

born again



PHOTO BY RUSTY TAGLIARENI

A chandelier saved is a chandelier earned

Selling cast-offs for a song to the creative and penny-wise

By Rusty Tagliareni

Donna Birch, a New Paltz artist, wires old Christmas lights into found glass bottles to make lamps that glow like candles. She also has a line of made-to-order purses stitched from surplus fabrics, straps, and zippers of all lengths and colors. Birch gets many of her materials from the New Paltz Re-Use Center, a warehouse that takes in discarded goods and sells them cheap to the public. Artisans, home remodelers, permaculture teachers and even the town police rub elbows here, where they can come in five days a week to browse the cheap and ever-changing wares.

Unclassifiable bits and bobs come to be collected and displayed within these walls: chandeliers and cabinetry from a remodeled hotel, shelves of binders from an updated IBM office complex that replaced its punch clock with a paperless barcode system, barrels full of packaged wood pieces from a wind-chime

manufacturing plant (even the plastic bags that the pieces are apportioned into are surplus make-up bags), desks, chairs, and doors are stacked and displayed for sale.

The reuse center serves as a flagship of sorts for the township's ambitious Zero Waste Initiative, and also as an example for other regions to follow, said Laura Petit, the town's recycling coordinator. The center is 100 percent self-sufficient, covering its costs with the revenue generated by sales from the center and the compost mounds.

Down a small hill from the reuse center, waste wood is being shredded for mulch. Compost mounds steam in the cold winter air, composed of foodstuffs like old pasta, bread and fish heads from the local Stop & Shop. Behind the center, a massive leaf compost hill sits next to a partially constructed greenhouse, made from lumber from remodeled school bleachers and reclaimed windows from renovated buildings. The idea is to grow food for the community in

the greenhouse.

Any time government bodies like the school district or police department have to buy something, they're required first to check the reuse center, said Susan Zimet, the New Paltz township supervisor. The police department was recently in need of a new desk for one of their offices. A new desk would have run them \$500, but they found a suitable desk sitting in the reuse center, attained free of charge.

In 2005 New Paltz was moving some 800 tons of waste. Through the Zero Waste Initiative, they have brought that number down to under 400 tons, said Zimet. (A massive dumpster you'd see at a construction site holds about three tons of debris.) This caliber of efficiency has led to the improvement of township services and the reduction of taxes for residents, she said.

If you visit the reuse center, come with an open mind. That barrel of right-handed work gloves? Wear one upside down and presto: you have a left-handed glove.