Making an upcycling station. Makers’ culture, cross-sector collaborations and citizens’ participation for new services and practices within waste handling.

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This guide summarizes some of the learnings emerged from the setting up of ReTuren the first Swedish upcycling station (återbruksstationen) in Malmö. The focus is on the role that makers’ activities, cross-sector collaboration and citizens’ participation can have in the setting up of an upcycling station and more in general in addressing sustainable city development out from a holistic perspective.

Makers’ culture describes activities where non-professionals engage in repairing and making things by collaborating and sharing information and knowledge. This guide highlights how these activities might be used not only to inspire about waste reduction practices and behaviours, but also to foster new social connections, manage conflicts and intervene in the urban context out from an holistic sustainability perspective.

Cross-sector collaborations are seen as a key approach in dealing with urban challenges, such as sustainability. Such collaborations allow to address challenges out from a holistic perspective, since they bring together different kinds of knowledge and experiences. In such a perspective, citizens’ contribution is also understood as playing an important role. This guide exemplifies how cross-sector collaborations and citizens’ participation might be at play in an upcycling station. What kind of opportunities but also challenges they entail.
Background

What is an upcycling station?

The notion of upcycling station, återbrukscentralen, refers to a new kind of service within waste handling. Such a service aims at (1) improving management of cumbersome and dangerous waste within urban context (2) encouraging waste minimization and waste prevention by supporting upcycling and reusing practices.

The upcycling station integrates three functions. The first one is disposal of hazardous and cumbersome waste. The second one is an exchange platform that provides citizens with possibilities to exchange items in good conditions. The third one is a permanent workshop where activities of upcycling and repairing are carried out.

The upcycling station provides the possibility for citizens to dispose correctly their hazardous waste and some cumbersome waste without having the need of bringing it to the outskirts of the city where recycling stations (återvinningscentraler) are placed. Thus, when it comes to waste disposal, the upcycling station is a service addressing people living in apartments within the city and who do not own a car.

The upcycling station is also a service that supports and encourages waste minimization by providing a platform for exchanging things. Users can bring to the station items in good conditions, which are made available for other citizens. These exchanges do not involve money. The station is also offering inspirational makers’ activities to its users and a permanent workshop space for making and repairing is under development.

In promoting waste reduction and experimenting towards waste prevention, the upcycling station is working with redefining the notion of waste, providing skills and inspiration in relation to upcycling and repairing as well as learning about existing initiatives working with upcycling and repairing. Thus the upcycling station is not only providing a technical infrastructure for waste minimization but also a place to experiment with values and practices around waste handling and consumption. The upcycling station is a platform to experiment with and discuss what is the value of objects, when things become trash, what kind of alternatives may exist to mass-production and mass-consumption.

Further readings:

Makers’ culture

The notion of makers’ culture is used to describe initiatives and activities where non-professionals engage in making, repairing, upcycling things by sharing knowledge, tools, materials and by collaborating. These initiatives may have very different focuses: from projects dealing with the design and production of open-source prosthetics, which are gathering people both on-line and off-line to experiment with and share knowledge about how 3d printers and electronics may allow to design and produce low-cost prosthetics; to repair workshops which are social gatherings where people meet and help each other in fixing things. The makers are people who engage in making and repairing in their free-time. They can be driven by curiosity (exploring technology possibilities), ethical/political interests (criticizing mass-consumption and the actual production system) but also just by the fulfillment that making something together with others generates.

Makers’ culture is characterized by three distinctive traits:

- learning by doing. Makers’ activities entail a strong learning component. By engaging in making and repairing participants learn about materials, production processes but also about coding, physics etc. etc. This “learning-by-doing” dimension has brought makers’ culture into schools, where different projects are experimenting with new ways of teaching and learning (see for example http://makerskola.se/).

- do-it-together. The other central aspect of makers’ culture is related to sharing and collaboration. Makers’ culture is characterized by the sharing of knowledge and resources as well as the collaboration among participants. This attitude entails that makers’ activities are also often creating social connections among participants as well as facilitating processes of mutual learning.

- Users become producers. Participants in makers’ activities are not just passive consumers but take an active role by creating/repairing objects. This shift questions the traditional division of roles between users and producers, with citizens becoming active actors who are shaping services and products in relation to their own and their communities needs.

