

Out of the ashes

A community center comes back from a fire with some creative carpentry—and provides a lesson in urban revitalization. By **Kate Rockwood** Photographs by **Mireya Acierito**

For years, artist Dan Peterman had labored to make something of the building at 6100 South Blackstone Avenue. In the mid-'80s, he joined a group that ran different ventures at the site, including arts studios and a recycling center.

But he saw that the structure—which took up about a quarter of a city block—was falling into a state of disrepair: “It was in need of some serious attention,” he says. So, in the mid-1990s, Peterman began the process of buying the building and clearing out the recycling detritus that filled it. Before long, the site was the home for several small businesses and community groups, including Peterman’s Blackstone Bicycle Works, which teaches kids

magazine of cultural critique, poetry and fiction; and The Invisible Institute, a human-rights group focused on Chicago public-housing issues.

“There was such a compelling impulse to rebuild—not just from me, but from everyone else involved, too,” he says. “We had a great deal of support, too. There was a lot of encouragement.”

The building, long known as The Resource Center, has a lengthy history as a hotbed of community involvement: Originally built as a parking garage and later renovated by an engineering company, the site seemed a good home for the recycling center begun by Ken

plus a bakery and a community garden (which has been moved across the street to land owned by the University of Chicago).

But by the time Peterman arrived in the mid-'80s, much of the recycling activities had shifted to a new location further south, and the building was being used mainly to store hard-to-recycle items. “It was abundantly filled with materials—intensely, almost insanely filled,” Peterman says. A few of the community programs were still in place—the automotive workshop, the community garden, a tepid book exchange—but it was a shadow of the bustling energy of the decade before.

So Peterman slowly took over the building



ONE MAN'S JUNK From left, flooring from a bowling alley offers style to spare, tea-candle holders make for colorful windows, and expansive windows provide natural light for artsy endeavors.



bike-repair skills and lets them trade hours of bike work for bikes of their own.

But disaster struck on April 25, 2001, when a fire started in a furniture shop’s finishing room and engulfed the structure.

“It was pretty devastating,” Peterman recalls. “It basically destroyed the interior of the building.”

Rather than lick his wounds and sulk off, Peterman began rebuilding almost immediately, using recycled materials and eccentric goods such as flooring salvaged from bowling alleys and IKEA candle holders (used as windows). Now, almost five years later, Blackstone Bicycle Works celebrates its reopening Saturday 14 with bike lessons and raffles, and the rest of the building will reopen over the next few months. The refurbished structure sports a new name, The Experimental Station, and will be home to several local groups, such as *The Baffler*, a

Dunn. So in 1975, he bought it for roughly \$16,000. “I had the idea that it would be our objective to challenge borders and frontiers, and at that time 61st Street was a very clear border,” Dunn says. “University of Chicago students were not to go south of it, and Woodlawn students were not to go north of it.”

It was rough going at first. “Kids would throw bottles at us,” Dunn says. “They had a sense that they couldn’t ride their bikes in Hyde Park, so I shouldn’t be able to ride in their community. But that decreased over time.” Dunn would stop to pick up the broken glass, and he’d let the kids know that if they brought bottles into the center they would get paid for them.

The Center became a grassroots recycling center and cluster of community programs, and grew to include some interconnected small businesses, such as metalworking, woodworking and automotive workshops. There were also book and clothing exchanges,

with the concept of the Experimental Station in mind. After the fire, he and an army of volunteers used recycled and repurposed materials, such as wood planks from Wrigleyville’s defunct Marigold Bowl, to raise the building from the ashes. That’s not just to save money, Peterman says—it’s also environmentally responsible and gives the building a sense of history. “Economically, it actually doesn’t really work so well—you’ve really got to do some creative carpentry,” he says. “But conceptually, we’re trying to make use of materials in ways that signal a real interest in long-term use of materials. Taking an old industrial artifact and making it fit—in the end, it shows an attention to the way things can be put together and stay together.”

For details on the Experimental Station, visit www.experimentalstation.org. For more on Blackstone Bicycle Works, see www.blackstonebike.com.