

Second Life

Zombies.

(Now that I have your attention, we'll get back to the undead in a moment.)

Those who are the children of Depression-era babies probably grew up with the mantra “Use it up, wear it out, make it do, do without” — much as kids now are taught the somewhat more plodding “Reduce, reuse, recycle.” The transmission of cultural values, particularly those encouraging restraint of any sort, is a difficult business. Just ask the US government: from Prohibition to “Just Say No” to abstinence-only programs, its efforts to encourage the citizenry to curb their enthusiasms have been abysmal failures, if not downright laughable. Let's face it — the boomers who grew up with the “use it up” ditty haven't been models of frugal behavior.

Even so, frugality is suddenly the virtue of the moment, thanks to the Great Recession. In fact, years from now, we may actually give thanks to the Great Recession for turbocharging the engine of the sustainability movement at the precise moment when green values collided with rampant consumerism, yielding such silliness as LEED-certified McMansions and threatening to undermine the movement's urgency with rampant cynicism over green marketing. The recession has made us realize that “reuse” has little meaning unless it is considered in the context of “use,” and neither has any meaning without considering the larger issue of our relationship with *stuff*.

These are among the most important cultural issues of our time, which means that those who are in creative fields have a job to do. Just as artists and designers colonize rundown urban areas and make them hip, so do they serve as tastemakers in our cultural terrain. They are the cool kids. And the cool kids, many of whom were among the first to embrace sustainability, are increasingly thinking about reuse.

Back to zombies. At this writing, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains”) is ranked 237 at Amazon and has been on *The New York Times*

trade paperback bestseller list for 39 weeks. It's a mash-up, reusing and combining existing material to create something new — which also happens to be wildly popular and wildly lucrative. At this writing also, Boston is abuzz over *The Donkey Show* and *Sleep No More* — the inventive productions at American Repertory Theater based on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Macbeth*. They are evidence of a new openness in the creative world toward repurposing and remixing that leads to work that is transformative — a completely new genre and experience.

Today's attitudes toward reuse have shed the stern moralism of the “use it up” dogma and the groupthink numbness of the “reduce, reuse, recycle” chant. Reuse has a new edginess to it: witness the international attention to Single Speed Design's “Big Dig” house, a wonderful residence in Lexington, Massachusetts constructed of materials salvaged from Boston's Central Artery project. Even preservation architecture — long considered the stodgy corner of the profession — has a new hipness, as practitioners take on midcentury masterpieces and academics look afresh at preservation theory, with journals such as *Future Anterior* (Columbia) and *Int/AR — Interventions/Adaptive Reuse* (RISD). The field has already been re-energized by its recent alignment with sustainability (“the greenest building is the one that is already built”); new appreciation of the invention and innovation that are possible with reuse will undoubtedly push it further.

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Reuse, repurpose, reimagine, remix, mash-up, hack — a growing vocabulary describes a trend that is not just about the moral high ground. It's about the sheer pleasure and frequent beauty in creating something new. And, oh yes, doing good. ■

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