Makers’ culture can thus play a role in promoting upcycling and waste minimization by providing inspiration and favoring the spreading of practical skills and competences about making and repairing. But it can also represent a cultural framework to further discuss what production is, who is driving it, what kind of needs it satisfies and what value does it generate.

Further readings:
- David Gauntlett (2011) Making is connecting: The
social meaning of creativity, from DIY and knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0. Polity:London.

Cross-sector collaboration and citizens' participation for social innovation.

In the discussion about how to approach the issue of sustainability on an urban scale, there is an increasing focus on the importance of establishing collaborations across city departments, between public, private and third sectors but also between institutions and citizens.

Such collaborations are seen as way to bring in different perspectives about a specific issue, to tap into each other's resources and knowledge as well as to support mutual learning. This opens up for opportunities to develop new solutions and ways of dealing with a specific issue out from integrating different kinds of knowledge and experiences.

Such approaches have been initially developed in the traditional innovation field, which, in the last years, has been working with fertilization across sectors and users' involvement as way to create technological and commercial innovation. In the last years these approaches have been spreading beyond the traditional innovation discourses and investing also the public sector. Here the discussion has been focusing on how, in order to deal with complex challenges such as sustainability, there is the need to work across departments and sectors as well as mobilize citizens. The notion of social innovation has been spreading to describe (but also highlight the need for) new services and solutions that entail not so much new technologies nor products, but rather new ways of living, working and delivering services in our societies. These new ways “of doing things” and dealing with specific issues are often entailing new roles for actors belonging to different sectors, new forms of collaboration across structures and a more active role for citizens.

Examples of social innovation in relation to urban sustainability are, for examples, urban gardening initiatives. These are often driven by citizens and/or associations and entail new ways of using but also taking care of urban spaces. Such initiatives are growing and many city administrations are supporting them and collaborating with them. These collaborations between citizens and civil servants are opening up for new practices in relation to the management of public green space.

Further readings:
Setting up ReTuren, the first upcycling station

ReTuren opened in November 2015 in Lindängen, Malmö, but the work of developing the concept and defining the pilot has been ongoing since 2013. This guide focuses on the happenings between August 2015 and June 2016 in relation to the setting up and running of the station. Specifically, the attention is on how makers’ culture, cross-sectorial collaborations and citizens engagement have been at play in the pilot.

Makers’ culture at ReTuren

Makers’ culture has been playing a quite central role in the development and running of the upcycling station. Makers’ activities have been used with very different purposes and have been taken different formats.

Formats:
- Public activity/Close activity
- Inside premises/Outside premises
- External actor as a leader/Personnel from ReTuren as leaders
- Organized in collaboration with other actors/Organized only by ReTuren
- Focusing on general public/ Focusing on a special group

Makers’ culture to inspire to and learn about upcycling

The main purpose of introducing makers’ culture and activities in ReTuren has been to inspire citizens and users about upcycling and provide them with skills to engage in making and repairing. These activities have been used also a platform to discuss upcycling and collecting input from local citizens in relation to wishes for further activities and for the permanent workshop. This has been done through dedicated activities which aimed at presenting different forms of repairing and upcycling for the citizens of the area. These activities were driven by actors working with different forms of upcycling and repairing. We tested out furniture reparation, bike reparation, textile upcycling, fixing electronics. All the activities have been well received in terms of participation (all the workshops were fully booked) as well as in terms of formats.

- The importance of having clear objective and tasks for the participants within the workshop (for example by creating diverse stations with different kind of activities where participants can sit for a while and learn about different things);
- Encouraging the workshop leaders to discuss with participants the connection between upcycling, making and waste reduction;
- It is important to have activities focusing on adults in order to have opportunities to work with more advanced skills and techniques;
- Being an expert in upcycling/making does not entail being an expert in organizing workshops: provide instructions and support to the external actors to organize their workshop.

Format:

Close activity
- Inside the premises
- External actor as a leader
- Organized only by ReTuren
- Focusing on a special group: adults

Each activity has been repeated twice in order to provide participants enough time for finishing their projects and for learning different competences.

