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## **Background**

Through my fieldwork and educational experience in Portland, OR, I had the opportunity to learn about sustainability-focused, community-building initiatives. All of these initiatives can be described as 'reUse' programs. Although Portland is a larger city, I believe there are ways smaller cities like Utica can adapt these models to serve the same ends. This document describes one possible adaptation. It borrows from some of the most innovative strategies available in Portland and scales them to fit the size of the Oneida-Herkimer County region.

## **Brief Descriptions of Portland Based reUse Initiatives**

1. Our United Villages (<http://www.ourunitedvillages.org>): Our United Villages (OUV) is a self-sustaining community enhancement organization that produces social, economic and environmental benefits. An integral part of OUV is The ReBuilding Center, a social enterprise that acts as a thrift store for reused building materials. Funds generated through the ReBuilding Center and its services – ReFind Furniture, DeConstruction Services, Driving Department – support the entire organization including the Community Outreach department. Through Community Outreach, OUV provides free venues, workshops and consultation services to strengthen the social fabric of neighborhoods. OUV represents a multi-faceted reuse initiative and serves as a model for the reMall concept.
2. SCRAP (<http://scrapaction.org/>): From the SCRAP web site, [SCRAP's] mission is to inspire creative reuse and environmentally sustainable behavior by providing educational programs and affordable materials to the community. [SCRAP] offers creative inspiration and affordable materials & tools for everyone.

A brief description:

- 3000 sq. feet of arts, crafts and office supplies and materials, all at VERY affordable prices
- a place for you to donate your gently used and clean art and craft supplies and materials
- Re:Vision Gallery, featuring art made of 75% reused/recycled materials
- Re:Boutique, featuring locally produced items made of 75% reused/recycled materials
- a Workshop space with tools for you to use
- tours, field trips and birthday parties, and Camp SCRAP during the summer and no-school days

SCRAP represents a model for youth development potential and serves as thematic inspiration for the reMall concept.

3. Free Geek (<http://www.freegeek.org>): From Free Geek's web site, Free Geek refurbishes technology to provide computers, education and job skills in exchange for community service. Believing firmly that reuse is the highest and best form of recycling, we refurbish what we can and send it back out into the community with a new lease on life. The stuff that doesn't make the grade is not banished to landfills to leach toxics into the water table. Nor is it sent to developing nations to be disassembled by small children. We do our very best to make sure that all electronic materials we don't reuse are responsibly recycled within North America.

Free Geek also promotes youth development by safely training youth on how to build and rebuild technology. The reMall incorporates the Free Geek model because of its youth development focus and the potential support this initiative might receive locally from institutions like SUNY Institute of Technology.

4. Community Cycling Center: (<http://www.communitycyclingcenter.org>) The community cycling center promotes the idea that ‘the bicycle is a tool for empowerment and a vehicle for social change.’ From the center’s web site, The Community Cycling Center, founded in 1994, broadens access to bicycling and its benefits through ... hands-on programs, volunteer projects, and neighborhood bike shop. This reuse initiative accepts donations of used bikes, fixes them up, resells them to the community and provides bikes for children. It places a special emphasis on serving all communities, as evidenced by their ‘Understanding Barriers to Bicycling’ study. The center promotes cycling because it is an economical, environmentally-safer, active form of transportation that promotes individual and community health and well-being.

While Portland might be nationally-known for its bike culture and custom frame-building shops, the nation as a whole is rediscovering and embracing the bicycle as a serious transportation option. Being a cyclist myself, I recognize the need for community supports to make cycling accessible, safer and more enjoyable. Utica is a city that was built and largely developed before the age of automobiles. As such, its infrastructure is amenable to bicycle transportation. Furthermore, cyclists improve neighborhoods because they are a presence on the street (whereas car drivers are insulated from their surroundings in a car). There is also a great deal of youth development potential in this model – from learning a valuable trade to improving health outcomes. For these reasons, the center model is included in the reMall concept.

## **Vision**

The reMall is a multi-reUse initiative that houses regionally-scaled versions of these four sustainability-focused, community-building initiatives under one roof, much like a mall provides retail space shared by several stores. Housed in a large, formerly abandoned warehouse with easy access to the region’s main thoroughfare (the arterial), the reMall will be a one-stop-shop for the Oneida-Herkimer County Community providing:

- An single place to donate a number of reusable materials (just like the Oneida-Herkimer Recycling Center provides a single place to recycle a number of materials)
- An easily accessible site for a number of volunteer opportunities (folks with a number of different skills sets and interests could find a place at the reMall to get involved – reMall initiatives could also refer and share volunteers easily because volunteers only have to travel to one site)
- Shared overhead costs for reUse initiatives that serve the community (since all the programs are under one roof)
- A diversified platform for financial support of each initiative, its employees and the community building initiative generated by the reMall.

Unlike a traditional mall, the reMall programs would function to generate revenue cooperatively, in support of a single community-building initiative. Together, the reMall program would support Utica’s equivalent of Portland’s ‘City Repair Project’. From their web site, (<http://www.cityrepair.org>) City Repair began in Portland, Oregon with the idea that localization - of culture, of economy, of decision-making - is a necessary foundation of sustainability. By reclaiming urban spaces to create community-oriented places, we plant the seeds for greater neighborhood communication, empower our communities and nurture our local culture.

[City Repair] projects include the annual Village Building Convergence, where people gather at neighborhood sites throughout Portland to engage in intersection repair ... and other forms of placemaking. Intersection Repair is the citizen-led conversion of an urban street intersection into public square. Streets are usually the only public space we have in our neighborhoods. But most all of them have been designed with a single purpose in mind: moving cars around.

With an Intersection Repair, that public space is reclaimed for the whole community. The intersection of pathways becomes a place for people to come together. The space becomes a Place – a public square.



(a picture of one neighborhood's intersection repair project)

City Repair projects strengthen relationships in neighborhoods, promote sustainability and build public safety from the grassroots level. It is featured (alongside Our United Villages and Free Geek) in Chapter 12 of new book about Portland: Brew to Bikes: Portland's Artisan Economy by Charles Heying (available through amazon.com - [http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb\\_sb\\_ss\\_i\\_0\\_40?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=brew+to+bikes+portland%27s+artisan+economy&prefix=brew+to+bikes+portland%27s+artisan+economy&x=15&y=20](http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_ss_i_0_40?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=brew+to+bikes+portland%27s+artisan+economy&prefix=brew+to+bikes+portland%27s+artisan+economy&x=15&y=20))

City Repair embraces community input in the work that it does, a crucial feature that Utica's City Repair must replicate. If Utica wishes to become a place more people view as 'home', it must offer residents a say in what 'home' becomes. The reMall can serve this end by generating local financial and cultural support for organizing and executing grassroots action in Utica's neighborhoods. The reMall will serve as a model for other smaller communities seeking to engage in sustainability-focused community development.

### **Next Steps**

I recommend sharing this vision with as many people as possible and discover:

- what support, if any, these ideas receive
- what additions/deletions/changes supporters would make to this concept
- who has interest and expertise in:
  - building materials
  - crafting furniture from recycled materials
  - deconstructing houses or other structures
  - green building
  - arts, crafts and education
  - youth development
  - bicycle repair
  - bicycle commuting and advocacy
  - computer repair
  - retail management
  - etc.
- how to organize a group of people who would serve as a board of directors for the reMall.
- grants/loans as seed money for an social enterprise that would become self-sustaining in 5 years.