

# INDUSTRY VISIONARIES MAKE EAST END HOUSTON THE HUB OF RECYCLING AND REPURPOSING SOLID WASTE

By Jose Monterrosa | Photos by Dan Joyce

Russell Klein (Marketing) and Caroline Kostak (Owner) with RePurpose Depot.



An entrepreneurial spirit is driving a generation of futurists who are merging their environmental activism with economically viable enterprises. This new group of developers is finding 'green' capital in what has traditionally gone into landfills.

Driving this recycling industrial growth is The East End District, an entity created in 1999 by the Texas legislature to revitalize and redevelop a 16-square mile area. Since its inception, the District has become a trusted partner in the community and with other governmental agencies securing \$38.6 million for its ten-year plan ending in 2013.

Having successfully reached the benchmarks of the first ten-year plan, the District has created a new and aggressive ten-year plan targeting a new group of industries. On the drawing board is: light manufacturing and assembly; logistics and warehousing; professional services and personal services – retail and restaurant.

This type of comprehensive strategic plan is bringing in residential and commercial developers to build the amenities in this historic part of Houston who will live, work and recreate in the East End Houston. With numerous walking and biking trails that span the East End, the area is attracting Millennials



who are now the largest purchasing block. The net effect for the East End is new startup companies, new housing and new consumers who are driving the tax base and future attractions.

## A business environment that promotes a new creative force

The East End District has actively promoted and recruited new startup and established companies to open facilities in the East End through community presentations and tours. This has been instrumental for East End Houston, which has become the hub for large and small recycling enterprises.

Currently, nearly two dozen companies process varied materials in the area. These commodities include zinc, plastic, glass, metals, computer parts, building materials, textiles and more.

Some of these green enterprises have made the East End District the starting point in assessing the viability of their enterprise. The redevelopment experts of the District provide extensive data obtained from revitalization studies for anyone interested in the region. This vital data on the amenities and ideal elements was the deciding factor for industrial entrepreneur, Caroline Kostak, founder of the RePurpose Depot.

In 2011, Kostak became fascinated with recycling building materials. Her interest peaked when she was introduced to the fast-growing concept of 'Green Building,' a process that uses new and used building materials that normally go into landfills. She took the leap and got the required training to be the local representative of The ReUse People of America (TRP), a national nonprofit organization that recycles building materials. The startup phase presented insurmountable challenges due to costs, shortage of skilled labor, warehousing and logistics. Not one to give up, Caroline pivoted and started the 'RePurpose Depot' (RPD), a partner organization to TRP. Her experience

helped her to innovate a working model for demolition and sourcing materials.

When Hurricane Harvey hit, Kostak was ready and the RePurpose Depot became an instant success due to the flood of requests to deconstruct and demolish damaged structures. This perfect storm aligned conditions to hire the right demolition team and to create a suitable warehouse to merchandise their inventory to homeowners with limited resources and building contractors. The RePurpose Depot's mission became "Repurposing People, Places and Things." Caroline and her partner, Russell Klein, an expert in solid waste management, are out to create a new model of how construction and demolition waste is handled in the United States. The RePurpose Depot is an organization that provides work, which is a second purpose for people in recovery. Moreover, this sustainable model provides tax deductions for homeowners to offset the deconstruction and demolition as well as to repurpose building materials.

Mark Austin's 'We CAN Recycle' is a company that processes disposed glass. His trajectory and destiny changed after he saw the environmental documentary, "An Inconvenient

Truth." Since then, Austin has spent a decade, through trial and error, creating a sustainable supply chain to turn disposable glass bottles into glass beads that are used in fiberglass manufacturing and glass foundries. The key to his success was finding a way to reduce the cost of recycling below that of solid waste disposal. Austin now feels satisfaction that he is contributing to the air quality of the community and the planet.

Designer Sarah-Jayne Smith launched 'Magpies & Peacocks' in 2011. The company is made up of a team of industry mavericks who are recycling textiles and clothing. Having worked in both the purchasing and purging of clothing in the fashion industry, Smith saw firsthand the vast amount of waste the industry sent to landfills. This knowledge of excess in consumerism led to having a mindset of conservation and recycling. The company has garnered local, regional and international recognition for its efforts in recycling over 150,000 pounds of post-consumer textiles from landfills over a seven-year period. The driving philosophy of Magpies & Peacocks is "never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world."

The common elements of these and all other recycling companies in East End Houston are the vision to minimize waste in landfills and to be a part of the new creative force that is transforming the East End into a Mecca of ecological forward-thinking entrepreneurs. It was this founding spirit that the Allan Brothers had when they built Harrisburg, the 'cradle' of the Greater Houston Area. According to Veronica Chapa Gorczynski, President of the East End District, "with new low-cost technologies, innovation and synergistic partnerships being formed, we are beginning to see just a glimpse of a future 'Green' Houston and it's happening in East End Houston." **N**

*About the East End District: The East End District was founded in 1999. Its mission is to enhance the image of the District, to attract more businesses and to increase economic activity in the area. The District covers 16 square miles and borders Clinton Drive to the north, Loop 610 to the east, Telephone Road and Interstate 45 to the south and the Houston Belt and Terminal Railroad to Highway 59 to the west. Visit [www.greatereastend.com](http://www.greatereastend.com) to learn more.*