What we have learned:
- Close format with a limited number of participants is a good choice to create a good learning environment;
Makers’ culture as way to communicate and present the station

Before the actual opening of the station some public makers’ activities have been organized in collaboration with other local actors. This has been an important way to reach out for the citizens, present the station and its different functions as well as get to know the key actors in the area.

Format:
Open activity
Outside the premises
ReTuren personnel as leaders
Organized in collaboration with other actors.
Focusing on a general public

What we have learned:
_It is important to pick an activity which is easy to organize and carry out so that all kind of participants can join in;
_The fact that they are open entail that very different kind and number of participants can join, pick an activity which can be easily driven even with a high number of participants;
_It is easier for kids and children get engage in these kind of activities rather than adults. Consider that when planning the activity itself. _Have communication material about the station to distribute to participants;
_Joining in another actor’ activity/event/premises allows to tap into their network and existing contacts thus facilitating the process of reaching out for citizens;
_These kind of activities usually requires some time for preparation and coordination with other actors;

Makers culture as way to support local anchoring and cross’ sectorial collaboration

Even though organizing activities with other actors requires time and resources for coordination it turned out to be particularly rewarding in terms of developing local anchoring, exchanging knowledge with different actors and develop mutual support among actors.

Format:
Open activity
Outside the premises/Inside the premises
ReTuren personell as leaders/External actors as leaders
Organized in collaboration with other actors.
Focusing on special group(s): adults and kids

What we have learned:
_Organizing something together with another actor becomes a unique opportunity for knowledge exchange, mutual learning as well as tap into each other’s networks;
_Working together rather than just meeting provides opportunities for deeper learning and understanding as well as create a strong relation related to the satisfaction of having organized something together;
_This kind of work is demanding in terms of coordination of efforts;
Makers’ culture for the development of a meeting place

The activities organized have been strongly contributing to the establishment of the upcycling station as a meeting place by fostering connections among participants as well as between participants and people working at the station. In participants’ evaluation about activities it often emerged how these activities were often an opportunity to socialize and have fun together. The positive climate that developed during these activities has contributed to create a friendly attitude of the participants towards the station and its personnel.

Format:
Close activity
Inside the premises
External actors as leaders
Organized by ReTuren.
Focus on a general public/ Focusing on special group: adults

What we have learned:
_ Consider and facilitate also social interactions: having an introduction in the beginning, providing participants with name tags, taking breaks with fika;  
_ Underline for workshop leaders the importance of creating a welcoming and open atmosphere;  
_ A close format allows to have more fruitful exchange and discussions among participants;  
_ It might be worth that personnel of the station themselves are involved/part of these activities at least in the starting phase of the station.

Makers’ culture as a way to deal with conflicts

Right after the opening of the station, there have been tensions with group of youngsters who were challenging the personnel of the station as well as making small damages. The decision was then to try to engage these kids and get to know them. This has been done by creating ad-hoc makers’ activities for them in collaboration with an after-school organization they were part of. The activity has been really successful because allowed ReTuren personnel and the kids to get to know each other as well as show how the station is not isolated but rather connected to the other actors in the area.

Format:
Close activity
Outside the premises/Inside the premises
ReTuren personnel as leaders
Organized in collaboration with other actors.
Focusing on special group: kids

What we have learned:
_ Makers activities can be an approach that can be at play in dealing with issues of safety and security;  
_ It has been an easy way to reach for the kids and learn about them as well as provide them the possibility to learn and meet personnel from the recycling station;  
_ These ad-hoc activities are worth the investment in time and resource because they greatly improved the everyday working situation for the personnel of the station.
Makers’ culture for sustainable interventions in the urban context

Makers activities have been also a way to support interventions about holistic sustainability in the neighborhood. In collaboration with other actors in the area two activities have been organized. The first one was focusing on collecting children ideas about Lindängen by making postcards from future Lindängen and then using them to upcycle an old bench (this intervention was tapping in the public discussion about the new plan for the area). The second one was about using music to reclaim public space. Old pianos were decorated/fixed at ReTuren and then placed in the centre of Lindängen for organized and spontaneous concerts; to reclaim a space that is often the scene for criminal activities. In both cases the interventions were characterized by a holistic understanding of sustainability, and makers’ activities became a way to address at the same time ecological and social sustainability. These activities have been important to understand how the station may play role in a broader/collective effort about sustainable city development.

