's value, the nonprofit would still sell it for a good deal less, in keeping with its mission of offering bargains to customers.

Another challenge has been accommodating customers who are doing renovation projects that require large quantities of the same material, such as several matching doors or a couple hundred feet of matching trim. Leftovers donated by homeowners and building contractors usually arrive in batches too small for larger projects.

To deepen its inventory, the nonprofit recently began purchasing more of some popular materials, such as paint made from recycled latex, which staff members say compares favorably with some popular name brands at less than half the cost. Partnerships have helped, including one with a

Far left: The Pillow Project dance company experiments with presentations that are unconventional in style and location. The company found a home in an upper loft on the Construction Junction site for dance performances, top, and other arts gatherings, bottom.

Left: Construction Junction is starting to conduct some of its own deconstruction projects to obtain salvage materials for sale. The nonprofit's first effort was the "panelization" of a house in Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighborhood. The technique involves carefully taking apart sections of a building with the hope of preserving some of the construction materials.

local Habitat for Humanity chapter, which sold more than 300 new windows to Construction Junction at a steep discount.

The organization has established a three-man salvage crew to remove usable building materials from buildings and homes, a process that often yields larger quantities of matching tile, baseboard and other materials. The nonprofit is exploring deconstruction, a more extensive salvage operation to rescue usable materials from structures scheduled for demolition before they are razed. Unfortunately, the region's older housing stock can mean lower yields of suitable material to sell for reuse.

that were engraved with names and dates, but never used.

Construction Junction's Point Breeze store itself can be a challenging place in which to shop and work. The former commercial lighting factory isn't insulated and has a high ceiling, a concrete slab floor and single-pane windows. In the summer, it can be stifling, and in the winter, it can be frigid, with temperatures dipping into the low 40s. The nonprofit's staff is planning to insulate the building and is exploring solar, geothermal and other energy options as part of the organization's green renovation project.

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Construction Junction did its first deconstruction project last September in East Liberty with mixed results.

"We learned a lot," says Gable. "But we reused or recovered only about 25 percent of the house, which from a deconstruction standpoint is low. You usually look for recycling and reuse rates of 75–80 percent."

Most customers, however, are like Otis Lockhart, less interested in quantity than in finding something that piques creativity. Among his recent purchases was a set of wooden theater chairs. He refinished a few and turned others into tables. "The appeal to me is finding something I can take and create something that no one else has," says the Verona homeowner. "I look for whatever strikes me, something unusual."

And customers can sometimes discover some very unusual stuff. Among the strangest was a coffin—unused—that was included in a garage full of material donated by a homeowner.

"I have no idea what they were doing with it," says Gable. The coffin sold as Halloween neared, purchased by a company that builds haunted houses for fundraising. The approach of Halloween also inspired the purchase of a few donated headstones

But recession has made financing a project with an estimated price tag of \$4.5 million to \$5 million more difficult than anticipated. Many foundations, for example, have put a hold on capital improvement funding in the wake of shrinking endowments and rising human services needs. In response, Construction Junction is seeking economic stimulus funds to finance part of its green makeover, asking the Pennsylvania Infrastructure Investment Authority for a grant to improve its water and sewage infrastructure, and turning to the Pennsylvania Energy Development Administration to help pay for solar technology to supply the store's electricity.

And yet, recession, the store's occasional too-warm or too-cold climate, and limited supplies of larger quantities of matching materials have not slowed the growth of Construction Junction's customer base, more than 60 percent of which are homeowners. One measure of its popularity, a recently started e-newsletter, counts more than 9,000 subscribers.

"It profoundly affects me to see useful pieces of architecture and design thrown away and wasted," says Stemac, a Construction Junction regular. "This place is absolutely perfect for me. I love it." *h*

Kitty Stemac
a Construction Junction
regular