
Be Careful How You Upcycle



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New life grows from unusable objects. (Photo: bookfinch/Flickr)

Upcycling is a buzzword tied to sustainability that is finding its way into everything from restaurant décor to online gift shops. Craft fairs are filled with Mason jar lights, homes are built from boxcars, napkin holders are made from toilet paper rolls, and all are labeled as “Upcycled Art.”

Repurposing used items is a wonderful way to save money on materials and to spotlight our habits of creating too much disposable garbage. However, creative reuse isn’t always good for the earth. To many, “upcycling” is as simple as turning trash into treasure, but a better way to think of it is as a type of creative reuse that elevates the status of an item’s life cycle in an environmentally sustainable way.



Pallets can easily be repaired and reused as pallets, but when they are broken or cut beyond repair, they make great upcycled furniture.

The key to turning creative reuse genius into upcycling gold is to think of the final product's complete life cycle, and to consider what will happen when it — and all of its components — are no longer desired in their current form. This “cradle-to-cradle” approach is what makes a creation environmentally

sustainable. Sourcing materials is where things get tricky. If the materials used are in no way reusable, repairable, or recyclable, then have at it! Make

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it more valuable than it was before and bolster up its status in the cycle of use. But better still, you can use materials that can be composted, recycled, or dismantled and reused in an infinitely continuous cycle of life.

Unfortunately, many creative reuse projects can actually turn once-recyclable or reusable items into inevitable trash. For example, plastic bottles cut up into light fixtures or plant holders are no longer recyclable. Electronic circuit boards get transformed into jewelry or attached to wood and other items that e-waste recyclers would turn away. Likewise with textiles: Instead of using tattered or stained T-shirts, perfectly wearable ones that could clothe the needy are sewn into pillows. Seashells glued to glass bottles, metals permanently adhered to non-metal materials, or paper and cardboard covered with tape or glue are all common reuse projects that turn a once-valuable, recyclable object into a landfill-bound piece of garbage.

The recycling process itself can be confusing. Recycling is a business that uses people and machines to extract massive amounts of high-quality, like-materials, bundle them, and resell them to a manufacturer that can remelt or repulp them into new commodities. Adhering two materials that aren't the same renders them impossible, too costly, or too hazardous to strip and resell – and thus unrecyclable.



Plastic bottles that have been modified are no longer recyclable. (Photo: Reciclado Creativo/Flickr)

The biggest downside to upcycling waste is it enables our continued use of disposable objects. There are commendable companies that temporarily reduce waste by making purses, wallets, business card holders, and more from candy bar wrappers, chips bags, apple sauce squeeze pouches, and other hard-to-recycle materials. While this can relieve the guilt of creating packaging waste on such a massive scale (especially by the corporations creating the waste), we still need to be aware that these items are bound for the landfill someday. Major change can only come from eliminating disposable packaging.

That isn't to say we shouldn't continue to support upcycling, and find ways to incorporate more sustainable creative reuse projects into our purchasing and making habits. The more we know about the full life cycle

of different materials – how they are put together, taken apart, and broken down – the more we can empower our decisions to ultimately change the waste behaviors of our society.

The principals of sustainable upcycling can and should extend beyond creative reuse projects and into our planning process for making all new items and commodities. From packaging to function, production process, shipment, by-product waste, environmental and social impact of material sources, and of course the cradle-to-cradle life cycle for the final product, all decisions along the creative process can be made with the environment in mind.



Eye-catching life extension for landfill-bound packaging. (Photo: Carissa Rogers/Flickr)



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