Format:
- Close/open activity
- Outside the premises/Inside the premises
- ReTuren personnel as leaders/External actors as leaders
- Organized in collaboration with other actors.
- Focusing on a general public/Focusing on special group: kids

What we have learned:
- In these activities it might difficult to bring forward specific aspects in relation to waste minimization, however they are important in terms of developing an holistic understanding of sustainability among citizens and local actors;
- These activities represent unique platforms to initiate collaborations with actors which might be difficult to reach, otherwise;
- These activities provide the opportunity to experiment with organizational models based on co-ownership and close collaboration, which might be relevant for collaboratively driving the permanent workshop.

Overall considerations and further questions to be explored

In driving activities about makers' culture it has been important to work with ongoing evaluation as well as having dedicated moments (twice a year) to discuss more in-depth and reflect over outcomes and set objectives for the upcoming period.

Makers’ culture can be a support to establish relationship and trust with citizens as well as contribute to behavioral change.

A question that needs to be further explored is how to organize the permanent workshop: if it should be driven by the waste handling organization or an external actor; and how to engage citizens as volunteers in its running. This question is also connected to the fact that is unclear if driving such a workshop and financing makers' activities might be (and to which extend) something that is included in the waste handling organization formal/legal tasks and, consequently, if resources coming from the waste fee (avfalls-taxa) may be employed to finance them.
Cross-sector collaborations and citizens' engagement at the upcycling station

Cross-sectorial collaborations have been characterizing the setting up of the recycling station at different levels and by engaging different actors both on local and on a city level, including local citizens.

On a local level: tapping into existing networks and knowledge

A particular effort has been put in developing connections and collaborations with local actors in the area. These collaborations have been often initiated but also nurtured by organizing makers’ activities together or joining in public events organized in the neighborhood. This has allowed to tap into existing networks but also to get support in relation to how to deal with different kinds of issues that arose along the way (from how to deal with conflicts and violent happenings to solve everyday practical issues). It also support the fact that the upcycling station is seen as a resource for these actors as well, particularly in relation to makers’ activities and interventions in the public space. The station has both tools and materials for such interventions as well as knowledge/inspiration about what it might be possible to do. Collaboration and mutual support among local actors has been playing not only a central role in facilitating the establishment of the station but also is opening the possibility, on the long-run, of having a collaborative management model for the station.

Working with the establishment and maintenance of local connections and collaborations is demanding in terms of time and resources, however it has been proved to be important for the quick establishment of the station as well as to deal with different kind of issues. Thus there might be need to both explicitly dedicated resources for this kind of work but also define limits in relation to it.

The makerspace: competences about makers’ culture and how to drive a public/open space

The upcycling station is having a close collaboration with Malmö’s makerspace. Such a collaboration has been crucial in several ways. First of all in finding a person that would match the requirements for being the coordinator of the upcycling station. The actual coordinator has been working in the makerspace before and she has a quite unique background that mixes environmental studies with competences in relation to making and upcycling. Moreover the makerspace acts as the formal employee of the coordinator (with resources coming from the waste handling organization). The waste handling organization is usually purchasing from external companies/other city departments most of the services related to waste handling. Thus in setting up the station there was the need to find an actor that could act as employer for the coordinator. This turned out to be quite difficult since none of the usual partners were willing to take up this role, since the project was new and no routines or specifications about this role were in place. Thus, the makerspace had a fundamental role in making possible the project to happen.

Moreover the makerspace has been providing access to makers’ actors and competences to drive activities in the station. It has been also providing support to the coordinator in setting up and managing of a public/open space.

The academic partner: reflection and coaching in relation to makers’ culture and collaborations

The collaboration with the academic partner has been ongoing since autumn 2014 and it has been related to explore how makers’ culture could contribute and become part of the station. The academic partner involved in the project facilitated the connection between the waste handling organization and the makerspace as well as contributed financially to the project by employing the coordinator of the station for 5 months. But the main contribution has been the involvement of one researcher half-time in project. Such involvement has been focusing on coaching the coordinator in relation to makers’ culture as well as in establishing local collaborations. Moreover the researcher has been supporting the coordinator in reflecting over issues emerging along the way in relation to local collaborations and citizens’ engagement. The researcher has been also practically involved in organizing and driving some of the makers’ activities, particularly before and right after the official opening of the station.

According to the coordinator this kind of support has been important in the beginning in order to learn about makers’ culture and build local contacts. On the long-run she has been highlighting the importance of having someone to discuss with and reflect upon decisions in relation to how to work with makers’ activities, local collaborations and citizens’ engagement.
Alignment, collaboration or co-ownership: different levels of engagement for different actors

When looking at the different kinds of relationships of the actors around ReTuren it appears how they greatly vary in terms of investment and commitment.

Some actors could be defined as technical partners (such as the public company responsible for processing waste) they do play an important role in the functioning of the station however they are not engaged so much in relation to decision making and development of the station itself. With these actors is more a matter of general alignment of interests rather than actual collaboration.

Collaboration might be instead be found particularly on a local level and with makers’ initiatives. These kind of actors play an important role for the functioning of ReTuren since they provide knowledge and contacts in relation to the local context and makers’ culture. Moreover they have a commitment to the functioning of ReTuren, since they see how the upcycling station can play a role also in relation to their own interests. Their stakes in relation to the station are however not very specific (they might be: how to make Lindängen a better neighbourhood or how makers’ culture can spread further on) which means that they are interested in organizing events together, and in learning and exchanging knowledge, but they do not contribute to the functioning of the station with concrete resources, such as time or personnel.

When it comes to the local civil servants’ and researchers’ role in ReTuren, it might be possible to discuss about co-ownership. These actors have been investing resources in the functioning of the station as well as participating to its development. They have been also influencing agendas and priorities within the station out from their stakes and thus having more a role as co-owners rather than just collaborators. Co-ownership has been giving in terms of sharing resources and knowledge and thus lowering costs in relation to the development and running of the upcycling station, however it has been also costly since it entails negotiations among actors who might have slightly different ways of understanding the station and its role.

In working with cross sectorial collaboration it might be important to distinguish among different kind of relationships and reflect about which kind of relationships might be worth creating with whom and why.
Citizens’ engagement: which formats for which aim?

Citizens’ engagement is seen as a crucial aspect in the station both as a way of creating a service that responds to citizens’ needs and wishes but also as a way of gaining trust and creating relationships that might support behavioral change among citizens.

At the moment, citizens’ engagement at the station has been mainly about consultation, such as asking visitors their opinion about opening times and participants to the activities about their wishes for further initiatives.

When it comes to the permanent workshop there is the idea of involving local participants in driving it. However, there is still the need to experiment about how this could be organized and carried out.

From the work carried out until now, some considerations in relation to citizens’ engagement can be already made. Particularly it seems important to frame scope as well as possibilities of follow up on citizens’ engagement. If opinions and ideas are gathered it should be important to both specify to which extend there can be a follow up on this, as well as, actually, having a follow up. Moreover it might be important to experiment with different forms for engagement: asking visitors about opinions and ideas might provide a quite scattered landscape which might be difficult to navigate. Moreover this kind of engagement works better with very specific and close questions.

Another format could be to engage a restricted group of citizens by, for example, having them on the board of the station. This might be a less representative way of working with participation, but at the same time it might provide the possibility for more giving and deeper discussions as well as provide citizens with a stronger opportunity to influence decision making about the station.

Further collaborations: house owning companies, other city departments and upcycling/makers’ actors

There are other possible collaborations which could be explored in the close future around the upcycling station.

The first one is with local house owning companies. They are very positive to the station. They have reported that they have less problems with littering since the ReTuren was established. A possibility to explore is, thus, a more concrete commitment of these actors. They could both provide physical phases but also contribute with personnel and/or financial resources to the station.

The second possibility would be to explore collaborations with other city departments particularly in relation to the station being a platform for holistic sustainability. The environmental department but also the cultural department and the planning one could have a more active role in supporting a platform that promotes sustainability in the urban context in a transversal way.

In relation to makers’ culture it might be important to further explore collaborations with actors working with upcycling and making, who could not just drive activities at the station but also have a role in the permanent workshop within the premises.